



Mr David Tune AO PSM  
Independent Reviewer  
c/o Tune Review Secretariat  
National Archives of Australia  
Queen Victoria Terrace  
Parkes ACT 2600

7 June 2019

Dear Mr Tune,

I am grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to the Functional and Efficiency Review of the National Archives of Australia. I have been using the records of the NAA for around 25 years, initially as a PhD student in Modern History, and then as an academic in the field of media history. I have worked in the reading rooms located in Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth. I access RecordSearch on a weekly – sometimes daily – basis.

The NAA plays a vital role in preserving, organising and making accessible records documenting the history, and democracy, of our nation. I cannot stress enough how integral NAA material has been in the writing of my four books about the history of the Australian media, as well as my editing of *A Companion to the Australian Media*, and my two current projects: a history of Australian radio and television audiences, and a collaborative cultural history of ABC Radio National.

My first foray into the NAA began with a visit to the Sydney reading room, then located near Central Station, in the early 1990s. Since then, skilled and committed archivists across Australia have helped me to locate and identify relevant records, and apply for access when files have been ‘not yet examined’, ‘open with exception’ or closed. I, in turn, have enthusiastically directed postgraduate students to relevant records in the NAA, and encouraged these students to seek advice from the archivists who have assisted me.

Over my 25-year association with the NAA, I have been concerned by the contraction in reading room services. The main reading room in Canberra is no longer open on Saturdays, a day when workers may be most able to visit. The reading rooms in Sydney and Melbourne are now only open Wednesdays to Fridays. It is now much more difficult for researchers needing to access Sydney records to do so at Villawood. I do understand that the decision to close the CBD reading room would have been due to cost, and is unlikely to be reversed. However, the impact on researchers is substantial. It takes much longer for most researchers to get to and from the reading room. Researchers from interstate and overseas working on major projects discover that they can only visit the reading room a maximum of 3 days a week, and not past 4.30pm. This means that researchers need to book and pay for longer stays in Sydney (or Melbourne), or are deterred from working on all the material of relevance to them in the reading rooms. If research shows that onsite visits to the Sydney reading room are down, the Review should be mindful of the fact that Villawood is not an easy (especially via public transport) or, quite frankly, a pleasant location to visit.

It has become clear to me, and my colleagues and students who regularly work in the NAA, that staff members are stressed, and struggling to deliver the services they believe users deserve, due to cutbacks and efficiency dividends over several years. And yet more and more is expected of the NAA, as the open access period transitions from 30 to 20 years. Professor Anne Twomey has recently written a disturbing account of significant delays in clearing applications for access. The NAA needs the resources to keep monitoring, and pushing for the resolution of, outstanding referrals back to Commonwealth agencies.

The digitisation of records is a challenge that confronts all collecting institutions. The NAA should be given dedicated funding to address at least one challenge in this area as a matter of urgency: digitising magnetic tapes that are predicted to become redundant by 2025. As a broadcast historian, I have a special insight into the cultural importance of this material.

I suggest another specific project: digitising the accession registers of all series (not yet completely listed in RecordSearch) held in the reading rooms. This would mean that researchers would no longer have to travel interstate simply to look at accession registers for series that have not been fully or partly listed on RecordSearch. Also, when archivists are responding to application for access to multiple items in one series, the NAA might (if it does not already) consider the logistics and efficiencies of digitising all items in the series (if it is not large) or at least items with consecutive numbers.

While the NAA sensibly makes print items that have been requested by other researchers for digitisation available online, the cost of this on-demand service has, I believe, recently increased, serving as another barrier to access.

Given the NAA's commitment to sharing its records with the public, it is most regrettable that the Frederick Watson Fellowship has not been offered since 2013, again I believe due to resourcing constraints. I urge its reinstatement.

Finally, I realise that the Cabinet Historian serves a unique role in Australia. I wonder how well-resourced and remunerated this role is given the volume of material they work through and analyse. The incumbent could be named and featured on the NAA website, and also used to help deepen connections with other historians in Australian universities. I also urge the appointment of an academic historian or historians to the NAA's Advisory Council.

In conclusion, I have a fundamental belief in the NAA's mission, and in the dedication of its staff. But I am very concerned that the NAA is struggling to fulfil its mission due to resourcing constraints, and urge the Review and the government to address this as a matter of national urgency.

Thanking you for your consideration,



Professor Bridget Griffen-Foley FAHA

