

# **From guardianship to abandonment: children's literature and Library and Information Science**

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## **Introduction**

Children's literature – and I use the term in the broadest sense of the word, from picture books for the very young to young adult literature – is a subject field that has always been close to my heart. I became involved in the subject field by chance, just as I ended up in Library and Information Science by coincidence. My background and interest have always been history and heritage. However, I was fortunate enough to have two formidable mentors during my undergraduate years in Potchefstroom: Professor TT Cloete and Professor Carl Lohann. It was Professor Cloete who made me aware of the existence of the subject field, Library and Information Science, and it was Professor Lohann, who was the Head of the Department at that stage, who ignited my passion for children's literature.

During my academic career I have always been in some way involved in children's literature but that was not the reason why I was appointed at Unisa, and I was never really able to specialise in it. I was appointed in 1989 to establish Archival Science in our Department, but it only really happened many years later. As it often happens in the academic world, there were other operational needs when I arrived in the Department

and I became involved in Record Studies – and I dragged in personal interests: Africana, rare books, and ... children's literature on the periphery. However, and I cannot stress this enough: right from the beginning I had the freedom at Unisa to live my own interests within the broad study field of Library and Information Science. Here I need to mention the name of the third mentor in my academic career: Professor Johan Bekker, my first Head of Department at Unisa, who provided me with that freedom.

At the time, school librarianship was taught in the Department and provided us with the opportunity to pay attention to the field of children's literature. In 1996 a Children's Literature Research Unit was established in the Department; we started to organise conferences and seminars in children's literature; annually a special number of our departmental journal, *Mousaion*, is devoted to children's literature; and master's and doctoral students can specialise in children's literature.

If this is the case, why then such a negative title for this inaugural lecture? Why the disillusionment? Because this is what it is: disillusionment with the way in which children's literature is treated by Library and Information Science as a discipline; disillusionment about how the Library and Information profession is ignoring and neglecting children's literature and reading by children in general; disillusionment also towards the authorities who are contributing to the precarious situation in which libraries find themselves today, especially in terms of services for children and the promotion of reading.

## **Children's literature in tertiary education**

Traditionally, librarianship has been known for its leadership role in the field of children's literature. Librarians, and specifically children's librarians, have long been seen as the self-appointed guardians of children's literature. Children's librarians have always had the reputation as the professional experts in children's literature. In the course of their training and practical work they often specialised in the child as reader and as library user, and usually had good knowledge of books and the skills to promote these books. Worldwide, librarians have taken the responsibility for encouraging publishing for children. Because of the emphasis they put on obtaining good books for children, these librarians formed strong alliances with editors and children's book departments in publishing houses. Publishers and booksellers acknowledged their expertise, and they were often in the position to alter the minds of parents and teachers. In addition, they were involved in professional and subject associations and interest groups such as parent guidance, as well as in informal training to improve awareness of children's reading materials.

Children's librarians were interested in and focused on tasks such as collection development; author awareness; they shared their love for reading by promoting literature amongst children and young adults; they discussed methods of developing an appreciation of the place of literature in a person's personal development and in the curriculum process; they reported trends in children's and young adults' reading interests; they identified research needs related to children and young adult literature; they debated and reported on literature in alternative media formats and its impact on

school librarianship. Librarians created selection criteria and selection lists of “quality literature” and were the first professionals to write about children's literature.

I mentioned the self-appointed guardianship of children's literature by children's librarians – an image that, with the passing of time, has sometimes caused discontent among various interested parties in the field of children's literature. Concern has been expressed that, during the book selection process, librarians in their "determined and aggressive determination to eradicate lesser forms of literature" (Vandergrift 1996: 691) are guilty of imposing personal judgments and didactic and ideological motivations on the intended readers.

Legitimate questions can therefore be raised as to whether the influence of librarians on the development of children's literature has been positive; whether it is the role of the librarian to distinguish between good and bad children's books; whether their specific intention that literature should "improve children's interests" is called for; in other words, whether their approach to children's literature from the viewpoint of the child as reader or potential reader is correct.

These questions have been asked by scholars from other subject fields interested in literature, children, or both children and literature. Children's literature is after all a subject field that lends itself to academic investigation from different perspectives. Academics in Education were always involved and interested in children's literature, for obvious reasons. Scholars in Sociology, Linguistics, Cultural History and other subject

fields brought their own perspectives to the field of children's literature. For quite some time, literary scholars tended to define the concerns of their discipline too narrowly to include children's books, with prominent local exceptions such as Elsabe Steenberg in Afrikaans and Elwyn Jenkins in English. In general, however, children's literature, the only literary category that defines an audience rather than a subject, a form or an author, was for a long time the stepchild of literature.

Fortunately this has changed, or should I rather say, it is in transition. Literary scholars started to pay attention – hesitantly, and much more slowly in South Africa than in the rest of the world, but then again, history has shown that in the field of children's literature, South Africa has always lagged ten to fifteen years behind the rest of world. The literary scholars became involved while noting the fact that children's literature had, according to them, evolved into a genre with greater complexity and sophistication, that changes were taking place that caused children's literature to move closer to so-called mainstream literature, that there is a so-called "contemporary evolution" of children's literature (Nikolajeva 1996:8).

Critics in the literary world made much of the "emancipation" of children's literature because, in their terms, children's literature was now regarded as "literature", as an interaction between texts and inherent features of texts themselves (...). In the introduction to the book, *Change and renewal in children's literature* that consists of contributions by, mostly, literary scholars, I warned that one should be wary of a one-sided perspective that children's literature had been emancipated due to certain types of

children's books that had been published, whereas it might rather be the result of how certain literary theorists had linked emancipation to the manner in which they approached the field of study. In 1996 Roderick McGillis (17) had already referred to the fact that "the audience for critical readings of and approaches to children's books, is generally, other critical readers: in other words, professional 'book people'. Critics speak to critics and not to the people directly involved in children's books: teachers, librarians, parents ... The children's literature critics speak among themselves, more often than not forgetting the children who are the impetus for the books they are talking about."

Johnson (2004:10) stated that not only was children's literature changing, but so was the study of it, and according to literary critics the two aspects cannot be separated. They believe that discussions of change and renewal in children's literature can refer as much to the role of critics, teachers and researchers as to the actual literature itself.

These changes in the approach of literary critics and theorists towards children's literature sometimes included a disregard of and attack on previous methods of study of children's literature – especially studies done by librarians and educationalists. For example, one of the main reservations of literary critics towards librarians is their categorisation of books – the fact that they "label" books. The idea of the superior nature of literary scholars' involvement in the field of study is expressed in Johnson's (2004:9) words: "Established ideas were challenged, criticism became more critical, less pedagogical, more sophisticated, less concerned with ideas of literature as life enhancement and more concerned with literature and ideological concerns".

One wonders to what extent this challenge is the result of an endeavour to establish children's literature as a study-object with status in the broader field of literature, and in the process to disregard other critical perspectives – pedagogical, moral, religious, sociocultural, psychological – as of less importance. As I have mentioned, all these perspectives should be seen as supplementary to the entire field of children's literature and not as in opposition to each other, and especially not in opposition to the contribution of librarianship.

The mistrust between diverse disciplines that study children's literature is unfortunate since it is the multidisciplinary character of children's literature that can elevate it to a unique study field. The different perspectives provide vitality and diversity that other subgenres of literature can hardly equal. The changes during the past years that have taken place in children's literature, the challenging of established ideas, the fact that children's literature is seen today from a much wider perspective, are exciting and can surely only enhance the field of study.

The increased interest in children's literature from literary scholars is especially good and can only be encouraged – as one of many approaches. The irony however is that the increased involvement from literary scholars parallels a decrease in interest in children's literature on the part of Library and Information Science. Today the literary scholars are at the forefront of developing this field of study in South Africa, not the scholars of Library and Information Science. Unfortunately, as will be indicated in the

rest of this address, the contribution from LIS departments in South Africa to the study of and research in children's literature is in a state of decline.

This is an unfortunate turn of events, as Library and Information Science has such an important role to play. If anything, librarianship has always had a more holistic approach, aiming to address both the reader and the text (Van der Walt 2004: 2). And when I mention text here, I am thinking of the material that children actually read, the "real stuff, the true children's literature", in the words of Peter Hunt (1991:14), and also of the work of people who endeavour to bring children and literature together. Without this perspective which librarianship can bring, (one of the many perspectives that many subject fields bring), children's literature will certainly be poorer.

We should recall the important work done by enthusiastic pioneers of children's libraries in South Africa, such as Bessie Lyndhurst and Lydia Pienaar, who identified and promoted what they considered to be books of high literary quality, and likewise discouraged the use of literature that they considered to be inappropriate for children (Jenkins 1994:129). In retrospect it is easy to point out the mistakes they made. I for one often refer to Pienaar's foolish banning of comics and series books from libraries, but in the process one forgets what they achieved. They aimed to inspire and cultivate in children a love for reading; a discriminating taste in literature; and judgment and skill in the use of books as tools. For this purpose they strove to make a wide and varied collection of books and materials available.



One has of course to mention that they did it largely for white children, for Afrikaans and English children's books; that they had the support of the government; and that nationalist publishers had a monopoly on the educational market and helped subsidise the publication of children's books. This is all true, but what is also true is that there was a belief that reading is important for children and that children deserve the best; and there was a will to do something about it.

Where is that belief and will today? Library and Information Science, both as an academic subject field and a profession, plays a limited, if indeed any noteworthy role in South Africa today.

### **Where do we stand today?**

In the field of children's literature the traditional leadership role of librarianship was based on solid professional education in children's literature (Hart 2002: 29). As Hart mentions, it was aimed firstly at providing the professional competencies needed by children's librarians, but also at enabling the profession to continue taking the lead in the development of children's literature.

Internationally there appears to be a concern over the weakening position of children's librarians in the Library and Information Science profession; over the reduction in the number of children's librarianship and children's literature courses offered as part of librarians' professional education and training; and over the impact on library school curricula of the shrinking of the public library market for new graduates. New information

and communications technologies are putting pressure on library schools to provide courses that equip students with advanced ICT skills. It seems that children's literature courses have lost ground in professional education internationally, and that the library profession is losing its position as a major role player in the domain of children's literature.

In South Africa the current situation is even more pronounced. Children's librarians used to play an important role with regard to the reviewing and criticism of children's books; but where are these reviews today that influenced publishers in the past? Where are the South African librarians today that have any influence on the publication of children's books? Where are the librarians that write about children's literature? What happened to the influence that librarians had in the past on the content of children's books? Have librarians abandoned their role as guardians of children's literature? Is this lack of influence by children's librarians not responsible for the fact that most of the children's books published today in South Africa are rather uninspiring?

As Genevieve Hart puts it:

"If indeed it is abandoning its traditional leadership role in the domain of children's literature, South African librarianship might be abdicating a significant national role" (Hart 2002:29).

The weakening position of children's librarians and children's literature may be an international tendency, but it is one that we simply cannot afford to follow in South Africa.

### **Children's literacy and reading in South Africa**

In late June 2011, the results of the latest National Literacy Assessment tests were announced. In Grade 3, 35% of the children were literate, and in Grade 6, 28% – that means only 28% of the Grade 6 children could read and write properly. For some provinces it was even lower. In Mpumalanga only 12% of Grade 6 children were literate (Bloch 2011:7). This figure is extremely low, even compared to all the other sub-Saharan countries that do not have our resources. According to the South African National Book Council, only 14% of the South African population read, and only 5% of parents read to their children (Ndlovu 2011:3).

Something is seriously wrong. Our children cannot read and therefore do not read. A major issue at the heart of this is the simple inaccessibility of reading matter. Reading is vital for early childhood development. It plays an essential role in the development of reading and writing skills; it exposes children to the wonder of language and it is critical for the development of vocabulary. Reading leads to the command of language without which the ability to create concepts, to reason and to interpret is not possible. Reading has a direct impact on the poor literacy and numeracy levels in South Africa. Reading improves general academic performance and strengthens interpretational abilities. Children who cannot read and write tend to become unemployable adults.

And I am referring to fiction – storybooks: not only does fiction enrich their knowledge of life and the world in which they live; it allows them to take note of a wide variety of human emotions and experiences and to benefit from that; it stimulates their curiosity and thoughts; the literary value of good books helps them to develop an appreciation for the aesthetic. It helps with the development of imagination, empathy and sympathy and the ability to empathise with and understand other people's situations and personalities. A good children's book is like a journey of discovery – a process of discovery, helping children to find order in the world around them and their place in society.

Taking this into account one would say that working with children, making books and information available to them, getting them to read is not only important but a privilege for people in the information profession. However, I believe the Library and Information Science profession has failed in its task of creating informed and literate future citizens. We are failing in our task, although it is well known and obvious that reading is crucially important for children and that it has to be part of their lives.

### **The role of libraries**

The library has a critical role to play in the cultivation of reading and learning, which is the basis for future reading. The library environment is particularly important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds who are unlikely to have books or Internet access at home. And although the rest of this presentation will mostly deal with school libraries, the same can be said about public or community libraries.

Since the 1990s much research has been done all over the world that confirms the positive impact of school libraries on the performance of school children in both developing and developed countries. Pupil performance increased by up to 25% when a school library was stocked and staffed (Marchmont 2010).

Similar studies done in the USA indicate that, all else being equal, learners from schools with libraries serviced by qualified librarians generally achieved higher reading scores. Fourth grade learners improved their results by on average 18% (Bloch & Ndebele 2010:12). What does this research tell us in the information profession?

- That the provision of libraries for children is not a luxury but a necessity
- That a library on its own is insufficient – for a library to be at its most productive, its resources must be managed by a qualified librarian (Bloch & Ndebele 2010:15).

The presence of a qualified librarian improves the average performance of learners significantly at all levels of schooling. A study, *Determinants of Grade 12 pass rates in the post-apartheid South African schooling system* showed that the mean pass rate for schools in South Africa without a library is 47%, compared with 66% for those with a library (Bloch & Ndebele 2010:8).

Library services for children are important in that they can instil a love for books and reading at an early age and encourage a culture of reading and the subsequent patronisation of libraries. The task of the public library is to offer an informal and individualised service to children with the aid of parents and later the school.

Taking into account that very few schools in South Africa have libraries, the importance of the public or community library and qualified librarians cannot be overestimated.

### **Libraries for children in SA**

The importance of children's libraries in a particular community usually depends on the community's perception of children and their place within that community, which in turn determines the place of library services and children's literature there. This unfortunately, does not say much for the South African community's perception of children. And that in a country where children as a group constitute such a large section of the population and the largest group of potential library users.

What is the situation in South Africa?

First of all, school libraries: there are two extremes. On the one hand, the school libraries in some advantaged schools compare well with the best examples in the world – and on the other hand, in the majority of schools, there are no libraries, or where there are libraries, they are very often few shelves of tattered books.

Fewer than 7% of schools in South Africa have a functioning library. Perhaps 21% have some kind of structure called a reading room, but these are usually used as classrooms,

are seldom stocked properly and do not have a library professional in charge to ensure that the right books are there and that they are used properly. The lack of libraries compounds the many problems, such as teachers' poor subject knowledge and poor access to textbooks, that plague our schooling system.

Obviously there are many challenges: the continuing increase of the school-going population, rural poverty, the apartheid heritage of school funding, the high rates of drop-out and learner failure, the huge backlog in basic facilities such as water and electricity, and the poor qualifications and subject knowledge of teachers. But this is no excuse for our reading outcomes, at all grade levels, being among the worst in Africa. Only 5 of the 9 provinces have an active school library support service. And even in the schools in these provinces, the books are often locked up in store rooms or are not used because educators do not know how to use them (Bloch & Ndebele 2010:20).

South Africa has no legislation governing libraries and the LIS sector in general – there are many library authorities at local, provincial and national level, but no overarching body formulates policy for libraries and LI services generally. There is not a single national ministry responsible for the LIS sector – it falls under the Departments of both Education and Arts and Culture. As far as school libraries are concerned, there is no legislation specifically for school libraries. A national policy framework for school library standards was compiled in 1998, but it has never been implemented.

Because there is no national plan to provide libraries for children, the majority of our children are not learning to read. A major issue at the heart of this is the general inaccessibility of reading matter. Because of this situation, the public library sector had to step forward, and has been left with a big burden. For many years they have been doing a sterling job, with limited means and an ever-decreasing budget.

The lack of school libraries and also public libraries for the majority of the population is a legacy of apartheid – yes. But, the truth is that the school library situation has deteriorated since 1994. There is a lack of commitment to policy and a lack of funding for school library positions. Municipalities have downgraded library services, and very often people who are employed in libraries have no professional qualifications. Collections deteriorated, and school libraries were dismantled. The Department of Education's School Libraries Unit was closed in 2002. Because of the impasse on national level, some provincial governments such as Kwazulu-Natal have taken important steps towards addressing this issue themselves, but their progress is hampered by the lack of national policy.

School libraries are simply not the priority of the authorities and lack their support. Public libraries struggle to exist: budgets are cut, opening hours are restricted and unqualified staff members are appointed. There is simply no demand for properly qualified public librarians any more, in particular for librarians with knowledge of children as readers and of reading material that is appropriate for them. I know this may sound simplistic, but the lack of appreciation and respect for our profession means that



Departments of Library and Information Science have been forced to phase out courses dealing with children's librarianship and children's literature – but of course this applies not only to children's librarianship but librarianship in general.

### **Information Science, children's literature and reading by children**

"As institutions of reading, libraries contribute significantly to a culture of reading with an emphasis also on writing and learning. Although reading occurs both inside and outside of libraries, libraries play the leading role in building a nation of life-long readers and learners [...] In addition to their educational and cultural roles, libraries contribute to economic development by improving productivity through a reading and functionally literate workforce" (Bloch & Ndebele 2010:6) It sounds so logical, so self-evident ... Yet, the library and information profession is failing in the role that we could play in the creation of an informed and literate society.

Children's literature used to be an integral part of Librarianship, then of Library Science and later of Library and Information Science; and now we have 'Information Science'. Is it coincidental that this decrease in attention in children's literature occurred with the discarding of the "Library" from the name of our subject field? We in South Africa were anxious to ride the international bandwagon and rid ourselves of the "outdated" term, library, in the designation of our subject field, and not to be associated with the old-fashioned idea of a library. The institution whose doctoral gown I am wearing has

distanced itself completely from librarianship – and openly does not want to be associated with librarianship.

The rationale is that we train for a wide variety of information-related professions: in our case, here at Unisa, specifically also for archives and record offices. One finds Information Science students today in many occupations that show very little similarity with traditional librarianship and libraries. However, we also have to be honest: we thought we would gain more status and attract more students by paying less attention to reading and the book as an information-carrier.

This situation is not entirely of our own making. Academic departments function in academic environments that are nowadays run as a business; and sound academic reasoning sometimes has to take a back seat to economics. Academic departments that train students for a particular profession, in our case, one as diverse as the information profession, are in an even more problematic situation. Unfortunately we have to pay attention to what there is a need for in society, what the profession demands ... and as shown, in South Africa, and Africa as a whole, public libraries are not a priority and services and material for children are not a priority – in this continent where they are needed the most. It is therefore no wonder that students are also not interested. We pay more attention to subjects that are taught at business schools and Departments of Computer Science or Information Technology. The buzz words are ICT and knowledge management, and curricula were adapted accordingly.

It is a fact that we live in the information era and had we not paid attention, other professions and occupations would have taken over our role – which they are in any case doing. Information technology is part and parcel of our profession but it is just a tool and not the alpha and omega. Globalisation brought about a paradigm shift in the conceptual understanding of what libraries are and how they operate. Of course the development of information and communication technologies, computers, telecommunications and optical media has seriously impacted libraries and what they are doing, and the impact is global. The collection, processing and dissemination of information is much faster and also increasingly cheaper. But the one important aspect that is forgotten is the environment in which we function: we live in Africa. In some ways technology increases rather than decreases the problems of African libraries in the provision of information. Unfortunately, most libraries in Africa were not able to take advantage of the gains of globalisation and the power of ICT to improve on their service delivery. This is why ICT and other modern developments should not be seen as the one and only saviours of the information profession.

What distinguishes us even more from the developed world that we imitate so willingly is the level of literacy in Africa, and South Africa, and the fact that the majority of the population of Africa, and South Africa, consists of young people. Knowledge management (and I use this simply as an example) will not teach these children to read and to like reading; it will not make children's books available in the language that their mothers use with them. The irony of the matter is that in most of the academic departments in the developed world that we so slavishly follow, librarianship, and in

particular, children's librarianship, is still very much alive, in many cases even in the names of departments. They did not throw out the children with the bathwater, as happened in South Africa.

When I discussed my lecture with one of my friends, she said, "You cannot end your inaugural lecture on such a negative note". Let me therefore end on a hopeful note. Our hope lies in school librarianship. Two or three departments in the country have kept it alive and our department is planning to reintroduce training – starting with short learning courses to determine whether the potential need that is expressed from time to time, will eventually result in the appointment of more librarians and therefore in the need for a formal course. Since reading in the educational environment will always be associated with school, with something that has to be done, the school library can, however, never substitute the role that the public library can play in developing a love for reading.

I recognise small pockets of hope at Unisa, outside our Department, in the fact that colleagues from different subject fields are busy with research in children's literature. It is still taught in the School of Education and important research is done by Professor Nieman. Professor Johan Coetser and younger colleagues in the Department of Afrikaans are involved. I was particularly pleased with Professor Maurice Vambe's recently delivered inaugural lecture on "The problem of authorising childhood in African children's literature". And then there is Ms Danisile Ntuli, with whom I have been working for many years and who recently received her doctoral degree on children's literature in Zulu. Children's literature in the African languages is an underdeveloped

subject field in South Africa and these colleagues have a crucial role to play. In my department, colleagues are involved in literacy projects where Professor Lilli Pretorius of the Department of Linguistics often takes the lead.

I have to come back to "Information Science" (and I will not mention the Library part again because it does not help to keep on kicking against the pricks) and "technology": and here I want to address my younger colleagues with their interest in technology and modern developments: technology and reading, and technology and specifically children's reading, should not be seen as extremes. The mediating role of us as information scientists, information workers between the user and information, should never be underestimated. The information worker's role is to ensure that the resulting use of computers and telecommunications and any other appropriate technology contributes in cost effective ways to the needs of scholarship and research (Simpson 1984). Librarians are known to have the expertise in acquiring materials in a variety of formats and making them accessible for a variety of purposes. We have to find a useful balance between traditional functions and aims and methods and new challenges.

Technology is often seen as a threat to reading, and to books in particular. The changes brought about by technology in the lives of children cannot be denied, and we as a profession should embrace it. As long ago as 2005 an in-depth survey on electronic media use by young children in the USA showed that young children used computers on the laps of their parents, and that by the age three they could independently turn on the computer, control the mouse and load CD-Roms (Hincliff 2008:47).

We know how much of our children's time is taken up by television and video games. The same American research indicates that 27% of children under age 6 spend an average of 50 minutes **a day** using the computer. Because of the new digital media, and in particular the social media, children are immersed in technology. However, this takes nothing away from the importance of reading (on a computer screen/Kindle/iPad) or being read to, and it takes nothing away from the important role that the library has to play in lives of children.

The important role that technology plays in society will only increase. Librarians should be responsible for providing equitable access to information technology in communities. Libraries should make use of young people's attraction to technological features to get them into the library and to provide information in ways that they can relate to. This may mean buying video games consoles, extra computers and cool software, developing MySpace pages and changing our mindsets – acknowledging, for instance, that children relate more to cellphones and iPods than to reference desks.

Children today find themselves sharing, using and understanding information in ways that were unimaginable a generation ago. Just as information has been reformatted over time, the concept of literacy, more specifically and most recently information literacy like books and music – has gone digital (Borawski 2009:53)

Children use computers to get online for many purposes – socialising, communicating, gaming, researching and audiovisual enjoyment – they are digitally literate – we also have to understand and effectively help them use various sources of information and communication in the digital world (Borawski 2009:53). It is our challenge to introduce children to books and information via mediums other than traditional print. Audio and visual literacy has become very important and we have to be digitally literate ourselves to provide the bridge between the two. We will have to embrace challenges, add value and be proactive when it comes to technology and the new media. This takes nothing away from the important place of reading – quite the opposite: before children and young people can intelligently use ICT, they must be able to push a keyboard and look at images – but to really get the most of information, they must be able to engage with a text, to distinguish, to form and articulate an own meaning – and to do that, they must be able to read.

In contributing to children's literature and reading, also in new formats and ways, librarianship can contribute to the education and culture of a society in a way that perhaps no other profession can. We also cannot afford to abandon our young users and their reading material. Whether our profession will be seen as important in future, and indeed whether we will continue playing a role in the development of the country, will depend on whether we believe that reading is important and whether we really believe that reading children become literature adults; whether we believe that in serving children, we are serving future information users and future well-informed citizens of this country.

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