



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

Reference: Treatment of census forms

CANBERRA

Thursday, 4 September 1997

OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT

CANBERRA

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

Members

Mr Andrews (Chair)

Mr Andrew	Mr Mutch
Mr Barresi	Mr Randall
Mrs Elizabeth Grace	Mr Sinclair
Mr Hatton	Dr Southcott
Mr Kerr	Mr Tony Smith
Mr McClelland	Mr Kelvin Thomson
Mr Melham	

Matter referred to the committee for inquiry into and report on:

The treatment of forms from future population censuses.

The inquiry will examine the issues surrounding the destruction or retention of census forms. It will focus on whether the current practice of destroying census forms after processing should continue or whether they should be retained for medical, social and genealogical research.

WITNESSES

BLUMER, Mr Sydney Donald, Director, Treasury, Parkes Place, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory 2600	61
BOADLE, Mr Donald Graeme, Director, Archives and Records, and Senior Lecturer in History, Charles Sturt University, PO Box 588, Wagga Wagga, New South Wales 2678	50
BORTHWICK, Mr David William, Deputy Secretary, Treasury, Parkes Place, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory 2600	61
CUNNINGHAM, Mr Adrian Edward, Councillor, Australian Society of Archivists, PO Box 83, O'Connor, Australian Capital Territory 2602	40
DAN, Ms Kathryn Patricia, President, Australian Society of Archivists, PO Box 83, O'Connor, Australian Capital Territory 2602	40
SEARLE, Mr Robert James, Secretary, Commonwealth Grants Commission, 5 Torrens Street, Braddon, Australian Capital Territory 2612	56
STERLAND, Mr Barry Keith, Director, Current Economic Conditions Section, Economic Division, Treasury, Parkes Place, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory 2600	61

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Present

Mr Andrews (Chair)

Mr Hatton

Dr Southcott

Mr McClelland

Mr Tony Smith

Mr Mutch

Mr Kelvin Thomson

Mr Randall

The committee met at 9.51 a.m.

Mr Andrews took the chair.

CUNNINGHAM, Mr Adrian Edward, Councillor, Australian Society of Archivists, PO Box 83, O'Connor, Australian Capital Territory 2602

DAN, Ms Kathryn Patricia, President, Australian Society of Archivists, PO Box 83, O'Connor, Australian Capital Territory 2602

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the committee's inquiry into the treatment of census forms. I welcome the witnesses and any other members of the public who are attending this meeting of the committee. This is the second day of hearings for the census forms inquiry. The subject of the inquiry is whether the current practice of destroying name-identified forms after the data is collected from them should continue in the future. On Tuesday we heard evidence from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Archives, and we look forward to some further discussion and elucidation of the issues today.

I welcome the witnesses who are appearing on behalf of the Australian Society of Archivists. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence on oath, I should advise you that the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as the proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter, and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament.

We are in receipt of your submission dated 20 July this year. Would you like to make some brief opening comments?

Ms Dan—Thank you. The Australian Society of Archivists is a professional association with about 800 members, and we work in the interests of archivists in Australia. As an organisation of archivists, we passed a resolution in 1993 affirming the value of name-identified census records due to their potential research value. The linking of the individual to socioeconomic data of various kinds allows a range of research to be undertaken in the fields of history, family history, social sciences and so on. These research interests could best be served by retaining this information for use long after the census itself has been taken. Archivists would argue that the sensitivity of information diminishes over time, and also that archivists are practised in administering access to records of various sorts, including records with considerable personal information in them.

It is a central professional responsibility to protect privacy and other sensitivities while also providing access to information for research purposes at the appropriate time. We believe that the privacy concerns that have been raised in relation to these records can be satisfied. We also believe that the investment in the taking of the census and the value of that data is so high that the Australian government should retain both the aggregated census data and the name-identified information for the benefit of future research and for the benefit of Australian society.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. Let me come to the nub of the issue before us

and put it to you in this context. I am not sure whether you have seen the submission of the Australian Bureau of Statistics or not.

Ms Dan—I haven't, actually.

CHAIR—We can provide you with a copy, but I will just take you to one pertinent part. In their submission, in talking about the decision for the 1996 census, the Bureau of Statistics said that they had received a submission from your organisation. They said:

It supported the argument for retention through the use of census data overseas for research in many fields, such as demography and the medical profession; 'the argument is particularly compelling in the area of epidemiological research'. This and other similar submissions did not, however, provide specific examples or possible applications.

Those submissions criticising the destruction of census forms failed to explain:

- .why it is necessary to retain census forms pursuing research
- .what information on the census forms, over and above that which is available from existing sources, is vital, as opposed to desirable, for conducting the research, and
- .the value of this research to the community, as opposed to the private benefit of the genealogist.

Given that that is the counter position to the one which you are putting, I would be interested in your response to what the ABS have said of your position. Let us take them one at a time. Why is it necessary to retain census forms for pursuing the research which you have referred to?

Ms Dan—Perhaps we could give an example of the use of information which does survive. Things like the New South Wales musters and some of those early records which we have for Australia are heavily used. They are heavily used particularly by those doing family history, but also those undertaking more general historical study. That is one aspect.

There is also an argument that family history itself is a legitimate pursuit. It is history. It often links into local history, and is not simply concerned with tracing the one family, but actually looking at the social conditions that impacted on a family and more broadly on a family group. That picks up some of the latter part.

There was a point there about epidemiological research. It is certainly true that the census information is not the only source of information for research. There are other sources of information which will give you personal data as well. However, this particular set of information is a unique collection, because it is a point-in-time survey of the entire Australian population. In addition, the range of questions gives a certain context for the individual.

CHAIR—Just before we go on, you are hearing beeping, which is to indicate to us that there will be a division soon. When the bells ring we are going to have to suspend the

sittings. This unfortunately occurs when parliament is sitting. I will apologise for it now rather than later.

Dr SOUTHCOTT—For a family history you could use the records of births, deaths and marriages, couldn't you?

Ms Dan—That is certainly true, and you will get some occupational information; but the census forms or the census data itself add more to that. It is not simply a matter of where a person was at a particular time, which is one element of it, and the basics of who they are and where they came from, but there is also occupational information and statements from the people themselves about salary level and religion, although that is optional. There is a number of questions to give a complete picture that is of value in this set of information which may not occur in other sets of information.

Dr SOUTHCOTT—What would you say if we were just looking at the first seven questions in the census, and not looking at income levels and so on?

Ms Dan—There would still be value in the retention of that information; but, as you say, there are some other sources that will provide some of that data.

CHAIR—On the point of epidemiological research, does that still have much value if these records are not going to be released for, say, 100 years?

Ms Dan—I think it is a particular case where there may be two different types of uses. You may have medical research which is more of a historical nature taking place if, for example, the forms were retained but not released until 100 years, say, after the census was taken.

There is also an argument that research use should be able to be made of those records much earlier where, for example, there is a genetic problem of some sort which might need to be traced through to alert those people concerned that their lives may be at risk—those kinds of uses.

CHAIR—I suspect that those who argue contrary to the way you do—if I could put their case—would say, 'Yes, you said that these documents and records will be maintained in complete confidence for 100 years, but now you say that if there is a public interest and benefit, and some genetic defect that follows a particular family line is one of those public benefits, isn't it a short step from public benefit about a genetic defect to Big Brother deciding whether particular genetic conditions are defective and, therefore, something to be desired in the community or not?' How do you answer that argument?

Ms Dan—I would say that, in general, we would argue that the records should not be made accessible for a long period of time. However, I would say that in the case of this kind of medical research, there are particular measures that are in place already for

the use of personal information in this kind of context. There may be some instances where that might be pursued but, as a general rule, we would argue that there should be a lengthy period before the records are made generally available.

The argument about potential misuse of this information is an interesting one because, as you may be aware, governments already hold an enormous amount of personal information of various kinds in various records, and the same sorts of arguments do not appear to be made for those sorts of records. So I think that there is a point where there is a public good in actually retaining some information balanced against the dangers of release.

Mr Cunningham—In the case of epidemiological research, there is already the extensive medical research relating to private individuals extant in hospitals, and so forth, around the country. They are, of course, stored under very strict access conditions. However, on occasion, they are made available for such purposes as epidemiological research under very strict ethical and privacy requirements. We are certainly not aware of any instances where there have been any breaches of ethics or privacy in that regard.

In terms of personal sensitivity, given that those records are much more potentially sensitive than anything that is in a census return, I would say that if our experience in the area of medical records has been a positive one, then that would give us every confidence that we could manage a similar regime for census records and the occasional use for medical research under very clearly defined circumstances.

Dr SOUTHCOTT—I am just confused as to what information you could get from the census that would help you with medical research.

Ms Dan—As Adrian has said, the more detailed information is actually held in other records, but I think it gives a more general social picture of the circumstances of the individual which might be impacting on his or her health. It is not quite the medical information which relates to that person and his or her medical status at a point in time, but the other things impacting on that individual. And then there is the tracing of families, which is the other aspect.

Dr SOUTHCOTT—It seems that the main advantage of the census over other forms of information is that you get that social picture. But it is also being put to us that there was the release of 18th century records in Britain requested by historians and yet historians have made very little use of those records. With so many different forms of information now available in forms that are likely to be kept, is it likely that in a hundred years time this information from the census is going to be used?

Ms Dan—It is a very difficult question to answer because we are trying to predict the future and future research use, which is never easy. I would say that at this point in time I believe that it would be used. While we are in this information rich society and

actually producing a lot more information, not all of that information will be kept in the long term. In fact, quite a large proportion of the information that is gathered is actually destroyed within 10 or 20 years. So, I would still argue that this set of information is a unique set, it brings things together which can be used for a range of research purposes, and people will approach it in different ways.

Mr Cunningham—I would also add that, if you look at the methodologies for demographic and social sciences research, it is based very heavily on random sampling, longitudinal studies, and so forth. As a data source for that kind of research, census records are unrivalled.

Certainly there are other sources of data, but they tend to be not so readily adaptable to random sampling. They are going to have particular biases in particular directions because the records have been collected for particular purposes. The value of the census record is that it is across the board. Everyone in the community is represented in the census, and random sampling and tracing randomly selected individuals for periods of time for longitudinal research purposes is something that can only be done using census records, unless you set up specific research projects that gather data over a long period of time for specific purposes. That second kind of research requires advance planning and knowledge of what you want to do looking into the future.

The value of the census records is that if the data is kept and it is there going back over a period of time, and if a social science researcher comes along at a subsequent point and decides to research a particular phenomenon, he or she has got a ready-made data set that is open to all sorts of statistical exploitation and analysis.

Mr MUTCH—Would it be of concern, perhaps, that modern information is more transient than it used to be because the capture of that material is affected by two things: firstly, the impermanent nature of the recording of information today and, secondly, concerns about privacy whereby we now systematically destroy records to ensure privacy? Wouldn't you, perhaps, be able to argue that we will have fewer records in the future? That concern is expressed about video and the fact that we have moved from letter writing to telephone, and so forth, where there is no record.

Ms Dan—There are a couple of issues in what you have just said. It is certainly true that the electronic age and the use of computer equipment to generate records are issues of concern to archivists in looking at how we capture the kinds of records that are being created. Those are issues which we are looking at to try to address to make sure that the critical information is actually retained.

I think that there have also been changes in practices in the gathering of information with the impact of greater public concern about privacy which, in some cases, is not a bad thing. Instead of collecting a range of information that perhaps was not needed, government agencies in particular are more focused about what they need to do.

As archivists we would argue that privacy itself is not a reason for destroying records. The decision about whether you keep or destroy a record is based on a range of factors but privacy alone would not necessarily be the only criterion on which you decide whether to keep or destroy a record. While it does have an impact on the kinds of information gathering decisions people are making, I would argue that there are other factors in the retention of records which is essentially coming back to why we think the census should be retained.

Mr MUTCH—Looking at something we do know about which is present practice and past history, would you say that records have not been uniformly kept in Australia, that in fact they are rather patchy and that is why a snapshot in time, which is also geographically accurate, might be of assistance in the future?

Ms Dan—That is certainly true. The growth of archives legislation has assisted in the retention of records but until legislation came into place and until archives bodies were established, the records have been very much at the whim of the creator or indeed someone else who comes across the collection of records. In the past, that was certainly true. There have been a variety of records kept or lost over time. I would simply reiterate that this is a unique set with a particular kind of coverage, a particular aspect of being taken at regular intervals which means that it is of incomparable value in some ways.

Mr MUTCH—In terms of professional archivists and so forth, would your membership be fairly unanimous in the view that the census is a very important record?

Ms Dan—I would not speak for each individual member but certainly the society as a whole has agreed that we believe that these records should be retained, as we discussed in our 1993 annual general meeting. I believe that, as a general policy of this group of society, yes, we do believe they should be kept.

Mr MUTCH—I was wondering if the chief archivist in Australia was a member of your society?

Ms Dan—The Director-General?

Mr MUTCH—Mr Nichols.

Ms Dan—Yes, he is.

Mr Cunningham—I was at the 1993 AGM when this motion was discussed and there was no dissent at all from the floor. Certainly the representative sample of membership that was present at that particular AGM seemed to be fully in support of that motion.

Mr TONY SMITH—Is there a mid-way where these things could be locked away

for X number of years and thus satisfy the requirements of what you are saying?

Ms Dan—Of confidentiality?

Mr TONY SMITH—And at the same time weaken the impact of people saying, ‘No, we want these destroyed’?

CHAIR—You can think about that while I suspend the hearing.

Short adjournment

CHAIRMAN—Before we suspended the hearing, Mr Smith had asked a question, so we will pick up on that.

Ms Dan—The question was about whether there was a middle ground in retaining these records and satisfying concerns for confidentiality and privacy. I think there certainly is a middle ground. We would argue that archivists have long experience in handling these kinds of situations and in administering access conditions for records. There is certainly also international experience in dealing with these types of records, retaining them for lengthy periods and only making them accessible after a certain passage of time. So there is a middle ground and that would be to retain the name identified information, probably in the care of archivists, and that it then be released at a time in the future.

Mr TONY SMITH—How long?

Ms Dan—We have said 100 years. The question about how long is really related to the society making that decision. I would estimate that that is a reasonable time for Australian society. If you look internationally, the periods tend to be somewhere between 70 to 100, or a little over 100, years.

CHAIR—I would like to pick up on an earlier question by Mr Mutch. The objection that relates to privacy seems to me, if I have read it correctly, not to be so much about actual privacy but the fear that privacy will be breached.

Ms Dan—There are almost two sorts of arguments. I think the one that you are referring to is that people would lose confidence in the taking of the census if they knew that the records were going to be kept. That is very hard to predict, because in some ways there is a lack of knowledge about what would be done if the forms were retained. For example, people may have a fear that this information will be released, but it may be based on an assumption that the information will be available almost immediately.

So if the records are retained there would need to be education of the Australian public, in the same way as there is education about how important it is to complete the census return, about retention and the protections that would be in place. I do not think

that argument has really been tested in this society. I think there is sufficient evidence from similar types of societies to say that that has not been borne out in the actual taking of the census.

Mr Cunningham—We would point to the experience in the US, the UK, New Zealand and Canada, countries which do retain the name identified census records. We have certainly not seen any evidence at all that suggests that the integrity of those censuses has been in any way impaired by the decision to retain the name identified records.

Mr RANDALL—That cuts across what the Bureau of Statistics has told us. They tended to suggest in their evidence the other day that the quality was down in the countries that you have mentioned. In fact, if my memory is correct, they said that they were not even worth referring to because there was such poor quality of information and that this had been as a result of people being worried about the privacy provisions. You are saying that there is no evidence to support that?

Ms Dan—I do not believe that we have seen any demonstrated evidence to show that that is the case.

Mr Cunningham—We are archivists and not statisticians, but certainly our view is that there is no widespread belief that the censuses conducted in those countries have their integrity impaired. If that were the case, why haven't they changed their policy in those countries? They have not. Obviously the governments of those countries are happy that the census is a statistically reliable exercise and they are happy to continue with retaining their records in those cases.

Mr MUTCH—One of the things the ABS pointed out was the poll tax protests in the UK which did affect that census. We made the observation that that would probably affect the census in Australia as well under the present regime.

CHAIR—Do you have a view, apart from the general question of retaining census forms, about the retention of the census forms from the 2001 census as a commemorative activity?

Ms Dan—There is certainly a symbolic aspect to the 2001 census as it will be the centenary of federation. We would argue that the information should be retained from all censuses taken, or at least from every second census. If that was not to be the case, it should be retained at least for the 2001 census to give us that historical picture.

Mr Cunningham—Could I add something in response to a statement that was made in the ABS submission that genealogy is purely a private benefit? That is a position that we reject very strenuously. We would argue that genealogy is a very culturally legitimate exercise. It is a vital element of social and cultural memory in any society.

Genealogy is not a pursuit that is at all unique to Australia or even to western societies. It is something that is a central element of people's self-definition, no matter what society they come from and it is by no means a purely private benefit.

We would argue, in a sense going into bat on behalf of our researchers, that their research is totally legitimate research and it is entirely legitimate for the government and the archival community to do everything in its power to support the efforts of those researchers. It is partly with their interests in mind that we have made the submission that we have.

Also, we have a professional concern for ensuring the survival of essential evidence for purposes of social memory and so forth in Australia. We consider the census records to be a vital element of that social memory. We referred earlier to the difficulty that archivists often experience in deciding which records should be kept and which ones should not and whether records are likely to be used in the future. We would certainly argue, based on our experience, that there is no question that census records will be heavily used in the future. I would put them in the same category as cabinet records. You know that they are going to be heavily used in the future. Lots of other records that we have to appraise in our work fall into a grey area but there is no greyness about census records, I would suggest.

Mr MUTCH—With respect to our immigrant communities and our short history, are you finding an increase in interest from certain groups who have come to Australia from places where they might not have a lot of good births, deaths and marriages records and so forth? Is there an increasing interest?

Ms Dan—Family history, generally, is certainly on the increase, as you say, with the immigrant populations tracing back when they came to Australia but also their experience in Australia is an increasing area of research—that is certainly true. This would be one source that they could use.

Mr MUTCH—Not just for family history, I was thinking also in terms of the social history or the actual history of those groups.

Ms Dan—Yes. The experience of coming to Australia and where people came to and where they might then have migrated in Australia—those sorts of things can be determined from these kinds of records.

Mr Cunningham—To give an example of that kind of research, I am aware of a very extensive research project into Irish chain migration into the Yass district of New South Wales during the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s. A vital part of that research was the New South Wales census records to trace the movements of individuals, the kinship links and the settlement patterns of those Irish settlers.

In terms of understanding the ethnic mix of Australian society and the genesis of the ethnic mix of our society, the New South Wales census records from the 19th century were indispensable. It is that kind of research that the retention of census records supports. There are really no alternative sources for researchers who are doing that kind of work.

CHAIR—Thank you for your submission and also for appearing before the committee today. I have a motion from Mr Mutch that exhibit No.6, the document ‘Australian Society of Archivists position paper on the destruction of records’ be accepted as an exhibit to the inquiry. There being no objection, it is so agreed.

[10.40]

BOADLE, Mr Donald Graeme, Director, Archives and Records, and Senior Lecturer in History, Charles Sturt University, PO Box 588, Wagga Wagga, New South Wales 2678

CHAIR—Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. The committee has received your submission of 17 July of this year. Would you like to make some brief opening comments?

Mr Boadle—Yes. This is not an easy issue for me personally because I come to this from both sides of the fence. On the one hand, I am a professional historian. On the other hand, I administer the university's archives and records programs. I am aware that users of evidence very often have different needs from keepers of evidence and that these needs can conflict on occasion.

The university, nevertheless, believes that there is merit in retaining personally identifying census data. It is worth pointing out that that census data which has been retained in the past—for example, the New South Wales 1841, 1891 and 1901 censuses—has been a very heavily used resource. The Archives Office of New South Wales has recently released the collectors notebooks for the 1901 census on microfiche and these have sold extremely well as full sets and also as partial sets. There is clearly a demand among professional historians and family historians. For many people the 1901 census notebooks are very valuable, particularly for Aboriginal and ethnic people generally because race is identified in those records. Certainly, to some Aboriginal people I know, finding this kind of record which provides some touchstone and some key to identity has been a matter of great importance to them. There is obviously some quite significant demand there.

It is more difficult in terms of professional use of this material. I must stress that I have never personally used census data in my own research, though last year I supervised an honours dissertation from a student who was writing about the Chinese community in Wahgunyah in north-eastern Victoria. This student made considerable use of the 1891 census personally identifying evidence, which he was able match up with evidence from court records and other sources. That brings me to another point: that there is a great deal of personally identifying data in other records, which is already available, some of it after only 30 years.

A researcher who is working on behalf of the Murrumbidgee Catchment Management Group is presently doing a survey of rural decline in the Tarcutta Creek catchment. Though she is using some ABS data, she is finding much more useful for her

purposes the personally identifying data from Crown Lands Office records which, in the case of inspectors' reports, contain many more revealing details than census data might be expected to.

It seems to me in this regard that perhaps census data and particularly a population and housing census, as distinct from other sorts of census data or other collection activities engaged in by the ABS—for example, the agricultural census—is often looked at out of context in terms of this debate. There is a great deal of material out there that probably is quite as personally identifying and certainly quite as valuable.

There is one more point that I will make quickly. At the end of my submission, in paragraph 7.2, I referred to the advantages of retaining the relevant data from the 2001 census and then went on to urge the committee:

. . . in the event that routine retention of name identified data from succeeding censuses is not deemed cost effective, to consider the retention of name identified data from one census each quarter of a century.

It has been put to me by quantitative methods people that that might be very suitable for genealogical or family history research but it would be statistically not significant to sample on that basis. It would need to be at least one census every 10 years if it was being used for numerical analysis. Thank you. I would be happy to answer any questions.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Boadle. In terms of the name identified information which is currently available—

Mr Boadle—In the census or—

CHAIR—More generally. As opposed to fears about inappropriate use of it, or fears of breach of privacy, do you have any experience of actual manifestations of those fears? I am not expressing myself very eloquently. Perhaps I could put it this way: in the use of that information, have there been instances where people have objected to other name identifying information being made available or being used in research?

Mr Boadle—Not in my personal experience.

CHAIR—As an example, take one of your projects—

Mr Boadle—A project that is actually being researched from resources we hold.

CHAIR—It would seem to me that if that rural area is like most others in Australia, there would be farmers and townspeople there for whom information you might be looking at relates to, or has some connection with, their parents, grandparents or great-grandparents. In that sort of context, has there been any objection?

Mr Boadle—No; in fact the Tarcutta Creek catchment is chronically affected by salting, so there has been an enormously rapid turnover in ownership of farms. In that particular instance—and it is a relatively small spatial entity that is being studied—I do not think that this is likely to be a serious problem. This study is not very far advanced at this stage.

I should add that the university holds this data in our capacity as a regional repository for the Archives Authority of New South Wales. There are six regional repositories in the state and several of them are based in university archives. Ours is the largest and undoubtedly holds the richest collection of state archives outside the premises of the archives in Sydney, so it is possible for this kind of research to be done in very great depth. At this stage I do not think it is envisaged that this research is likely to be published very widely.

CHAIR—More generally, have there been objections or complaints about the use of name identifying data?

Mr Boadle—My experience is that the great majority of researchers, and particularly family historians who make up about 80 per cent of the users of the Archives Office and about 75 per cent of my users, want to get their hands on anything they can. That is where the user and keeper roles come into conflict.

CHAIR—Regarding the actual method of retention of material, do you have any views on whether, if the census data were to be retained, it should be retained in its original form or in, say, a microfiche form or other electronic form?

Mr Boadle—My view is that it is impractical and costly to keep it in paper form. From the point of view of most researchers, one of the reasons researchers have tended to use more recent census data and not use, for example, 18th century census data in Great Britain is that the more recent data is already keyed in or scanned in, so it is immediately amenable to electronic manipulation. You can buy census data on CD-ROM, you can download it to your machine and you can push the numbers around. That is its real attraction.

Obviously, retaining it in electronic form has many advantages. One of the real strengths of that is that it cuts costs. It cuts the costs of access and reference services because, hopefully, most of the original access points and the original indexing will be retained. The downside is that it will have to be migrated to new software configurations, to new hardware platforms over time. In the course of each of these migrations, the data may well be altered in significant ways.

I would have thought that there were great advantages in looking at this issue within the archives and information management communities. Probably a good risk management strategy would be to use more than one format so that if the records were

held electronically, they were also converted or dumped to computer output microform. The beauty of doing that, if you have still got the access points and the searchability that operational electronic records provide, is that you also have the safety of microform on silver halide, which is a very, very long-term preservation medium, and it can subsequently be re-scanned electronically and the data uploaded again. There are, I think, some merits in that.

There are other possible hybrid solutions that could be used—for example, dumping to computer output microform but maintaining the indexes to the data in electronic machine readable form.

CHAIR—Is there a difficulty with that though? I wonder whether the perception of misuse of information is actually heightened when such information is on computers. Is there, in your experience, any different perception that people have between the situation where, for example, the census data was kept in its original form, locked in the equivalent of Fort Knox for 100 years with nobody getting access to it—except to make sure the silverfish do not as well—compared to having it in an electronic computer form, where people have some fear about others being able to gain access to it more readily?

Mr Boadle—I think the reality is that more and more personally identified data is being held electronically, and more and more will be held electronically. While we may resort to various preservation or risk management strategies involving other formats or secondary formats to provide back-up or safety, the primary record will be the electronic record. I think this is something that people may have to be educated to live with over time.

The sophistication of electronic record keeping systems is increasing in any case and I think this is a point that obviously could be sold. It is becoming increasingly possible to encrypt data to build in audit trails so that access or alterations to the records are documented in a way that can be subsequently traced over time. I think that one has to recognise that the management of electronic records, in the long term, is a new field and, in some ways, an unknown field.

Nevertheless, this would seem not only the most realistic way to go, but also the way to operate that is most likely to be of the greatest utility to researchers, particularly professional researchers, who want to use the quantitative data for longitudinal studies and so forth, where they need to be able to manipulate it. The sheer quantity of data that is involved in the census, for anything other than genealogical work, is just so great that obviously having it in a form where it can be manipulated by machine is vital.

Mr TONY SMITH—In relation to the electronic side of things—the keeping of data in that way—there is now a real concern that these systems can be broken into by pirates, effectively, and that this seems to be a disturbing trend in this area. Are you in effect saying that it would be better for researchers to have this data locked away in a

computer or locked away in a vault?

Mr Boadle—I am saying that, to be useful to the widest range of users, the records, since they are basically electronic records originally, need to be kept in operational form. To stay in operational form, they need to be migrated periodically to new hardware platforms, to new software configurations as obsolescence dictates. That is an ongoing cost obviously, and it requires a clear migration policy and a recognition of the risks that migration may involve.

That is why I advocate a second or alternative formats, like the computer output microform dump, which can be done very cheaply but onto a very archivally stable medium which, held in cold storage—literally locked away in a vault—can last. That is the other alternative, of course: simply to hold it in microform. I think there is advantage in holding it in electronic form, keeping the records operational, particularly if this committee intends to consider earlier release options for specified classes of professional research.

That is a vexed issue, I realise, but there is already the provision for earlier release of other sensitive Commonwealth records under the 1984 Archives Act. That is an issue I am sure you will be considering. That is among the terms of reference. I think it is a very important one.

Mr RANDALL—You were sitting in the audience when you heard us speak to the last witnesses. What is your opinion—you might tell me that it is not within your area of expertise—on the Bureau of Statistics contending that the storing of name identified data would produce a less than satisfactory response? Do you have an opinion on that?

Mr Boadle—I have seen no research on this and I know of no studies of this that provide any degree of objectivity. Presumably, the ABS has hard data to support this position. That is all I can say.

Mr RANDALL—You do not have a personal view? You do not have an industry view?

Mr Boadle—Personally, I do not think this is a major concern. So much personally identifying data is already collected, not just in regard to the housing and population census. For example—I do not know if there are any gentlemen farmers among you—the agricultural census that is undertaken by the ABS requires very intimate details from land-holders about all aspects of their operations. I have never really heard people complaining about that in any high degree. Perhaps I do not know the right people.

CHAIR—Picking you up on that, just for my own information—I will get an opportunity to ask the ABS about this—do I understand you correctly to be suggesting that there is a range of other information which the ABS collects which is name

identifying and which is retained?

Mr Boadle—I do not think the name identifiers are retained from the agricultural census. One just does not hear people getting excited about the quality of it in the same way as the population and housing census.

CHAIR—But the ABS would argue, would they not, that that is because it is not name identifying?

Mr Boadle—No doubt. But I do not think that such an issue is made of that.

CHAIR—Right.

Mr Boadle—I do not think I have ever thought about it in connection with that particular collection exercise as I duly filled in the form for a family farm.

Mr MUTCH—Have you ever seen any research done on whether people actually think that the census is already kept?

Mr Boadle—No. I know of no research in this area. But I imagine if such research exists the ABS which clearly has a position to safeguard on this would deem it in its interests to lay it before you and it might be worth pursuing with them.

Mr MUTCH—We have.

Mr Boadle—I obviously have not heard their evidence.

CHAIR—Can I thank you for both your submission on behalf of the university and for appearing before us today.

[11.02 a.m.]

SEARLE, Mr Robert James, Secretary, Commonwealth Grants Commission, 5 Torrens Street, Braddon, Australian Capital Territory 2612

CHAIR—I welcome Mr Bob Searle from the Commonwealth Grants Commission. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the hearing is a legal proceeding of parliament and warrants the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament.

We are in receipt of the submission from the Commonwealth Grants Commission of 18 July. Would you like to make some brief opening comments?

Mr Searle—Thank you. The commission is a major user of census data, going right down to census data based on the collectors' districts. As such we would be concerned about any change to the method of collection or the information that is collected in the census if it had an impact on the accuracy with which the data are collected and presented.

Because of the fine detail to which we use the census we already have some minor difficulties with the random rounding that the ABS needs to put into some of the smaller more remote CDs so that privacy is maintained. If there were changes to the policy that influenced either the randomisation of data at CD level or the accuracy with which the census is portrayed, we would have considerable concern about that.

CHAIR—As I understand the process, there is already a degree of inaccuracy in the system. I take it that the primary data which the grants commission is concerned with is that which relates to the population of the respective states and territories, which is a factor of not only births and deaths which can be identified from the records of births and deaths kept by the states and territories and immigration which can be identified from arrivals and departures but a third factor, namely internal migration between the states and territories. I do not wish to sound dismissive but is that not an exercise in educated guesswork between the taking of each census?

Mr Searle—I do not think I should comment on the way the ABS undertakes that process.

CHAIR—I am not trying to be critical.

Mr Searle—Obviously, any statistical collection has some elements of doubt about the precise accuracy of the data, particularly when you talk about something as large as the census. I suggest that if you tried to count the number of Holdens on the roads in Australia you would probably have far greater inaccuracy than what you would in the

census because at least you have a well structured attempt to do the quantification from which you can make whatever adjustments are necessary. You are correct that the starting point for the commission's work, obviously, is the total population count and the population count distributed across the states and territories.

The work that the commission does in recommending the distribution of Commonwealth financial assistance to the states really has a lot to do with the confidence with which the states and territories see that work being done and the calculations being made. I do not think the states are very concerned, nor have they expressed concern to us, about the accuracy of the total population count in each state. They would accept that, yes, there is probably some under-enumeration or mis-enumeration. But, in relative terms, there is about the same degree of inaccuracy in all states.

What can influence the distribution of funds between the states is the way we use data down to the collector's district level and because of the different weightings that are applied to different types and locations of people in Australia. The magnification influence of that through to funds distribution is of concern to the states. Where the states argue to us about the adequacy or inadequacy of census data is in terms of the Aboriginal count, the non-English speaking background count, the count of people in specific remote areas, then the Aboriginals by age in those remote areas and the non-English speaking background people by age in the inner urban areas. The cross-classification of three or four different attributes of each individual can and does influence the distribution of the funds.

CHAIR—A division has just been called, so I am going to have to suspend the hearings until its conclusion, Mr Searle. I apologise.

Short adjournment

ACTING CHAIR (Mr Mutch)—We will reconvene the hearing. I was just reading your submission again. You note in it:

The results of research available to the Commission suggest that a decision to retain Census forms could reduce the quality of the Census information.

I am curious as to what research you have had made available to you, who made that research available to you, and whether perhaps you could provide us with copies of it.

Mr Searle—I would be surprised if you do not already have a copy of it. The only research that I have is the report that was done for the ABS by AGB McNair, which indicated that there was a greatly increased probability of poor response rates and under-enumeration if there were different attitudes taken to the holding of census data, in particular the names and addresses.

ACTING CHAIR—Is that all you have?

Mr Searle—Yes, and I assume you would have a copy of that.

ACTING CHAIR—Yes, we do have a copy of it.

Mr RANDALL—When we spoke to the ABS last Tuesday we had some concerns about the construction of that survey. That caused an animated response by the ABS, as you can imagine. Can you tell me why you wanted to make a submission to the committee on this matter? What prompted you: did you see it advertised, or did you decide that this was something that it was necessary for your department to become involved in?

Mr Searle—We did see it advertised, but the commission is always concerned about the accuracy of the data that it uses. Last time there was a census held the question was whether or not it would have the same coverage and whether or not it would be deferred for a year or whatever. On that occasion the commission expressed the view that it did not want to see any great reduction to the scope of the census and that it did greatly prefer there to be a five-yearly census. So this is really a continuation of the commission's policy of seeing the ABS as the primary source of demographic and socio-demographic data for the Commonwealth. The term of the census being five years is important to us; but more so, the perceived accuracy of the census is extremely important.

Mr RANDALL—Could you tell me whether the commission was asked to put in a submission by the ABS?

Mr Searle—I would have to check the file, but I do not believe we were asked to. We may have been asked to consider whether we would, but the commission is an independent authority and makes its own decisions as to whether it will or not. As I said, we have in the past, of our own volition, made submissions in this area and we will continue to do so.

Mr RANDALL—Have you corresponded or communicated with the ABS regarding your submission?

Mr Searle—I certainly did not communicate with them prior to making the submission. I do not think we have even supplied them with a copy. I could check the file, but to my knowledge we have not provided them with a copy.

ACTING CHAIR—They obviously provided you with a copy of the AGB McNair survey.

Mr Searle—Yes. In fact, my former personal assistant is now the personal assistant to Dennis Trewin at ABS, and I rang her and asked to get a copy of the AGB McNair document.

ACTING CHAIR—Did you take any steps to have a look at the questioning in that poll from your own point of view, to determine whether you thought it was in any way leading, or just to assess the impartiality of that poll?

Mr Searle—No, I haven't. Even in collections that the commission undertakes, you could always question the impartiality or the extent to which questions are leading people. What struck me with the document that I was provided with by ABS was the strength of the responses and the consistency of the responses.

ACTING CHAIR—Perhaps, if you have got some expertise in the commission, it might be worth putting it to some of those boffins to have a look at because we, as lay people, had some considerable concerns. It talked about computers all the way through the opening questions and so forth.

Mr Searle—From my point of view, computerisation of the census is inevitable. We are just not going to be able to manage a census if we do not. My overriding concern is the perceptions of the people we are asking to fill in the census forms. I am not sure how you can avoid questions of privacy and computerisation and these other things when you are asking people to fill in a form that they know will be put on computer tape or computer disk.

ACTING CHAIR—Are you aware that the major proposal is that information that is sought to be kept—the name-identified forms—would not be put on computer at all?

Mr Searle—It would have to be held in electronic format, surely?

ACTING CHAIR—No. The whole proposal is that the hard copy—in fact, microfilm of the hard copy—would be put aside and buried in a vault, so none of that information would in fact go on a computer at all.

Mr Searle—It is an interesting proposal. The problem with all such things is that we are ultimately dealing with the perceptions of the people who are asked to fill out the forms. Many of those people would not know the difference between holding it in microfilm version and holding it on a computer disk. What they will know is that it is being held so that people can read it at some time in the future.

ACTING CHAIR—Do you think that if you did a survey asking people whether they thought census forms were destroyed, they would probably answer that they thought they were kept?

Mr Searle—It is hard for me to guess what people's perceptions are. I would have thought that at census time each five years generally the population know the census forms are destroyed. That is one of the points that ABS make in trying to convince people to fill them out and fill them out accurately; so that at least at that point in time the

general community is probably aware that they are destroyed.

ACTING CHAIR—Are you aware of major problems in the UK, for instance, with similar commissions to yours? They in fact keep the census forms in the UK.

Mr Searle—No, I am not. I would have to say that there is probably no organisation in the world that uses their country's census data at the micro level the way my commission does for the purpose that my commission does. My contact with international bureaucracies is in the kind of work that we are involved in, obviously; and in this area, none of them use census data to the extent we do, so I have never discussed with them the difficulties of data collection. The Canadians, of course, always tell us that their data is better than ours; but again, they do not use it to the same extent we do, so maybe they do not know the flaws in it.

Mr RANDALL—Could I just pursue this point: you have said here that the research available to the commission suggested the decision to retain census forms could reduce the quality of census information. Is the only research available to you the research given to you by the ABS from the AGB McNair poll?

Mr Searle—Correct.

Mr RANDALL—That is the only information that has led you to make that statement?

Mr Searle—Correct.

ACTING CHAIR—Are there any further questions? Thank you very much, Mr Searle. We appreciate your attending.

Mr Searle—I am sorry I cannot help you further with research on the implications for accuracy, but I can assure you that the commission's concern is all about possible implications for the accuracy of the data, down to the collector's district level, because that is obviously the extent to which we use the data.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you.

[12.00 p.m.]

BLUMER, Mr Sydney Donald, Director, Treasury, Parkes Place, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory 2600

BORTHWICK, Mr David William, Deputy Secretary, Treasury, Parkes Place, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory 2600

STERLAND, Mr Barry Keith, Director, Current Economic Conditions Section, Economic Division, Treasury, Parkes Place, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory 2600

ACTING CHAIR (Mr McClelland)—We will now resume for the remainder of the evidence today. I now call Mr David Borthwick, Mr Sydney Blumer and Mr Barry Sterland to give evidence. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as the proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament.

We have received your submission. Would any of you want to make a statement in relation to your submission or at least some brief introductory remarks?

Mr Borthwick—I would like to make a few brief introductory remarks. You would have seen that the main thrust of our submission is to underscore to the committee how extensive the survey or the census is in terms of underpinning our statistical collections. In effect it is the foundation on which all of our statistical collections rest. Anything that impairs the quality of the census impairs the statistics more generally than that of the census.

The other point that we wanted to make—and it flows from that previous observation—is that it is not just the Commonwealth government that relies on those statistics. They affect all levels of government and the information flowing therefrom is critical for private sector decision making as well.

I might also observe that the Australian statistical base is of very high quality in terms of international standards. That is not just an Australian or a Treasury assertion. I was reminded of that observation several times when I was ambassador to the OECD in the early 1990s by their statistical unit. They observe very closely statistical collections from all OECD countries and they tend to be the best ones. The ABS was ranked in the top one or two in their view of the quality of the statistical base.

Moving from those observations, we would be concerned should a change in practice, vis-a-vis the keeping of the census, work to erode the quality of that statistical base. The costs for the community as a whole in terms of inefficient and less effective

decision making could be substantial. That is the starting point of our submission and I think those points were elaborated upon in our submission, so I will leave it at that.

ACTING CHAIR—To open the evidence, on page seven of your report you have said that, in terms of any benefit that might result from retaining the census returns, Treasury does not want to comment one way or the other; it is not your field of expertise.

Mr Borthwick—It is not our field of expertise. We are not demographers or medical researchers or those things, so we thought it best not to offer comments on those aspects.

ACTING CHAIR—Your evidence goes to an apprehension that the accuracy and the quality of the record could be diminished. It is an apprehension of a risk of diminution. Is that right?

Mr Borthwick—That is exactly an accurate description of our view. I think it is a risk that needs to be weighed very carefully because of the pervasiveness to which the census underpins our statistics. In the words that I think we used in our submission, we think there is a material risk—not just a risk but a very real risk—that our statistical base will be eroded.

Mr MUTCH—You have noted in your paper there was the survey carried out on behalf of the ABS. We presume that is the AGB McNair survey?

Mr Borthwick—That is right.

Mr MUTCH—Would you have any in-house statistical people yourself? Would you, for instance, have been able to pass that along to some people in your own organisation to assess the impartiality and integrity of that particular survey?

Mr Borthwick—We have read the survey. We are not in a position to because it is not our duty to assess things like attitudinal surveys—which that is—trying to establish attitudes, but we have discussed it amongst ourselves and have come to the view that, even if you thought that some of the questions might have been leading or prompting certain results—and we have got no reason to suspect that but that is a common criticism of all these sorts of surveys—then those sorts of factors tend to be persuasive when the results of the survey are fairly finely balanced. That was certainly not the case in terms of this survey. It was overwhelmingly pointing toward a public sensitivity about the census and what happened to those records. So we have got no reason whatsoever to question the validity of that general finding.

Mr MUTCH—Just to clarify that, you have not relied on any other survey or information?

Mr Borthwick—That is the only survey. But we have also been persuaded over the years by the sorts of information that the ABS has had come to hand in terms of the difficulty they have in persuading the public that this is indeed a well-kept-secret census form. There has been a considerable degree of sensitivity in that regard in Australia, and it flairs up from time to time in other countries. So all that anecdotal evidence, if you like—it is probably more than anecdotal evidence; practical experience out in the field—is consistent with the survey's findings.

Mr MUTCH—Amongst your international colleagues have you ever found any major problems expressed by them? For instance, would the UK Treasury people have expressed any major problems with their use of their census?

Mr Borthwick—I have not made inquiries of them. The only point I would note is that in recent times the New Zealanders changed their view on the census.

Mr MUTCH—They have decided not to keep the 1996 one.

Mr Borthwick—That is right. I think the point was made that what has happened in different countries is very hard to translate to the Australian experience. All I am going on is what we know from our Australian experience.

Mr HATTON—On page 8 there is an assessment of costs where you have made reference to ABS's figures in its 1995-96 annual report. The cost of storage, or of microfilming and then storing, could be between \$2 million and \$9.4 million in 1988 prices. It may be pernickety, but we are in 1997. Do you have any notion as to why ABS's assessment—and then your usage of ABS's assessment—would be in figures that are nine years old?

Mr Borthwick—I cannot speak for the ABS, and it was not worth our while independently trying to come up with another estimate of that, other than to note that the estimates would be substantial. The Canadians clearly thought the costs of retaining the census were substantial because that was a major factor in why they changed their minds.

We have no reason to doubt that the costs are substantial. In fact, I recall reading in another submission—I thought from Australian Archives—where they said that they thought the costs would be well above these estimates. I have got in the back of my mind a figure of \$30 million, but I only glanced through the submissions and that could be wrong.

Mr HATTON—First of all, the range is not clear on here. I am guessing it is from \$2 million to \$9.4 million, if we use those figures. It could be higher. If you microfilmed it and then kept the microfilm, are we dealing with the lower range of \$2 million if you actually kept the paper records?

Mr Borthwick—You would have to ask the ABS and the Archives to clarify that. We have no independent way of verifying what the costs would be.

Mr HATTON—Do you have any notion of whether this is a yearly estimate or is it some kind of all-up estimate? Is that the yearly cost of storage on that document?

Mr Borthwick—I am not sure what the costs would be. I assumed that this would be the costs of documenting each census and that then ongoing costs are built into it, but I have no idea of that. We did not see that as a particularly material factor.

Mr MUTCH—It might be interesting to know whether you thought the figures of the costings were substantial or not, that is, the archive costs.

Mr Borthwick—Is that where I was reading it?

ACTING CHAIR—Yes. I am just reading evidence from the Bureau of Statistics and Australian Archives. They do not make it clear if it is a year.

Mr Borthwick—All I recall reading when I went through the submissions was that there seemed to be a higher estimate than the one that we had included in our submission. Maybe that is because it is in later year prices or maybe it is because they have taken into account other considerations. I think the Australian Archives estimate would be the one.

ACTING CHAIR—That would be the accurate one to go on.

Mr Borthwick—It would be the accurate one.

Mr HATTON—Given that you are arguing that the monetary cost would be high, it would be useful also to have Treasury's opinion laid out a bit further on this. Given that ABS is a subset of that, we could see what their current figurings might be as a useful balance and corrective to what Archives is arguing for. If that were provided to the committee, we could find out whether the assessment is on an annual basis and what kind of factors are based in that. Obviously, one of the things the committee will have to look at is the whole question of cost if a census were to be kept or a series of censuses were to be kept. We need a real basis on which to establish it.

Mr Borthwick—Can we take that on notice? We would have to talk to the ABS and Archives. We might be able to form some judgments on what they say.

ACTING CHAIR—You would be happy for us to rely on the figures Archives gave us, would you?

Mr Borthwick—As long as they have agreed with the ABS, yes.

ACTING CHAIR—Perhaps that may be a wise suggestion, if you do not mind taking that on notice too.

Mr Borthwick—Can we take it on notice? We will talk to Archives and the ABS and see if we can come up with a clearer answer on that.

Mr MUTCH—The cheapest cost Archives has come up with is an annual storage of \$2,516 per year for microfilm, which I would imagine you would not say was substantial in the accounts of the Commonwealth. They have figures for microfilming. They have three figures of \$558,000, \$267,000 and \$857,000. I would imagine you would not say that they were major or substantial costs overall.

Mr Borthwick—I am not sure if they are the only costs involved.

Mr MUTCH—That is true, too.

Mr Borthwick—That is why I said that we will need to talk to the ABS involved in it, because I think the costs could come from both sources. Can I just make one point on that? The thrust of our submission is that they are not the main costs that you need to consider. Because of the erosion of the value of the statistical collection, the main cost is to governments and business of making less accurate decisions.

Mr MUTCH—Yes. I understand that point. That is a fear, not an established fact.

Mr Borthwick—What is arguable is to what extent the statistical base would be eroded. As to the extent, I personally have no doubt that there would be an erosion in the statistical base and that that would have a material impact.

Mr MUTCH—I thought it would improve the quality of the answers to questions if people were aware that certain records were being kept for historical purposes and a campaign preceding the collection made them well aware of this and so forth. That has not been tested either, apparently.

Mr RANDALL—On that line, Mr Borthwick, could you tell me whether Treasury relies on statistical information from other countries for modelling by way of comparison?

Mr Borthwick—We draw heavily on statistics from other countries. Those statistics are usually consolidated either by the IMF or the OECD or other sources.

Mr RANDALL—Countries such as Canada, New Zealand and Britain, as you mentioned, would gain a lot of this information or some of this information from their census statistics, and yet you rely on or use that information and you do not have any problems with its integrity, from what I understand?

Mr Borthwick—No. The question of the integrity of the data does not really enter into it. We have got no choice but to use what data they have.

Mr RANDALL—But you still use it?

Mr Borthwick—Yes, we do. But for our own decision making, and the decision making of the private sector, we want better quality data than is available to most of those other countries, and we believe we have got that.

Mr RANDALL—The previous witness suggested, maybe even in a jocular manner, that Canada thinks that their data is better than ours. Given the fact that over a period of time they have not been destroying theirs, we are probably talking about opinions here from one country to another. But, moving on from that, I just want to re-visit—

Mr Borthwick—May I just comment on that because I think it is an interesting point. I mentioned from my OECD experience that there were a couple of countries that were regarded ahead of the others. The other one was Canada. I am not saying they are ahead of us, but they have very high quality statistics. I think all that shows is that there is a range of factors that go into the quality of statistics—not just the census—that goes to whether the statistical bureaux are adequately resourced and it goes to the question of the coverage of all the samples. So it is not our view that the census is the only factor influencing the quality of statistics. It is our view that, if you remove or downgrade the quality of the census for Australian statistics, our statistics will be that much worse. So I do not think you can draw the conclusion that I think you were driving towards.

Mr RANDALL—That may be your opinion, and I am sure you have got a good reason to say that, but I would like just to consolidate the fact that, other than—as you have said—anecdotal argument from the ABS and from the research done by AGB McNair on behalf of the ABS, you do not have any hard core evidence to say that the integrity or the erosion of quality would be lessened by not destroying them. You do not have any hard core—

Mr Borthwick—I do not have any evidence other than that, but I find that evidence persuasive.

Mr RANDALL—Given the fact that you use this information, and you have probably got the capability yourself to do a similar sort of survey, would it be of interest for you to do that so that there is another source of information that has polled this opinion, because you are relying on somebody else's survey?

Mr Borthwick—No, we have not got the expertise to do this sort of survey. It is not a statistical survey; it is an attitudinal survey. We have no capacity or expertise in Treasury for that sort of work.

Mr RANDALL—You could commission somebody.

Mr Sterland—I suppose the additional option would be to experiment with it, which, as the ABS survey points out, is a once off thing, and it is very hard to get any other accurate information as to exactly how this would affect responses. So you have to rely on the indirect information before the event. And the fact that the AGB McNair survey asks those questions from a number of different angles—positive and negative, and including direct questions on people’s behaviour—would seem to us to be compelling.

ACTING CHAIR—I would like to intervene on the same point, Don, before coming back to you. How would Treasury feel, if, for example, it were proposed that the next survey in 2001 be a special turn of the century census—and the public was informed that it was being conducted on that special basis? It would be a one-off survey for the turn of the century but would include the experiment postulated there by Mr Sterland.

Mr Borthwick—I think you would have to go and survey people explicitly on that sort of issue—that it was a one-off, et cetera. All the evidence would suggest that there is still going to be a diminution of the 2001 census, but whether or not it will be as overwhelming as the general proposition would be has to be tested.

ACTING CHAIR—If someone ticked the box beside the question, ‘Do you object to this primary record being retained?’, would it be possible for them to be weeded out?

Mr Borthwick—I think you would have to ask the ABS for a view as to how that would—

ACTING CHAIR—Whether that is practical or not.

Mr Borthwick—Whether that is practical or whether it would affect the integrity of the census.

Mr MUTCH—With respect to Canada, would you agree that, if the Canadians, who lead the field in this area—sharing the lead with us—can do it and retain their census, we should be able to as well?

Mr Borthwick—There is no doubt that we could maintain the quality of our statistical collections, but I am not sure what the cost would be—in additional resources and additional surveys, et cetera.

Mr HATTON—In terms of the significance of the data that is provided to you through ABS—and the census data—can you make a comparison between the census data itself and the household surveys that follow up that data to validate it and to take a much deeper look at a specific subset of people who are selected in household surveys? Further

to that, from what I know of them, the household surveys provide a much deeper subset of information for Treasury and for everyone else who has access to that information—not only for cross-validation, but for a deeper look into the actual operations of the society at a particular time. Do you have any comments to make on your experience there?

Mr Borthwick—I am not sure what point you are trying to get me to draw out here.

Mr HATTON—Firstly, the census is significant and absolutely important in terms of the operations of Treasury and the operation of all government departments that are dependent on that information. Is the information in the follow-up household surveys—where they just take a small number of people and do very in-depth investigations of their circumstances—more useful to you?

Mr Borthwick—The information that we rely on very heavily comes from the household expenditure survey, but that is underpinned by the census of the whole population. As I understand it, it is vitally important. To give you an idea of how reliant we are on the household expenditure survey, that underpins all of our retirement income social security modelling. It underscores our Prismod modelling, which we use for examining the effect of taxation changes, for example through the indirect tax system by income class, et cetera. It is used for underpinning the weighting in the consumer price index. In other words, all of those uses that come from the household expenditure survey are underpinned by the census, as I understand it, in terms of the weighting that is given to the survey.

Mr Sterland—The causation goes the other way. You talked about these surveys validating the census. What the census does in my understanding is create the population frame from which the samples are then chosen. There is the sample of the HES, the labour force survey and income and housing survey are the other very important ones. The census will show us the geographic distribution. They use the age, gender distribution and all of these sorts of things to construct the samples in the first place.

I suppose one of the problems if the census becomes less accurate is that you will probably not know how much that data is affected, because it affects the very sampling basis of the data itself. For the applications that use small groups, either a cross-section of the population or geographically, those samples are crucial. For something like retirement income modelling, where we are very interested in age cohorts, if the concerns about privacy were not distributed randomly across the population in an age sense, the samples would be wrong in the first place. You would get the information from that and you would not be able to be sure about the basis for those samples. The causation comes from the census, through the population, the sample framework and then to the data.

Mr HATTON—As far as I understand it, it is not alluded to in relation to this, because this inquiry is about the census form itself, but it could possibly be suggested in the future that the household surveys themselves could in fact be stored and kept for

future historical research and so on.

Do you have any opinion on the relative importance of the information in the census versus the household surveys and the importance of keeping the information as private as possible in order to get the best data out of that? What lies under that is the proposition that most probably—given past experience—people are far more sensitive in regard to the household surveys because they are so in-depth in terms of the amount of information that is provided.

Mr Sterland—The concern with the census is that it is so broad ranging. That would seem to be why people are so concerned. It asks questions across such a broad range of pieces. I cannot comment on the particular point you raise, but there is an associated concern and that is that people may not distinguish fully between the ABS surveys if they have privacy concerns over the census. Besides the route we talked about before where it would affect the sample framework, there is the concern that it would affect response rates to the actual surveys themselves. That would possibly mean that there is a double up effect in data quality, which we noted in our submission and the ABS has drawn attention to. That would be of very real concern to us.

Mr HATTON—As to the importance of the profile information that comes out of the household surveys, it is fundamental to Treasury and to every other organisation using it. What I am trying to suggest is that the privacy concerns that people have about the census as a whole would relate, not only to the fact that it is general, but to the fact that most people are not subjected to a household survey. For that small number that is picked out, their whole life is really actually put under an intense electron microscope. So the privacy concerns that they would have in regard to those household surveys would probably be quantitatively greater than the census as a whole.

Mr Borthwick—It could well be.

ACTING CHAIR—Are the in-depth surveys voluntary?

Mr Borthwick—No. I think the bureau relies on and has powers to extract the information.

Mr HATTON—Therefore the information arising out of that, because it is in such depth—

Mr Borthwick—But basically it cannot compel because people can fill out inaccurate information. It really needs them to have confidence in the system.

Mr Sterland—I suppose the additional point to make would be that, if it is high for the census, maybe these types of survey responses would be even higher. The point is that there are very high levels of concern for privacy on the census, which is the only

issue that is being discussed. We certainly would be concerned if those issues were more broad ranging over the set of ABS statistics because that would start having knock-on effects through the whole statistical system.

Mr HATTON—Have you had any strong reaction—and this would primarily, probably, go to statistics—in terms of the amount of information that is already available through C Data 91 and what will be coming up in C Data 97, where census information without the personal details is available to anyone who has enough money actually to buy it and then go out and use it? Has Treasury got any concerns in regard to the ready availability of census data, not only to government departments but community wide, and whether that has caused, since its initiation, any problems in terms of data quality?

Mr Borthwick—I am not aware of that issue, but I would have thought that, if names are not attached to it, what it is showing you is a snapshot of the Australian population, and there should not be a concern. But I cannot—

ACTING CHAIR—I think a snapshot can get as specific as about 250 households, can it not? They are the individual selection criteria?

Mr Borthwick—The ABS, with all its surveys, has very strict codes about not being able to identify individuals or companies. That is regarded as integral to all its statistical collections, so I can only assume that that group of 250 does not tell us about individuals, and that is okay.

Mr HATTON—If you drill down through the census data and you take that census data that is available, all you have to do is whack a database next to it—and that is the Australian *White pages*. You can drill down to a census collection district level and virtually pin that particular group. I think the standard that ABS uses is two census collection districts, but you can get a pretty fine idea of at least two census collection districts for marketing purposes and so on. I have seen reactions by people understanding that there is a hell of a lot of information available on them and that they can virtually be profiled by any company in Australia and then directly targeted and marketed to. That is what prompted my question in regard to that.

Mr Borthwick—It is becoming very ingenious.

ACTING CHAIR—There being no other questions, thank you very much to all of you for your evidence here today. Thanks to *Hansard*, and also to the Sound and Vision Office. Before we close the proceedings—

Mr RANDALL—Before you do, there was a question on notice that was to come.

ACTING CHAIR—Would you mind liaising with the secretariat on that issue of the costings?

Mr Borthwick—Yes.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you.

Resolved (on motion by Mr Hatton, seconded by Mr Mutch):

That the committee authorise the publication of the evidence given to it at the public hearing today.

ACTING CHAIR—I now declare the meeting of the committee closed.

Committee adjourned at 12.34 p.m.