

## **Introduction**

I am an Arts graduate, with a Grad Dip that gave me a basic understanding of economics and accounting. I am politically left of centre, pro-republic and progressive on social issues.

I worked for the National Archives from 1978 to 2006, mostly on project work to do with records disposal, description and storage. I look back positively on my time in the organisation. I had the opportunity to take on interesting and challenging tasks and my achievements were recognised.

I have also done occasional research using the collection<sup>1</sup>.

In the course of my research, I have been confronted twice by the alarming reality that Commonwealth records of great historical significance really can be lost forever, even despite having been registered and described by the National Archives, and formally protected by coverage in records authorities.

In 2003, while researching Australian economists' attempts to deal with the Great Depression, I became aware of the unauthorised destruction, via negligent agency sentencing, of several 1930s Treasury policy files cited in (former NAA Advisory Council member) Boris Schedvin's history of the Great Depression.

The second case involved me personally. In 1980, in the course of my work in arranging the transfer of records to archival custody, I was contacted by the retiring Commonwealth Crown Solicitor, Charles Morrison, who wanted to transfer a small collection of records.

I visited Mr Morrison and learned that in the early 1970s, he had gone to Papua New Guinea as part of an Australian Government mission to educate as much as possible of the entire local population in concepts of democracy, in preparation for the country's independence. With the help of native speakers, Morrison produced a set of instructive scripts in pidgin that rendered democratic concepts intelligible to tribal villagers by expressing them in terms drawn from their own lives, like looking after domestic animals and attending sing-sings. Quite apart from their obvious historical significance, they were absolutely fascinating to read.

Some years ago, after retiring from the APS, I applied as a private researcher to see these records (AA1980/62) and discovered they had been withdrawn from custody and destroyed by their current controlling agency, as a consequence of incorrect sentencing.

## **Submission**

This submission provides comments on the following of the review's Terms of Reference:

2a) The functions performed by the National Archives in discharging its role, and any functions it should cease, continue, transfer or commence;

2b) The capability and resourcing of the National Archives to efficiently and effectively fulfil its essential functions;

2e) The feasibility and efficiency of alternative approaches to fulfil its outcomes and functions including identifying the benefits, costs, risks and any other relevant considerations

---

<sup>1</sup> Chiefly, research commissioned by the Archives' Public Programs section in 2003/4 to research records on the economist LF Giblin for possible feature as one of a series of Collection Snapshots. The idea ultimately did not proceed, as most of the interesting records directly about Giblin proved to be in the National Library.

## Comments against the identified Terms of Reference

2a) The functions performed by the National Archives in discharging its role, and any functions it should cease, continue, transfer or commence;

2e) The feasibility and efficiency of alternative approaches to fulfil its outcomes and functions including identifying the benefits, costs, risks and any other relevant considerations

Resource limitations are leading the Archives to a 'distributed custody' approach, where Government agencies take responsibility for preserving and publicising their non-current records of enduring value. From my past experience, agencies were neither resourced nor culturally equipped to look after their older records once they lost administrative relevance and political sensitivity. I doubt this has changed.

Regardless of whatever preservation goals agencies might commit to, their own needs to preserve a corporate history are likely to be satisfied by a limited and superficial selection favouring conspicuous successes, quaint curiosities and notable individuals. Just look at the content displayed on the 'About Us – Our History' webpages of many long-established corporations.

It will not serve an agency's corporate interest to make an effort to preserve records that display the agency unfavourably. But by far the biggest risk to agencies' permanent value records will not be deliberately targeted neglect, but a general lack of care and interest.

This is not just a problem of costly shelf space that will be solved via the replacement of paper records by electronic recordkeeping systems. In the electronic records context, inadequate record description jeopardises the preservation of important records and makes it likely the record will not be found in a later search. For example, a specific case can be highly significant and lead to a fundamental change in policy, but if the case record does not include the word 'policy' in its title, its survival and retrieval will not be assured. But at the time, everyone in the agency, and half the ABC media audience, knew about the Bloggs case, so where was the need to slap a 'policy' handle on it?

Moreover, even if the records are properly described at the point of their creation, and correctly 'sentenced on creation', a point will be reached where their migration to current electronic recordkeeping systems cannot be justified from the agency's perspective. No malfeasant intent, just lack of money.

What this means is that, if the Archives is uninterested in the fate of records, they will be just as good as gone.

It will not be enough for the Archives to be required to monitor agency recordkeeping practices, and empowered to detect and punish instances of culpable practice. It has had something resembling those functions for thirty-six years, and I doubt it has ever used them.

**The only effective solution is proactive intervention by the Archives to secure the prompt transfer of agencies' most significant permanent value records to the Archives' custody for preservation.**

If there is no alternative to distributed custody for the generality of agencies' permanent value records, then the Archives must make it its business to:

- learn about what the whole spectrum of agencies do, and be able to identify which of their functions are likely to generate permanent value records of the greatest public significance.
- keep aware of current events and issues (not just Royal Commissions) to identify any such records, which may include records of highly significant cases as well as 'policy' records
- if the records are in electronic format, arrange transfer to archival custody of authentic copies for high security storage, as soon as possible
- if in paper format, arrange for their transfer to archival custody as soon as administrative use has ceased.

2b) The capability and resourcing of the National Archives to efficiently and effectively fulfil its essential functions;

It will challenge the Archives to approach the broad range of Australian Government functions in this actively acquisitive way.

The Archives has for long had an unacknowledged set of acquisitional priorities. This has evolved through a combination of responding to areas of established research interest and, more recently, efforts to elevate the Archives' public profile by publicising records of compelling episodes in Australian social history. (I am discounting the period during the 1970s when the Archives rushed to fill its new repositories with whatever it could get – the eclecticism of this approach was a good thing in some ways, not in others.)

When I left the Archives, the legacy of this mindset was that the permanent value records of certain current Departments and agencies were much more likely to be accepted into the Archives' custody, or indeed actively sought after, than those of other Departments. They included records of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Foreign Affairs, Attorney-General's, Royal Commissions, the intelligence agencies, and some areas of Home Affairs and Defence<sup>2</sup>, together with anything constitutionally significant (eg 'the republic') or relating to indigenous rights or human rights generally. Agencies with a particularly appealing function, like Antarctic research, might also receive favour. But records of the vast range of other Government functions were not actively sought after.

If, in the age of distributed custody, the Archives takes a passive approach to the fate of all but a favoured set of Government records, the consequence of this practical lack of interest will be the disappearance of records relevant to issues of significant public interest, regardless of whether they are formally covered in records authorities or not. For example, consider the case records generated by APRA before and after the HIH insurance collapse<sup>3</sup>, those generated by the former Pharmaceutical Benefits Pricing Authority to do with negotiating the high PBS price paid for the lipid medication atorvastatin<sup>4</sup>, and those generated recently by CSIRO's examination of the proposed Adani mine's water plan<sup>5</sup>. Agency staff just can't be relied on to recognise the policy significance of these case records at the time of their creation, let alone many years later.

(The foregoing examples reflect my politics, but conservatives might nominate cases demonstrating: waste of funds via 'picking winners'; questionable dealings with unions; hasty ventures into funding radical social programs, etc.)

---

<sup>2</sup> Immigration and war service case records

<sup>3</sup> <https://treasury.gov.au/publication/economic-roundup-issue-1-2015/economic-roundup-issue-1/the-hih-claims-support-scheme/3-aftermath-of-the-hih-collapse> section 3.4

<sup>4</sup> [https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Australias\\_Bad\\_Drug\\_Deal\\_FINAL.pdf](https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Australias_Bad_Drug_Deal_FINAL.pdf) p2

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-14/adani-csiro-emails-foi-melissa-price/11107276>

Implementing the approach I am recommending might require the Archives to deliberately broaden its staff selection to include graduates in a broader range of disciplines. It might also need to employ consultants in those disciplines to identify emerging issues and recommend interventions.<sup>6</sup>

The approach might also have implications for the composition of the Archives' Advisory Council, most of whose current members' backgrounds seem likely to confirm the acquisitional preferences identified above. I wonder for example, if one of Australia's former Chief Scientists would be interested in joining the Council.

In the following paragraphs, I go into more detail about records of economic management to illustrate the general points I have made so far.

### *Records of economic management*

It is unquestionably a good thing that the Archives has been able to build a public profile by publicising Government records documenting the dramatic national events of fifty or more years ago, like world wars and mass immigration.

But for most Australians alive now, the national events of greatest personal impact have been those to do with economic management. Think of: 'the recession we had to have', the GFC recession we avoided, the end of tariff protection and the decline of manufacturing, the retreat from aggressive wage bargaining since the Accord, and the consequences of the privatisation and marketisation of services. The major economic decisions and actions of our national Government surrounding these events have filled the news and affected our lives.

To date, the Archives' public presentation of historic records relating to economic events has focused on older records documenting the social impact of the Great Depression ('Working for the Dole'), and Government involvement in postwar reconstruction (eg reviving the building industry to address housing needs). The research guides on these topics are very good, but **the Archives should now progress to the challenge of presenting records from more recent decades that directly document key aspects of Government's economic management.**

This will be challenging, because economic management is not a public drawcard to rival war service records. But like it or not, economic management has been the major constant in Federal Government policy since the early seventies. Economic issues have filled our lives. Can we really pretend that the last forty years don't matter? Or that it is a case of 'not much to see here', apart from unsuccessful attempts at *closing the gap*, foot-dragging on climate change, and niche issues like same-sex marriage, institutional child abuse and the republic?

I am concerned that the process of deciding which post-1970 Government records receive priority for preservation and public presentation will be determined by a cultural perspective that equates economic management with economic rationalism. From that perspective, anything to do with the economy is seen as uninteresting, technical, visionless and tainted with inhumanity.

The fact that Recordsearch's functional taxonomy<sup>7</sup> has no distinct category for economic management is an illustration of that lack of interest. Another is the likelihood that the Government

---

<sup>6</sup> Consultants with advanced qualifications relevant to the portfolio and an appreciation of public policy

<sup>7</sup> <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/SearchScreens/AdvSearchMain.aspx> Aspects of economic management are split between "Financial matters" and *Social and Economic research*

records viewed by the landmark Royal Commission into HIH Insurance remain in the custody of their recording agencies even as they are about to enter the open access period.

This lack of active interest will have consequences. It is true that most permanent value records of Government's involvement in economic management, including market regulation, have been brought formally under the Archives' explicit protection via the issue of records authorities. However it appears from Recordsearch that the great majority of non-current records relating to these functions have not been transferred to the Archives. They remain with their recording Departments and agencies, outside the Archives custody and unknown to the public, and it is unclear if the Archives has any interest in seeking their transfer or actively monitoring their ongoing preservation.

Contemporary public analysis of Government's economic management is hindered by many factors, so the Archives must be empowered, resourced and encouraged to preserve and (in due course) publicise the evidence.

Yes, economic management can be presented in a way that makes it dry as dust. But there are ways of responding creatively to the challenge of publicising records of economic management, and I am sure the National Archives is capable of finding them.

It is good to see that a current member of the Archives' Advisory Council has a background in economics and the public presentation of related issues. I hope this member will engage with the challenges identified here.