



SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY ON CANBERRA'S NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

The attached submission is presented for the information of the Inquiry.

The **Friends of the NFSA Inc.** is an independent membership organisation which exists to support the NFSA Act, advocate for and promote the NFSA, provide volunteer support, present public programs based on the NFSA collection, and serve as a focus for the NFSA's constituency.

Founded in 2000, the Friends has historically worked to defend the professional integrity and independence of the NFSA, including the campaign leading to its creation as a statutory authority in 2008. The Friends' mission, history and activities can be accessed at www.archivefriends.org.au

We would be happy to provide further information as requested and would be happy to appear before the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

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PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY ON CANBERRA'S NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

SUBMISSION FROM THE FRIENDS OF THE NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND ARCHIVE (NFSA) INC.

Submitted 7 May 2018

Overview/Executive Summary

As one of the pioneers in the creation of the audiovisual era, and a contributor that punches above its weight in creating sound and visual content, Australia deserves a world leading institution devoted to the “popular cultural expression of our age.”

Unfortunately a decade of “efficiency dividends” and associated funding cuts has led to a significant reduction in the resources devoted to the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA) with staffing cutbacks, loss of public profile, the closure of many of its public activities and slow progress in digitisation.

In this respect, the Friends of the NFSA note that the Inquiry is to “inquire into and report on the range of innovative strategies that Canberra’s national institutions are using to maintain viability and relevance to sustainably grow their profile, visitor numbers, and revenue”. Because of the sustained funding cutbacks that have adversely impacted the viability of the NFSA, we would consider that it is a “fail” in many areas of examination for the Committee, such as brand awareness, public engagement, cultivating private sector support and developing other income streams. In this submission we provide a number of suggestions on how to address these failings, which primarily relate to issues of funding.

We believe **the NFSA can return to a position of prominence and world leadership by:**

- **Restoring** the NFSA’s original funding levels so that it can turn its attention to rebuilding its activities and public profile nationally and internationally, including a “special” appropriation to the NFSA to enable it to fund the ongoing major digitisation program at a sustainable level without disruption to other NFSA functions.
- **Encouraging** an ongoing political and stakeholder discussion about the cultural value of the NFSA and its worth to Australian society as the central standard setter and custodian of the nation’s audiovisual heritage, so that policy and funding decisions are consistent with of this role.
- **Opening appointments** to the NFSA Board to public application to ensure it will always have the best range of appropriate expertise and experience needed for the institution’s strategic development

- **Obtaining agreement** in principle from the major political parties about the long term benefits of housing the NFSA in a purpose built building fully expressive of its character and services

Introduction

The Commonwealth of Australia was born with the audiovisual era.

In 1901 we became the first country to be born in front of a movie camera: there is a precious record of the Federation ceremonies in Sydney which still survives. In 1906 we invented the feature film.¹ We became the first country to include a weekly visit to “the pictures” in calculating the basic wage.

Our social history is documented in our radio and television broadcasts. Our music and speech has been recorded since the invention of the phonograph. Our lives are immersed in the digitally born and mediated audiovisual world.

The audiovisual heritage has a central place in our national consciousness.

What is the NFSA?

The NFSA is Australia’s national audiovisual archive – the custodian of its film, radio, television, audio and born-digital heritage. It is the largest institution of its kind in South East Asia/Pacific and is internationally respected.

The establishment in 1935 of the National Historical Film and Speaking Record Library made Australia one of the earliest countries to formally provide for the preservation of its audiovisual heritage. A long and uneven history as part of the National Library and its predecessor eventually led to the establishment of the NFSA as a separate institution in 1984. It was seen as “a new kind of institution....devoted to the popular cultural expression of our age, and dedicated to the preservation of some of the best manifestations of Australian character and Australian imagination”. (Prime Minister Hawke’s speech on the opening of NFSA’s HQ, 3 October 1984).

Well before Bob Hawke’s involvement, the creation of the NFSA was championed in Parliament by Liberal Senators David Hamer and Chris Puplick, the latter becoming the first chair of the NFSA’s governing board when it ultimately became a statutory authority on 1 July 2008. Between 1984 and 2008 the NFSA was an “outrider” of its portfolio Department before an ill-judged merger with the then Australian Film Commission in 2003. Advocacy groups, including the Friends of the NFSA,

¹ UNESCO’s *Memory of the World Program* recognizes **The Story of the Kelly Gang** (1906) as the world’s first feature film.

successfully campaigned for the NFSA's independence and establishment as a statutory authority in 2008.²

Current position of the NFSA

This impact of ongoing funding cutbacks and the loss of public profile has meant that the NFSA is now a poor cousin of other major memory institutions in Canberra, such as the National Gallery, the Australian War memorial, the National Portrait Gallery and the National Library.

Reduced funding³

The incredible shrinking NFSA: For the last few years, the NFSA has been in retreat. Between 2008/9 and 2016/7 government funding has been static, therefore declining by about 20% in real terms. Staffing has also declined by about 20%.

This loss in funding has been through inflation (average 2.2%) plus the “efficiency dividend” whereby all Government agencies are expected to reduce operating costs by a fixed percentage each year – currently 1%, although it has gone as high as 2.5% during this period. The “efficiency dividend” hits small organisations such as the NFSA and other cultural institutions particularly hard, as they have little room for budget flexibility. Any reduction in activities cuts into “muscle” rather than “flab”. The inappropriateness of such an approach was shown by the recent Government decision to top up the funding of the National Library and finance special projects at the Australian War Memorial. Staff losses also entail the loss of expertise, collection knowledge and corporate memory.

Impacts of reductions in funding

The funding cutbacks and staffing reductions are facing the NFSA with impossible choices:

Digitisation and collection

The rapid move to the digital environment profoundly impacts all the NFSA's operations, but we focus here on a particular issue.

The NFSA's existing collection of analogue audio and video tapes must be digitised if their content is to survive. Playback machines are now obsolete and the skills to operate them are disappearing. As a working technological museum the NFSA is engaged in this transfer process now, but it is proceeding at one third of the rate necessary if the work is to be completed by the

² The PhD thesis *National Film and Sound Archive: the quest for identity* (Edmondson, Ray, 2011) provides a history of the institution up to 2008.

³ The reference points are the NFSA's annual reports for 2008/9 and 2016/7. Government allocation fell from \$25,082,000 to \$24,416,000, and staff from 202 to 164 (full time equivalent).

internationally adopted benchmark of 2025.⁴ While even this limited rate is an increase on previous years, it is being achieved at serious cost to the NFSA's public presence and accessibility.

All memory institutions have constantly growing collections, which must embrace the deluge of born-digital content, games and social media which now surrounds and challenges us. Since 2008 the NFSA's national collection has doubled in size, while the staff to manage it has been reducing.⁵

Public profile

Economies have meant a drastic reduction in the NFSA's public face. For example:

- Reduced opening hours
- Closure of weekend film screenings
- Closure of exhibition gallery, shop, library, travelling festivals such as Big Screen
- Drastic drop in visitor numbers⁶
- Closure of research fellowships, awards and lecture program
- Reduced interaction with the professional community in Australia and overseas
- Effectively leasing out part of its headquarters and visitor parking area to make money

These reductions have been strategically disastrous. Derogatory comments on forums like Trip Advisor show that NFSA has disappointed visitor expectations and lost its status as a top tourist attraction.⁷

Within the limits available, staff have made imaginative efforts to compensate, complemented by the voluntary efforts of the Friends of the NFSA, which runs its own stream of public programs. The monthly Vinyl Lounge has proved popular, as has the recent "Starstruck" exhibition, based on the NFSA's collection of film stills and costumes, held at the National Portrait Gallery. Yet it is the Gallery that gets the public credit for the exhibition, not the NFSA!

Potential sponsors will not be attracted to an invisible institution.

Into the future

The NFSA is in a Catch 22 situation. It cannot increase digitisation without further reducing other activities. It cannot restore its public profile without reducing preservation and acquisition work. Restoring its budget to an adequate level is the only way to improve both and fulfill its legislated mandate to both preserve and provide access.

⁴ 14,825 titles digitized in 2016/7. The rate needed is 45,000 titles per year.

⁵ 1,400,000 items in 2008/9 compared to 2,835,000 items in 2016/7. The comparison is approximate since statistical methods have changed over time.

⁶ For example, school students dropped from 33,430 in 2008/9 to 13,056 in 2016/7.

⁷ It is understood that the Exhibition Hall will reopen in August 2018 with an exhibit loaned by another institution. At that time, short term parking for visitors will be reinstated.

Increased funding and public debate on the role of the NFSA

Reversing the retreat described above is the key to reinvigorating the NFSA's brand. Clearly, this will require the provision of additional resources by government, although this will be partially supplemented by some increase in revenue and possibly by greater corporate support.

The Friends therefore propose:

- A reinstatement of its annual base budget allocation, inflation-adjusted to 2008/9 levels: that means an increase in current dollars from \$25 million to \$30 million per annum.
- Gaining support across major political parties for a “special” appropriation to the NFSA to enable it to fund the ongoing major digitisation program at a sustainable level to be concluded by the internationally accepted target date of 2025 without causing disruption to other NFSA functions. Subject to current quantification by NFSA, a figure of \$10 million is proposed.⁸
- Instituting political and stakeholder discussions about the cultural value of the NFSA and its work to Australian society so that policy and funding decisions are cognisant of this role and the views of its constituency.
- Opening appointments to the NFSA Board to public application to ensure it will always have the best range of appropriate expertise and experience needed for the institution's strategic development
- Avoiding further deterioration of the NFSA's funding levels so that it can turn its attention to increasing its public profile nationally, so that all Australians, no matter where they reside, can identify with the rich repository of Australia's past and present entrusted to the NFSA for safekeeping for future generations.
- Obtaining agreement in principle from the major political parties about the long term benefits of housing the NFSA in an appropriate and accessible building that signals to all Australians the importance of preserving and providing access to their cultural heritage.

Comments against the Inquiry's terms of reference

1 Creating strong brand and online presence

⁸ <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/about/our-mission/support-us/deadline-2025-campaign>

Like other institutions the NFSA has developed its **on line presence** which is now a standard expectation, and much more in the way of on line access to digitised collection content will be expected in future. The *Australian screen on line* portal is a particularly important educational resource, but the addition of further content to the portal has been frozen for lack of resources.

The on line presence complements, but cannot replace, personal visitation for client access, public exhibitions, screenings and presentations. Both are necessary.

2 Experimenting with new forms of public engagement and audience participation

Volunteers: Unlike Canberra's other national memory institutions, the NFSA has no tradition of utilising volunteers in its daily routine work. Appropriately managed, a volunteer program can effectively enlarge the NFSA's resource base. It can utilise skills, collection knowledge and corporate memory that is available in the Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne communities and is willing to be used. The Friends presently operate a limited volunteer program in Canberra engaged in indexing work for the NFSA, and a Sydney-based volunteer group undertakes oral history recordings.

Screenings and festivals: The NFSA's Arc cinema is not only the best cinema in Canberra, it is a unique facility capable of screening multiple formats of film and digital presentations. It should be utilised to the maximum extent, both with curated screenings from the NFSA's own collection and by supporting compatible external ventures such as the retrospectively-themed Canberra International Film Festival.

Regular public consultation with the NFSA's constituency – its donors, users, suppliers, supporters, the film and sound communities – is vital to keep the institution relevant and honest. It should include real dialogue, workshops and public meetings. This is the task of management and the Board. While press releases and e-news are important, they are no substitute for personal engagement.

Collection access: Research fellowships and a functioning library enhance the intellectual life of this one-of-a-kind institution and both should be reinstated. There is a constituency view that **access fees** are excessive compared to other memory institutions, and are counterproductive, reducing access and income. The NFSA Act requires that the national audiovisual heritage be accessible. *Accessibility is purpose of preservation and is the justification for public funding of memory institutions.*

NFSA Building: The original 1930s heritage building was doubled in size by a sensitively designed, purpose built extension in 1999. It is an icon that is associated with the NFSA's history and public image, the chief limitation being the lack of sufficient visitor parking space in a crowded part of Acton, made worse by the alienation of NFSA's parking space from short term visitors, and the possibility of the Gordon St. car park being redeveloped.

A new building, located on the Acton peninsula, has been proposed. To be justified it needs to offer a larger public experience than is possible in the present one – the Thai Film Archive in Bangkok being one case study example of the potential – and the NFSA must be guaranteed the resources

to fully operate it. Even so, such a building may compete for parking space if adjacent to the Australian National University, AIATSIS, the National Museum of Australia and other intended new structures. It may also lack sufficient profile or public accessibility, depending on the siting available, especially if it is in West Basin.

3 Conducting outreach outside of Canberra

Travelling festival and loans: the “Big Screen” festival, presenting new and archival films to audiences across rural and regional Australia was suspended in 2015, closing the NFSA’s link to regional communities, where – ironically – caches of early films and other collections material are still found. Loans of films and DVDs to institutions and film societies have diminished as fees have risen.

Sydney and Melbourne While the NFSA has “back offices” in the two largest population centres, it has no dedicated public presence. This is perhaps most acutely felt in Sydney, leading to calls for the NFSA to be relocated there. The Friends view is that while the NFSA should maintain its HQ and a major public presence in Canberra, there is also a case for a dedicated public presence in Sydney, which should include an archival cinema and an exhibition area. In Melbourne, the NFSA has a partnership with the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) and there is a case for increasing the NFSA’s visibility through that arrangement.

International engagement The NFSA is part of the global community of audiovisual archives and its various UNESCO-linked international professional federations. These connections are crucial for the NFSA’s and Australia’s profile, and for the professional development of its staff. Yet its engagement with these federations has been diminishing rather than growing. It has been the singular achievement of the NFSA, as the largest AV archive in the South East Asia/Pacific region, to lead the creation of a regional professional association⁹ and to mentor the growth of AV archives across the region. Now, as these archives forge ahead, for example in Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam and Singapore, they are leaving a shrinking NFSA in their wake.

4 Cultivating private sector support

Major sponsorship: In the past, the NFSA has attracted significant corporate support, for example the \$4 million News Corporation/Greater Union *Operation Newsreel* project of the 1990s. The key to such success was the careful building of relationships with stakeholders over many years, and the enhancing of the NFSA’s profile over time. This potential remains, though there appear to have been no major corporate sponsorships in recent years.

Crowdfunding and personal donations are useful and should be encouraged, but they are supplementary and unlikely to achieve the quantum potentially available through corporate

⁹ SEAPAVAA (South East Asia Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association), created in 1996 following a month-long ASEAN-Australia training seminar at the NFSA,

sponsorship. The most recently reported results may well amount to less than the cost of the staff time involved in achieving them.¹⁰

Foundation: More than once in the past, the creation of a NFSA Foundation has been announced, although it has never actually happened. The creation of a Foundation could broaden private sector support by attracting major donors, and would add to the NFSA's prestige and visibility.

5 Developing other income streams

Products: In the past the NFSA offered an extensive catalogue of retail products – CDs, DVDs, postcards, reproduction posters, books etc – based on its collection, sold through both its own shop and wider retail outlets. Whether or not this enterprise yielded a net surplus, it was a crucial part of the NFSA's national profile and it provided widespread, curated collection access. While there have been recent sporadic attempts to re-start the product line¹¹, this remains an area of great unfulfilled potential. The NFSA could again be seen as “the” place to obtain real or downloaded archival-standard copies of Australian films, television, radio and recorded sound – whether the products are produced by NFSA itself or by other parties.

Rights licensing: NFSA controls and licenses the use of Film Australia productions, providing an income stream. It also owns a variety of other properties, such as the entire output of Melbourne's Efftee Studios of the 1930s, which could be marketed for broadcasting and downloading. While the NFSA does *not* control rights in the great majority of its collection, there is a significant segment that it *does* control. There is a further range of historical material for which it could arguably negotiate worthwhile distribution deals.

6 Ensuring the appropriateness of governance structures

The Board has often been under strength and is remote: it has shown little interest in the Friends, and its deliberations are opaque. In our view the Board should be kept fully up to strength, and should embody the spectrum of relevant professional and strategic skills. It should be representative of the NFSA's constituency, including connections to the audiovisual industries, the audiovisual archiving profession and academia. Given the NFSA's unique character, an understanding of its history and culture is also important for the Board.

For these reasons, appointments to the Board should be open to applications from the public rather than made behind closed doors.

CEOs from overseas While absolutely no disrespect to the current incumbent is intended, the sequential appointment of three NFSA Chief Executive Officers from overseas proclaims a “cultural cringe” message that no Australian is up to the job of running our national audiovisual archive.

¹⁰ NFSA Annual Report 2016/7: it appears a total of \$88,000 was raised through donations and crowdfunding, though it is difficult to analyse the figures. NFSA adopts the convention of putting a monetary value on donated collection acquisitions, which is not the equivalent of financial support: rather, it actually adds to the NFSA's net obligations.

¹¹ NFSA markets the inherited the product line of Film Australia, but the additions from the main collection offered through its on-line shop are, so far, few and untypical. The original product line of the 1990's/2000s has not been revived.

Fairly or not, this puts the incumbent, the NFSA and the nation at a disadvantage. It suggests a lack of foresight and strategic planning by the Board, and should not be repeated.

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