

## Letter to the Editor

When I wandered (metaphorically if not literally) into the national archival 'enterprise' in the late 1970s, I was particularly struck by a sense of adventure with it all. In particular, I was drawn to the attempts to develop strategies to deal with the mountain of paper records and to come up with new ways for intellectual control over the content. This adventure continued into the 1990s, through endeavours such as the development of electronic means for controlling existing records and the coming world of electronic records. I felt the situation overall for the archival enterprise was that the profession had one eye on the past and the other on the future. The profession still has that eye on the past but I am not sure about the future.

The turning point was I feel somewhere around 2000: costs for making, storing, and accessing records in electronic formats fell through the floor. The flood of electronic records of business and government was bad enough. But more recently this situation has been further complicated by such novel means of communication as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and the like. Change has been vast and profound, and indeed, in my view, nothing of the current situation was conceived of in 1994 at the *Playing for Keeps* Conference in Canberra on the electronic future (sponsored by the National Archives of Australia). But never mind the volume and format of modern records, there are completely new issues for archivists arising from records being cheap, personal, and accessible from anywhere.

I do not have the impression the profession is adequately acknowledging these new issues and their implications, let alone addressing them in either theoretical or practical ways. By way of two examples of such issues: the meaning and implication of WikiLeaks, and the proposed introduction of a national health e-records system, and the possible fall-out in terms of access to the records and privacy implications. In summary, I believe the archival profession has to align more with the future and not just the past otherwise the profession too will just become part of the past.

Having said that, I turn to the May 2011 issue of *Archives and manuscripts* and the article and interview published therein on what is known as 'the Heiner Affair'. It is impossible to describe to the casual reader in any concise way the issues and events associated with those two small words. Rather, I would suggest a comparison with (say) the Doctrine of the Trinity, *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce*, or the contemporaneous quip of Lord Palmerston on a knotty problem in North German affairs. That is to say, the issues are complicated if not complex, somewhat obscure, and not the least there are many conflicting views and opinions of the facts expressed by those directly and subsequently involved in the matter.

I stress this is not to say the Heiner Affair represents matters of no importance or significance; the issue of the proper relationship between an archivist and their government is significant and continuing, and no doubt will arise again. However, I do think the matter from the archival perspective has been taken as far as it can as a case study, in the absence of contributions from hitherto silent participants.

For the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA), the Heiner Affair has bedeviled if not distorted its functioning and business as a professional society for more than a decade. This impact can be calculated in terms of the time devoted to debate by Councils, Presidents' time (including mine), financial expenditure by the ASA, conference discussion time, discussions in online and email forums, and so on. I would go so far as to say that to even describe the ASA involvement with the Heiner Affair would constitute a good-sized article, if not a complete issue of *Archives and manuscripts*. In that context, I suspect the very word 'Heiner' constitutes a page-turner in the negative sense for the majority of the ASA's members.

As for the whole Heiner Affair as such, the same facts and assertions continue to be pushed around and, no matter how these are re-arranged or revisited, no resolution or even significant advance that I can see has occurred over the past decade. To repeat what I said some six years ago: I believe any closure (however defined) with Heiner or indeed actual advance will not occur without compelling new evidence being found. And I do emphasise 'compelling' in terms of the prospects for a government to institute another formal inquiry into Heiner-related matters.

In the absence of such evidence, I propose for the Society the equivalent to that found in formal debate: that the matter no longer be heard. My view is that the Society's and the archivists' future depends more on focusing on the present and the future rather than what did or did not happen in Brisbane in the late 1980s.

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