

THE AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF ARCHIVES

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The Executive Office of the Australian Council of Archives describes its origins, objects, activities and membership, thus remedying a serious gap in the published history of Australian archival endeavour. The Council's relationship with local library and archives bodies, its current projects, and future possibilities and uncertainties are also discussed.

The Australian Council of Archives is the national consultative body which represents and promotes the interests of archival institutions in Australia.

Membership of the ACA is open *only* to institutions, i.e. 'to any organisation in Australia which collects and preserves archival materials, whether produced by itself or by other bodies or persons, in accordance with accepted standards of archival practice, and which demonstrates a continuing commitment to the application of such standards in the care and use of archives' (*Australian Council of Archives*, ACA leaflet, 1987). The restriction of membership to archival institutions clearly distinguishes the ACA from the Australian Society of Archivists, to which both individuals and institutions can belong.

The impetus for the formation of the Australian Council of Archives came from within the ASA. As a result of a motion at the 1979 ASA Biennial General Meeting, the ASA Council established a National Consultative Machinery Committee. The motion was a response to the feeling in the Society and in the archival community that there was a need for some formal means of facilitating communication and cooperation between archival institutions and for articulating coordinated views. The Committee reported in 1981 on the advantages of a national consultative body and expressed the hope that the institutions could thereby be induced to take up the question for themselves. The institutions did not take up the initiative but interest in the proposal continued.

In 1983 the ASA Council carried out a survey to gauge the feeling of archival institutions about 'national consultative machinery'. Because

of the overwhelming response in favour of a permanent consultative body, the 1983-1985 Council convened a meeting to discuss the establishment of such a body. This meeting was held in Canberra in November 1984. Representatives from twenty-six institutions attended; thirteen forwarded apologies. The membership, purpose and activities of the proposed organisation were widely canvassed. Agreement was reached on the motion: 'That this meeting approves in principle the formation of an organisation of archival institutions to provide a continuing basis for cooperation and consultation between those institutions.' A Committee of four members was appointed to draft a constitution for the new body and to prepare proposals relating to administrative matters such as membership and subscription fees.

The organisation, initially known as the National Archival Forum, was formally established at a meeting in Canberra in July 1985. At that meeting, a constitution was adopted, office-bearers were elected and issues were identified for the Forum to focus on. The word 'forum' did not appeal to the first Executive Committee: they considered it too passive, suggestive of a talk shop rather than an action oriented organisation. At the Committee's instigation, the name of the organisation was changed to the Australian Council of Archives at the first annual meeting in June 1986.

Why did archival institutions feel so strongly about the need to establish an organisation separate from the ASA even though most (possibly all) were institutional members of the Society? The first reason was the concern, especially of the larger institutions, about the ability of the ASA to represent and to promote their interests. Rightly or wrongly, the major institutions have seen the Society as an organisation primarily focused on its professional and associate members and their interests. The second was their concern (and that of the archival community generally) about the nature and priorities of the Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographical Services (AACOBS) and the Australian Library and Information Council (ALIC) and about the ability of those organisations to represent and to promote *archival* interests, even though quite a few archival institutions belonged to those bodies. Those organisations neither presented a model to emulate nor an arena within which the archival institutions felt their voices were being heard. (The motion at the November 1984 meeting to establish consultative machinery initially included the words 'analogous to AACOBS' but these were deleted.)

Prior to the establishment of the Australian Council of Library and Information Services (ACLIS), which superseded AACOBS and ALIC, both the ACA and the ASA expressed their concern that if the new body were to include archival institutions then some mechanism would be necessary to ensure that the views of the archival community could be

expressed and heard, given the dominance of library interests in the new body. No such mechanism was effected and the ACA therefore requested that ACLIS remove all references to archives from its name and its objects and that it recognise the ACA as the organisation which would represent the archival community nationally. ACLIS subsequently confirmed that it was the ACA's role to represent the archival community. (The development of a consultative mechanism between the two organisations was discussed but has never eventuated in any structural mechanism to facilitate such consultation). Ian Pearce, in his ACA Presidential address in 1988, referred to the ACLIS decision as 'both an opportunity and a challenge for the ACA — an opportunity in that for the first time in this country only one organisation will purport to represent, nationally, archival institutions in the government and public arenas; a challenge — to do this effectively'.

In the five years of its existence, the Australian Council of Archives has grown from thirty-seven to forty-eight members. Geographically, the membership is concentrated in the capital cities, especially in those in the south-east of Australia:

New South Wales:	16 members (3 outside Sydney)
Victoria:	13 members (2 outside Melbourne)
Australian Capital Territory:	6 members*
Queensland:	4 members (1 outside Brisbane)
South Australia:	3 members
Western Australia:	3 members
Northern Territory:	2 members
Tasmania:	1 member

In terms of 'interest', the members of the ACA can be categorised as follows:

University archives:	18 members
Commonwealth/State government:	8 members
Collecting archives:	7 members
Departmental or agency archives:	5 members
Business archives:	4 members
Local government archives:	2 members
Other:	3 members

In practice, the only 'interest' formally or informally represented in the ACA is the Commonwealth/State/Territory archives bloc. The Council's constitution provides that these government archives have a major input to the ACA's administration since they occupy three of the seven positions on the Executive Committee which consists of:

- A President, elected at the annual meeting

*Two of the ACT members, Australian Archives and the Australian Society of Archivists, are in fact 'national' members because of their national coverage and regional organisation.

- The Director-General of the Australian Archives
- Two representatives of State and Territory government archives
- Two representatives of the other members of the Council
- The President of the Australian Society of Archivists

The Commonwealth/State/Territory government archives also have informal liaison through the State and Territory Archives Group which consists of all the State and Territory archives which are members of the Council, with the Director-General of Australian Archives as an observer. STAG has an annual meeting in conjunction with the ACA Annual Meeting and members maintain liaison about matters of mutual concern. The ACA has no other 'special interest groups' nor are there regional branches.

In May 1991 the ACA appointed a part-time paid Executive Officer. Since the inception of the organisation there had been concern among its members about its heavy reliance on the voluntary efforts of the office-bearers, many of whom were not only fully occupied with their official jobs but also involved in the ASA. The strong push for a Secretariat was enabled by a hefty rise in fees in 1990. The appointment of an Executive Officer is an experiment since it is the first time in Australia that an archival organisation (unlike many other similar professional associations) has had a paid officer. The ACA has only committed itself to the experiment until the annual meeting in May 1992 when it will be reassessed and a decision made about its continuation.

According to the constitution of the ACA, its objects are:

- (a) to promote discussion of matters of mutual concern;
- (b) to make representations on behalf of its members; and
- (c) to organise and coordinate activities and projects for mutual benefit.

In line with these objectives, the Council is currently engaged on the following projects:

- Compilation of a Glossary of the Archival Terms used by Australian archival institutions;
- The identification of areas of concern relating to the management of electronic records through liaison with the computer industry and other information industry professionals;
- The establishment, in cooperation with the Australian Society of Archivists, of an Archival Trust Fund to promote and to finance archival activities;
- The development of archival projects for the commemoration of the Centenary of Federation;
- The collection of data and information about archival institutions in

Australia and the publication and promotion of information of value to the archival profession;

- The monitoring of on-going issues of concern to the archival profession such as copyright, evidence and criminal records legislation; political party policies regarding archives; heritage collections and information management policy;
- Promotion of the exchange of information about matters of concern to archival institutions such as performance indicators, charging for services, the valuation of collections, the formulation of acquisition or collection policies and the availability of funding sources;
- Liaison with other information industry associations in order to exchange information and to identify areas of common concern;
- Revision of the existing membership fee structure;
- Regular contact and liaison with member institutions through the *ACA Newsletter*, through regional meetings and through other appropriate means;
- Incorporation of the Council; and
- Expansion of Council membership.

Many of the issues and activities currently being pursued are ones which have been of concern since the inception of the ACA. However, the appointment of the Executive Officer and the development of initiatives such as the current series of regional meetings have enabled long-standing projects to be re-examined and given new direction if necessary and have also enabled greater consideration of the development of new initiatives.

Whether the ACA has a future is of course for the members to determine and to shape. From the experience of being directly involved in the formation and subsequent development of the ACA, I believe that the Council does have a future. To date, the ACA has been the means of developing cooperation between the archival institutions, especially the major ones, and a means of involving them in the concerns and activities of the archival community in Australia. In my opinion, a profession whose major institutions remain aloof from it has great difficulty in establishing its identity and its role. The ACA and the ASA have everything to gain, and nothing to lose, from mutual cooperation.

There are of course difficulties. At the last ASA annual general meeting a motion that the ASA should not have institutional members, because of the existence of the ACA, was discussed (and defeated). The ACA, on the other hand, has never addressed itself to the concerns of the 'small' archives, such as school and church archives, and its current constitution and structure does not provide for such interests to be catered for. Within the ACA there is also debate about whether there is identity of interests and whether cooperation is possible or necessary

between in-house and collecting archives. Such differences need to be aired and argued out; their resolution will greatly affect the future of the Council. A third area of concern is the attempt of other organisations, such as the Council of Australian Museum Associations, to take the running in representing a spectrum of interests which includes those of archival institutions. The development of strategies which interweave appropriate cooperation with respect for specific archival interests is a task which urgently faces the Council.

As Ian Pearce said in 1988, the Australian Council of Archives has to face both its opportunities and its challenges. I believe that it has both the reason to grasp those opportunities and the resources to deal with those challenges.

Note: All enquiries about the Council should be addressed to the Australian Council of Archives, PO Box 767, Dickson, ACT 2602, Australia.