



Inquiry into the NSW State Records Act and the Policy Paper on its Review

Australian Historical Association Submission.

The Australian Historical Association (AHA) is the peak national body of historians which includes academic, professional and other historians working in all fields of history. The AHA currently has over 800 members ranging from established scholars, to mid-career, early career historians, and to students. The AHA hosts an annual conference and produces the journal *History Australia* which is published four times a year.

Members of the AHA are active users of the collections of the State Records and Sydney Living Museums. The proposed reforms will have a direct impact on our members and their ability to conduct essential historical research.

Response to the Policy Paper on State Records Act 1998 (NSW)

The AHA commends the NSW government for its commitment to support and value the state's history, archives and material heritage. We welcome the proposed policy outcomes which seek to ensure that government records are collected, preserved and made accessible to the public, and we endorse all efforts to encourage responsible record keeping, which supports good governance, decision making, and transparency. We do, however, have some concerns about the proposed reforms outlined in the policy paper.

The AHA supports the aim stated in the review to increase the visibility of the archives, enhancing community engagement with collections and supporting moves to use the archives to tell the history of NSW. However, the policy paper suggests a significant change to the role and purpose of the State Archives and Records Authority of NSW. It proposes that the archives expand its mandate to 'deliver programs to activate the collection' (p.3). The primary purpose of the SARA is recordkeeping regulation; management and access to State archives; and commercial storage and associated services for government agencies. Community engagement is already an implied part of their existing mandate, achieved through various outreach activities. This outreach could be strengthened further by initiatives such as a program of research fellowships, similar to those offered by the State Library of NSW and National Library of Australia.

Like our colleagues in the Professional Historian's Association, **we maintain that State Archives should be focussing on improving access to records, not undertaking a major change in purpose to 'activating' their collections.** Engaging the community through exhibitions and other forms of outreach does not constitute access to the collections. Archival collections are crucial to historical research. Archival repositories perform the critical role of

arranging, describing, preserving archival collections, and facilitating access to them. State Archives should be dealing primarily with managing access to the archival collections.

Access to the documentary heritage of NSW has long been hampered by budget cuts to the State Archives. Government record keeping and the maintenance of state archives is important government business that should be funded by the government, not philanthropic donations. Funding cuts have curtailed public access to State Records collections in numerous ways, including:

- The closing of the city access point in 2012;
- The reduction of access days in the Western Reading Room in 2019;
- The lack of investment in the digital catalogue, and particularly, the lack of investment in the digitisation of records.

These accessibility problems not only impact on NSW citizens, but interstate and international researchers seeking to use the collections. We suggest that improving access to the digital catalogue and expanding digitised collections be urgently prioritised in this review process.

The AHA supports the recommended reduction for the open access period to 20 years but cautions that implementation must be mindful of privacy concerns, the handling of sensitive information and freedom of information legislation. Any change to the access period could result in government ministers or agencies choosing to retain sensitive records, and new measures to test, measure and enforce compliance may need to be introduced. The policy paper is also silent on the particular needs of Indigenous communities in accessing records.

The AHA does not support the creation of a new executive agency comprising State Records and Archives NSW and Sydney Living Museums. While the goal of delivering ‘richer, more heterogeneous stories about our social, historical and cultural identity’ is valuable and important, it is not at all clear how this new executive agency will achieve this goal and the other policy outcomes. Sydney Living Museums manages an important collection of historic properties in NSW and they run site-specific education and outreach programs very successfully; but their expertise is very different to that of the State Records and Archives, just as the two collections are very different. Any combining of the two organisations would require more staff to achieve the proposed outcomes and risks diluting the core remit and funding for both entities. The proposed new agency would also exclude many of the key organisations involved in history making in NSW: galleries, libraries, universities, other museums, independent historians and other historical organisations. Finally, if the NSW government aims to ‘enhance public access to and use of our documentary and material heritage’, it is vital that historians are represented on the governing board of any new entity that emerges from this review. Historical perspectives are vital to decision-making in State Records, and in government more broadly.

Professor Joy Damousi,

President

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