

A Move Too Far? The Relocation of the Adelaide Office of the National Archives of Australia

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*I have an old and contemporary Oxford Dictionary, 4th edition, 1950 that includes in its definition of **consult** (v.t.) Seek information or advice from (person, book); take into consideration (feelings, interests). This article looks at the public consultation that occurred leading up to the relocation of the Adelaide Office of the National Archives.*

The decision to relocate the Adelaide Office of the National Archives of Australia was not entirely unexpected. A burgeoning collection and bureaucratic necessity to annually reduce its operational budgets required the National Archives to reconsider how it managed its collection both internally and externally.

One of the earliest decisions that would impact on future holdings, particularly at the regional level, was the commissioning and introduction of General Disposal Schedule 18 (for general administrative records common to government agencies) on 22 December 1993.

While this disposal authority was the subject of extensive research and consultation with its government clients, there appears to have been no consultation with public clients about its impact. Perhaps this was not required because the authority related to records that were not in the public domain, ie they were less than 30 years old.

Nevertheless this authority substantially changed the retention status of records that had an implied continuing value through the concurrent marketing of their worth and availability in the National Archives' finding aids such as the *Relations in Records* genealogical guide and Fact Sheets.

Its successor disposal authority, the Administrative Functions Disposal Authority (for functions common to all government agencies) compiled and signed on 18 February 2000 which was even more conducive to reductions also underwent extensive consultation with its government clients but there was no reference to any external consultation.

In 1999 the Archives reported the development of a new custodial policy that was expected to identify significant quantities of formerly permanent and longer term temporary records which could be removed from the collection. It was expected that the review would have a major impact on custody arrangements over the following three years. The Archives had formed the view that existing disposal authorities were over-retentive from self-examination of its own holdings. This was supported by overseas visits and studies that identified very generous holdings for a national archives or significant excesses in per capita holdings of archival material when compared to the major archival jurisdictions of those countries visited.¹

A Collection Review Project was established in 1999 to undertake the systematic review of National Archives holdings. One of its first trial projects in Canberra indicated that 50% of head office correspondence records from some agencies could be disposed of. There were other equally compelling regional examples that indicated that substantial reductions would impact on all repositories.

The cost of maintaining regional operations was also a key ingredient to future management as these costs represented approximately 31% of the National Archives' budget (as at the 1997-98 financial year). With property operating costs continuing to escalate through energy consumption, commercialisation of the property portfolio and the commissioning of the new national headquarters, reductions in holdings and customising of buildings (to suit those reductions) seemed an obvious way to achieve substantial savings in later years.

The implementation of Commonwealth Government policy that the Commonwealth should not, in general, own real estate forced government agencies to review property operating expenses with a view to reducing those expenses. The Archives had reasonable forewarning of the impact of this policy through the application to the Commonwealth's General Estate in 1998 and 1999. When the Commonwealth Department of Finance and Administration began planning the sale of the Special Purpose and Industrial Estate (which included the National Archives repositories) the National Archives was asked to commit to occupancy durations.

While the Archives has stated that the program of office relocation and the review of the collection were not linked, it would have been administratively prudent to have some interconnection between the two projects when the National Archives was asked to commit to occupancy durations for each property that it occupied and the Archives' position on property leases was agreed with the Department of Finance and Administration in November 1999.

The forerunner to a concerted push for reductions was the release of the discussion paper *Making Choices: Deciding which Records to Keep for Posterity* (September 1998), albeit marketed in a haphazard and ad hoc fashion through distribution over-the-counter and on the Internet. Comments and feedback were gratefully received until November 1998. In keeping with the marketing strategy, responses were also received similarly.

The National Archives reported that there was a good response to the paper from a wide range of over 30 sources. Most comments supported the thrust of the document though there was a divergence of views on particular aspects.² Among the major issues raised were mechanisms to facilitate stakeholder consultation and the relevance of past and current use of records and the place of prediction of use.³

The National Archives acknowledged those responses by promising to keep the interested parties informed of progress with a policy. In its 1998–99 annual report the Archives advised that it would issue a revised statement of its appraisal aims and approaches in October 1999.

Despite those promises, nothing was heard until the Archives released *Why Records Are Kept: Directions in Appraisal* (March 2000) that outlined the appraisal framework that the National Archives adopted for Commonwealth records and the objectives and criteria for the selection of records as national archives. There appeared to be no exploration of the divergence of views and issues that were relevant to the review of the Adelaide holdings.

These drivers of collection review and property operating expenses led to the formulation of a number of options that ranged from centralisation of the distributed national collection to reduced regional involvement. At that time a figure of 5,000 metres was seen as the target figure for the Adelaide Office, regardless of the extent of records of enduring value held there.

These options were discussed at a public meeting held in Adelaide in October 1999. As could be expected, the preference was for all records of enduring value to be retained in Adelaide. Given that cost was also a consideration, statements bandied about by senior National Archives executives that it would be cheaper to store records centrally and have them escorted to requesting localities, suggested that this was not a shared preference. With a certain amount of realism and fatalistic acceptance, the

meeting concluded that, in the event that any records were moved interstate, access should not be affected. Access should still be possible, and at no cost.

At that stage the fate of the office and its records were subject to deliberations that the public were not privy to: the finalisation of a regional office model, the outcome of the *Making Choices* discussion paper, the work of the Collection Review Project and the Archives' position on its property leases, as well as culmination of inter-related activities such as the *Why Records Are Kept* publication and the Administrative Functions Disposal Authority.

Between January and September 2000 the Friends of South Australia's Archives and the Association of Professional Historians canvassed concerns about consultation on the appraisal process and the types of records the Archives proposed retaining in Adelaide. Despite Archives' responses, the Friends' concerns did not appear to be allayed.

The subsequent actions taken by the National Archives remained unknown to the public at large until the South Australian Branch of the Australian Society of Archivists invited the Director of the Adelaide Office to talk about its activities in an effort to clear misconceptions and allay fears about the fate of the office and its records. At a general meeting of the South Australian Branch held on 19 September 2000 the Director of the Adelaide Office informed the audience that the Archives had made an administrative decision to retain 4 000 to 5 000 metres of 'heartland' and vital records (based on past and present usage). Unfortunately that meeting only served to raise more questions and fears about a National Archives that would not make any apology for its administrative decisions that it deemed it had a right to make.

Another spate of concerns were raised in the Adelaide *Advertiser* with pieces on 9 and 13 January 2001 weaving together collection review, the relocation of the Adelaide Office from Collinswood and the relocation of some records interstate. On 23 January 2001 the *Advertiser* published a letter to the editor from the Acting Director-General outlining the approach of the National Archives to the relocation of the office in Adelaide. The Archives wrote to each person quoted in the *Advertiser* pieces to provide additional information. As these people expressed concern about the work of the Archives, each letter sought advice about the means the Archives might use to report more widely and efficiently on its work to those interested.

Presumably as a result of the pieces in the *Advertiser*, in January and February 2001, several correspondents approached the Archives' portfolio Minister or the Archives about concern about appraisal and/or the movement of records from South Australia. Each of these letters was responded to.⁴

By the time a senior executive of the National Archives addressed a public meeting on 13 March 2001, once again at the invitation of the South Australian Branch of the

Australian Society of Archivists, to clarify the Archives' intentions for South Australia and South Australians, the die had already been cast. While the Archives apologised for the lack of consultation and communication and promised to do better for future regional projects, it did so knowing that its actions were almost inviolate.

The only concession that the Archives seemed to make through the whole process was offered at this meeting and may not have resulted from consultation with any of the mentioned protagonists, but a chance meeting between the author and another senior executive. The Archives offered to provide what transpired to be five digitised files free per year for records moved interstate.

On face value this seemed to excite the audience. However the saving of copying charges for a wait of over four months (at the time of writing) that is inconsistent with standards of service outlined in Fact Sheet 20 hardly seems something to get excited about.⁵

This offer was a far cry from previous claims about the economics of returning records to Adelaide and that should records located interstate be required by researchers in Adelaide, arrangements would be made to make them available. Notwithstanding the application to records less than 30 years old, the Archives' government clients are able to borrow their own items located interstate in accordance with Archives Advice 54, while other clients are not.

Instead of the previous free right of access afforded to those records, researchers were told that they (or a search agent) would have to visit the new locations. They had been deprived of a service currently enjoyed by researchers in every other state and territory.

In what could be viewed as an act of self-protection, the Archives issued a media release, 'Archives maps out its future' on 16 March 2001, which outlined its changed property arrangements and its approach to reviewing the collection. The media release was distributed widely to the research community in South Australia.

The Adelaide Office had been reduced to 3 000 metres, not 5 000 metres as first mooted. Some records were not centralised but were relocated to State Records in Adelaide and to the National Archives' offices in Perth, Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra; some high-use records falling within the criteria for retention in Adelaide had been relocated; and South Australians had been disenfranchised.

This is the culmination of the first move in an Archives strategy to relocate a number of its current state operations from large repositories to small, centrally located premises, or to downsize and upgrade existing premises. Although the strategy is intended to consolidate the bulk storage of records and reduce the long-term property costs, the cost-negative move, interstate relocation costs and the ongoing storage costs for the bulk of the records makes the writer wonder whether the public has been subjected to a pea and thimble game.⁶

On balance the National Archives appears not to have undertaken meaningful consultation with its public clients in South Australia nor kept them informed of progress in its directions, except in reaction to publicly raised concerns. The National Archives has described its collection as ‘unique and irreplaceable, it belongs to us all’.⁷ That inclusive ownership should be an invitation for more of us to be consulted as to how it is managed, rather than decided by a select few ‘public servants’ who seem to view consultation with the public they serve as an anathema.

While it is commendable that the Archives has established forums in Hobart, Brisbane and Perth bringing together key stakeholder representatives to discuss relocation and collection review matters, the same needs to be done at the location of the currently inviolate offices in anticipation of similarly anticipated or expected property moves. For the Archives to be consistent, there needs to be ongoing dialogue with key South Australian stakeholders about the fate of records moved interstate as the Archives has indicated that they are not being destroyed, but stored until their value is confirmed or new disposal decisions are made.

Until such time as all locations are on an equal footing, South Australian researchers should be treated equitably in relation to records that once resided in South Australia. This seems consistent with the Archives’ concern with equitable and cheap access to material and its intention to provide digitised copies of records at no cost to those who find it inconvenient, impossible or unnecessary to go to a reading room.

Most importantly there needs to be increasing consultation with public users not only about the issue of new disposal authorities but also the impact of their implementation even at the regional level where records may be packaged differently.

ENDNOTES

1 National Archives of Australia, *Annual Report 1998–99*, Canberra, 1999.

2 *ibid.*

3 Australian Society of Archivists South Australian Branch, *Newsheet*, 17 May 2001.

4 My thanks to Anne-Marie Schwirtlich for outlining this public contact.

5 National Archives of Australia, ‘RecordSearch’, at www.naa.gov.au/the_collection/recordsearch.html where the date of those requests for digital copies that are currently being processed is displayed; Fact Sheet 20, ‘Our Standards of Service’ at www.naa.gov.au/Publications/fact_sheets/FS20.html.

6 National Archives of Australia, *Annual Report 2000–01*, Canberra, 2001.

7 National Archives of Australia, *Our Collection*, Canberra, 2002.