

Editorial

Conscience v. Political Expediency at ALA

*Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.*

Robert Frost¹

“Good fences make good neighbors,” posits conventional wisdom, until one questions their purpose. And, so it was that in Chicago late in the morning on July 2nd a thin convention hall wall lent material substance to an enforced border between one act of conscience and another of political expediency.

On one side of the wall, ALA Council III wrapped up a session that sent one longtime council member into a very uncharacteristic torrent of tears, saying she had never been so ashamed to be a member of ALA's governing body, while on the other side of the wall poet Alice Walker rose to the podium to laud librarians and libraries for their good work, and to share poems and stories from two new books – *The Cushion in the Road: Meditation and Wandering as the Whole World Awakens to Being in Harm's Way* and *The World Will Follow Joy: Turning Madness Into Flowers, New Poems*. Toward the end of her allotted hour, Walker told the audience she needed guidance in selecting a last reading. With soft, slow-cadenced voice and rooted presence, she said, “I have one short

■ Elaine Harger is the library teacher / library media specialist / teacher librarian / librarian at Washington Middle School in Seattle, and longtime editor of *Progressive Librarian*.

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poem and one long one. The short poem is about Julian Assange. The long one is about Bradley Manning. Which shall I read?"

Having just witnessed ALA Council's failure to pass a resolution recognizing Bradley Manning as a whistleblower (see page 113), and the parliamentary maneuvers that sent a similar resolution regarding Edward Snowden (see pages 116 and 119) from the status of ALA policy into its dustbin of history in little over a 24-hour period, I shouted Manning's name as loudly and forcefully as I could from the back of the hall, over the heads of hundreds of conference attendees. Who knows if she heard my shout, there were others, but she read,

As an elder of color born and raised in the United States, I have dreamed of a day when young white men, *en masse*, might rise to take up the cause of freedom and justice in defense of those manipulated, oppressed, and stolen from around the world by our government. That time seems to be beginning. I am thinking of Bradley Manning, Julian Assange, and Tim DeCristopher, in particular...

...Something transformative is happening here. We must rouse ourselves not to miss it...

...It is a sad culture that punishes its children for doing what they have been taught, and believe, to be right. Perhaps Manning was taught long ago to love and protect his neighbor. To love the world and the people who inhabit it; to despise the lies that cause their suffering and destruction around the globe.

If so, he was not alone in learning this.

If he is, himself, our neighbor, what then? What are we called to do? This is the question whispered always in the ears of those who would be both merciful and just.²

Walker had no way of knowing the timeliness of her reading, but she certainly would not have been surprised at the Council debates' outcomes regarding Manning and Snowden. Alice Walker, after all, knows a thing or two about politics, history, and the great gulf that divides American claims from the reality of democracy in political arenas such as ALA.

Although *Progressive Librarian* does not usually publish ALA Council documents, we are making an exception in this issue in order to salvage from the dustbin a telling moment in ALA's history. The fate of the Snowden resolution was a first. In just over 24 hours, Council passed then "substituted" the resolution. Given the egregious fate of this resolution, the editorial board of *Progressive Librarian* has decided to provide a "legislative history" as it were of this particular resolution and the substitute motion that replaced it. Here is the chronology:

- Spring 2013 – Tom Twiss (PLG, SRRT, and ALA member) drafts and facilitates the crafting of “Resolution in Support of Whistleblower Edward Snowden.”
- June 29, 2013 – Action Council of the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) of ALA approves the Snowden resolution at its morning meeting
- June 29, 2013 – Snowden resolution is approved at the ALA Membership meeting that afternoon
- June 30, 2013 – ALA Council I approves the Snowden resolution
- July 1, 2013 – a motion is made in the first few minutes of Council II to reconsider the Snowden resolution and refer it to the Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC) and the Committee on Legislation (COL)
- July 2, 2013 – the IFC and COL jointly present to Council III a substitute resolution entitled “Resolution on the Need for Reforms for the Intelligence Community to Support Privacy, Open Government, Government Transparency, and Accountability.” Council III votes in favor of the substitution, thereby making the Snowden resolution null and void.

The significance of these actions cannot be underestimated, and lay in what they reveal of the well-being of the democratic process within ALA, which takes great pride in being the voice of America’s libraries – a “cornerstone of democracy” (See <http://www.ala.org/aboutala/governance/officers/past/kranich/demo/quotes>).

The Council is ALA’s decision-making body. It alone sets ALA policy, and on June 30, by majority vote, it put ALA on record as recognizing Edward Snowden as a whistleblower, a status the U.S. government refuses to grant him, charging him with espionage and treason.

Members of ALA Council are thoughtful, and take their responsibilities as counselors seriously. The majority vote to recognize Snowden as a whistleblower was an informed and considered act. However, it also proved to be a vote that inflamed at least a few people in positions of power within ALA, and led to what must have been some frantic politicking the evening of June 30th, because the first action the following morning at Council II was a motion to reconsider the resolution and to refer it to the IFC and COL.

This motion to reconsider and refer was, essentially, a slap on the wrists of all those council members whose “yes” vote was determined to be somehow wrong by the powers-that-be in ALA. The motion’s underlying message was clear – “You screwed up, now somebody more expert than you has to fix this mess.” Needless to say, the motion to reconsider and refer was passed, and the following day IFC and COL presented their “substitute” resolution, which does not mention Snowden, or the word whistleblower, or even ALA’s own prior statements regarding whistleblowers. In his report of the 2013 Annual Council meetings, Al Kagan, SRRT Councilor, wrote of the substitute resolution,

In keeping with ALA's recent tradition, that resolution stripped out names of individual whistleblowers and just made broad policy statements. There is nothing wrong with the generalities in that document, but it will have little or no effect in supporting the people who are taking huge risks to bring out the misdeeds of our government...I could not support this resolution as a substitute for the Snowden resolution, and a small number of Councilors agreed with this position and voted against the substitute resolution.³

The border patrol along the fence between conscience and political expediency within ALA was vigilant, guard dogs strained at the leash, a whistleblower was allowed to stand accused of treason, and spin and accusation prevailed over democratic deliberation. Fortunately, there are within ALA many a someone who doesn't love a wall, who wants them down – someones like the library activists who brought the fossil fuel, Snowden, and Manning resolutions to Chicago⁴; someones like the activists who took to the streets, and to the conference halls of the Canadian Library Association, in defense of Canadian archives.⁵ Given the dedication of these someones, ALA Council will have other opportunities to do the right thing by whistleblowers who reveal government-condoned and conducted criminality.

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NOTES

1. Frost, Robert (1914). "Mending Wall," from *Anthology of American Literature: II. Realism to the Present*. 2nd edition. New York: McMillan Publishing Co. 1980, p. 992.
2. Walker, Alice (2013). "The Case of Bradley Manning," from *The Cushion in the Road: Meditation and Wandering as the Whole World Awakens to Being in Harm's Way*. New York: New Press, p. 185.
3. Kagan, Al (2013). "Council Report to SRRT," e-mail to SRRTAC-L, 9 July 2013. [forthcoming in *SRRT Newsletter*].
4. See this issue *Progressive Librarian*, pp. 110-119.
5. See this issue *Progressive Librarian*, Samek's graduation speech (p. 52) and MacDonald's symposium report (p. 74).