

Prof. Peter Stanley  
29 June 2019

Mr David Tune  
c/o National Archives of Australia

**Submission to the 'Tune Review', 2019**

Dear Mr Tune

I am glad that the National Archives of Australia has asked you to conduct this review and would like to offer views that may assist you and ultimately contribute to the development of a more effective national archives.

I am making this submission as an individual, representing my personal views. Professionally, since 2013. I have been Research Professor in history at UNSW Canberra. Before that I headed the Research Centre at the National Museum of Australia (207-13) and before that was Principal Historian at the Australian War Memorial, where I worked from 1980 to 2007. I have published 36 books, mainly in Australian military-social history, many of which drew on National Archives records. I believe I am correct in claiming to have a wider experience of archival research internationally than any historian I know. I was the founding President of Honest History (2013-17).

Having just reviewed the very first notes I took in what was then Australian Archives, in 1981, the value of the contribution that the National Archives has made to my work over nearly forty years is very much in the forefront of my mind as I contemplate the questions posed in your review. I was one of the earliest beneficiaries of the *Archives Act* of 1983 and am saddened and frustrated by what has occurred over the past decade or more in the way successive governments have taken the National Archives for granted and by neglect, unthinking discrimination and doctrinaire budgetary policy, have eroded its capacity to give the Australian people and their government the archival system the 1983 *Act* envisaged.

A functioning archive is one of the foundations and safeguards of a secure democracy. Sadly, and regrettably, Australia's national archives has been persistently under-valued and under-funded for many years. In common with several other Commonwealth cultural institutions, it has been treated poorly by successive governments by being gradually starved of resources under the Orwellian 'Efficiency Dividend'. This destructive policy has inexorably compelled the archives to reduce and cut functions, services and staffing, dilute standards, close branches, reduce opening hours and become less efficient; now dangerously so. The National Archives' inability to meet not only the expectations it has helped to arouse but even its only legislative conditions (in archival clearance times, for example) makes a mockery of the intentions and aspirations of the framers of the 1983 *Act*.

The cuts inflicted on the National Archives have subjected archives staff (who naturally want to meet the standards that the archives used to achieve) to continuing stress, leading to pervasive disillusionment and demoralisation. The National Archives' shortcomings inflict on researchers many impediments, from the inconvenience of being unable to consult records as freely and easily as was once the case to actual costs (especially for researchers living distant from the surviving repositories). Technological expedients, such as digitisation, have

not offered the panacea that zealots have offered. All of these shortcomings and deficiencies, which have now continued for many years, continue to actively harm the conduct of research by all categories of researchers.

Whereas when the *Archives Act* was introduced in 1983 Australia had arguably one of the best national archival services, the reduction of budgets and the inequitable distribution of funding has gradually reduced that standing. Now, Australia should not only be embarrassed at the standard of archival service the National Archives delivers, but the diminution of services and standards is now actually harming the conduct of academic research and even the functioning of our democracy. The issue of clearance times and quantities, to which other submissions allude, is critical.

As has been abundantly documented, government departments (and several large and powerful ones in particular) treat the National Archives and its users with contempt. By limiting the number of requests researchers are allowed to submit, the National Archives has become complicit in the closing of government to public and scholarly scrutiny: reprehensibly. A pluralist democracy such as ours depends upon institutions such as an independent judiciary, a free press, and the adherence to conventions such as governments untainted by corruption and the observance of the rule of law. Among the most precious, but often overlooked, enablers of open government is the expectation that official decisions and actions should be subject to the scrutiny of scholars, journalists and indeed citizens generally. This freedom is threatened by recent decisions made by National Archives under the impulse of the constraints I have mentioned.

As you know, the *Archives Act* of 1983 established reasonable procedures to enable researchers to obtain records after proper scrutiny and clearance under clear criteria. That process has now become unworkable, not just because National Archives struggles to meet all of the expectations placed upon it, but principally because several government departments decline to play their part in releasing records, even though they fall in the open period. Risk-averse departmental officials evidently seek to conceal records which citizens are entitled to see. National Archives is dependent upon those departments releasing documents. Regrettably and reprehensibly, rather than confront departmental inertia and secrecy, National Archives has penalised researchers seeking records by limiting their ability to request files. A national archive must inherently mediate the relationship between researchers' needs to know and a government's need to operate with a degree of discretion, at least until records can safely be opened, but recent developments have seriously disturbed this balance. In the interests of restoring that equilibrium the National Archives needs to fundamentally re-think that relationship.

The entire basis of the present clearing procedure is wrong-headed. Rather than making researchers ask permission to consult records (requests that are dragged out, denied for inadequate reasons and now made increasingly difficult) National Archives should adopt as a policy that *all* government records should be automatically opened after, say, 20 years, unless departments can show good reasons under strictly limited conditions (for example 'national security' – and not 'potentially embarrassing' to departments, officials or politicians). Those responsible for devising and implementing archival policy in this nation appear to have forgotten that governments serve citizens, and in the interests of open government national archival policies must change.

You will observe that I am not only not critical of many aspects of the National Archives' work, I am warmly appreciative of it and its staff. While I do not agree with all of the decisions it has made (for example the undue focus on war records, the closing of branches, limiting opening hours, charging for services, and so on) I understand why it has made many of those decisions. It has also managed to maintain some functions at a high level, such as its excellent exhibition program (and especially its travelling exhibitions, which takes the National Archives to the nation) and its fellowship and internship programs, which are warmly appreciated by the historical profession particularly.

Of course the National Archives has been skewed by the broader circumstances in which it operates. In a general climate of budgetary stringency, for example, while a massive amount of money is made available for war remembrance, of course the archives will be inclined to focus on Anzacs, regardless of the justification historically for doing so. This offers a reminder that the archives has not necessarily done what is best (retaining records in states, maintaining branches across the nation, clearing records requested by researchers) but has increasingly been obliged to do what it can, making the best of the poor hand a short-sighted and stupid policy (the efficiency dividend', and all that that entails and follows) deals it. (I will leave to archival experts to speculate and pronounce on how National Archives can possibly deal with preserving and making available official records in a period when files are digital, but even a relative non-specialist can see that *reducing* budgets at a time of uncertainty and increasing demand is a foolish policy, though sadly not one the archives can solve alone and without substantial additional funding.)

It is easy for us to take our system of National Archives for granted. That is exactly what governments of all stripes have done. It is also clear that departmental officials have taken National Archives not only for granted (in assuming it will store records over which they essentially retain control) but has taken National Archives for a patsy, leaving it to carry the blame for departmental inertia and secrecy. Rather than advocating for the needs of the researchers who desperately need records, National Archives has unfortunately sided with its fellow bureaucrats, privileging their desire for security from scrutiny above the needs of citizens who rightly seek to consult public records which should be in the public domain.

If your review can open a constructive and open debate about what National Archives is for, who it should serve, how and how we value it; if it can help to redress a decade or more of dilution and erosion in standards of service and archival responsibility, then you will have made a very considerable contribution to restoring Australia's national archival system to the position of esteem it once deservedly enjoyed.

I would be glad to elaborate upon this submission. From 4 July I will be overseas on an extended research sabbatical but can be contacted.

With best wishes  
Yours sincerely

Prof. Peter Stanley