

# The Australian Archives

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Australian Archives

The Australian Archives is the Commonwealth Government's archive authority and, as such, is responsible for the survey, evaluation, disposal, conservation and preservation of Commonwealth Government records and archives and for the regulation and servicing of official and public access to them.

## History

Prior to 1942, no formal arrangements existed for the preservation of the vast majority of records of the Australian Government other than patents records, records relating to World War 1 which were held in the Australian War Memorial and some important collections of papers of an archival nature which were preserved in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library (e.g. the Petherick Collection, preserved under the Petherick Collection Act 1911). The Nation's archives had not been entirely forgotten, however. On 21 June 1920 the Prince of Wales laid the foundation stone of 'a building to house the national archives' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 June 1920) — the building unfortunately never eventuated and the stone was finally consigned to a War Memorial store. In 1927 a Public Archives Bill was drafted at the request of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Librarian — the Bill, however, got no further.

Added impetus was given by the discovery of the destruction of certain valuable records of World War 1 and in 1940 the Australian Institute of Librarians chose Archives as the main topic for its annual conference. The proceedings of this conference, together with strong resolutions pressing the Commonwealth and State Governments to take urgent steps, were sent to the Government and were widely published.

Impelled by the need to preserve records relating to Australia's activities in World War II, the Curtin Government set up the War Archives Committee to arrange for the preservation of war records. The Australian War Memorial and the then Commonwealth National Library were designated as archival authorities, the one for the defence group of departments, the other for civil departments.

An attempt was made in 1943 to establish basic rules on disposal of records. Each department was given complete responsibility for deciding how long it wished to retain records but was instructed not to destroy

records except with the approval of the appropriate archival authority. The two archival authorities were to act as provisional repositories. Records designated as not being archives by the archival authorities in collaboration with each Department could be destroyed (subject to certain requirements) without further sanction.

In 1946 the War Archives Committee became the Commonwealth Archives Committee, charged amongst other functions with submitting recommendations for a permanent national archives system. Pending the establishment of such a system, it was to advise the Government on general archives questions and to lay down principles to be followed by Government agencies and the provisional archival authorities.

As part of a programme for the more efficient management of departmental records initiated by the Public Service Board in 1949, arrangements were made to provide for the transfer of records of permanent or further temporary value to repositories specially established in all mainland State capitals under the control of the Archives Division of the Commonwealth National Library, which hitherto supplied repository facilities only in Canberra and Melbourne. In order to avoid setting up two systems of Archival arrangements, the Commonwealth National Library became the sole archival authority for all Departments. It was agreed however that the Australian War Memorial should continue to be the repository for the records of the Fighting Services and such records of the service departments as were deemed to be directly concerned with the operations of the Fighting Services.

Following a request in 1953 by the Chairman of the Public Service Board that further thought be given to the question of preservation of Government records, the Prime Minister's Department circulated in July 1955 the document entitled *Arrangements for the Management of the Public Records of the Commonwealth Government*. At the same time the Chairman of the Archives Committee distributed for the guidance of the Departments a document entitled *The Report on and Recommendations for the Granting of Access to Commonwealth Archives for Non-Official Research Purposes*.

The major difficulty with these arrangements was the emphasis on the view that government agencies were themselves legally and to some extent administratively responsible for the management of the public records — even after they ceased to be current — and that the archival authority had merely a devolved responsibility for certain aspects of managing semi-current and non-current public records. Such an emphasis left the archival authority without standing in the event that a department failed to observe the spirit or letter of the administrative arrangement for the management of archives or attempted to prescribe the way in which the archival authority should organize records transferred by them.

Such an approach encouraged the view that each Department should establish its own individual access policy, whereas it would have been preferable to emphasise the need to work towards a uniform policy.

Under these conditions — requiring departmental officers to examine documents prior to release and in certain circumstances to examine manuscripts drawing on Government Archives prior to publication — there were inevitably delays in access clearance resulting from difficulties in sparing time from current work for this activity.

When after 1958 the Commonwealth Archives Committee ceased to function there remained no co-ordinating or consultative machinery for devising and administering uniform policy — particularly but not exclusively in regard to access. There was uncertainty about the precise responsibility of the Commonwealth Archives Office in respect of government records other than those defined as ‘archives’ in the 1955 *Arrangements for the Management of the Public Records of the Commonwealth Government*, specifically in respect of public records which remained in the custody of departments.

In 1961, following the establishment of the National Library of Australia, the functions and archival arrangements in respect of official records formerly administered by the Archives Division of the Commonwealth National Library were transferred to the Commonwealth Archives Office.

Problems arising from the administration of the 1955 rules were identified and set out by the Interdepartmental Committee on Commonwealth Archives which sat from 1962 to 1964. The Committee recognised one fundamental deficiency — lack of a constituted authority to decide questions in respect of archives which were not obviously within the province of a single department or agency. This lack militated against consideration of particular problems and issues from the point of view of the government as a whole. The Committee saw a need for the establishment of an authority to apply and regulate Government policy on questions of ownership of public records, disposal of records, transfer from one type of custody to another, and questions of access. *The report of the Committee was never presented to the Minister.*

There was however a heightened awareness of the problems associated with the existing archival policy following the investigations of the Interdepartmental Committee. Accordingly in 1966 Cabinet approved new arrangements for government archives which vested in the Commonwealth Archives Office authority to:

- regulate destruction of records,
- provide adequate reference and lending services for use by departments and the public,
- regulate access to public records by research workers and other members of the public in accordance with approved policies.

Departments were encouraged to transfer records wherever possible. To ensure consistency in implementation of access, applications by members of the public were to be directed to the Chief Archivist. Access to records originating before 1923 was regulated by the Archives Office subject to restrictions applied to certain documents or classes of documents (including Cabinet records). Access to records originating after 1922 or to

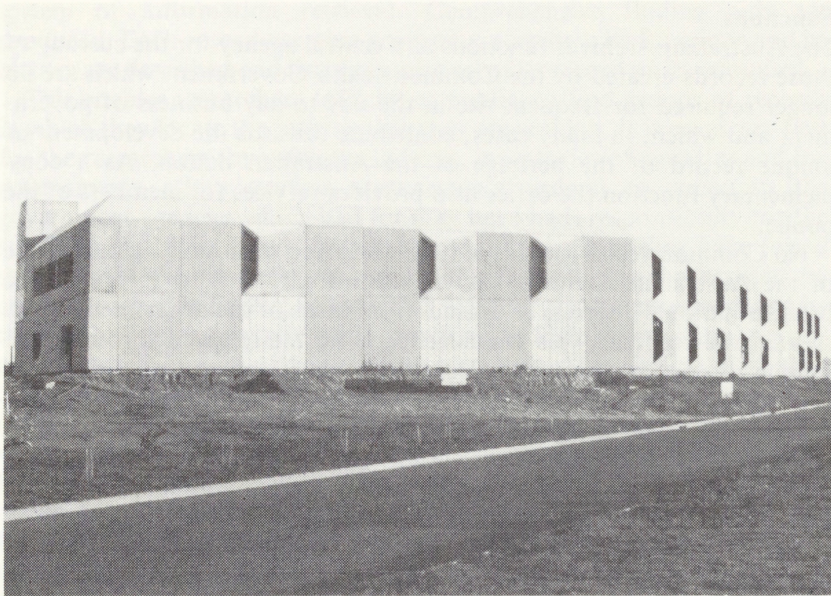
records in one of the restricted categories was regulated by government agencies. There was still therefore no single authority responsible for granting access to Government records and there remained the problem of inconsistencies in application of the policy as between applicants by different government agencies.

As from 1 January 1971 conditions of access were changed to allow public scrutiny of the generality of records thirty years old or more. Announcing the new policy, the Prime Minister further specified that: "Custody of Commonwealth records and control over access to them is the responsibility of the Commonwealth Archives Office". Thus for the first time regulation of government access policy was vested in a single authority — the Commonwealth Archives Office under the overall supervision of the responsible Minister.<sup>1</sup>

In 1973, the Labor Government invited to Australia a former Dominion Archivist of Canada, Dr. W. Kaye Lamb, to advise the government on the development of a national archives. During his visit, Dr. Lamb had discussions with senior Archives staff in Canberra, with representatives of major government departments and with the Public Service Board, and visited other major archival institutions. When tabling Dr. Lamb's report in March 1974, the Special Minister of State announced that the government had decided to upgrade and expand the operations of the Archives Office, to introduce appropriate legislation, to appoint a Director-General to head the Archives and to set up a task force to make specific proposals for the development of the Archives. In late 1975, Emeritus Professor R. G. Neale was appointed Director-General, but it was decided not to proceed with the appointment of a task force.

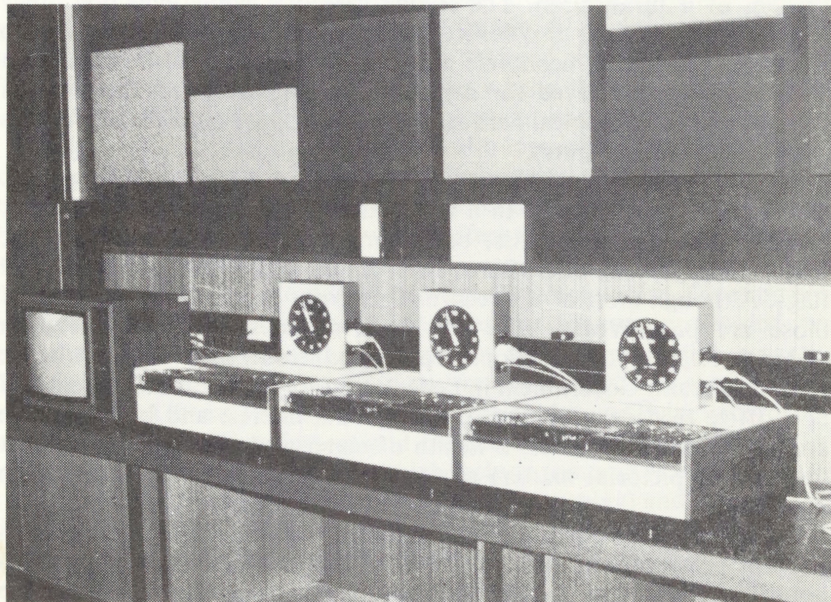
Legislation was introduced into Parliament only in June 1978. The Archives Bill provides machinery which will improve, in many important respects, the management of the Commonwealth's own records. It will replace existing ad hoc arrangements and conventions and will establish firm procedures governing the custody, destruction, retention, storage, conservation and public accessibility of the Commonwealth's vast mass of record material. The Bill, with the exception of the access provisions, was referred to the Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts — the access provisions were referred to the Senate Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs. Both committees have now reported to the Government, the latter committee recommending quite sweeping changes to the access provision. The Government is now considering the reports.

In spite of all this apparent interest on the part of the Government in its archives, it is interesting to note that effective staff levels in the Australian Archives (the name was changed in 1974) have decreased significantly over the last four years.



*Nearing completion — the Australian Archives A.C.T. repository at Mitchell, A.C.T.*

Photo: Robert French.



*Part of the Newton Hobbs Studio, an A.B.C./Australian Archives facility at the Villawood, N.S.W., repository.*

Photo: Robert French.

**Functions**

The Australian Archives functions as a central agency for the custody of those records created by the Commonwealth Government which are no longer required for frequent use in the day-to-day business of government and which, in many cases, contribute towards the development of unique record of the heritage of the Australian nation. As a complementary function the office also provides services for members of the public.

No Commonwealth records may be destroyed without the concurrence of the Australian Archives whose responsibility it is to safeguard the broader national interests as distinct from those of the department which created the records. This concurrence is normally given through continuing disposal authorities or schedules which enable Commonwealth departments to destroy nominated classes of records automatically. Records not covered by continuing disposal authorities are checked by Archives staff before disposal is authorised.

Records assessed as having evidential or informational value to the nation are selected for permanent retention. In the first category are all records documenting the democratic, constitutional, and legal basis of the Commonwealth Government; the origin, development, organisation, functions, policies, and substantive activities of Commonwealth departments; and the rights and entitlements of Australian Citizens. These range from single copies of Acts of Parliament to duplicate certificates of naturalisation. The second category, while including many records from the first, also covers source material considered of value to researchers in social, economic and scientific affairs (such as migrant documentation preserved for demographic purposes) and the nation's cultural and technological heritage (represented, for example, in records of patents and copyrights).

The range of material held by the Australian Archives is quite vast. Government records come in a wide variety of formats including files, manuscripts, registers, cards, books, maps, plans, models, paintings, films, photographs, microfilms, recordings, magnetic tapes, seals and flags. Although most of the records date from Federation (and most of those are post World War II), Archives does hold pre-federation material relating to functions transferred from the colonies to the Commonwealth Government in Federation (notably customs, patent and post-office records). Because of its national interest and because there are no 'territory' archives, a wealth of material (including a significant quantity of pictorial matter) relating to Canberra is also held by the Archives.

Records which are no longer in active use but which are considered to warrant preservation, either permanently as national archives or temporarily for a further specified period, may be transferred to an archive repository. When in archival custody they are analysed, arranged, and described, as resources permit, by a wide variety of processes, so that the broadest range of research interest may be served by a comprehensive

system of information retrieval. Comprehensive finding aids are produced. Each record-creating government agency, its functions and its history are described and lists (inventories) of its record series compiled.

This enables researchers (official or public) to find groups of records in which they locate the information they are seeking. It is necessary first for the researchers (by using the indexes, inventories of agencies and the governments administrative arrangements orders) to ascertain the government agencies which had (or may have had) responsibility for the function or activity in which they are interested. Once they have found the relevant record series or groups, researchers may be assisted by contemporaneous finding aids such as registers and indexes produced by the agency for its own use when creating the files. Australian Archives always endeavours to obtain these contemporaneous finding aids when taking the records into custody. If the relevant indexes, etc., are missing (as they often are), Archives staff compile lists (or inventories) of items within record series, and these are also available to researchers. Unfortunately, this work is in arrears and it is sometimes necessary for researchers to examine quantities of records to find relevant items. It is the policy of Australian Archives to encourage researchers to do their own searching of indexes and inventories as Archives staff are in short supply and cannot reasonably be expected to know the precise direction of researchers' investigations. Archives staff do, however, try to point researchers in the right direction.

It has always been a long-term aim that Archives finding aids will be published. However the quantity of material to be arranged and described is so vast that this is not likely to prove possible for some time. They will ultimately be published as part of the National Guide to Archival Materials envisaged under the current Archives Bill.

The current policy of the Commonwealth is to designate the generality of official records created more than thirty years ago as open to public access. There are, of course, expectations to this, the most common being material whose disclosure would affect the security of the nation or which is of personal sensitivity.

While its main function is to service Commonwealth Government records and archives, Australian Archives also accepts custody of the personal archives of government Ministers and senior public servants. This is because these often contain papers of an official or semi-official character and because they are closely related to official records in custody which they supplement and complement. Two examples are the personal archives of Lord Bruce (which include some silver and porcelain now on loan to the Prime Minister's Lodge for display) and those of the Hon. E. G. Whitlam. Access to personal archives is regulated by Archives in accordance with the wishes of the donor.

### **Premises**

Australian Archives maintains offices in each State capital and in Darwin and Townsville, as well as in Canberra. Modern repositories with

controlled environments have been constructed in Sydney, Perth, Adelaide and Darwin (where the partially completed building withstood cyclone Tracy) and planning is proceeding for the other centres. The Brisbane office is currently being greatly extended and a new repository is under construction at Mitchell in the A.C.T. to replace the Romney huts at Parkes. The winner of a national competition for the design of a headquarters building has recently been announced, and a final decision on its site is expected soon.

At 30 June 1979, Australian Archives holdings throughout Australia totalled 297,109 shelf metres of records, including 111,230 metres of permanent value material. During 1978-79, 1850 official reference enquiries were received and 256,078 items were issued on loan to Government departments. Some 2,500 public reference inquiries were also received.

FOOTNOTE

1. The foregoing historical survey is based on a paper entitled 'Brief History of Archival Arrangement for the Australian Government' prepared by the Commonwealth Archives Office for a Seminar on a National Archives System sponsored by the Department of the Special Minister of State and held on 1 September 1973, in conjunction with the visit of Dr. W. Kaye Lamb.