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Mr. David Tune
c/- Tune Review Secretariat
National Archives of Australia
Queen Victoria Terrace
PARKES ACT 2600

Dear Mr. Tune,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the Functional and Efficiency Review of the National Archives that you are leading. I am grateful to the Review Secretariat for permission to make a late submission. I wish to offer several suggestions in relation to how the National Archives might best perform its crucial roles of protecting, preserving and enabling use of Commonwealth information.

Context for this Submission

By way of context, I note the frequency of concerns expressed in other submissions about Archives' urgent need for additional resources to meet its statutory obligations, including for timely decision-making and to protect 'at risk' records. I also note that the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories made similar recommendations on Archives' resourcing needs in its recent Report on its *Inquiry into Canberra's national institutions*. The need for innovation – including through digitisation and other technology-based strategies – to improve and sustain collection management and access strategies is a challenge faced by all of Australia's national institutions that collect documentary records. I am aware that other national institutions, notably the National Library of Australia, have received specific Budget funding to help modernise their collection management and access strategies, and to protect records that would otherwise be at risk. While my suggestions below would add to Archives' needs for additional resourcing, I submit that funding for such strategies is also essential for the utility and viability of Archives' services.

Many Review submissions have focused on the importance of the National Archives in enabling academic scholarship and research by individuals interested in Australian civic history or genealogy. In contrast, I write from the perspective of concern about National Archives' current capacity to perform its essential role in the practice of public administration.

My background explains this focus. I was formerly an Australian Public Service officer, and worked in diverse portfolios from graduate entry to Senior Executive levels, in a wide range of policy development, service delivery, corporate support and accountability roles. I now run a consulting practice which has for over 20 years provided services to APS agencies, to government agencies and publicly-funded institutions in all State and Territory jurisdictions, and to clients in other sectors – in academia as well as the non-government and private sectors – who work closely with the Commonwealth public service.

The present APS-wide context is very relevant to the current Review of National Archives. To summarise current circumstances of Commonwealth public administration with which you are no doubt familiar: there is wide-ranging concern about the capability of the APS to operate with sufficient expertise to meet present and emerging requirements.

Academic analyses and ‘grey literature’ have highlighted the decline in public sector capabilities that rely on accessing information about, and learning from, past experiences in public administration. “Political Amnesia” and “thinning out” of public sector capabilities are recognised risks in Australia and internationally, particularly where functions have been outsourced and/or under-resourced. For over a decade, various reviews of Commonwealth performance and capabilities have highlighted growing risks to the quality of APS policies, programs and service delivery. From ANAO reports, to targeted reviews following performance problems (e.g., Shergold’s 2015 *Learning from Failure: why large government policy initiatives have gone so badly wrong in the past and how the chances of success in the future can be improved*), through to the current Thodey Review of the APS, a frequent call is for action to build, and leverage, public sector learning and evaluation capabilities.

Issue 1: Archives’ holdings as a resource for effective APS performance

Other Submissions have noted how such APS-wide pressures are constraining Archives’ performance capabilities. I submit that there is a larger, and systemic risk: if National Archives cannot properly perform its core functions of protecting, preserving and enabling use of Commonwealth information, then APS agencies will not have access to an essential resource for policy and administrative learning and evaluation.

My experience over many years is that very few APS staff understand the information that is available to them from Archives, and thus cannot take advantage of the historical wisdom that should be taken from its collections. I offer one revealing anecdotal example. A Graduate recruit was given a major project that required analysing likely issues and opportunities that could arise if a potential national policy direction was pursued. Expected to take most of one rotation, the task actually took only days – because the Graduate (who had used Archives’ resources while writing a thesis) took the initiative to search Archives for past related Commonwealth initiatives, and discovered a Cabinet submission from a previous exploration of the same policy proposition. Not only had the Graduate’s managers been unaware of that policy history, it apparently had not occurred to them to take an historically-informed approach to their current policy work. Nor were they aware that Archives’ trove of government documents, including Cabinet records (once released), could be searched quite simply. I submit that Commonwealth policy and public administration would be better served if APS staff were educated about Archives’ holdings, to enable learning from prior experiences. Similarly, evaluation of current and potential programs would be facilitated if more APS staff knew how to utilise Archives’ holdings. There are also circumstances where Archives’ records are vital to determining an individual’s entitlements to Government services and supports. While that is understood in some parts of the APS, such as the Department of Veterans’ Affairs, a wider understanding could improve decision-making in individual cases.

I therefore suggest that ***Archives’ functional remit should be expanded to include an active role in building the capabilities of APS staff to make use of Commonwealth information holdings.*** This would require more specialist advisory services than the Archives’ general public engagement work, which is recognised in other submissions including from the Australian Library and Information Association. A practical possibility could be that Archives could develop a training module that could be delivered to Graduate recruits in all agencies, and/or similar approaches for staff recruited into higher positions.

Issue 2: Ensuring that APS agencies contribute to Archives' work as required

A second, and related, area for attention is the need to ensure that all APS staff understand and are able to deliver on their obligations to contribute to the National Archives' information holdings. I note that the submission from the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia expresses concern that some APS agencies do not demonstrate a commitment, and/or do not provide the resources required, to enable the Archives to deliver its responsibilities. The fact that it appears, from my (admittedly quick) skim of submissions to date, that no APS Department or Agency has made a submission to this Review may reinforce the concern about inadequate cultural commitment from some APS agencies which ASSA expressed.

I therefore suggest that, in considering governance frameworks for the National Archives, your **Review should consider how to ensure that all APS agencies actively comply with their practical obligations to make complete and timely deposits into, and release decisions regarding, Archives' holdings.** I believe that attention to this would help to give practical effect to aspirations articulated through the Thodey APS Review process, in regard to bringing to life the APS Values of public accountability, transparency in practice, etc.

A related governance matter that warrants specific consideration is how to ensure that the National Archives receives all Commonwealth information that is generated by outsourced service provision arrangements. I propose that the **Review should assess the adequacy of provision of information to Archives by entities that are contracted by APS agencies to advise on, develop, deliver and/or evaluate services.** There could be value in assessing the need/potential to refine the Commonwealth Procurement Roles to ensure all information is provided to Archives as would be required if the work was not outsourced.

Issue 3: Connecting Archives' documentary holdings with related data holdings

My final suggestion relates to links between the National Archives and the Australian Data Archive (ADA) that is based at the Australian National University.

Increasingly, Commonwealth policy decisions and administrative arrangements are informed by substantial data analyses. Departmental initiatives such as Prime Minister and Cabinet's BETA unit for applying behavioural insights to public policy, and Social Services' "Try, Test and Learn" experiments, rely on substantial data and complex data analyses. In future, a comprehensive collection of Commonwealth information will require both documentary and data holdings to be preserved and accessible in parallel. Evaluation over time will also be supported by researchers having access to the original data, so it can be re-analysed using new methodologies and/or for emerging research questions. The ADA holds, and provides public access to, a number of key Commonwealth data sets, including Longitudinal Studies. I suggest that the **Review should assess the effectiveness of current connections between the National Archives and the Australian Data Archive, and suggest any governance or functional enhancements required** to facilitate the effectiveness of National Archives in protecting, preserving and enabling use of Commonwealth information.

I would be happy to expand on my Submission if that would be of use to your Review.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Swift