

PTAHHRAN MECHANICS' INSTITUTE VICTORIAN HISTORY LIBRARY

140 High Street, Prahran PO Box 1080, Windsor Victoria 3181 Australia
Ph/Fax (03) 9510 3393 www.pmi.net.au library@pmi.net.au

PRESS RELEASE: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

HISTORIC VICTORIAN LIBRARY UNDER THREAT

This is a story of the Prahran Mechanics' Institute (PMI), a small, non-profit community organisation, which created a school and presented its use in 1915 to the Victorian Education Minister, who described it as the best gift the government had ever received.

Unfortunately this is also the story of how that gift has been used by the Minister over recent decades to take advantage of the PMI and rob it of a secure future, while coldly refusing to acknowledge that the PMI, after having gifted what amounts, on present values, to an estimated \$26.5 million over more than 90 years, cannot afford to give any more.

The Prahran Mechanics' Institute Victorian History Library, a 154-year-old Victorian landmark, faces a bleak future – unable to maintain its unique library service within its own High Street building and forced to use its meagre funds to battle for control of its heritage listed buildings, which have been occupied by a large university, rent-free for nearly 20 years.

The PMI is a self-funding organisation and without control of its buildings, the PMI will be unable to maintain its staff, its collection or its services, and there is a significant risk that this important and historic library service could become an irrelevancy. The PMI library contains the only Victorian history collection available for loan to the general public. It is also the home of the archives of the Cinema & Theatre Historical Society (CATHS) and the Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria (MIV).

Melbourne journalist and author Keith Dunstan says, "The PMI is a superb research facility, used by many thousands of citizens and scholars. Unquestionably it has the best collection of local history material in Australia." Frank Van Straten, well known history writer, broadcaster and researcher says that, "It would be awful to lose the PMI library. I live locally and have been a member of the PMI for 24 years and frequently use the local history publications, the CATHS archive and other records held there on micro film. We must ensure that PMI is around to serve the Victorian community for another 154 years!"

For over 15 years Swinburne University has occupied two High Street, Prahran buildings in breach of a lease granted in 1947 by the PMI for the Prahran Technical School, which the PMI established. The technical school was moved from the High Street site in 1971 and was eventually closed by the state government in the 1980s.

The lease granted the Victorian Minister for Education use of the buildings to provide for the *technical school* for a nominal one shilling per year for 99 years. Since the removal of the technical school, and occupation of the site by a university (which is not the responsibility of the lessee), the Victorian Minister for Education is allowing Swinburne University to occupy the buildings without the consent of the PMI and in clear breach of the obligations under the Lease.

Swinburne University has refused repeated requests from the PMI to enter into a new lease that would allow the PMI to secure its future. The PMI believes that the real lessee – the Victorian Minister for Education – has over decades taken advantage of the PMI by not being prepared to properly and fairly reconsider the matter.

After exhausting all other alternatives, on 4 May 2009 the PMI was forced to issue a legal notice to the Victorian Minister for Education to arrange the removal of Swinburne University from the PMI's buildings within 90 days.