

## **Support by the New South Wales Government for the Archives Authority of New South Wales 1960–98 and State Records New South Wales 1999–2012**

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*Despite optimistic pronouncements by successive New South Wales governments since 1961, support for archives and records management in New South Wales is amongst the lowest in Australia. This has led to State Records New South Wales being in breach of its own legislation, because of low levels of funding and the inability to carry out its statutory functions. Numerous reviews of operations have failed to convince the New South Wales Government that recurrent funding for the agency is urgently needed, especially for continuing the Digital State Archive pilot, the preservation of the archives collection and the arrangement and description of the collection.*

**Keywords:** archives and records management; government funding

In 2007, I wrote an article for the *Australian Library Journal* entitled ‘A tale of tension and neglect: state archives in New South Wales 1788–1960’.<sup>1</sup> This article outlined the apathy and inaction of the New South Wales (NSW) Government over many years in relation to the care of government archives and the management of government records from its very inception. The period between 1960 and 2012 has seen many advances in the care of government archives and something of a revolution in the development of mandatory frameworks now supporting good recordkeeping in NSW.

However, the progress made has not been entirely positive, linear or effective. The inability of State Records NSW<sup>2</sup> to influence the NSW Government in the provision of reasonable levels of resources for the ongoing care, arrangement and description of the archives collection is a cause for ongoing concern. More recently, the lack of proper funding for the development of a Digital State Archive (DSA) has also raised serious doubts about the NSW Government’s understanding and commitment to archives and challenges posed by contemporary recordkeeping.

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**Archives Authority of NSW, 1960–98**

The Archives Authority of NSW came into existence with the passage of the *Archives Act 1960*, which commenced when the Archives Act became operational on 1 June 1961. For the first time, NSW had state legislation governing the disposition and control of archives. Prior to this date, the administration of archives in NSW had been a rather haphazard and shambolic affair. The Mitchell Library had managed some of the state's archives since 1910, but in a rather un-archival fashion, picking out documents and series of documents from large collections based on what librarians thought would be of interest to researchers, while not maintaining their archival integrity. This went against the basic principles of archives management, and it was only the passage of the Archives Act in 1960 that gave archivists in NSW a firm foundation with which to start building the state's archives in a systematic and coherent fashion.

The first meeting of the Board of the Archives Authority of NSW was held on 29 June 1961 with the Minister of Education, the Honourable Ern Wetherell, in attendance. In the report of the Minister's address to the Board, he expressed great appreciation towards the Trustees of the Public Library of New South Wales (now known as the State Library of New South Wales) for their custodianship of archives before legislation was enacted in the state and a positive view that archives and records would be better managed in NSW in the future. The Minister also made mention of the groundbreaking nature of the legislation:

This Authority started with full legal power, it was an indication that individuals had come together on common ground, in that all those bodies previously working separately had now joined in the one aim. The Minister repeated that the Authority had great work ahead, he was sure that it would be faithfully and diligently carried out, that there was an important future for the Authority, and under the wise and experienced guidance of the Chairman he was sure that it would do all that was required of it.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this optimistic outlook for the future expressed in 1961, unfortunately, there is little evidence of any real financial support for the Authority, just as there was no additional financial support with the passage of the *State Records Act 1998*, when State Records NSW assumed the added responsibility of ensuring good recordkeeping for all New South Wales universities, area health services, local government and state-owned corporations (prior to this, State Records NSW was only responsible for NSW government agencies). A great deal has changed since those early days of the Authority, but the difficulties that the current organisation has in securing archival estrays<sup>4</sup> has remained a constant over the 50 years of its existence. The tardiness of the NSW Government in establishing archival legislation in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries continues to haunt the State Records Authority of NSW to this day. Whenever state archives of any nature are discovered in the community, it is not only difficult to ensure that they remain in NSW, but it is also often difficult, if not impossible, to have them returned to official custody.

The provisions in the State Records Act are too weak to ensure the state's archival materials are returned to official custody. On occasion, State Records NSW has had to pay enormous amounts of money to the 'holders' of archival material which have become fugitive. Examples of this include a John Oxley map, records relating to the capture of Ned Kelly at Glenrowan and, more recently, an early sketch of a proposed Sydney Harbour Bridge by John Bradfield in 1910. In all of these cases, considerable sums of money had to be paid from the State Records NSW non-existent acquisitions budget. The relative weakness of the current and previous legislation means that the

foundations, which were laid by the Government in 1960 with the Archives Act and subsequently with the State Records Act, have not turned out exactly the way that the Minister of Education, the Honourable Ern Wetherell, imagined in 1961.

Despite the obvious goodwill in the establishment of an archives authority in NSW, very little in terms of tangible support and resources have been provided to the Authority over the years. Minister Wetherell's address to the Board in 1961 set the pattern for the next 50 years. Clearly, all governments believe that archives and records are a 'good thing' and essential in the efficient and effective management of government business, but when it comes to the provision of reasonable resources to carry out the tasks mandated by legislation, there are grave shortfalls in the provision of reasonable resources to carry out the tasks mandated by the government.

During this period, the area of major concern for the Archives Authority of NSW was the need for storage, both for archives and for non-current records, especially those that were potential state archives. The storage and accommodation at the State Library of New South Wales was described by John Cross, its Principal Archivist from 1980 to 1999, as 'absolutely diabolical'.<sup>5</sup> Storage of government records at a variety of unsatisfactory locations around Sydney had been the order of the day for many years. For example, in the 1950s, the then Public Service Board stored government records at Shea's Creek, where it leased an old wool store for the purpose, possibly the worst choice for the storage of archives. Later, between 1971 and 1979, a former plastics factory at Yagoona was used to store around 7 kilometres of archival material. This was a great improvement on Shea's Creek, but still not ideal. It was yet another example of the NSW State Government's parsimony when it came to the care and preservation of its irreplaceable archival material. The lessons of the 1882 fire in the Garden Palace, where irreplaceable archives had been stored and destroyed in their entirety, had not been learned.

The acquisition of property earmarked for use as an archives repository was a rare example of foresight by the NSW Government, when a parcel of land of around 20 hectares was purchased at Kingswood on Caddens Road in the early 1960s. This land was subsequently swapped for the current location on O'Connell Street, Kingswood, in the early 1970s, because the original property was thought to be more suitable for housing, according to the local authority, Penrith City Council. The location at Caddens Road may have been a better site in the event of a nuclear attack on Sydney, because of its sheltered nature, but in terms of accessibility to the general public, both the Caddens Road site and O'Connell Street site are both equally inaccessible. Russell Doust, the Acting Principal Archivist from 1973 to 1976, commented that: 'few politicians were interested in preserving departmental records, let alone providing public access to them'.<sup>6</sup> This statement is as true now as it was then.

### **State Records Authority of New South Wales, 1999–2012**

The early 2000s were an exciting and invigorating time at the newly constituted State Records Authority of NSW. Change was in the air, and it was generally believed that if the NSW Government refused to notice or properly support the Authority, then the Authority would raise its profile to such an extent that support would inevitably be forthcoming. In retrospect, this was a naïve assumption, given the parlous record of the NSW Government in relation to caring for its archives and records over the past 200 years.

Initial efforts concentrated on a revitalised exhibitions program. Susan Charlton, who was appointed to the position of Creative Producer in 2001, brought some radical

ideas to the job, and State Records NSW saw some wonderfully innovative exhibitions as a consequence, such as *Art Meets Archive*, *In the Realm of the Censors*, *House of Exquisite Memory*, *Sydney Resort of Thieves*, *Romance and Industry*, *Natura Morta* and, from 2006 to 2012, the long-running *In Living Memory*, which highlighted the records of the Aborigines Welfare Board between 1919 and 1960. All of these exhibitions were popular with the general public, and, on a number of occasions, the relevant minister was persuaded to open an exhibition.

However, additional funding was never forthcoming. This was predominantly the case, despite the fact that State Records NSW was also producing a new and exciting groundbreaking magazine, *Vital Signs*, so as to highlight the value of its work to the wider community. The production costs of *Vital Signs* were high, but, at the time, it seemed to be a worthwhile strategy – to invest in a glossy house magazine – in the interests of raising the profile of the organisation, with the potential promise of additional funding later on. *Vital Signs* was produced from 2002 until 2006, when the cost of production became prohibitive, and, thus, the magazine ceased publication.

The establishment of the volunteers program was also a significant event during this period. If the NSW Government would not fund staff to do essential indexing work, other innovative solutions had to be found. The volunteer program at State Records NSW has allowed much-needed indexing and preservation work to take place, which otherwise would not have been done. This has led to massive increases in the use of State Records NSW's website, which currently remains one of the most popular within government. Despite these efforts at revitalisation, no additional funding for the organisation was forthcoming. In fact, funding cuts were on the horizon.

### **State Records Board and the relationship with central agencies**

The main role of the State Records Board was the approval of retention and disposal authorities, standards and the strategic direction of the State Records Authority of NSW. Its members are also volunteers. Unfortunately for State Records NSW, the Board has moved away from a wider advocacy role within the NSW Government, which characterised its early days, to a narrower role, focusing mainly on the administrative aspects of Board membership, rather than the more expansive role that the Board occupied during its foundation period. Recently, the constant change of Board members has led to a lack of continuity and has undermined a deeper understanding about the nature and long-term responsibilities of State Records NSW. This has been regrettable, as the need for advocacy within government and the wider community has been more intense over the last ten years than at any other time in the agency's history.

Dealing with the parent department of State Records NSW – the Department of Finance and Services (Ministerial and Executive Services Branch) – over Board appointments has been a constant source of friction and difficulty for many years. This has been the case since State Records NSW was moved from Arts NSW to the then Department of Commerce in 2006. Unlike Arts NSW, whose senior bureaucrats were adept at dealing with Board appointments, those in the current parent department – the Department of Finance and Services (successor to the Department of Commerce) – appear to be totally disinterested and unconcerned with the need to act quickly and decisively to replace outgoing Board members. Many appointments are dictated by legislation, and it can be difficult to identify individuals from a department with the requisite skills. In addition, there is a level of political interference in relation to Board appointments, which adds an unnecessary layer of complexity and makes the whole

process even more difficult and complicated. For example, the previous Labor Government tried to stack the Board with its own appointees, who would be sympathetic to Labor policy. Similarly, since the election of the O'Farrell Coalition Government in March 2011, there has been a batch of Liberal Party appointees. This has, on occasion, led to the dysfunctional situation where it is hard to have a meeting, as the quorum for meetings is five (out of nine), mainly because of the complexity of selecting and making appointments in an almost Byzantine bureaucracy.

The nature of State Records NSW's relationship with the dominant departments within the NSW Government, the Department of Premier and Cabinet, the Department of Treasury and the Department of Finance and Services has always been difficult, but, more recently, as severe government budget cutbacks bite, it has become increasingly so. This situation is not unique to State Records NSW. As the NSW Government shrinks and more emphasis is placed on cost savings rather than on service delivery (despite rhetoric to the contrary), agencies have had to make some very tough and unpopular decisions.

In the case of State Records NSW, this led to the closure of The Rocks reading room on 30 June 2012 for a total saving of \$500,000 per annum. Constant and unrelenting budget cuts have been a source of great aggravation and difficulty for the whole organisation. When David Roberts resigned his position as Director of State Records NSW in June 2008, it would have been hard to imagine that the budget could plummet any lower, but, in due course, it did. At that time, it was considered that \$5 million per annum was the absolute lowest limit that State Records NSW could be provided with to fulfil its multitude of statutory responsibilities. As of September 2012, the budget is down to \$4.4 million per annum. This has resulted in a massive increase in the cross-subsidisation provided by the Government Records Repository (GRR) to the detriment of the GRR and to the growth of its business of storing non-current records.

The Government Records Repository is the commercial arm of State Records NSW and provides a fee-for-service storage facility for non-current government records at the Western Sydney Records Centre at Kingswood. Money generated from this business effectively supports the Treasury-funded side of the organisation and its 50 staff. It is used, among other things, for preservation, arrangement and description and outreach services. The GRR also ensures 80 staff remain off-budget at no cost to the NSW Treasury and provides an incomparable service to government agencies for the storage of their non-current records in excellent environmental conditions at competitive prices. Constant inroads into GRR profits to prop up the Treasury-funded side of State Records NSW have meant that opportunities to grow the business and construct additional storage facilities have been forgone.

### **Council on the Cost and Quality of Government review**

From 2004 to 2005, State Records NSW was reviewed by the Council on the Cost and Quality of Government. David Roberts, who was Director of State Records NSW between 1999 and 2008, sought the review. Such reviews are often the last recourse of 'basket case' agencies, utilised to either get them back on track or get rid of them. In the case of State Records NSW, the gamble was that the review would show that the organisation was not properly funded to carry out its statutory responsibilities and recommendations would be made to Cabinet for a reasonable level of funding, at least sufficient to carry out statutory obligations. As such, the review was sought as a circuit-breaker for the level of budgeting, in order to bring to the attention of the NSW Government the parlous level of funding that was being provided at the time. This was,

and currently is, the case when the State Records NSW budget is compared to that of Public Record Office Victoria or Queensland State Archives, which sit at around \$14 million and \$18 million, respectively.

The review group was headed by Alan Griffin, who had been a former Director-General of the Department of Commerce. Griffin was therefore eminently qualified to delve into the workings of any organisation and make recommendations for improvement. The group reviewed the functions, outputs and outcomes of State Records NSW.

The results of the review were not what State Records NSW expected. There was no increase in funding, and there was a complete and almost brutal rejection of the importance of the preservation of the state's archives. That rejection, in terms of funding, extends to this day. This is despite the fact that the preservation of the collection is in the extreme risk category on the State Records' risk register, which has been compiled in association with the government's own Internal Audit Bureau. This was, and remains, a positively Kafkaesque situation. On the one hand, the Government dictates action through the Internal Audit Bureau, and the responsibility is clearly within State Records NSW's remit and enshrined in legislation. However, on the other hand, no money has been provided for the preservation of the collection, thus placing State Records NSW in breach of its own legislation. Nevertheless, the key finding of the review was that State Records NSW was an efficient and prudently run organisation.<sup>7</sup> There was an expectation of some reward or recognition in financial terms based on such a positive statement, but this was not forthcoming.

In the same vein, there is the seven-year saga of the Digital State Archive (DSA). The DSA pilot project is possibly the most important project that State Records NSW has ever been involved in, and its success is critical for the future of archival access in NSW. Without a DSA, digital records will face an uncertain future, with the possibility of data loss and corruption and no access provisions to the digital archival records of the state. From a purely legal perspective, the lack of a DSA would expose the NSW Government to massive losses through litigation and the inability of the NSW Government to produce relevant documentation at the appropriate time.

In the dying days of the former Labor State Government, State Records NSW received \$3.5 million in funding for a pilot stage of the DSA in February 2011. In previous years, many efforts had been made to raise the funding necessary to undertake this important initiative. Numerous business cases have been put forward since 2003, but all to no avail. It was only when advice was sought from the NSW Crown Solicitor about being in breach of the State Records Act 1998 and the subsequent alerting of the Auditor General of NSW that State Records NSW was in breach of its own legislation that funding was finally provided. Even then, it was only capital funding for three years for a pilot stage, and, as yet, no provision has been made for ongoing recurrent funding of the DSA. The level of brinkmanship and game playing in relation to the funding of the DSA continues to this day, and State Records NSW still has no assurance that ongoing funding will be provided.

The whole concept of the DSA is so fundamental to good government that it is a source of wonderment that so much effort has had to be expended on persuading the Department of Treasury that this is an essential foundation stone for the future of all governments in NSW, not just the current one. The DSA project is also intimately linked to the State Plan, the Open Government strategy and the Government Information Public Access legislation (GIPA). The NSW State Plan and Open Government strategy both stipulate that all government agencies should adopt a freer and more open philosophy in supplying government information to the general public. This information

is primarily digital, and State Records NSW has carriage of the capture, preservation and dissemination of information provided to citizens under the state's GIPA legislation. Yet, once again, no additional funding was provided to carry out this important responsibility. It almost beggars belief that an agency is charged with carrying out a task, but is not funded in any way, shape or form to do so. It is the ultimate in wish fulfilment.

Reviews of the operations of State Records NSW now appear to be almost as regular as clockwork. Since the Council on the Cost and Quality of Government (CCQG) review, it has also been reviewed by Deloitte, in order to verify that State Records NSW was a suitable candidate and not a 'basket case' agency, so that it could be transferred from Arts NSW to the Department of Commerce. More recently, the organisation has been reviewed again by the Better Services and Value team from within the Department of Finance and Services. The aim of this review is related to the 'market testing' of the Government Records Repository. This is effectively a way of foreshadowing the privatisation of the GRR. The report has not yet received Cabinet approval, so the results are yet to be made public.

Should the NSW Government decide to privatise the GRR, it will have to provide significant additional funding, as the GRR is currently cross-subsidising the Department of Treasury funding of State Records NSW and has been doing so for many years. In reality, at least \$10 million per annum should be provided to bring State Records NSW up to the funding levels of Victoria and Queensland, but that is unlikely to ever happen in the current financial climate. This means that the services provided to the NSW Government and the citizens of NSW will be diminished over time. In addition, the rental costs of the infrastructure at Kingswood will quickly overtake any short-term capital windfall on behalf of the government.

The fight for funds to do the job that State Records NSW is legislated to do is an ongoing battle and is particularly galling when budgets are cut to such an extent that the prospect of carrying out statutory responsibilities retreat into the far distance. Naturally, this has an effect on the morale and general spirit of staff, and it is unfair that the Government preys on the goodwill and hard work of State Records NSW employees, who are all very committed to the organisation, to records management and to the archives in their custody.

Most State Records NSW staff work above and beyond their contracted hours, and many staff have been with the organisation for a very long time. To illustrate this amazing loyalty, recently retiring managers John Burke, Richard Gore, Michael Allen, Christine Yeats and Christine Shergold had over 150 years of service between them. Another staff member, Di Morgan, has provided over 50 years of service to State Records NSW, which is testament to the commitment of the staff to the organisation.

## **Conclusion**

It is obvious that the nature and culture of the NSW public service is changing rapidly, and no organisation or bureaucracy is immune from change. Perhaps the current focus on budget cuts will create a harder, focused and more effective public service in the long term, but for those dealing with the current situation on a day-to-day basis, with insufficient funds and massively increased demand, something has to give. One of the most significant changes that has occurred within the NSW public service in more recent years relates to loyalty.

At one time, loyalty within the NSW public service was a given. Unfortunately, that is no longer the case. The NSW Government gives no loyalty to its public servants, and, because of this, they are no longer reciprocating.

All organisations have periods of growth and decline. Regrettably, the NSW public sector is experiencing a period of decline at present. This decline sometimes feels like a death spiral. This will not last indefinitely, and the new public service is clearly going to be leaner and meaner, as will the services that it provides, possibly with the emphasis on the word 'meaner'. Many of the traditional responsibilities of government are being rejected by the NSW Government and are being outsourced. The logical conclusion is that, at some time in the future, the NSW Government will suddenly realise that it no longer has anything left to govern.

Competition for funds within the NSW Government is analogous to wars between warring fiefdoms, and, unfortunately, State Records NSW is little more than a small principality surrounded by large and more powerful states. The large central agencies control the flow of funds, and most small agencies can barely pay their staff, let alone embark on new projects and initiatives. In addition, it is hard, if not impossible, for an archives and records management authority to compete for funds with hospitals, police, transport and education.

State Records NSW has always had to make do, live off the smell of an oily rag and be at the bottom of the food chain in terms of resource allocation, and it is deplorable, but true, that this parlous state of affairs will continue for many years to come.

### **Endnotes**

1. *Australian Library Journal*, vol. 56, no. 3–4, November 2007, pp. 428–43.
2. State Records New South Wales and State Records Authority of New South Wales are one and the same organisation and are used interchangeably throughout this article.
3. Archives Authority of New South Wales, 'Board Minutes', 29 June 1961.
4. An estray is an official document that has 'strayed' from official custody.
5. Peter J Tyler, *State Records New South Wales 1788–2011*, Desert Pea Press, Annandale, 2011, p. 57.
6. *ibid.*, p. 66.
7. State Records Authority of New South Wales, *Annual Report*, SRNSW, Sydney, 2006–7, p. 6.