

A TIME FOR REASSESSMENT

by DOUGLAS BISHOP

IT IS SOME four years since the first moves which led to the formation of the Australian Society of Archivists in 1975, and now that those hectic, and perhaps for archivists halcyon, days are over, I consider it is high time that we gave some thought to the nature of the Society—what we are and what we are trying to do—something to which not enough attention was given in those early days and to which even less has been given subsequently.

What have we at present? An Australia-wide Society comprising members of the profession, institutional members, and associates including students. This organisation is further structured into branches or groups which, if I might say so without intending any offence to the smaller groups, means in effect branches in Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney. At the top of these general structures and levels is a Council containing within its membership a further subgroup, the Executive. After some four years, I think that it is a legitimate and fitting question to ask: What is the purpose of all of this?

I am not by this wishing to demolish the Society or scale down its activities, but rather to find out and define the purpose of the Society, and considerably scale up its activities. Before anyone considers that this is an early bid for a Bishop, or even, horror of horrors, a Victorian, reform ticket for the 1979 elections, please forget it. I am not, as all good American presidential candidates say, intending to nominate; however I mean it, and after being involved in the Executive of the Victorian Branch for most of its existence I am looking for a rest. But I do think that for the well-being—and even as I think in my more depressed moments, the continued existence—of the Society we cannot continue to shamble on as at present. The members must consider what are the fundamental aims of the Society, how these should be attained, and what form the Society should take.

Fundamental Aims

What is the Society? It seems to me that three elements have been mixed in the formation of the Society and, since none of these predominates, that no-one has a clear idea of what the Society is. In turn it is hampered by the hybrid ideals of those elements. These elements are firstly a professional society—like the A.M.A.—to set standards of training and the like, register members and establish standards of professional conduct by the members; secondly as a P.R. show and social club to emphasise to the outside world what archivists are and what they do, the importance of this work, and generally to raise consciousness amongst those interested in archives. I think that this

Mr Bishop was Chairman of the Victorian Branch of the Australian Society of Archivists 1977-78. His paper was delivered to his final Branch meeting as Chairman in June 1978.

is an aspect which we in Victoria have accomplished quite well with our programme of visits, seminars and talks, and pleasant informal gatherings where we meet over drinks and food to discuss our work and moan about our bosses. But this should not be a sop to asking questions about fundamentals of why we do meet and what we intend to do. The third element is to function as a de facto archivists' trade union. Examples of this may be seen in recent advertisements which have offered better salaries and have specified membership of the Society.

Now I am not suggesting which of these ought to be the fundamental aim of the Society, but I do think that to have such a wide, generalised and unorganised set of aims could well lead to—and in my opinion already has—a dissipation of the energies and interests of the members. Instead they should give thought to ordering those aims either into a long-term programme to be carried out sequentially, or to rank them hierarchically and concentrate wholeheartedly on the aim in hand—conservation, for instance—at one time. They may also, on reflection, wish to alter by expansion, reduction or direction, such aims.

Attainment of Aims

Once the aims and direction of the Society have been decided upon, the question is how they can be attained. Whatever individual methods are adopted, the Society will need to be considerably more active in seeking to further these aims—looking for trouble, if you like—and offering leadership in all areas of archival concern, such as training, conservation and standards generally rather than sitting back as I believe it does now, waiting for the march of history to tramp on over it. Again I am not offering palliatives or strategies for this, but rather trying to bring it to the attention of members as it is essentially up to them to decide whether such extended activity and involvement is worthwhile and how it should be undertaken. The only alternative to expansion is atrophy.

The Form of the Society

Whatever might be decided to do, or not to do, it is essential to look at the form and structure of the Society. By *form* I mean administrative organisation, and by *structure* classes or categories of membership. I have been, I suppose, fairly actively engaged in the local branch since its inception and must say that the administrative organisation of the Society is a disaster. We have three dogs—Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney—plus a few pups elsewhere all trying to wag a non-existent or perhaps I should say a phantom tail somewhere carefully in between and equidistant; or, probably more correctly, a phantom dog trying to wag several tails in different places. Now I am not criticising individually, or severally, or collectively, any members of the present or former Council and Executive. Indeed I have nothing but the greatest admiration for those who fly to and fro for meetings and committees and devote themselves to the running of the Society in this way, which is something I am not prepared to do; but I do feel most strongly that the branches, or at least the Victorian branch, have had virtually no direction or leadership (although we do now

have financial assistance) from the central body and that this is a most unsatisfactory state of affairs. I don't, in my saner moments, think that a Council should be deleted from our Constitution, but I do think that there must be some form of direction and encouragement to the branches on matters of policy and possible developments to further discussion at the base level. It sometimes seems to me as if the Council and the branches are two entirely different entities which come together for but a few days every two years. If policy is the prerogative of the Council—which it should be—then the Council must spell out such policy. It is extremely awkward continually to organise meetings, visits, discussions at the local level, let alone be asked for an opinion from the Society, without direction from above and in ignorance of what might be happening there.

I believe that the form of the Society should be changed, and one suggestion, once greeted as subversive and as yet more evidence of Victorian radicalism, from Anne Green, that the Executive rotate would I think greatly help matters. To ensure an equitable representation from the smaller groups let us say that the Executive, or even the whole Council if you like, consists of six people—four from Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne in successive years, together with two successively from Adelaide, Brisbane and Hobart. I think that this would encourage greater local participation, solve the problem of the present links (or lack of them) between centre and branches, and save considerable time and money. Given the scale of our operations and the size of Australia I think that the present size of Council is unwieldy and the travelling costs and time a luxury we cannot afford. Further, since members of Council would be in closer contact it would be easier to formulate and implement policy, especially when speedy answers are necessary. Lest it be queried that it will encourage inter-group or interstate rivalries to have the Council centred in different places, let me say that since we are all one Society and one country we should work together; that a rotation, giving a guaranteed share of the administrative cake to all sectors, should lessen such rivalry; and such rivalry is rampant already. Other solutions to what I see as the present impasse, if they are thought necessary or desirable, would need to be thought up by members.

As regards structure, that is the classes or categories of membership, there are two points I wish to make. First I feel that greater thought needs to be given to the position of the Associate Members of the Society. What is their role? Interested onlookers? Part-time participants? Again I think that too little thought has been given to this and I have had several Associate Members raise the matter as they did not know what was expected of them or what was in the Society for them. I don't know the answer. In Victoria we have through the programme of visits provided what I consider to be an activity of considerable interest to those who are involved with archives but who are not archivists, but this has not answered the questions in my or their minds. Secondly I think that the category of Institutional Membership should be abolished. I recall from the discussion at the inaugural meeting that the prime aim of having this category seemed

to be to raise money. Leaving aside this attitude, I consider it contrary to two of the aims of the Society as defined earlier—to be a Professional Society or a de facto trade union—to have employing bodies represented. To rely for money on such organisations is likely to compromise our aims and objectives.

In conclusion, I am not setting out a legislative programme but I do want to make people think about the Society if it is worthwhile, which I believe to be. You may wonder at one whose fascist tendencies are so well known continually emphasising popular participation, but such an attitude is, I am sure, compatible with the ideology of the corporate state, and if the members of the Society do not become actively involved in the running of the Society, you can rest assured that no-one else is going to.