

The National Film and Sound Archive and Australian Film Commission: the end of the affair

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Closer to home, Ray is Secretary of the advocacy group Archive Forum, and is working on his doctorate at the University of Canberra.

This article is the third in a trilogy on the turbulent fortunes of the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) over the last decade. The first, 'A case of mistaken identity' (Archives & manuscripts, vol. 30, no. 1, May 2002, pp. 30–46) analysed the 1999 rebranding of the NFSA as 'ScreenSound Australia' and its consequences. The second, 'What's a nice archive like you doing in a place like this', (Archives & Manuscripts, vol. 32, no. 2, November 2004, pp. 178–190) covered the subsequent forced takeover of the NFSA in 2003 by the much smaller and dissimilar Australian Film Commission (AFC), and its immediate aftermath. This article covers the final phase of the story up to the attainment of independent statutory authority status for the NFSA in 2008.

Throughout 2004, the fate of the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) – or ScreenSound Australia as it was still known – was constantly in the news. Along with debate on radio and in professional forums, press clippings for the year made a very thick file. Immediately following the release of the Australian Film Commission's *Directions* plan for the institution in December 2003, there had been public street demonstrations in Canberra, followed in the new year by over 120 submissions from stakeholders, petitions to the Federal Parliament lodged by Canberra Senator Kate Lundy and the advocacy group Archive Forum, as well as letters and emails to the Australian Arts Minister and Prime Minister from concerned professionals worldwide.

The overwhelming message was one of alarm at the intentions of the Australian Film Commission (AFC) for the NFSA, coupled with a call for the film and sound archive to be separated from it and made an independent statutory authority. On 12 February, Shadow Arts Minister Lundy announced that this was now official Labor Party policy, and a change of government was anticipated in November's federal election. It was against this background that on Sunday morning 3 October,

the Archive Forum staged a street party to celebrate, to the day, the NFSA's twentieth birthday. It was held on the footpath in front of the AFC's shuttered doors in William Street, Sydney.¹

But the Coalition victory dashed this optimism, and confronted stakeholders with a dilemma. The returning government had, by its earlier actions, rejected the arguments for autonomy and seemed unlikely to contradict itself. As the AFC/NFSA merger receded into the past as a *fait accompli*, could the pressure be sustained – if necessary, until the next election? And was there the political will in the Labor and minor parties to maintain their stance for the long haul?

The AFC and the minister had been forced, by public reaction, to retreat from the more draconian agendas in *Directions* – which, if implemented, would have destroyed the institution – but neither had actually withdrawn or disavowed the paper itself. What had failed by frontal assault might now be done incrementally. Given their experience of the AFC's approach, the two audiovisual advocacy groups – Archive Forum and the Friends of the NFSA – concluded that there was only one responsible answer. By serving as a professional reference point, both groups would continue to offer constructive advice to the AFC and the minister. As watchdogs and whistleblowers, they would also try to protect the NFSA's institutional integrity within the AFC. Finally, by persistently drawing public attention to the NFSA's vulnerability, they would keep pressing for independent statutory status as the only satisfactory arrangement for a national archive.²

In its newsletter the Friends of the NFSA would now call the AFC regularly and publicly to account, more than once provoking its fury.³ Archive Forum pursued the political process through meetings and letters, seeking allies on both sides of politics and in the media, maintaining contact with the minister and issuing regular press releases. They were joined by other groups, notably the Australian Society of Archivists⁴ and the Australian Historical Association, as the weight of expressed professional opinion grew. This would culminate, as we shall see, in a crucial joint position paper released in July 2006. But let me pause the chronology here to examine some thematic aspects of the AFC's impact on the NFSA.

Consultation

The AFC's annual report for 2003–04 – the first 12 months of the merger – paints a positive picture:

The AFC engaged in an extensive consultation process, with an issues paper released to staff and stakeholders for comment. Out of this process a proposals paper was developed and, again, released publicly for feedback. In addition, a series of public forums were held in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Brisbane, at which open and lively debate was facilitated, along with extensive staff consultation sessions. Over 120 written submissions were received and are available to read on the AFC website ... The AFC welcomed the resulting debate over the variety of proposals suggested.⁵

One might speculate on the integrity of an official report which ignored the media controversy and the public anger, to say nothing of recognising the anti-AFC content of most of the 120 submissions, or the tenor of what was said at the 'public forums'.⁶ Nor does it explain that the forums were by-invitation affairs rather than open public meetings, and that the window for feedback on the 'proposals paper' (that is, *Directions*) was confined to the December–January silly season – when most people were on holiday – until the minister, under pressure, extended the deadline.

I still have vivid memories of the two Canberra forums, chaired by Mark Armstrong of the Network Insight Institute. Each drew about 50 people to the small NFSA theatre on 5 February 2004. Media controversy over who could participate was resolved by ACT Senator Gary Humphries securing public assurance from the AFC that the doors were open to all comers. Besides AFC executives and NFSA senior staff, four members of the AFC Board attended, although none of them spoke a single word during the proceedings. Sitting in the front row, backs to the audience, were the AFC chair, Maureen Barron, and AFC Chief Executive Officer, Kim Dalton. The message was clear enough: the AFC was in charge and it didn't have to speak to anyone.

The forums were neither dialogue nor debate. The agenda was not free ranging, but confined to issues raised in the *Directions* paper. Following

each group of three or four questions or comments from the audience, Kim Dalton responded. After the allotted two hours, proceedings were closed. There was no opportunity for outside discussion, and immediately the afternoon forum finished a fleet of taxis whisked away the entire AFC delegation.

Hostility to – or was it fear of? – the NFSA’s constituency characterised the AFC’s behaviour. Kim Dalton was its usual spokesman, and typical media responses to stakeholders⁷ were that they demonstrated ‘a complete absence of vision’ or ‘willingness to accept change’ and were creating ‘a campaign of misinformation and misrepresentation’. He took particular aim at Archive Forum, declaring ‘what we’re willing to do is have a discussion.’⁸ The Archive Forum, by continuing to make its claims, is undermining a valuable discussion.’ For its part, the Archive Forum – whose members had responded positively and fulsomely to the AFC’s early requests for advice – finally concluded, ‘the basis of trust and accountability between AFC management and the Archive’s constituency, on which genuine consultation depends, now no longer exists’.⁹

The Australian Society of Archivists and the Friends of the NFSA marked the first anniversary of the merger with a conference on *The future of the Archive*. Convened in Canberra over 3–4 July 2004, it also attracted participants from Sydney and Melbourne, as well as representatives from the Australian Labor Party, Greens and Australian Democrats. The resulting communiqué listed 26 recommendations covering many aspects of the NFSA’s work, especially its governance. It affirmed the call for the NFSA to become a separate statutory authority. Arts Minister Rod Kemp declined to attend, dismissing it as a political event. The AFC merely ignored both the conference and its recommendations.

Of the 120 or so submissions in response to *Directions* which the AFC had placed on its website, around 90 per cent were critical of its plans. Whether the AFC ever digested, or indeed even read, the submissions is unclear. Although they comprised a considerable body of material, the AFC never published an analysis, study or critique of their contents nor, so far as is known, responded individually to any of them.

NFSA Advisory Committee

As prescribed by *Directions*, in late 2004 the AFC established a NFSA Advisory Committee. It comprised representatives of selected stakeholder groups, and would 'formalise channels for effective communication between the Archive and its stakeholders'.¹⁰ The committee was chaired by the NFSA Director and advised him on a range of internal matters. It would continue to operate until May 2008.

Convening about once a quarter, it did have value as a sounding board for the NFSA Director, Paulo Cherchi Usai, and it allowed stakeholder groups to monitor the state and integrity of the NFSA and the level of staff morale. But it was a far cry from the former NFSA Advisory Council - appointed by, and with direct access to, the minister - which had been disbanded with the merger. The new committee did not even have formal access to the AFC Board or CEO; even its existence was ignored in the 2004-05 annual report. It had no directive powers, nor any entrée into the strategic deliberations of the AFC Board; nor was it necessarily consulted on relevant budget or policy matters.

In September 2005 Archive Forum received private information that the AFC had entered into discussions towards divesting itself of the NFSA's sound functions and collections to another party. This would, of course, leave a rump film archive that would sit more easily within the comfort zone of the AFC, even though it would be a complete betrayal of earlier assurances and would destroy the character and rationale of the NFSA. Archive Forum's immediate representations to the minister and the CEO, foreshadowing strong public reaction if such a move were attempted, brought a flurry of official denials.

Such fundamental matters were never on the agenda of the NFSA Advisory Committee, although shortly after this particular incident the minutes show a pointed discussion about distinguishing 'legitimate stakeholder interests' from those of 'the NFSA within the AFC'. There was a fine line to be trod as the Friends of the NFSA and Archive Forum continued their efforts towards a secure future for the NFSA.

Integrity and profile

Following the merger, the NFSA's support services and staff – personnel, accounts, information technology, building management, public relations and so on – were subsumed into the AFC. Budgets were merged, so it was no longer possible to discern what was being spent specifically on the NFSA. Although, thanks to public pressure, it retained its core acquisition, preservation and access functions, and its Canberra headquarters stayed open as a public facility. The NFSA's Sydney and Melbourne offices, however, were merged into the AFC's premises and lost their separate physical identity. Meanwhile, outreach activities like the annual Big Screen touring festival were taken over by the AFC's cultural development unit, and the NFSA's once extensive catalogue of collection-based audio and video products was wound down and finally eliminated. Archive Forum drew public attention to this 'implementation of *Directions* by stealth'.

At the time of the merger, assurances were given by the minister and the AFC that the NFSA would retain its distinct identity and branding. To its credit, the AFC did promptly address the contentious issue of the 'ScreenSound' brand. It sought early advice from stakeholders, who strongly urged reinstatement of the National Film and Sound Archive name. Nevertheless, *Directions* proposed yet another variation: Australian Film and Sound Archive (perhaps because it sat more easily alongside Australian Film Commission). Fortunately, professional opinion prevailed and the original title was reinstated in December 2004.

At the same time, however, it was painfully clear that the NFSA no longer controlled its own public image and identity. Its website was merged into that of the AFC, and staff – even the Director – could no longer speak to the media except via the AFC's public relations unit in Sydney. Further, since it was now part of the AFC, the NFSA no longer appeared in its own right in government directories – or even in the phone book. High profile public events, such as the premiere of the NFSA's restored version of *The Sentimental Bloke* at the Sydney Film Festival in June 2004, were under the AFC, not the NFSA, brand.¹¹

It was perhaps inevitable that by mid-2005 the AFC would be advised by consultants to submerge the NFSA brand altogether. In a strategy

document leaked to an advocacy group, the AFC was urged to project itself as a 'single organisation'. The NFSA's name on letterheads and business cards was reduced, like any other branch or division, to small type under the AFC logo. Email addresses were standardised – as @afc.gov.au – and so on. While this strategy would soon be overtaken by other events, it nonetheless contradicted the iron-clad undertakings of two years earlier.

The people dimension

Although NFSA was under its domination for five years, the AFC never succeeded in winning hearts and minds, nor in dismantling the archives' core functions to the degree it intended. That it failed on both counts is not only a tribute to staff members and stakeholders, but also reflected, I believe, its inability to understand the character of archival institutions, their principles of governance, and the motivations of those who work in them. The AFC never offered a philosophical basis for its takeover of the NFSA: it merely asserted its legislative authority, aggressively so, where necessary. 'You're integrated', said one AFC executive to a NFSA staff meeting, 'Get used to it'.

In *Directions* and, by all accounts, in early staff briefings, AFC executives berated the past management of the NFSA and belittled the achievements and qualities of its staff generally. This disdain was poured out both in general meetings and cult-style staff cell groups. While public reaction had foiled the initial attempt to remove most of the NFSA's senior managers (and their corporate memory), some soon departed anyway, leading to a brain drain whose effects still linger.

Under such conditions, staff members faced an invidious choice: either move to a more congenial employer, for which there could be good and sufficient reasons, or stay on in the hope that you could survive and things would improve. As staff have shared their own stories with me, I have been impressed and grateful that so many saw their professional loyalties with the institution and its collections and took a courageous long-term view about its prospects. Without them, the task of rebuilding the post-AFC NFSA would have been difficult indeed.

Those who stayed, however, found themselves sandwiched between opposing forces: the AFC on the one hand, and stakeholders on the other. The hottest seat fell to Paulo Cherchi Usai, an internationally recognised archivist who took up his post as NFSA Director in September 2004, and steered the archive through its AFC years.¹² There is evidence that the AFC was prepared at times to lean heavily on staff, as well as on industry organisations which it subsidised, to promote the AFC line in the face of stakeholder criticism. Since it did not subsidise any of the archival advocacy groups, however, it could apply no leverage to them.

The effect on these groups, however, was costly in other ways. The cards are always stacked against voluntary lobby groups who seek to change government policy, for they lack the time and resources of government agencies. Nor does one lightly oppose a major funding agency like the AFC, with its power of patronage and influence. Yet without the existence and persistence of the various advocacy groups there would have been no change, and the NFSA as we know it may well have disappeared.

And what of the other individuals in the equation: the minister, departmental officers, the staff and board of the AFC? What did they understand to be their duty of care? How did they analyse the situation, the media attention and the continuing unhappiness? What did they think of the logic of the AFC-NFSA marriage? Whatever their private views, nobody broke ranks: there were no resignations, no public comments, no deviation from the official line.

Breakthrough in 2006

On 12 January 2006, Kim Dalton, recently reappointed as CEO, announced his surprise departure from the AFC to become the ABC's head of television. Helen Musa, arts editor of the *Canberra Times*, had long followed the fortunes of the NFSA and reported the tidings in these terms:

When the news flashed around ... there was quiet rejoicing in Canberra. Dalton's peremptory way of handling change continued to irk archive staff, and anyone who

has had to battle through the commission's minders to get to local staff in Canberra. So Thursday's news ... came as a breath of fresh air, suggesting momentarily that the grip of the commission might now be loosened. Dalton's authoritarian approach ... led to a ludicrous bid for control, leaving no room for individual opinion or ideas to come from Canberra, though an elaborate round of consultations in early 2004 attempted to wallpaper over the process. The result has been a feeling among staff that they are working under a hostile colonial occupation.

As the euphoric effects of Thursday's announcement wore off, archive-watchers were taking a more cautious view, one commenting that it remained to be seen what difference his departure would make. [AFC Chair Maureen] Barron's term runs out in July and nobody is predicting her successor.¹³

Meanwhile, there had been a change of heart at the AFC. Maureen Barron invited representatives of Archive Forum and the Friends of the NFSA to meet with members of the AFC Board. It proved a frank and constructive gathering which covered many issues. It was acknowledged that trust levels were low. The *Directions* paper was now a dead issue, and the NFSA's identity would be properly promoted with its own stationery. Archive Forum and the Friends of the NFSA affirmed their stance on statutory independence for the archive, but said that in the meantime they would try to make the NFSA work as well as it could within the AFC. And while, by definition, there would always be an archive, there may not always be an AFC.

As tensions eased, the focus turned to another need: the creation of a new document which would be a joint stance of Archive Forum, the Friends of the NFSA, the Australian Society of Archivists and the Australian Historical Association. Although all four had been advocating statutory status for some time, there had never been a single statement which set out the intellectual and strategic case for this as the only satisfactory basis for the NFSA's future. Moreover, such a document was needed to definitively demonstrate why the marriage with the AFC had not worked, could never work and threatened the

security and survival of the institution. As a joint policy, the statement would carry more authority than positions prepared by any of the bodies individually. The paper went through many drafts, draining out the emotion and strengthening the objectivity.

Released on 10 July 2006, *Independent statutory status for the National Film and Sound Archive* was sent, with a covering press release, to every federal parliamentarian. While its 20 closely-argued pages were hardly scintillating reading, it did get media attention – for example, the e-news journal *Screenhub* headlined it ‘NFSA: campaign that never died’ – and it caught the eye of several politicians. These included Peter Garrett, Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for the Arts, who responded with a media statement declaring that ‘Minister Kemp’s foray into the art of wedding planning has been a failure’. He added:

The findings of the report again reinforce the need for an independent and autonomous body to collect and store Australia’s audiovisual heritage, which has been Labor policy since the 2004 election, and stipulated by UNESCO and the Australian Law Reform Commission. The imminent release of Labor’s Arts Policy Discussion Paper, which canvasses the possibility of a merger between the AFC and the Film Finance Corporation and related film bodies, together with the release of the DCITA Issues paper into the *Review of Australian Government Film Funding Support*, provides the government with the ideal opportunity to remove the NFSA from under the AFC and restore its independence and autonomy.¹⁴

The Film Funding Review had recently been announced by Minister Kemp. Accordingly, the joint statement, with some covering material, was submitted to the review – which, in due course and to nobody’s surprise, produced the outcome anticipated by Garrett. In May 2007, the new Minister for the Arts George Brandis signalled the creation of the Australian Screen Authority – a merger of the AFC, the Film Finance Corporation and Film Australia. But it was not good news for the NFSA, which was slated to remain part of the new authority. Despite some cosmetic phrasing in the draft legislation, and the minister’s promise that the NFSA would have ‘a distinct and prominent

profile',¹⁵ its situation would be essentially unchanged. The review had not accepted the advocacy groups' case.

Timing came to the rescue. Before the legislation could be passed, the November federal election, and a change of government, intervened. True to his word, Peter Garrett, now Minister for the Arts, moved quickly and the Australian Screen Authority bill gave way to the *National Film and Sound Archive Act* and the *Screen Australia Act*, both of which emerged with bipartisan support to receive royal assent on 23 March 2008. During this rapid journey there were vigorous back-room discussions involving Archive Forum, the Friends of the NFSA, the minister's office and the AFC, on the allocation of the AFC's resources and functions between the NFSA and the new Screen Australia. The legislation took effect on 1 July 2008 and the NFSA's new governing board, whose membership includes several veterans of the autonomy campaign, took office.

Reflection

In a recent essay, NFSA Board Chair Chris Puplick summarised the experience:

This was an exercise in old fashioned politics. A determined group of well informed and dedicated individuals embarked on a campaign to reverse a significant government policy in the arts. By the traditional methods of lobbying the Opposition, seeking support within the Government's own ranks, mobilising external support groups and interests, using the parliamentary meetings such as estimates committees to raise questions and concerns, and planting or encouraging favourable media reporting, this complete reversal of policy was achieved. What is more, the poachers were then appointed as the gamekeepers and of course, now have to deliver on the claims they made about the benefits of their preferred course of action.¹⁷

Yet it was also a close-run thing. Had the AFC's management of the NFSA been more open, informed and sensitive, had the government

honoured its promises to reform the AFC Board membership to reflect its expanded role, had the AFC itself been willing to change rather than require the archive to conform, then the NFSA's extreme vulnerability may not have been so obvious, and its long wait for statutory status may not have ended.¹⁸ There are many 'what ifs' in its story.

Nor has the NFSA regained its independence unscathed. It has lost resources: its first post-AFC budget was about \$2 million less, in real terms, than its last pre-AFC budget. It has to rebuild skills and expertise. It has to re-engage corporate sponsors and re-establish systems. It now has the freedom and, at last, the legislative mandate to do so. But the lost years during which staff and stakeholder energies were diverted to saving the institution, rather than (for example) building its collections, have had an opportunity cost that can never be calculated.

The most sobering realisation from this experience is that the ultimate guardian and watchdog of the national audiovisual memory was not any institution of government, but rather the archival community in its widest sense. The official guardians failed in their duty of care – whether in making wise and transparent decisions or in providing legislative protection when it was needed – so the community had to act instead. It has so often been grass roots activism that has advanced and protected the NFSA and its predecessors. Having finally achieved its majority, the NFSA faces new challenges and temptations, so now, as they say, comes the hard part. But that is another story. Hopefully the NFSA will never take its hard won independence for granted.

Endnotes

¹ A video record of this event, including a speech by Archive Forum deputy chair Chris Puplick, is now in the NFSA collection. It seems the AFC was unaware of the date until reminded of it by the Archive Forum.

² In a separate article, 'When governments make mistakes', the author reflects on the principles and experience of long-term advocacy, available at <http://soima.iccrom.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=47&Itemid=70>, accessed 2 October 2011.

³ The Friends of the NFSA's newsletter constitutes, in effect, a journal of record of these years. All its issues are available on line at <<http://www.archivefriends.org.au/index.php/newsletters>>, accessed 2 October 2011.

⁴ At its annual general meeting in September 2004, the Australian Society of Archivists

unanimously adopted a detailed resolution calling the AFC Board to account on a range of matters, and calling on the government to establish the NFSA as a separate statutory authority. The resolution was reaffirmed and updated at subsequent AGMs.

⁵ Australian Film Commission, *Annual Report, 2003–04*, Executive Overview, p. 2.

⁶ Transcripts of the forums were accessible on the AFC's website for a time, and copies have been retained by the author.

⁷ For example, Kim Dalton, 'The Future of ScreenSound is not under threat at all', *Canberra Times*, 17 December 2003; Lynden Barber, 'Reel Time Hollywood', *The Australian*, 28 January 2004; 'Forum calls for Archive Separation', *The Age*, 3 February 2004.

⁸ Bernard Kellerman, 'Screensound: the final countdown', *IF magazine*, March 2004.

⁹ 'Cinderella betrayed: the shoe won't fit', *Friends of the NFSA Newsletter*, no. 8, 20 January 2004, p. 5. Widely circulated, this document was Archive Forum's submission to the AFC in response to the *Directions* paper. Its 59 pages comprised a detailed and damning analysis of the paper and the AFC's plans.

¹⁰ The initial membership included Friends of the NFSA, Archive Forum, Australasian Sound Recordings Association, Film and Broadcast Industries Oral History Group and Australian Teachers of Media. The other seven members were film, broadcast and sound industry associations, at least some of whom received financial subsidy from the AFC.

¹¹ Those who were present will remember the many introductory speeches, including the unfinished one by Minister for the Arts Rod Kemp, who was slow-hand-clapped off the stage by an audience of some 2,000 at Sydney's State Theatre. The reason for this reaction, and whether or not it was connected to the AFC's treatment of the NFSA, will forever be a matter for speculation.

¹² An assessment of Paolo Cherchi Usai's achievement at the helm of the NFSA requires a separate article and is not attempted here. Suffice to say that if the AFC did not understand the character of the NFSA or its people, they may not have anticipated the effect of appointing such a professional to the Director's post.

¹³ Helen Musa, 'Relief but apprehension at National Film and Sound Archive over Dalton's move', *Canberra Times*, 14 January 2006. But the spin doctors had been at work elsewhere, it seemed. *New Matilda* said that Dalton's 'controversial attempt to drastically down-size and decentralise the AFC's archive operations in December 2003 was thwarted by union action' while the *Australian Financial Review* noted that 'the AFC's integration with the National Film and Sound Archive was managed without drama'.

¹⁴ 'Cupid's arrow misses its mark', media statement by Peter Garrett MP, 13 July 2006.

¹⁵ 'New Australian Screen Authority to be formed', joint media release Senator Brandis and Senator Coonan, 9 May 2007.

¹⁶ A crucial step. Shadow Arts Minister Dr Sharman Stone drew some of her remarks from the joint statement.

¹⁷ Chris Puplick, 'Getting ahead: achieving an effective arts advocacy', Platform papers no. 18, October 2008, Currency House, p. 51.

¹⁸ When the NFSA was created in 1984 it was the government's stated intent that it should be supported by defining legislation, a requirement fleshed out by the first NFSA Advisory Committee in its 1985 report *Time in our hands*. The report included draft legislation. It is an accident of history that the legislation was not progressed at the time.