



## **Australian Historical Association Response to the Functional and Efficiency Review of the National Archives of Australia**

The Australian Historical Association (AHA) is the peak national body of historians and students which includes academic, professional and other historians working in all fields of history.

We welcome the release of the *Functional and Efficiency Review of the National Archives of Australia* (the ‘Tune Review’) on 12 March 2021. The Tune Review draws attention to the urgent need for increased funding to ensure that the National Archives of Australia (NAA) is able to secure public access to its riches, preserve at-risk materials, and collect digital and other records from agencies for future researchers. The NAA’s holdings are an irreplaceable part of the nation’s cultural heritage and of enormous significance to Australians. They capture not only the elites but, in fields of government activity such as immigration, war and repatriation, and through the records of royal commissions and enquiries and the correspondence files of political leaders, the words and voices of many ordinary people. Such people—whether women, First Nations peoples, immigrants, the sick and the poor—have not always been adequately represented in historical scholarship.

We despair, however, at the 14-month delay in releasing this Review. We do not believe that this delay is an appropriate response to the scale and importance of the problem or to the significance of the materials involved.

We therefore call on the Federal Government to take urgent steps to ensure that our documentary heritage is not lost forever.

1. The AHA welcomes the report’s recognition that making records accessible to the public has been unsatisfactory in many respects, largely because of long delays in clearing open period records for research. Delays have occurred not over months but years, ensuring that both the 20-year rule and the 90-day provision in the *Archives Act* 1983 (amended to 90 business days from 2019) have become dead letters for many types of research. We agree with the Tune Review that part of the solution will be technological, part of it a matter of increasing resources, and partly a more sensible approach to consultation with the originating agencies for records of low sensitivity.
2. The AHA fully supports the need for a program of digitisation to preserve at-risk records. Yet the fact that only 37% of the collection is described and discoverable through RecordSearch is worrying. The report gives insufficient weight to the discoverability of the collection. Most of the existing collection will never be digitised but researchers need to be able to find these materials.
3. The Australian War Memorial (AWM), which plays a key role in the preservation of unique objects and documents, is not subject to the same fiscal disciplines as the NAA. Yet, like the AWM, the NAA is responsible for preserving and making accessible Australia’s military heritage, including the individual war records of Australian service personnel and a rich collection of materials concerned with Australians at war and in military service. It does not make sense to treat military heritage as worthy of extensive government funding when housed in one repository but with indifference if located in another. We believe that government needs

to find a more balanced approach to funding the preservation and public access to these important national records by directing resources on the basis of need: and in this case, the NAA's need to preserve the nation's precious records from being lost forever.

4. We are concerned about the emphasis in the review on the introduction of new fees (Recommendation 15). If the NAA is to fulfill its legal obligations and to foster ethical, accountable and transparent government, access must not become the privilege only of those who can afford it.
5. Increasing the budget for marketing in the current financial climate seems a misuse of scarce resources. We commend the report for favouring other priorities over a new building.
6. One function of the NAA—to encourage and foster the preservation of all other archival resources relating to Australia—is not examined in any detail in this report. The NAA's profile and reach means that, with appropriate support, the organisation has the remit to be a leader in fostering the documentation of Australian society and history. However, this will only prove possible with appropriate resourcing, and a reframing of the strategic scope and direction of the organisation.
7. There is a lack of clarity surrounding the ability of the NAA to implement the ambitious Government Information Management Model (GIMM) in Recommendation 5. The NAA should be at the heart of government decision-making about 'information management and policy standards', but the organisation must also maintain its independence from the agenda of the government agencies with which it deals and ensure that it is advancing the legitimate rights and interests of its user stakeholders in the wider Australian community.
8. The AHA calls on the government to appoint at least one University-based historian to the National Archives Advisory Council. The AHA would welcome the opportunity to work with the NAA on this vital matter of representation.

The National Archives of Australia is for all Australians. It holds our past and our future; if we do not act to preserve our cultural heritage and our stories, no one is going to do it for us.

It is dangerous to democracy and to scholarship to starve the NAA of the funds it needs to do its job. Our precious cultural heritage should not be subjected to continuing, and debilitating, efficiency dividends.

As our executive committee member Professor Michelle Arrow has reminded us (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 May 2021), 'There's no back-up copy of these documents sitting in another country's National Archives. They aren't on google, or YouTube. If we allow them to be destroyed through neglect, they are gone forever'.

Professor Melanie Oppenheimer FASSA

President

Australian Historical Association