Editorial

Widespread publicity was given to the release of the Petrov papers in September 1984, thirty years after the dramatic episode they document. On television, viewers saw the Regional Director of the Australian Archives open the vault that held them in Canberra and describe the work his staff had done in sorting and listing the papers. Then the events of 1954 were thoroughly regurgitated and debated by representatives of the media and some of the surviving participants.

As a result of this exercise, several points about the nature of archives became evident. Firstly, the papers did not support the conspiracy charge laid by the Labor politicians who were then in Opposition. Secondly, Document J, the most controversial document at the time, was found to contain allegations about people that were quite extraordinary, even when read with the benefit of hindsight. (Incidentally, Mark Brogan's paper in this issue advocates bringing the archives of the security services within professional archival control). Thirdly, it was a clear demonstration that thirty years is actually a very short period of time. Both the Evatt and Spender families complained at the release of the papers when neither man could defend himself, and of the innuendos the families have had to face. It should be noted that Dr Evatt and Sir Percy Spender were on opposite sides of the political fence.

Policies regarding government archives are inevitably bound up with political considerations. It is therefore surprising that a recent survey, whereby the Australian Society of Archivists' Promotions and Information Committee, sought to obtain the policies of the major political parties in regard to archives, should have produced a completely negative result. Not one party could show that its platform incorporated any such policy. The Liberal Party claimed that the Archives Act of 1983 represented its policy. Other parties pointed to sections of their platform relating to museums or libraries, though in no case did these sections refer specifically to archives.

At the recent conference in Brisbane of the Library Association of Australia, one of whose 'streams' was concerned with Special Collections, both the President of the LAA and the Chairman of the Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographical Services (AACOBS), emphasised the need for librarians to pitch in and fight for funds; they pointed to the success of museums in lobbying for greater recognition in the past few years. While many archival institutions still operate within the framework

of library systems, and some are associated with museums, others stand alone and therefore need to battle in their own right.

In a democracy, the practice of lobbying for funds and recognition is a legitimate activity for all kinds of groups that make up the community. We have recently seen the result of a campaign to remove the film and sound archives from the National Library of Australia. The decision taken about them ignores the needs of the National Library's holdings in other formats and the breaking up of an integrated National Library can certainly be deplored, but no doubt the Film and Sound Archive will be able to flourish faster and more spectacularly under the wing of Home Affairs and with the help of the associated media interests. (In this issue David Roberts asks what is the difference between archives and sound archives.)

The important thing is for archival bodies to press for fuller recognition as an integral and exciting part of the total political system and the community's general organisation. The Australian Society of Archivists needs to follow up the initial survey of its Promotions and Information Committee and, by vigorous lobbying of all political parties, turn their hitherto negative replies into positive policies.