

It's about who decides what's right or wrong

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You would never have thought there could be so much flap over a children's book about two penguins.

In websites, on blogs and social media, the outpouring of views, both for and against the controversial decision of the National Library Board (NLB) to remove and pulp three children's books continued for more than a week after the news broke.

The Straits Times received more letters from readers on this than any other single subject this year - more than 110, and still counting. This is unprecedented, considering it isn't a bread-and-butter issue that affects people's pockets or livelihood.

You can understand when Singaporeans are unhappy over, say, not being able to withdraw their retirement savings in their Central Provident Fund (CPF). Or with overcrowded buses and trains, and rising health-care and housing costs. But not being able to read, in the children's section of the library, a tale about two male penguins bringing up baby?

When the NLB decided to remove the three books (And Tango Makes Three, The White Swan Express and Who's In My Family), following a complaint that Tango wasn't suitable for children because of its "homosexual" content, it couldn't have expected a tenth of the reaction that followed.

The fallout is an eye-opener, placing another marker along the transition that Singapore society is making to a new political landscape. No one can now say that people here are moved only by issues that affect their wallets.

At first, I thought the debate might have been driven, even hijacked, by gay activists and conservative Christian types who are always engaging in running battles.

But while there is some of that, it would be a mistake to believe this is another pink versus red (or white) dot affair. If it was, it wouldn't have caught fire the way it did.

Neither is it only about the role of public libraries in providing free access to information and knowledge.

Many writers have focused on the importance of keeping libraries open to new and controversial ideas, unburdened by having to decide what is or isn't morally acceptable.

Last week, Dr Carol Soon of the Institute of Policy Studies wrote in The Straits Times: "Other institutions exist to promote moral values. Our libraries should stay true to their core principles of promoting learning and literacy, and use these as their guiding light."

In the opposing camp are those who argue that children who use libraries are vulnerable and should be protected.

This was how an online petition supporting the NLB put it: "The library... should not be a place where parents are afraid their child would be compromised in his vulnerability. It should not be a place where all kinds of sub-cultural beliefs or behaviours are promoted at the expense of children - not for inclusivity, political correctness; anything."

Indeed Singapore isn't the only place where Tango is being debated. In the United States, more people complained about the book's suitability for children than any other book from 2006 to 2008, and again in 2010. Clearly, it is controversial.

But I doubt if the debate in the US was as intense and wide-ranging as it is here. This is because, even though much of the discussion here has been over the proper role of libraries, I believe it wasn't the overriding issue.

Instead there is a much deeper underlying concern that troubles many people, and it has to do with the freedom to decide what is right or wrong especially on matters concerning moral beliefs and values, and not have them decided by a higher authority (unless it's a religious body acting on behalf of its believers).

Worse, if the authority is seen to be unduly influenced by others in society pushing their own interests.

Of course, this concern is grossly exaggerated in the NLB saga. The books are not banned and no one is saying that Singaporeans are prohibited from reading homosexual content. But I'm afraid these details are lost on many.

If I'm not permitted to read material, especially in a public library, that has been decided on my behalf to be harmful to me or my children, that's as good as controlling what I can or cannot believe.

And that's what many people cannot stomach.

In fact, Singaporeans are increasingly questioning the Government's right to control the flow of information.

It was what led to the storm of protests over measures to control online media by requiring some sites to be registered. More recently, theatre practitioners objected to the Media Development Authority's newly introduced self- classification scheme, with many saying the burden of self-censorship would hamper their creative expression.

You can be sure there will be more such battles.

For public institutions like the NLB trying to negotiate these tricky issues, it's important to be crystal clear about their role in serving the public interest. This clarity has to be provided by the leadership of the organisations and not left to individual officers to second guess and decide.

In the case of the NLB, I would have thought the Government's approach to the homosexual issue is a pragmatic one that could have guided the library's decision.

The official view often articulated is that the gay lifestyle isn't part of mainstream Singapore but is a growing reality that can and should be accommodated, provided gays do not push their agenda aggressively. Hence, while the Government knows the contending parties will never see eye-to-eye on this issue, it encourages Singaporeans to adopt a "live and let live" approach.

Applying a live and let live policy would have left those three books alone, recognising that they are part of a growing body of literature on the subject, and that having a few such books in the library doesn't amount to aggressive pushing of the agenda.

Alas, it looks like that was lost on the NLB, resulting in its present predicament.

This is a real pity because it has done a fantastic job over the years of encouraging the reading habit especially among young Singaporeans.

The decision on Friday to reinstate two of the books, but in the adult section, will go some way to repair the damage.

I hope the Government learns from this, not just about public sentiment towards the library, but the more important issue regarding the freedom to access information and to decide what's right or wrong.