

SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS
ATTORNEY-GENERAL'S PORTFOLIO

Group: 2

Program: Other Agency

Question No. BE15/036

Senator Xenophon asked the following question at the hearing on 27 and 28 May 2015:

Senator XENOPHON: Do you see the role of your office, or of the National Archives, as being to give advice to government about the declassification of documents? Is that within the remit of your statutory role?

Mr Fricker: Yes, I think it is, because our statutory role is to collect, preserve and make accessible the records of the Commonwealth. To make accessible the records of the Commonwealth, I feel, brings with it an obligation for us to do everything we can within our powers and within our resources to release those records to the public.

Senator XENOPHON: I think you are familiar with the report several months ago about the half a million diplomatic cables released in the US. Would you mind terribly taking on notice whether, based on what occurred that there, you are—and I am always reluctant in front of the Attorney to praise what other countries do, otherwise he will give me a line from *The Mikado*—

Senator Brandis interjecting—

Mr Fricker: Senator—sorry to interject there. Just for clarification, my understanding is that the WikiLeaks got a set of records which had been examined and released over many years by NARA, the national archives in the US. What WikiLeaks did was then to take that public domain information and put their own search engine over the top of it. And so there is nothing in that WikiLeaks release that represented of itself a new concentrated effort by the government. Those cables—many of them have been in the public domain for many, many years prior to WikiLeaks.

Senator XENOPHON: I understand that. I think it was just a convenient repository or a reference point for people to find the documents. But I guess my question to you is, and I am very happy for you to take this on notice, what advice and what programs are in place to ensure that archives are more easily accessible pursuant to your statutory obligation? I do not want to take it any further than that, but that would be useful. Could I just move on to—

Mr Fricker: I would be delighted to take that on notice. But I would be delighted to advise you here today that we are well advanced in our thinking down this track, and of course taking advantage of digital technology is a key part of that. So we are well advanced in developing our strategies through the uptake of, in particular digital technology, to make sure that we are, as rapidly as possible, examining, releasing and making accessible the records of the Commonwealth, which should properly be released into the public domain.

The answer to the honourable senator's question is as follows:

The collection – overview

The National Archives of Australia (the Archives) can best be described as the memory of our nation – collecting and preserving Australian Government records that reflect our history and identity.

The collection traces events and decisions that have shaped the nation and the lives of Australians. As well as preserving our history, the Archives plays a key role in helping to ensure the Australian Government and its departments are effective and accountable to the people.

The Archives was established under the *Archives Act 1983* as an executive agency of the Australian Government.

Under the *Archives Act 1983*, the Archives has two main roles:

- to preserve Australia's most valuable government records and encourage their use by the public; and
- to promote good records management by Australian Government agencies.

In fulfilling these responsibilities, we ensure that Australians have access to a national archival collection so they may better understand their heritage and democracy.

Through individuals' interaction with various government departments, aspects of their lives are preserved for future generations. Family historians find a wealth of information in our records, as do academics and other researchers.

The Archives encourages good records management by government agencies to support:

- Australia's cultural heritage
- the rights and entitlements of citizens
- informed decision-making
- government accountability.

Digital Continuity Plan

The Archives has released the Digital Continuity Plan, which is based on six Digital Continuity Principles to assist agencies to achieve business benefits, including efficiencies and mitigation of risks.

The Digital Continuity Plan:

- identifies the practical outcomes that arise from the Digital Continuity Principles and suggests key actions to achieve these outcomes
- assists all agencies in the ongoing management of digital information while allowing them to address agency-specific requirements and optimise benefits
- links to more detailed advice on how to carry out each action, and identifies useful tools where appropriate.

The Digital Continuity outcomes:

- benefits of digital information to your business, the government and the community are optimised
- People, processes and technology are aligned to support effective information management
- Information is fit-for-purpose over its life.

Transferring records to the collection

When records of archival value are no longer being actively used, Australian Government agencies can arrange to transfer them into the custody of the Archives. To ensure the preservation of archival value records and to allow the Archives to prepare records for public access, section 27 of the *Archives Act 1983* requires Australian government agencies to transfer records to the Archives within 15 years of their creation.

The Archives stores its collection in environmentally controlled, secure repositories which promote the preservation of the records. Specialist conservation staff monitor the condition of the collection and storage environments and undertake conservation treatment where necessary.

Using the Commonwealth records Series (CRS) System, the Archives documents contextual information about records in its collection. The CRS System allows the Archives to keep track of the various agencies of the Australian government, the series of records they produce, and the individual items in those series, by registering and describing each of these elements in *RecordSearch*, the Archives' online collection database. This information assists researchers understand a record and determine whether it is relevant to their research.

Access to records

Under the *Archives Act 1983*, most Commonwealth records are available for public access once they enter the open access period. The Act requires the Archives to release as much information as possible. Before records are available for public access they are examined to identify sensitive information that is not suitable for public release.

Most records (98 per cent) are wholly released for public access while 1.75 per cent are released with some exempt information deleted. Only 0.25 per cent of records are wholly withheld because they consist entirely of exempt information.

While most access examination is completed within a month, it may take up to 90 days and sometimes longer to examine some records. On occasion, the advice of the agency, which created the record is sought before a final access decision is made.

Most records are made available to researchers in their original form, unless they are fragile, in which case a copy can usually be provided.

Archives' National Reference Service and reading rooms

The Archives provides access to, promotes and interprets the national archival collection. Timely and appropriate access is provided through its National Reference Service – online, or via telephone or mail – and the network of reading rooms at the National office, Canberra and across state and territory offices where reference staff are available to assist researchers use finding aids to identify records relevant to their research and view original records.

During 2013–14 the Archives received 80,642 reference inquiries. The National Reference inquiry telephone number is answered from 9am to 5pm each business day.

In an Archives' reading room, researchers can access the Archives' website, online databases, guides and fact sheets and other finding aids, and view digital copies of records of which copies can be ordered. The Archives also publishes resources (online and print) to assist Australians to research the Archives' collection.

In 2013–14 a total of 63,296 records were accessed in Archives reading rooms and 46,071 records were accessed via the National Reference Service. Opening hours of reading rooms in all offices are available on the Archives' corporate website naa.gov.au. Charges are levied for copies of records from our collection and researchers are encouraged to use their own digital camera to capture images of records. In 2013/14 some 14 million records were viewed online. There is no charge to view original records or to use research aids or computers in our reading rooms.

The Archives also assists agencies' access to records. Agencies require access to records for a range of reasons including litigation or investigation of historical issues. They also undertake research for official histories and other publications. In 2013–14 the Archives responded to 1722 inquiries from agencies, providing access to 16,023 records.

Digitisation of the collection

The Archives has been making digital copies of selected records available on its website since 2001. Now, over 27 million images of archival records are available online for viewing through the Archives online database, *RecordSearch*. New images are made available each week.

Digital images of records are linked to contextual information in *RecordSearch*. Generally digital images are presented in two sizes – a smaller viewing image and a larger image suitable for printing. Images are optimised for online viewing and provide an accurate representation of the original.

Education programs

The Archives provides education programs for Australian students (primarily years 5 to 6 and 9 to 12) and teachers within the framework of the Australian Curriculum: History, Civics and Citizenship, to enhance understanding of archival records and their value in the classroom.

Onsite programs primarily take place within the permanent exhibition *Memory of a Nation*, with educator-led programs focusing on in-depth consideration of Federation documents, Indigenous and Defence records, and combined learning activities with the Reading Room to investigate specific original records. 6,582 students visited *Memory of a Nation* in 2014-15.

Other in-person education programs include collaborative events with the National Capital Education Tourism Project, Constitutional Education Fund Australia (ACT Constitution Convention and National Year 12 Constitution Convention), professional learning for teachers and programs associated with the National History Challenge Prize and the Governor-General Prize.

Online education services are provided primarily through the dedicated website *Vrroom* (Virtual Reading Room), which hosts a selection of records from the Archives' collection, organised by topics related to the Australian Curriculum to facilitate research and learning activities in classrooms. *Vrroom* attracted approximately 57,000 users in 2014-15. Education kits are also available on the Archives' websites *Discovering Anzacs* and *Forced Adoptions History Project*. The Archives showcases its resources with education packages on key external online platforms, notably *ABC Splash Collections* and *Australianscreen*.

Public programs

The Archives conducts public programs to highlight records in the Archives, and to promote an understanding and awareness of them. Open days, public lectures, school holiday programs, exhibition tours, launches, and community education programs are regularly held.

Each year the Archives celebrate Constitution Day (9 July) to raise awareness and understanding of Australia's Constitution and democracy, including a major public forum broadcast on ABC Radio National's *Big Ideas*. Events are organised around other key dates, such as Reconciliation Week and NAIDOC day, or in association with external organisations, such as annual displays at the Migration and Settlement Awards (since 2013). Public programs are often associated with temporary exhibitions, and include special events associated with Canberra's annual *Enlighten* festival, which attracted almost 2,000 visitors to the Archives over two weekends, 28-29 February and 7-8 March 2015.

Exhibitions

Memory of a Nation, the Archives' permanent exhibition in the national office, allows visitors to view treasures of the Archives' collections, including Australia's Federation documents.

Temporary exhibitions curated by the Archives provide access to key series of records from the collection and explore social issues of importance to the nation, including immigration (*A Ticket to Paradise?*), forced adoption (*Without Consent*), defence history (*Shell-shocked*) and Antarctic exploration (*Traversing Antarctica*). The Archives also hosts exhibitions from external venues, with subjects that align closely with the Archives' holdings. 66,782 visitors attended exhibitions held in the national office in 2014-15.

The Archives tours exhibitions nationally, facilitating access to the nation's archival collections in regional and rural as well as metropolitan areas. These touring exhibitions are accompanied by resources such as media releases, marketing materials, education and public programs specifically designed to draw out the exhibition's themes and highlight records of importance to a national audience. The Archives' touring exhibitions attracted 72,272 visitors during 2014-15.