



# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

**Reference: Treatment of census forms**

**ADELAIDE**

**Tuesday, 9 September 1997**

**OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT**

**CANBERRA**

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

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Mr Andrew	Mr Mutch
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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**

<b>DASVARMA, Dr Gouranga, Senior Lecturer and Director, Graduate Program in Population and Human Resources, School of Geography, Population and Environmental Management, Flinders University of South Australia, Bedford Park, Adelaide, South Australia 5042</b> .....	<b>131</b>
<b>DeBATS, Professor Donald Arthur, Professor of American Studies, Professor of Politics and Head of American Studies, Flinders University of South Australia, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, South Australia 5001</b> .....	<b>108</b>
<b>O'DWYER, Dr Lisel Alice, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, School of Geography, Population and Environmental Management, Flinders University of South Australia, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide 5001</b> .....	<b>131</b>
<b>O'NEIL, Mr Bernard John, Executive Member, Association of Professional Historians, Institute Building, 122 Kintore Ave, Adelaide, South Australia 5000</b> .....	<b>124</b>
<b>PEAKE, Mr Andrew Guy, Vice President, South Australian Genealogy and Heraldry Society Inc., GPO Box 592, Adelaide, South Australia</b> .....	<b>118</b>
<b>ROACH ANLEU, Associate Professor Sharyn, President, The Australian Sociological Association, c/- Sociology Department, Flinders University, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, South Australia 5001</b> .....	<b>145</b>
<b>STEELE, Dr Ross McLean, Lecturer in Population Studies, School of Geography, Population and Environmental Management, Flinders University of South Australia, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, South Australia 5001</b> .....	<b>131</b>

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL  
AFFAIRS

*Treatment of census forms*

ADELAIDE

Tuesday, 9 September 1997

Present

Mr Andrews (Chair)

Mr Andrew

Mr Mutch

Mr McClelland

Dr Southcott

The committee met at 9.48 a.m.

Mr Andrews took the chair.

**DeBATS, Professor Donald Arthur, Professor of American Studies, Professor of Politics and Head of American Studies, Flinders University of South Australia, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, South Australia 5001**

**CHAIR**—I declare open this public hearing of the committee's inquiry into the treatment of census forms. I welcome witnesses and other members of the public who are attending this meeting of the committee. The subject of this inquiry is whether the current practice of destroying name identified forms after the data is collected from them should continue. We have taken evidence so far in Canberra and yesterday in Perth and we look forward to further contributions today.

Welcome, Professor DeBats. 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 and misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament.

**Prof. DeBats**—I speak to the committee as a professional researcher. My training is as an historian and I make extensive use of the American and Canadian census records—which, of course, are preserved records.

**CHAIR**—Professor, you have had extensive experience, as you have indicated, using the United States census data for research purposes. I understand you are also interested in the privacy aspects of using the data. I am also informed that you gave evidence to Justice Michael Kirby's inquiry for the Australian Law Reform Commission into privacy, back in 1979. Would you like to make some opening comments about the subject matter of this inquiry?

**Prof. DeBats**—I brought along a copy of the paper which I submitted to the Law Reform Commission in June 1979. You are welcome to that as a document. Looking back at that and the report of the Privacy Commission and the recommendations on the one hand, and then looking at the material which has been supplied to me from this inquiry on the other hand, what is most striking is how similar it is to the debate—and, indeed, to the situation—of 18 years ago. Then, the advocates of census preservation were researchers, medical researchers, social scientists and genealogists. The opponents were the ABS, affiliated government departments and, ultimately, the federal government. Today, it seems to me the advocates are medical researchers, social scientists and genealogists. The ABS is an opponent, as are affiliated government bodies, and the stance of the government is yet to be determined.

The arguments of the ABS at the time were, firstly, privacy—perhaps an ironic concern; secondly, costs; and, thirdly and most importantly, the threat that public cooperation with the census would be diminished and census reliability reduced if the census were preserved. At the time, the ABS used an ongoing report to the US government, conducted by the National Research Council—which is the document I have here—to suggest that even the proponents of census preservation were changing their minds.

Today, the ABS uses an argument for, firstly, privacy—no less ironic than it was, 18 years ago; secondly, costs—not an iota further advanced than they were, as far as I can see, 18 years ago; and, thirdly, the threat that public cooperation with the census would be diminished and census reliability reduced—

exactly the same argument as before. As a fourth line of defence, ABS advances the notion that the Canadian and New Zealand governments have changed their minds on how worthwhile it is to preserve their censuses—as a way of showing that even the advocates of census preservation are changing their mind. In other words, it is exactly the same situation.

It is not a very illuminating debate, I think. As I say, I have brought a copy of my paper which I presented to the Privacy Commission 18 years ago. I still hold to that paper and I believe that the wrong decision was made at the time in rejecting the recommendation of the Law Reform Commission to preserve the census. I would add only two points, I think. The first is that I developed my position—and I think it is the position that any historian or, indeed, any social scientist would take—in reference to my professional interests. It is perhaps worthwhile noting that I did that while I was simultaneously a great believer in civil liberties, as I still am. Indeed, I made my submission when I was president of the South Australian Council for Civil Liberties.

Secondly, and this is more important, I believe that the history of Australia would be a different history had the census records of Australia not been so wantonly destroyed. I refer to the pictures, which ABS will no doubt republish this year, showing the destruction of the census, the original boxes in a storage area, the actual pulping process and then the wallboard to which the census is converted. I believe that, in an earlier day, there were pictures of the census being burned rather than pulped. They were equally trumpeted as great good things being done.

They remind me of how, when I first came to this country, farmers used to stretch along their barbed wire fences the hundreds of wedge-tailed eagles that they shot, as a testimony to progress and the necessity of destruction. It seems to me that what the ABS advertises, trumpets and seeks condonation for in this is not much different from what the farmers used to do.

Australia does not have a proud record of document preservation. Much has been lost and much continues to be destroyed. The social history of Australia would be different. It would be much more focused on the lives of ordinary people—men and women, black and white, immigrants and native born—if the census of the past had been preserved. Not only would this be a different history but I believe it would be a history which ordinary men and women, citizens of Australia, would be engaged in and involved in, to a much greater degree than they presently are. They would see that the real history of their nation is not what happens in parliaments, in Canberra, on battlefields or in the diaries of famous men, but what happens in the ordinary lives of ordinary citizens everyday.

The census creates a people's history because the census is the only record of the people. It is the only record in which the people—all the people—speak. It is as unfortunate today as it was 18 years ago that this record continues to be destroyed with such relish and that those voices are silenced. That is my formal statement to the committee. I sincerely believe those points and I think the destruction of the census is a grave loss to be inflicted on the social history of a country.

**CHAIR**—Thank you, Professor. I would like to explore this with you a little. You have experienced the history of the retention of census data in the United States and the use that can be made of that. Has the United States census data always been retained?

**Prof DeBats**—Yes; not in a very coherent way, I guess, because things are seldom done coherently in the States. All US census records—that is, the individual manuscript records—are preserved either in the paper form and/or on microfilm from the first census in 1790 to the most recent census which has been opened, which I think is the 1920 census. There is a 72 or 75 year statute of limitation which applies and the census is closed for that period.

**CHAIR**—What sort of use can be made of it? What is it that we are missing in terms of historical and other academic studies by not having that material?

**Prof. DeBats**—For example, the United States national archives, which holds the census, brings out catalogues; here is a list of the federal population census from 1790 up to 1890. There would be a more recent edition that would take this up to 1920. What the census provides is a snapshot of every person in a country at a given moment in time. Therefore, it is invaluable for social historians and, indeed, political historians—and you have seen in your own evidence from epidemiological medical researchers—to have a single snapshot view of the population.

It means that one can go back to any part of the country and reconstruct a social world as it was at that moment in time. It is like a family album, but everybody is in it. You go back and turn to any page and find any population that you want. You can find rural populations, urban populations, immigrant populations, and you can paint the picture. You can say what these people were doing and what their occupations were. You can develop profiles of them.

That whole profiling opportunity is lost. I take the point that you can derive some information from other ad hoc sources: rate books, births and deaths registers and so forth, but nothing gives you a profile of the contemporary population—what it was doing, what it was engaged in, what the family structure was—at a moment in time. Nothing can do that other than a census and that is what is destroyed.

**CHAIR**—The American people have long had a high regard for individual rights and privacy. Are there any problems in the States with people concerned about privacy, or is that something which is just accepted, that 72 years later it is not really an issue?

**Prof. DeBats**—I think that is accepted. That was the point that was being discussed when the Australian Law Reform Commission began this inquiry. In the mid- to late 1960s there was a bill pending in the United States House of Representatives, HR 10686, which was to regularise the 75-year release point. At that point, because it had not been regularised, it was a result of an exchange of letters between the National Archivist, I believe, and the head of the American Bureau of the Census in 1952. However, there had not been federal legislation.

Certainly, in the late 1970s, when this was going to be subject to legislation for the first time, there was concern about this and the US Bureau of the Census argued a line which is, I think, indistinguishable from the line which the ABS has argued. That was the point of this inquiry that the National Research Council undertook to see if they could deduce in a scientific way whether or not differential pledges of confidentiality would have an effect on compliance with the census. The general conclusion was that this

difference would be so small that it was negligible and the legislation went ahead and the law was regularised.

Yes, there is always concern about privacy. The debate which surrounded the bill was a good one. The National Archivist at the time and members of the US Congress speaking in defence of HR 10686 argued that the pledge of confidentiality that was included in the American census, which is, of course, very similar to the pledge of confidentiality which is included in the Australian census—to paraphrase my paper—was intended and had served as an inviolate protection against the use of information supplied in the census by any other branch of government, but that was not a contract to confidentiality in perpetuity. That was, in the end, the situation which was accepted.

Yes, there are concerns about privacy, but they were seen to be a lesser concern and of lesser importance than the preservation of the record which was viewed as a very important public document.

**CHAIR**—The report you refer to, is that the report of the Congress or the report of—

**Prof. DeBats**—No, that was the report of the National Research Council.

**CHAIR**—Is that footnoted?

**Prof. DeBats**—I think so. It is not very helpful, I should say. It is really more a methodological inquiry, but I believe it is footnoted.

**CHAIR**—It would appear that the United States census bureau has shifted ground because I met with the director a couple of months ago and he told me that they were fully supportive of retaining the census records.

**Prof. DeBats**—Yes, originally, of course, they were. Indeed, at one point in time, the director of the US census was actively urging the records, but they got nervous when this was up because it was putting it in legislation. But I could not agree more that, today, the US Bureau of the Census is very cooperative and supportive of this program.

I did make some inquiries in Canada, because the situation with the Canadian 1996 census is, I believe, ambiguous. I believe you would have more accurate information than I do. But Canada, too, has preserved its census. Again, historians, genealogists, medical researchers and sociologists find this information invaluable in the reconstruction of the Canadian past and the history of the Canadian people, and the censuses have been preserved up to this point.

I am told that the situation in Canada is that the issue is simply a matter of space and that the present census records have not been destroyed but there has not yet been a decision made to preserve them either. So, as I understand it, they are in an ambiguous situation. But their records are preserved back to the first census of Canada.

**Mr McCLELLAND**—You indicated earlier that the social and political history of Australia would be



different if the census forms had been retained. Clearly, retention of the forms is of interest to individual researchers; but, if you could develop your previous account, is there any public benefit in the retention of the forms?

**Prof. DeBats**—I believe there is. I believe there is a benefit in an immediate way in that medical researchers could use it, but I do not think that is the real benefit. The real benefit is that the history of the country is written differently, because there is a source that allows a different sort of history to be written. Presently, that source does not exist in Australia which is ironic, in a way, because Australia has always made so much of its past as being the past of a nation of ordinary people, of the common people, and yet they are precisely the people who are most invisible in the Australian past, so that our sense of what was the social world of the common people, of the citizens of the past, is terrifically vague.

You simply cannot do the work that you can do in the US or in Canada or in France or in England, or in any country which preserves its census, because there you can go back and layer this and you can write a different kind of history. That seems to me the greatest benefit of all. The medical use is real, but it is not nearly as great as a people's understanding of themselves and their nation.

**Mr McCLELLAND**—On the medical research issue, some of the evidence which we received yesterday was to the effect that, at least in some areas, it would not be of much use if it could only be accessed 75 years later. Is there a case for allowing medical researchers to access the census forms if, for instance, they are vetted by a committee as to the significance of their research and the public benefit which will flow from it, and they use that information for very limited purposes?

**Prof. DeBats**—No I would not support that. If Australia is going to move in this direction, which I think would be a great thing to do in time to celebrate 100 years, and to say, 'We have learned; we are not into doing in wedge-tailed eagles anymore, we are going to do something different,' then I think the only way to proceed is with a rule which is a common rule, does not have subclauses in it and is simple and unambiguous.

**Mr McCLELLAND**—You would lock it away for 75 years, or whatever the period is?

**Prof. DeBats**—Or 100, or whatever it is; I think the British rule is 100 years. I think it should be an inviolate rule that you put in place and you say there are no exceptions to it. If you do not, I think you are in a difficult situation whereby there is one set of rules for one kind of person and another set of rules for another kind of person. Any faith in the pledge of confidentiality will be eroded. My view is very strong that it should be one way or the other. Either keep turning it into wallboard or preserve it with an inviolate pledge of confidentiality which is in legislation—which you can show to people to prove that you mean it—and mean it.

**Dr SOUTHCOTT**—Is it not overstating the case to say that in 100 years time there would be anything that medical researchers could find in the census? What sort of things in the census would medical researchers look at?

**Prof. DeBats**—I do not know. I can only guess at what medical researchers will be interested in in 100 years. But I do not think that that should lead to an ambiguous statement of confidentiality. There may

be something. There may be losses. But all these things are issues of balance. Australia has taken one extreme position to the present time. If it is going to change its position it should do so in a uniform and unambiguous way. In 100 years, I do not know what medical researchers would be interested in. I know that medical researchers now or at least medical historians would be interested in all sorts of things. One hundred years from now, the level of lead pollution in Port Pirie may be something that is of interest to people. There would be other issues of that sort. I accept that the epidemiologists would lose something but in my judgment it is better that they lose something than Australia proceeds with an ambiguous statement of confidentiality.

**Dr SOUTHCOTT**—This may have been covered earlier, but how much use is made of the retained census forms in the United States?

**Prof. DeBats**—It is huge. I think in that paper there is a figure of 40,000 reels of microfilm which the national archives has sold. There are 11 regional archives. Every central historical research library in a state would have its whole census that is open from the first census to the last. Most major genealogical libraries would have them. Most private libraries would have some or all. It has a huge use. The main users are going to be genealogists in terms of numbers. If you ranked the numbers and asked, ‘What are the constituent groups?’ genealogists, professional researchers and medical researchers would be in that order of frequency. The medical researchers would be least. I think the greatest gain is the public gain that comes from the second use, that is the professional researchers who create a history of a country that people know.

**Dr SOUTHCOTT**—The Australian Bureau of Statistics has put it to us that in the UK they had some problems with their census in 1971 and 1991. Essentially in 1991 it related to the issue of the poll tax and the fact that the census may have been used to collect data for the poll tax. Do you think that is a risk that we would have even if we had enshrined in legislation that it would remain confidential for 75 or 100 years?

**Prof. DeBats**—It is possible. Taxes, as we know, excite the imagination of people. I would think that if Australia is going to do this it would have to proceed carefully, and it would have to do it up-front. It would have to sell the changed policy well in advance of the census so that people were convinced early. I do not think it would be honest to sit here and say, ‘Well, you could do this and there won’t be some controversy. There won’t be some problems.’ I think there would be but I think they would be worth the price.

**Dr SOUTHCOTT**—I suppose that is the danger. The concern on the other side of the coin is that it may lead to a census which is unreliable or inaccurate.

**Prof. DeBats**—Yes. As I say, that is the central position that ABS took then—that is in 1979—and that, I am sure, is the central position which I see in these papers. I am sure that that is the position that they would take, and the allied departments in government will also take that position. I think all one can say is that on balance there is a problem. Conceded. The question is: how major a problem is it? By what per cent do you think compliance will decline? You could even find that it went up—that people would say, ‘Here’s something for my children.’ Here is a record on a not insignificant Australian census—and a chance to be part of it.

**CHAIR**—What do you think of the proposition that has been put to us that there ought to be an

opting out provision—that is, that in future we say that the census data will be retained unless you tick a box that says, ‘I do not want it kept’?

**Prof. DeBats**—That is a hard question. It has a compelling logic to it. It might be an interesting first step to see how people did respond. It would be a no risk situation as long as people believed that, but there is faith in this all along the track. One would just hope that most people would not tick the box to have it hung up on the barbed wire. I cannot think of a country that does it that way, but it would be worthwhile considering. There would be a loss if you thought that a significant number of people were going to opt for the barbed wire.

**Dr SOUTHCOTT**—In your opinion, is it fair to say that there is a paucity of social information about Australia compared with your experience in the United States?

**Prof. DeBats**—I think there is a different social history of Australia and I do not think it is nearly the social history that exists in other countries. I do think that that is an important point. I think it is very important that people have a sense of sharing in their history, that their history is about them and the ordinary people. There are great works obviously of Australian history and social history, but it is different and the ordinary people do not loom as large in that as I think they do in other places.

I do not think Australian history, as a consequence, is as exciting as is the history of other countries, because it can be written from a different perspective. I do think it is different. One can think of ‘Marvellous Melbourne’, the really excellent social history of Melbourne, but it is a rarity to see that in Australia. There is no social science history association in Australia. Australian history has, I think, developed differently because its core sources are different.

**Mr McCLELLAND**—I suppose a good example of that might be the history which I at least was taught regarding the First World War. It was the glory of the ANZACs, whereas if it was taken from a different perspective—the effect it had on country towns, the loss of the male population and what consequences befell those towns as a result of losing so many young men—future generations may have a different perspective as to the value of going into that sort of a conflict.

**Prof. DeBats**—Yes, exactly, because if you have the individual names from the past, you can link those across time. You could move from the census of 1911 to 1916 to 1921, and you could look at a place across that time. It has been very important and interesting in the US, and in Canada too, to watch the way in which women’s history has been able to be developed because the records were there. The historians, if you want—or the public—were not interested, but when they were, there was something they could go back to. Similarly, with the history of ethnic and racial groups, the stuff is there. You can go back and find it and build into a nation’s history those people.

**Mr McCLELLAND**—Even in formulating economic policy there is a debate as to whether you focus on the industries that are viable international industries as opposed to propping up industries for regional purposes. I suppose Newcastle is a good example. A hundred years down the track, it may be very interesting to see the consequence of the closure of BHP in Newcastle. That may determine economic theory at that time or the emphasis as to whether the consequences are dramatic for the region or whether other industries come

in to fill the vacuum, that sort of thing.

**Prof. DeBats**—Yes. You can see what happened across time to those individuals who were employed. I think that is right. It is all a way of saying that the history is different and the people are in the history—where they should be, if you have got the record.

**Mr McCLELLAND**—The final point I have is this. You mentioned that in the United States they actually sell the microfiche records. I suppose that is some way of recouping the cost of restoring these records over time.

**Prof. DeBats**—I suppose it is pretty cheap. I think it is \$40 a reel.

**Mr McCLELLAND**—It is not designed for that purpose.

**Prof. DeBats**—I do not know what the cost structure is. I think it is designed to be readily available to most people, so it is designed to be cheap.

**Mr MUTCH**—I suppose Mr Costello would be very interested in the revenue that could come to the Commonwealth in 100 years time. He is a very far-sighted Treasurer.

**Prof. DeBats**—You would need to be. I do not think it is a big profit maker.

**Dr SOUTHCOTT**—Regarding the social history of Australia, is it a problem that the primary sources just are not there, or is it a problem that people are not delving through them? There are other sources that historians can use, like births, deaths and marriages.

**Prof. DeBats**—But they are really different records. This is what I do. This is my work, and I do this in parts of the US and parts of Canada. While it is true that you can go back to births and deaths records and you can go back to the rate books—there are things you can do—it is almost impossible to do that for a whole city or a community or a group, because you do not know where the people were born. You have no idea where they were born because there is no record that tells you. You are interested in a population that is here. They are in the telephone book or something. But where were they born? You have no idea. To go through births and deaths records, vital records, is just impossible.

Yes, they are there, but not in a way that is useable. I think that is a very good point. The quality of material which is preserved in the census is unique precisely because it is a snapshot of everyone at a moment in time. There is nothing like that anywhere, except the census.

**CHAIR**—Professor, thank you very much for coming along this morning and discussing this matter with us and providing your paper, which we will look at with some interest. It is amazing how much things go around, they come around.

**Prof. DeBats**—They do. I just hope the result is different.

**CHAIR**—I have a motion from Mr Mutch that the exhibit ‘The right to know: a case for the preservation of the Australian census’ by Donald DeBats, be accepted as an exhibit in the inquiry. There being no objections, it is so resolved.

[10.41 a.m.]

**PEAKE, Mr Andrew Guy, Vice President, South Australian Genealogy and Heraldry Society Inc., GPO Box 592, Adelaide, South Australia**

**CHAIR**—Mr Peake, I welcome you to the inquiry. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the hearing is a legal proceeding of the 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 parliament. We are in receipt of your society's submission of 16 July of this year. Would you care to make some brief opening comments?

**Mr Peake**—Sure. I did not really want to go into the value of census records for family historians in great detail. I am sure that you have got submissions from every state, all saying the same thing, and so it would be just a bit repetitive. I wanted to look at some of the other issues that you included in your brief and some of the arguments which have been used for not retaining the census by ABS and other organisations in Australia.

I suppose our belief is that it is very much a marketing issue. If you market the census as something which has to be destroyed because that information which is going to upset people cannot be left around for people to look at, then people believe that it has to be destroyed. You could equally put out a marketing strategy to preserve it, along with the securities to make sure that information is not released until a due period of time has gone by.

That is just as much a marketing issue and I would assume that most of the other western countries which preserve them have marketed it on the same basis, that is, that the information is preserved, but after 75, 100 years or whatever period it has been decided that they can be released in, people with a legitimate interest can look at them. In some cases, they can look at it earlier if they have some immediate legitimate interest, immediate family connection or whatever.

The other issue was the cost of retention. Back in the 19th century when everything was paper based, there was a great problem just keeping all those pieces of paper stored. Now with the electronic storage of information it should be possible just to key in the extra data, which is the name and identifying information. Then it is keeping that electronic database which probably fits into a suitcase—rather than fitting into a wool store—without much problem. It is only just a matter then of making sure that the electronic means is kept up to date and renewed or replaced as new technology becomes available.

**CHAIR**—Just on that last point, I wonder whether there may be some different reaction or perception by the community if the census in a name identifying the form was kept electronically. For example, I think you made reference in your submission to CD. Do you think there would be any different perception and that people may have some increased fear that that sort of material is kept in a computer type environment, which may be more subject to breach of privacy than being microfiched and locked away in a vault for 70 or 80 years?

**Mr Peake**—I think the Commonwealth government already keeps a lot of very sensitive private

information on an electronic database. Social security has a huge database which is spread all over Australia with terminals everywhere. The Australian Taxation Office also keeps very sensitive information. There has not been any suggestion that that has been breached to any extent. With not actually having a networked computer system, you have got it on some sort of electronic tape or whatever. The ABS would use one with all the identifying information stripped off. What they have is not a problem. The only one which gets locked away is the master copy with the name identifying in the Australian Archives or some other secure depository.

**CHAIR**—In terms of retaining the census, one of the propositions put to us was that there ought to be an opting out provision. That is that the census name identifying data be retained unless the individual respondent ticked a box to say, ‘I don’t want this retained.’ Do you have any comments about that?

**Mr Peake**—I cannot see the purpose of it. We are talking about releasing it in 75 or 100 years time. I can understand the question, but I cannot actually see why. You have to put your name on it anyway for ABS to be able to tick off that you have actually filled in the form and you are not in trouble. As for the purpose of ticking a box to say you do not want it, who is going to know in 75 or 100 years time that a geneticist is not going to need your information to determine that you have not been carrying Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease or whatever?

**Mr McCLELLAND**—Just on that point, the Bureau of Statistics and Treasury say that the threat is that retaining these records is going to affect the quality of the census and to perhaps in some way neutralise that concern. Perhaps there could be the option of saying that there is no need to have that concern to such a degree, because, if anyone were disinclined to give you accurate information, there is a means for them to opt out of having their records retained. In other words, this would neutralise the argument that the quality of the data will be tainted.

**Mr Peake**—There does not seem to be any argument in Britain and America that it is going to be tainted or the quality of the information is jeopardised by people’s names being there and it is going to be released in 75 or 100 years time. I am aware of the argument, but I am not quite sure. That has been part of the PR process of selling it, as much as it has been part of the PR process of selling it up to date by saying, ‘You must fill it in and we are going to destroy it, so you are safe.’ I am not quite sure where the sensitivity of the information is from my memory of filling it in.

**Mr McCLELLAND**—I suppose with the income level, for instance, someone may have been bodge on their tax returns, but have been prepared to be more accurate on their census.

**Mr Peake**—Perhaps. You can put what you like. I felt like putting my cat on my census form, because he feels like a son. How were they to know that ‘Tim’ was a four-legged creature and not a two-legged one? I do not know what more I can say. The problem will be that, if you opt out, people will tend to tick the box. I can see ABS coming back and saying, ‘Fifty per cent ticked the box. What’s the point of keeping it when 50 per cent don’t want it preserved? The whole thing is useless,’ and it would be. You have a 50 per cent chance of finding your ancestor and you would end up finding out that they ticked the box and it was not there.

**Dr SOUTHCOTT**—What about alternative sources for genealogy, like births, deaths and marriages? Is that enough to trace family history?

**Mr Peake**—As I said in my submission, most of the information that the family historian is going to want, as distinct from the social historian and the community historian, you can actually get from other sources. The biggest benefit from it is that it is all in one place. You can find out who their neighbours are and whatever. But, as you say, births, deaths and marriages, electoral rolls and land records will tell you all. You can get from local government records how many bedrooms they have in their house. You can get all of the information that family historians are probably going to want out of this information from elsewhere, but they are all from different places.

**Mr MUTCH**—Are they necessarily consistent with the repository practices and the extent of different authorities keeping that information?

**Mr Peake**—They all keep information for their own purposes, so they may not be consistent, but I suppose you can get all the birth certificates. The thing that this will tell you is who is actually living under one roof. There may be a man and a woman with half a dozen kids, but they may not have had their union blessed by holy matrimony. They may have separated and moved into other blended families. I suppose that is one of the things that you are not going to find very easily from other sources.

**Mr MUTCH**—We have also lost a lot of records in the past, have we not, through flood, fire and so forth?

**Mr Peake**—Yes. One hopes that the information we are collecting today is secure for the future, but it is like everything else. I suppose that is what the Irish thought in the 1920s, that it was all safe, until they used the records on the barricades and they got destroyed.

**Mr MUTCH**—It would also depend on the type of medium that you are using to store the material. Often the modern mediums are shorter lived than the old ones. Colour photographs, for instance, are less durable than the black and whites used to be.

**Mr Peake**—I think that is one of the problems. You can keep it electronically, but then you have to be looking every five years. We know that with computer technology a computer that we had five years ago is an antique now in terms of how it works, what it stores and the medium it stores. So there has to be some mechanism built in for the electronic medium to be upgraded so it can be read continually.

**Mr MUTCH**—When I visited your headquarters recently you had some big discs of microfilm. They seemed to be reels of film. You had census material from England stored on that and it seemed to take up a very small space. Would that be a very good way of storing the census, for instance—on a reel of film?

**Mr Peake**—It stores it very well. But the benefit with the electronic medium is that when you come to use it there is a self-indexing and self-finding part of it, whereas with microfilm you have basically got pieces of paper on a piece of celluloid, or whatever it is made of, and you have to wind through it and work out where someone's address was by using some other technique. With the electronic medium you could put



in 'Peake, Andrew Guy' and then it can find it; you have actually got an indexing and retrieval system built into the process and that is the big advantage. The ABS are doing that any way; they are already putting it into an electronic database—

**Mr MUTCH**—Not the names and addresses.

**Mr Peake**—But all you have to do is add the names and addresses and then you have the lot. They do not need it microfilmed. As far as that is concerned once they have got it electronically it gets destroyed. So you are actually asking for another process, at fairly large expense I would imagine, of microfilming all of the pages. My view would be that electronic is the way to go, but it means that it would have to be looked at every five years to bring it up to whatever the current technology is.

**Mr MUTCH**—Some of the genealogical groups are saying that they want only one or two pages and a certain number of questions, so that would delete some of those more controversial questions from the need to be stored.

**Mr Peake**—Yes; but, looking at it as a social and community historian, there is some other information that is of value not perhaps to the family historian but to the community historian. If money is the critical issue, you could feasibly cut out that field on the preserved electronic database. It is a fairly simple matter, just putting in or cutting out.

**CHAIR**—Could we have a census form that is in, perhaps, two or three parts—that is, one part which includes the name and the identifying information; another part which includes other general information about birth place, birth place of parents, internal migration and occupation; and a third part which has what is perceived to be the more sensitive material, which is probably the income levels—and none of the third part is retained, all of the second part which is non-identifying is retained and used in ordinary statistical uses on an ongoing basis, and the first part is retained but not released for a period of, say, 80 to 100 years?

**Mr Peake**—I could live with that alternative.

**CHAIR**—It would seem to me, having visited the census processing centre in Sydney, that what was happening there was that the census was being processed in two parts anyway. The first set of information was being taken from all the forms which were then kept and at some subsequent stage they went back and processed the second half of the form. If that can be done that way, it would seem a possibility that you could have it in three parts and process it. But I am asking about the concept of that approach.

**Mr Peake**—I think the concept would work. I think we potentially have to resell an idea to the public and if that is one way to resell it, okay.

**CHAIR**—How would you resell it? What message, what advertising campaign, what spin—if I can be so crude as to use a political expression—would you put on that that would have the desirable outcome in terms of public acceptance?

**Mr Peake**—The problem is that I am a social worker by trade and a family historian by inclination,

not a public relations or advertising person. So I do not know whether you just downplay the whole confidentiality issue or you tackle it up-front and say, 'This is the first one that is going to be preserved. However, your salary will be sacrosanct.' That is something a public relations person would be better able to answer than I can. They can sell ice-cream to the snowmen.

**Mr MUTCH**—But people are generally aware that the census is kept for a couple of years anyway while the information is being transcribed, so if there is going to be any breach why wouldn't they be concerned about it happening in the first couple of years when it was fresh and current information?

**Mr Peake**—Yes; and the Taxation Office would—

**Mr MUTCH**—Yes, they have it.

**Mr Peake**—They have got it too. I suppose it is all a matter of just having a computer data link between the two agencies and, bingo, the government can make a lot more money!

**CHAIR**—There are no further questions. Thank you very much for your society's submission to the inquiry and also for coming here this morning and discussing it with us. We appreciate that.

**Mr Peake**—Thank you very much for your attention.

**Short adjournment**

[11.25 a.m.]

**O'NEIL, Mr Bernard John, Executive Member, Association of Professional Historians, Institute Building, 122 Kintore Ave, Adelaide, South Australia 5000**

**CHAIR**—Welcome, Mr O'Neil. 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 and misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. We are in receipt of the submission of 15 July from the association. Would you care to make an opening statement?

**Mr O'Neil**—The association represents 65 to 70 practising historians, people who work on a professional basis in a whole range of areas from museums and archives through to libraries or people consulting, working for government departments or companies. We do have some university people and some unemployed and student members, so we have a fairly wide range of members.

As to the background of the association, we have been in existence for 16 complete years, and we were the first professional historians' association in Australia. We meet regularly and discuss a wide range of issues relating to historical matters, our work and so on. In that context, we have had discussions over time about research problems and issues such as this one with the treatment of census forms.

In preparing for today, as well as representing an official executive position, I have canvassed various members of the association for their attitude. In the letter it was spelt out very clearly that we believe the census form should be retained, with an embargo on access. At an official level we suggest an embargo on access for 100 years. Personally, I would be happy with 50 or 75 years. I know some of our colleagues would also like a shorter time limit.

**CHAIR**—What sort of research would be able to be done, which is not able to be done now, if the name identified records are kept?

**Mr O'Neil**—A lot of genealogical work would become much easier than is currently the practice. Things like electoral rolls and telephone books which are commonly available do not, for example, list all members of a household. People would find it an easier process to prepare genealogies, the family trees, the family histories and so on.

At a professional level, making material available in the raw form will allow people to do their own research rather than relying on the condensed statistics that come out from the ABS. It will enable people to follow through individuals or individual families. For example, a pastoral family might want to establish not just one side of the family but a broad range, how far back it goes and the various interests they have had in the land. It would be very useful to be able to identify the names of people from the census form, rather than the detailed research that is needed at the moment.

That has particular relevance to issues of the day, such as native title claims where white people or black people have to identify their connections with land. To have that sort of information from the current

perspective for, say, 100 years ago, would be very valuable in that sort of context. Unfortunately we do not have it, but perhaps in the future we would.

**Dr SOUTHCOTT**—You mentioned native title. Can you think of other examples where the name identified census records would be of value to historians in 100 years' time?

**Mr O'Neil**—With the way work is currently done, it could be in the preparation of publications and reports, perhaps even heritage surveys where items are coming up for heritage listing—you may need to establish the bona fides of the claims and so on. Part of my comment was based on the fact that having that material in the census form will make it much easier. Therefore, it will be an easier process for the researcher and a less costly process for the person or organisation having the work done.

**Dr SOUTHCOTT**—Surely you could get some of that information from the titles office.

**Mr O'Neil**—You can do, obviously in the land claims and so on. With the native title issue, a large part of that, from the Aboriginal side and from the European side, is to identify who has links with the land. The land title research will only give you the name of the titleholder. It will not give you the family and their links, their relationships and so on.

**Dr SOUTHCOTT**—Have you or any of your members made use of some of the name identified census data that is available from overseas?

**Mr O'Neil**—I have in my work, primarily from the UK, going back as far as 1836. I cannot remember the exact year but I was looking for somebody in 1836 and I was trying to identify the family. I knew the person's address but I was trying to identify which members of the family lived in that house. Without going into a long saga, the point of it all was to establish a connection between this person and German migration. He was one of the first German migrants to Australia. It turned out that he did not own the house, but the daughter of the person who did own the house married Pastor Kavel. For people who are not familiar with South Australian history, Pastor Kavel was the first Lutheran pastor to come here with a big congregation. I was attempting there to prove some connection between the person I was investigating, who seemed to have a role as a mining/land agent, and the Germans coming out. I was interested in why they came to Australia rather than going to America. I was not able to get the solution in the end because it did not give me enough information but that is one specific example I have had.

**Dr SOUTHCOTT**—That is very interesting. Apart from historians, what use do you think social scientists or geographers would be able to make of the census data in 100 years?

**Mr O'Neil**—It is very difficult to predict the future, obviously. A lot of it is household information and obviously will not be of much value to people working as, say, geographers in that area of the sciences. The social scientists will find it useful to identify population movements. Looking at it in the current context, and trying to predict the future, would be difficult. There are issues now such as the break up of families, the extended families now and what happens to those people. There are families now where one or more of the children may have a different surname from the parent. It will be very difficult, down the track, to trace those people. Let us say we want to look at people interested in politics and so on. I cannot think of anything

specific but we may be able to do biographical studies of people, where they came from and how they became important in the political sense.

**CHAIR**—Just to pick up your last points about living arrangements in the future, if the current trend of family fragmentation, if I can use that expression, continues, then tracing living arrangements in the future and making some sense of that is going to be much more difficult than it is today because of the things you were talking about.

**Mr O'Neil**—Yes, and having more information rather than less information will enable the story to be put together, an account to reflect what has been happening. I would like to think we have promoted the notion of an information led society and an information rich society. To have this information available would add to that, not to have it available would detract from the concept that we are information led. Some people would argue you could have too much information and how can we get through it all if we have so much? On the other hand, if there is more information available, there could be more people working on it. I would always argue for more information rather than less.

**Mr ANDREW**—Are you suggesting, Mr O'Neil, that you personally favour a 50-year time span rather than a 100-year time span? To me that seems eminently sensible, too, given that 50 years seems to guarantee as much privacy as one would require. Why did your society nominate 100 years?

**Mr O'Neil**—There were some people on the executive—and it was an executive decision—who were more comfortable with 100 years. One of our members, for example, works in the area of medical research—the history of medicine, and so on—and she was interested in having the material available, but was aware of the privacy concerns and protecting people's interests that way.

Personally, I go for 50 years. I can live with 75. That also reflects the trend now for archives, for example, to reduce the time in which they make material available. The current standard for Australia has been 30 years. It has now moved to make that 20 years so that records will be available sooner for people.

**Mr ANDREW**—It would be marginally facetious, but I pick up the chairman's concern about being able to include some political genealogy and the family tree. I would have thought that a good deal of dilution of the conservative genes could occur over 100 years, as compared with 50 years.

**CHAIR**—Perhaps the major argument, it seems, against a retention of the data is the concern that the reliability of the census data that is collected will diminish if people fear that it is going to be made available. What do you say to that?

**Mr O'Neil**—Having had experience working with census forms at the collection point, I would say that I do not really think that it would make that much difference. It is more an impression—as I have worked as a census form collector. I came across numerous people who just filled it in, regardless, just to fulfil the obligation. Certain people would not fill it in at all. I had to report back and send the next person up the ranks to go and approach them. But by and large, I think that most people would have filled the forms in correctly and accurately.

I do not know whether putting a name on it would change that. It may mean that some questions, for example, are left off—without a form in front of me, I could not give an example. It may mean that you have to redesign the form slightly, but by and large, I like to think that most people would complete the form honestly and accurately. You do allow, of course, when doing statistical analysis, for some percentage of error—whether you go for 95 per cent or 90 per cent.

**CHAIR**—One proposition that has been discussed with us is to retain the data as a general rule unless people opt out. That is, you tick a box which says that there is a statement that this name identifying data will be retained and released after 80 or 100 years unless you indicate by ticking the following box that you do not want it retained. Do you have any comments about that proposition?

**Mr O’Neil**—My immediate reaction is to relate a small story which is of working on a project where the manager of the organisation was very unsympathetic to the work I was doing. They had commissioned a history project, yet he was not the least bit interested. Some 12 or 14 years later when he was no longer with the organisation, I was commissioned again to do more work for them and I went and interviewed him.

At that point in time, he was over the moon about how important the work was and how thrilled he was to be recorded and how vital it all was. Part of that was the ageing process. When you are 20 or 25 years old, history may not mean much to you, but when you are 55 or 65 years old, it can. You find that a lot of people getting interested in genealogy, for example, are the older people. Younger people do not understand, or are not that interested, or they have seen their family sitting around the table talking about it. That is all they need to know. So there is a generational thing. If you give people the option, they may make a decision at 25 or 35, and at 55 or 65 years of age, they might say, ‘I wish I had not ticked that box.’ I would prefer to have it basically all in. I am sure there would be safeguards to privacy and that sort of thing built into the process.

**Mr MUTCH**—The other question I had about that was that it was one person ticking the box, whereas that collection of data could represent six family members.

**Mr O’Neil**—There is no easy answer to that one, is there?

**Mr MUTCH**—No.

**Mr O’Neil**—But, currently, the head of the household is the person responsible for giving the answers. You could not keep going back over every form five years later and asking, ‘Do you agree, or not?’

**Mr MUTCH**—Would the historians in your organisation be unanimous in the view that has been put forward?

**Mr O’Neil**—The range of people I have spoken to in the time we had available—some 12 or 15 members—have all agreed. That includes the seven of us on the executive, all executive members. By and large, the majority would support our stand.

**Mr MUTCH**—What sort of historians are you talking about then? Are they people doing ethnic

histories of different communities? Have you got those?

**Mr O'Neil**—Yes, we have got those. There are academic historians through to people consulting. There are people doing genealogies; people researching, as I mentioned, native title; those working on Aboriginal history, and people working at the SA Museum with Aboriginal families. Others are working with migrants at the Migration Museum or the History Trust of SA. That is a very broad spectrum. There are people doing company histories, industrialisation and geographic studies through to individual families and individuals. A person might say, 'Here is a photograph of six people. Can you identify which one is my father? And who are the other five people? I do not know when it was taken or where.' Strange as it may seem, we do get queries like that. So it is a very broad working base.

**CHAIR**—Mr O'Neil, I have just one final matter. It has been suggested as an alternative to the proposition that all future census data be retained that as a special one-off centenary of federation project, the 2001 census data should be retained and released after a due period of 80 or 100 years. Is there any value in doing that as a one-off exercise?

**Mr O'Neil**—I certainly think that it is worth while to pursue that notion. It may set a precedent, but then my argument would be that it would be a good thing to follow through and people may become comfortable with having done it once and say next time no problem. So I would be supportive of the notion of doing that.

But to take it in isolation would mean that it would be very difficult to make any comparison with a census either side. But on the other hand, it would at least give some data for people to work with in snapshot, a point in time that people can refer to. With the bicentenary, the official histories were done as 50-year slices, looking at people's lives every 50 years. To have had the census information in that sort of situation would have been very helpful, but at least they were able to do that snapshot.

**CHAIR**—I take it from what you are saying that the greater value for historians in retained census data is not so much the snapshot of the one year, but the longitudinal use you can make by taking a number of census collections over, say, a period of a decade and looking at what is happening. Is that correct?

**Mr O'Neil**—Yes. The publications come out as a 'day in the life' sort of thing. It might be flooding at Lake Eyre one year, but for the other 25 years following, it does not flood. Which is more normal: the situation which is unique, or the standard? So you tend to study things over a longer term.

**CHAIR**—Is there any value if the data were retained, say, for every second census rather than every census—that is, every 10 years rather than every five?

**Mr O'Neil**—I would say that is an improvement on what we have, but I still prefer—

**CHAIR**—At what length of time after first retaining the data does it lose its significance? Obviously, if you took a census every year—as I read somewhere that they do in Finland—and you retained the data every year, that would have greater historical use and significance than if you did it only every five years. But, as you conceded, if you retained it every 10 years, that would be better than not retaining it at all. How

far can you stretch that out before it starts to lose significance? For example, if you retained four sets of census data for a century, would that have any significance, or would the time between be too great to make it useful?

**Mr O'Neil**—I think that the time would probably be getting too great in that situation, given that people seem to move house on average every six or seven years, depending which report you read. So 10 years would at least cover those sorts of people. The rate at which people change jobs or leave jobs, or retire or whatever, is far greater now than before. So, with any longer time span, the information would still be useable, but perhaps not as valuable in following those sorts of things through.

**CHAIR**—This is a leading question, so I do not want you to agree with it if you do not wish to. Am I correct in understanding that a period of about 10 years would be about the longest period of time to have some significance in longitudinal research?

**Mr O'Neil**—Yes. I would not go for 15 or 20 years. Again, I come back to the preference being for every five years. A concession would be for every 10 years. Certainly, the notion of starting with 2001 could be a good trial or test. It would mean modifying the forms anyway. Once that was in place, there would be a measure as to how people would respond.

**CHAIR**—One of the major concerns with the retention of the forms from the privacy point of view seems anecdotally—not that we have got any accurate indication of this—to relate to the section pertaining to the levels of income that people fill in. One proposition put to us was that that information not be retained but that other information be retained. Do you have a view about that?

**Mr O'Neil**—From my recollection, most of that information is in a very broad band and, given that there would be a restriction and embargo on that material being available, I do not think that would be a problem.

**CHAIR**—You do not think people will worry that in a year's time their income will be shown to be X, Y or Z?

**Mr O'Neil**—In some cases, they are only giving the salary or wage information. There is no provision there for showing stocks and shares or how much money you won on the races last weekend or anything of that type. The total wealth or lack of wealth within families and so on would not be immediately apparent from just the information on the forms. I do not think that would be a problem.

**CHAIR**—Thank you. As there are no other questions, Mr O'Neil, I thank you for the association's submission and also for coming this morning and discussing it with us.



[11.54 a.m.]

**DASVARMA, Dr Gouranga, Senior Lecturer and Director, Graduate Program in Population and Human Resources, School of Geography, Population and Environmental Management, Flinders University of South Australia, Bedford Park, Adelaide, South Australia 5042**

**O'DWYER, Dr Lisel Alice, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, School of Geography, Population and Environmental Management, Flinders University of South Australia, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide 5001**

**STEELE, Dr Ross McLean, Lecturer in Population Studies, School of Geography, Population and Environmental Management, Flinders University of South Australia, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, South Australia 5001**

**CHAIR**—Welcome. 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. Before inviting you to make some opening comments, can I say in advance that I have to leave at 12.20 p.m. and my colleague Dr Southcott will take over chairing the committee at that stage. We are in receipt of your submission of 15 July this year. I invite you to make some opening comments.

**Dr Steele**—As you have noted, the three of us were authors of submission no. 154 in volume 2 of the papers, which was signed by Professor Dean Forbes as head of our school. Dr Dasvarma has accompanied me to the hearings today and will speak to points 3, 4 and 5 of our submission. Dr Lisel O'Dwyer will later draw attention to the implications of the findings of this committee for geographic information systems research in Australia.

I would like to briefly introduce our submission and in particular speak to the first two points of that submission. First of all, with regard to retention of the original census forms, before preparing this submission on behalf of our school I widely canvassed the opinions of my colleagues. I discussed the issues with them and there was unanimous support for the retention and long-term archival storage of name-identified original census forms from future population censuses.

Most of my colleagues considered that the storage of the original completed forms would probably be the best option. In time, these data sets would become invaluable sources of historical demographic data which could be used to reconstruct the demographic composition of particular communities at the time of these national censuses. That has particular significance with the centenary of Federation in the 2001 census.

However, due to cost considerations and the difficulty of storing paper records, it was considered by many in our school that an image of the form, such as a microfiche image or some alternative, may be more easily stored and may be easier to keep for a long period of time. This was considered preferable to name and address identified electronic records of the coded census data, as the original forms—as those of you who have dealt with questionnaire forms will know—often contain information of interest to historians which is

not necessarily coded in the electronic record.

All of my colleagues indicated that privacy concerns and the need for confidentiality would require a lengthy time embargo of perhaps 75 or 100 years before these records could be accessed by researchers, because they are the individual census returns. Due to cost considerations and possible storage problems, some of my colleagues suggested that the retention of all of the forms or their images from every 10-year census rather than every census would be an appropriate compromise.

However, I would now like to speak to the second point, that is, the need for individual name and address identifiers to be included in the electronically stored coded census data. Most of my colleagues are naturally more concerned with contemporary research questions of an applied nature than they are with historical records which can only be accessed many years after our death.

It is in this context that many of them suggested that I draw your attention to the need for the Australian Bureau of Statistics to include individual name and address identifiers in the electronically stored data from the Australian population censuses.

Currently, as you will be aware, the Australian Bureau of Statistics stores this data without the individual identifiers. In this way, it precludes three options that are often available to other national census bureaus. First of all, by storing the data in electronic form without individual identifiers, it precludes the selection of a one or two per cent sample of individuals who could then be traced longitudinally through successive censuses.

Secondly, by not storing the identifiers, it prevents the linking of individual records with records of the same individuals in other data sets, particularly the linking of census return information with vital statistics from birth and death records, for example.

Thirdly, the use of this individual data in geographic information systems analysis, which requires geographic point data, which can then be linked with other relevant information to explain the incidence and pattern of a variable of particular interest to the researcher, is impossible because of the absence of name and address identifiers.

Dr Dasvarma will shortly explain the value of linked and longitudinal data for demographic and health research and Dr O'Dwyer will then describe the data needs of GIS research. My own experience has been largely in the field of migration research. I would like to illustrate the value of longitudinal and linked data in this field.

Data from the 1996 census, as you will be aware, provides only very limited information on previous places of residence of those enumerated and it provides no information on their occupational, educational, welfare or household conditions at these earlier times and in their earlier places of residence. It is therefore impossible to analyse how the conditions of migrants—and that includes immigrants—and non-migrants have changed over time.

In addition, it is impossible to determine the direction of cause and effect relationships between many

of these social, economic and demographic variables. One example cited in the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare submission is that it is often impossible to determine the direction of the relationship between, say, unemployment and ill-health and increased mortality. Unless you have longitudinal data through this sequence of events, it is unknown, if you just compare cross-sectional data, whether unemployment has caused ill- health or whether it is those who suffer frequently from ill- health who are more likely to be unemployed.

However, if the individual name and address identifiers were stored electronically, along with the individual census data, as is the case in the UK and the US, a one or two per cent longitudinal sample of individuals could be drawn from the 1996 census and these individuals could then be traced through the successive censuses in 2001 and 2006.

Longitudinal data on individuals over successive censuses could be used in many fields of social science research. I will give some examples. It could be used to examine the extent of inter-generational poverty among disadvantaged groups in Australian society. It could be used to look at the effect of long-term unemployment on health and mortality levels. The relationship between migration and occupational and social mobility could be analysed, and the role of so- called escalator regions, characterised by higher social mobility and quick advances along the occupational hierarchy, could be examined in their role in aiding social mobility.

The effects of rural depopulation on the individual rural urban migrants and on particular regions could also be examined with longitudinal data. We could see what happens to the individuals over time and relate it to the general conditions and levels of development in those particular sources of migrants. It could be tied in with economic cycles and change over time.

Also, the occupational history, geographic mobility and welfare of Australia's indigenous population, which is a very serious issue, could be examined with some surety of increased understanding coming from the results.

There are concerns about the confidentiality of these data and the privacy considerations and those concerns often rank very highly with different individuals. In the UK where longitudinal studies have been conducted since the 1971 census, the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys does the matching of these individual data with successive censuses and with the national health service central register to identify births and loss of individuals through death or migration. In this way it has eliminated such concerns because it is the actual census authority that does the matching.

In the UK the individual researchers are provided only with the tapes of the records of the matched individuals. Information about other household members and all individual name and address identifiers have been removed. In this proposed source of data the individual identifiers are not made available to the actual researchers.

Unlike the UK, in Australia we conduct our population census at five-year intervals and this would increase the likelihood of the successful matching of individuals over successive censuses. In addition, the results will be even more contemporary than they are in the United Kingdom because of the increased

frequency of our census taking.

Finally, I believe that if the ABS were to conduct a one per cent longitudinal sample of individuals enumerated in the 1996 and subsequent censuses then it would greatly increase the worth of the census as a valuable resource for researchers in Australia. Moreover, the availability of longitudinal data from censuses already conducted plus the opportunity to link these data with other specialised data sets would minimise the need to fund expensive special purpose longitudinal surveys. Or at least it would minimise the actual cost of these special purpose longitudinal surveys. This point has been very effectively stated in the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare submission to this inquiry—submission 259, page 703.

**CHAIR**—Thank you, Dr Steele.

**Dr Dasvarma**—I will mainly address points three, four and five which basically boil down to the studies on mortality and fertility in the population. As we know, in the study of mortality and fertility we have to rely on two basic sources of data. One comes from the Registrar of Births and Deaths and the other, the denominator of those studies, comes from the population censuses.

At any point in time, looking at the cross-sectional data, these two sources of information have to be assumed to be matching. In fact they do not. For example, if we are trying to locate the occupational differentials in mortality, the occupation which is recorded on the death certificate may not be the same as that recorded in the census schedule. Moreover, people in reporting the occupations are different. On the census it is the respondent himself or herself who records the occupation whereas on the death certificate somebody else is reporting about the occupation of the deceased.

Furthermore, any occupational relationship with mortality can be traced back for a number of years. The person could have actually contracted a particular disease which finally led to his death in an occupation which was not his current occupation as reported in the census. Let me elaborate on that. Let us take the case of a coalminer who worked in the mine and contracted a disease of the lung. Because of that disease he was transferred back to the surface to a desk job. The occupation related to the death that would be reported would be that of a clerk whereas the disease was contracted while he was working in the mines. It would be a less meaningful matching of the profession with the death.

In spite of those, we have been able to relate occupation with mortality and treat occupation as a subgroup of the broader social class. To get a more meaningful analysis I think it needs to go back to the previous occupation, which can only be done by actually matching that record with the census going back in time longitudinally. In this context, the retention of the name identified census forms would prove invaluable.

Similar cases can be made for fertility analysis. When we try, for demographic purposes, to get information on the fertility of women, information which is mostly from the centre of analysis, we then try to relate those fertility statistics to the woman's characteristics: education, occupation, residence patterns and so on. When we do the census from the birth certificate we get these characteristics at the point of birth, not necessarily representing the previous times. This does not always reflect the effect of those factors on the birth that happened previously. For example, if the woman has given birth to three children, the characteristics recorded would be at the time of her third birth and not the first or second birth. By retaining

those records and going back in time again we can reconstruct those histories.

Similar analyses, like analysing the differentials in mortality leading to marital status changes, also can be done by going back in time longitudinally. These kinds of studies have been done in countries like the USA and other places, where the matching has actually been done, as Dr Steele has suggested, by the Bureau of Census and the National Centre for Health Statistics, not by the researchers themselves. That could be another way of safeguarding privacy and confidentiality, and allaying any perceived apprehensions. I think those are the two main points I wanted to stress. If there are any questions I will try to answer those.

**Dr O'Dwyer**—I would like to speak mainly on how name and address data is important in social research using GIS, geographic information systems. GIS is an information system that integrates and analyses spatial data, which is any kind of data that has some kind of spatial distribution and physical location.

To date GIS has not really been used very much in social research and this is solely because of the problem of getting precise spatial data. GIS is a very powerful and precise tool, but the only social, health or demographic data available from the ABS is at very coarse spatial levels. Even the collectors district spatial unit is too coarse for most kinds of spatial analysis. If we could retain the names and addresses of individuals we could pinpoint related data and produce much more powerful analyses.

As I see it, the potential and the power of GIS for social research is simply being wasted unless we can get good spatially referenced data. To give you an example, I am currently doing a study of the risk of elevated blood lead levels in children, by overlaying the distributions of individual dwelling characteristics with data on the proximity to roads, traffic flows, air pollution and so on. After integrating and analysing those data sets I can actually pinpoint individual houses that meet certain criteria; for example, in poor condition, within 20 metres of traffic flow of X number of cars per hour and built before 1950—which is the proxy for the likelihood of leaded paint. But, I cannot find out how many children live in those dwellings unless I go to the expense and time of doing a survey.

Using CD level data to indicate the number of children is too ecological; that is, you cannot relate the characteristics of areas to individuals and so the precision of the GIS, which is really the strength of GIS, is compromised. If we could relate the addresses of children aged under four to their actual addresses, we could identify exactly how many children are at risk of elevated blood lead levels. But otherwise we can only say that there is a risk of elevated blood lead levels if a child lives in a particular dwelling.

**CHAIR**—Do I understand from what you were saying that this sort of analysis is currently undertaken in the UK?

**Dr Steele**—Yes. I think the best description is perhaps in the submission from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Since the 1971 census they have carried out a one per cent longitudinal sample of individuals. At each census they linked this to national health registration data, which means they can eliminate by the next census those that have died or have emigrated and then they are left with the predicted numbers of survivors that you should be able to trace. They have had a success rate of something like 91 per cent in being able to trace people through to the next census. Then they add birth on that same randomly

selected birth date and any immigrants that have come in also born on the same day, and that restores the sample to the original figure of approximately 530,000. So you have a wastage each time, but you are restoring it, so you have still got a fair comparison between successive censuses.

**CHAIR**—And that is done without compromising the privacy concerns of individuals?

**Dr Steele**—I have never seen any adverse comment in terms of its effect on privacy. If the ABS carries out the linkage and the match in between successive censuses, only they would have the information about identifiers, which could be name, birth date, and perhaps address in Australia.

**CHAIR**—As I understand it, you are saying that can be done in such a way that you can still honestly say to the population that no name identifying information has been released about you until we get to the end of the 100 years or whatever.

**Dr Steele**—Yes, that is right. There are two issues: the retention of the census and that time embargo. Everyone has almost agreed on that.

**CHAIR**—The argument that is put to us from ABS is that if you retain name identifying information you actually diminish the information which you have because some people would be less likely to provide information to them. But it seems to me what you are saying is that if you are able to carry out these sorts of studies, we actually greatly enhance the quantity and the quality of the information which is available for a variety of other purposes in the community. Is that a fair assessment?

**Dr Steele**—Yes. The worth of the data for social scientists would increase many times if you could follow people through longitudinally and link it with some other data that is readily available. Provided the researcher does not have access to the individual identifiers, there is no way the researcher would be in a position to release individual data. I think, to be honest, the ABS have made a rod for their own back a little bit in that they have gone out and broadcast the advantages of destroying a lot of this. I realise that makes it a little bit hard to change back.

I think that if the researcher does not have access to it, the whole force of the law and legislation can be brought down on any public servants that disclose individual data. I think the whole point has been twisted a little bit too. Gordon Carmichael's submission, I think, suggests this, that a lot of people forget that all the researchers that we have anything to do with are really interested in aggregate data. There would be no benefit in disclosing individual case studies and disclosing information about individuals. Another way, of course, would be for us to sign an agreement that none of this could be published or whatever. But I do not see how it endangers the worth and the confidentiality and privacy provisions of the census if the researcher cannot get access to it anyway.

With Dr O'Dwyer's case, I think it is a little bit different in that you would have to be able to have access to addresses, and that is more difficult. You would think there must be ways around this in terms of having the right to vet any published information. It could be produced on such a large scale that individual households could not be identified. Really, we are all interested in linkages in causal relationships. That involves aggregates. We are not really interested in individuals, and that goes for most social science

researchers. That has been confused a little bit in the debate.

**ACTING CHAIR (Dr Southcott)**—Can I ask for your opinion on the argument that if we do have a census retained, even if it is for 100 years, we may have a decrease in the quality of the census?

**Dr Steele**—It depends how it is done in that some of the surveys the ABS have conducted have asked blanket questions. If you or I asked questions of a man in the street and the word ‘privacy’ was included in one of those questions—‘Would you prefer that information be not be retained for privacy considerations?’—we would all say, ‘Yes. Why would you want to retain it? That’s good, that gives me a safeguard.’

However, if it is done in a more balanced way by saying, ‘There are certain advantages that we could get from census information in predicting the incidence of infant deaths or child deaths or illnesses. Therefore, would you be in favour of us retaining individual identifiers to link data but still no individual information could be released?’, we would get a different answer. It is very much in how it is portrayed to the general public.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Sure. Just as an example, in the UK in 1991 I understand they had some problems because the campaign against the poll tax was associated with the campaign against the census. I believe they had a problem too in 1971 with the census in that they ended up with a census that they could not rely on and they are actually looking back to the 1981 census for official statistics and so on. As I see it, that could be one problem. What are your comments on that?

**Dr Steele**—I have heard of the poll tax incident. That is where one has to be very careful in terms of what you use some of this information for. I am not aware of the 1971 matter. It depends very much on how it is portrayed to the general public. All of us know that as far as the information is concerned, there is nothing very secretive or confidential in a lot of it. Some people can refuse to answer particular questions anyway, and do refuse to answer. If it is portrayed correctly—

**Dr Dasvarma**—As Dr Steele said, it is how you educate the public. It may be you need to launch a public education campaign about the benefits of such data as research and use that as a background and then ask the questions. People have been used to feeling that confidentiality and privacy are safeguarded because the census forms are destroyed. That is the only way they see the safeguarding of privacy. However, there are other ways.

In the beginning, when a person gives information on a census form, they already have the names and addresses and they keep them for some time until the data are processed. It is not as if it is never given; it is given for some time. Maybe we can then extend it by saying that it will still be kept a secret for 75 years or 100 years, by which time very few of the respondents would be alive—most of them would be dead. On the other hand, it will provide immense, valuable information. Mind you, when we talk about the 2001 census it may be available only at the end of that next millennium, or 100 years on.

**Dr O’Dwyer**—The benefits of retaining the data far outweigh the risk that the data will be compromised in some way because of the perceived lack of privacy.

**ACTING CHAIR**—You have mentioned some of the uses which the census can be put to, and I must say that that is very helpful. Are there other primary sources that you can use—arrival data or births, deaths and marriages, and so on? What other primary sources are available to do these sorts of studies?

**Dr Steele**—There is immigration data.

**Dr Dasvarma**—Those sources have been compiled by the ABS or other agencies based on arrival data and the general tables about place of origin, age, sex and all those kinds of things. But a census has, I think, the only comprehensive sort of data which tells us mostly about the socioeconomic characteristics. There are other ways too, like launching some longitudinal studies, which would be very costly. The health and welfare submission also mentions that they have started a three-year longitudinal study on women's health at an enormous cost. That can be easily done if we can follow up. Again, I would like to stress that it is not as if we can start these things immediately. It has to be 100 years from now or something. For future researchers and future generations, we can try to provide them with something that they can go back and look at.

**Dr Steele**—I think there is a particular problem in Australia too in that we have large geographic units—as you know—low density population and low population numbers. It means that the geographic representative of any of these other data sources is very limited. It is a very spotty distribution. That is the strength of the census. It is meant to be a complete enumeration at a particular point in time. It collects a cross-section of information from a number of variables for that time at that time so that you can make valid comparisons. Most of the other data have very limited additional information. Sure there is information on arrivals, departures, sex and reason for departure—and not much else.

**Mr MUTCH**—From time to time, the ABS have done surveys of opinion on questions that we are examining now. Have you ever been invited to make any submissions to the ABS?

**Dr Steele**—No.

**Mr MUTCH**—How about the Archives?

**Dr Steele**—We made a submission prior to the 1996 census and were successful in having another question added on migration data. Instead of just asking the place of residence by state a year ago, they now have the actual address. You can do some more detailed analysis down to more detailed geographic units. We had success there. But, no, I have never been approached.

**Mr MUTCH**—They have never really asked you.

**Dr Steele**—No.

**Mr MUTCH**—There has been some suggestion that, because of the new privacy considerations, we could have an opting out box at the front of the form. I am not sure how we would handle the fact that there is more than one participant. How do you think that would affect future research if we had a number of people opting out of being part of the retained record?



**Dr Steele**—Opting out of individual questions or from participation in the census overall?

**Mr MUTCH**—The proposal is that we could do this as an incremental thing by saying in the year 2001—the next one is—

**Dr Steele**—Yes, 2001.

**Mr MUTCH**—We could start off by saying, ‘If you don’t want to have your name and address kept, you can opt out.’

**Dr Steele**—I would not give them the option of opting out of the census altogether. You would have all sorts of problems in terms of budget.

**Mr MUTCH**—No—opting out of having their name and address kept.

**Dr Steele**—I think that would be fine. That would, presumably, be seen in a positive way in that you have the choice. They could see, hopefully, that nothing very harmful came from it.

**Mr MUTCH**—Would that affect the sort of work, for instance, being done by you, Dr O’Dwyer?

**Dr Steele**—It would create some biasing, wouldn’t it?

**Dr O’Dwyer**—Yes. We could perhaps do a survey to establish what kind of bias comes about as a result of that. That might be useful. We could probably still use such data.

**ACTING CHAIR**—In the first of the uses that you have mentioned—research in the field of historical demography, cross-sectional profile of particular communities at the time of national census—are you able to get most of that information now from the aggregate data that the ABS provides for the census collection districts, the small groups of about 200 people?

**Dr Steele**—Yes. You can get it at an aggregate level.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Aggregate level?

**Dr Steele**—Yes. Again, there is a problem with that. That is fine in theory. To request particular tabulations costs a lot of money and, unless you have got a major research grant, it is really prohibitive. I think that is another concern that I should have addressed. I can understand the increasing need for cost recovery and the exorbitant costs of running the census, but I think there is the other side of it. A lot of researchers in a few censuses’ time, in say 2006, will have such little published information that they can access free of charge that they will really be limited to requesting tabulations from past censuses, and that will probably be increasingly expensive. In theory it is there, but to actually get access to it can be quite costly.

**ACTING CHAIR**—We heard this morning that in the United States they charge \$40 from the

national archives, or whatever, for microfiche of past censuses and they have had something like 40,000 requests for those microfiche.

**Mr ANDREW**—It struck me, particularly during Dr Steele's delivery, that one simple analogy to what I imagine you are seeking to achieve is to take, as it were, my Bankcard, the number on which could be the census material collated and which I am happy for you to have, and the pin number of which is my name, which I would like assured is always kept separately.

**Dr Steele**—Yes, that is right.

**Mr ANDREW**—If we could indicate to people an assurance that the name was not going to be linked to the material, then I see no reason why the material should be archived for 70 years, 100 years or any period of time at all. On that note—I asked this question earlier this morning—I was a little surprised at the 75- or 100-year time frame, with or without the linking of the pin number to the Bankcard, because it seemed to me that that is an unnecessarily long time frame if we are to make use of the material that is being collected. Would you like to comment on that?

**Dr Steele**—Yes, I would agree with you. I think my view has changed reading the submissions. Maybe we are influenced by others there. I thought that just to introduce the idea of retaining the original census forms, which would be available to researchers, would come as a rather difficult proposition to sell to the populace, so I was rather conservative on that. I would agree. I would have thought surely 50 years or 30-odd years is the usual. That is the embargo for access to wartime documents, isn't it?

Surely the income data is one sensitive component, you would imagine. It is group data anyway. It is not as if you can actually get an exact estimate of income. It is household income too. I think it is easy to scare people with this, but really I would agree with you. I think surely a 30 year interval, or something like that, could be sold over time. I was just thinking initially about confronting. This might be a little more difficult but, no, I would agree.

**Mr MUTCH**—We had another professor from Flinders University this morning and—

**Dr Steele**—Yes, Don DeBats.

**Mr MUTCH**—Yes. He made me feel very depressed. Would you agree that it is a national tragedy that we have not kept our censuses in the past?

**Dr Steele**—We do not have a great record of preserving things in Australia, do we? As one of the submissions in there said, we have got more details of the convict era in Australia than we have of the 20th century. I think historians in the future might turn around and make a very harsh judgment about all of us.

Yes, I think that is true. In America, they have done some remarkable work, as Don obviously outlined this morning, on linking the information. That is of just purely historical interest, isn't it? It is not as if particular groups will be affected in any harmful way.

**ACTING CHAIR**—In the United States and the United Kingdom, how much use is made of the census for these purposes—longitudinal studies into morbidity, migration, fertility and so on?

**Dr Steele**—There certainly seems to be quite a lot of work on migration—linking it with social and occupational change. They are the hot issues today, too, obviously.

**Dr Dasvarma**—Mortality definitely, not occupational mortality on which they will prepare the social class differentials. That has been going on in longitudinal studies in England and Wales. With regard to the United States, the only thing I can pinpoint is that they did a record matching study in 1960, so they matched the total number of deaths in the country with this matching census record and finally arrived at some number of deaths, after eliminating the unmatched ones. That was a very good study and I believe they have done it since. The record linkage is also not new to Australia; they have done some record linkage in Western Australia, linking peri-natal deaths with the birth statistics. It provided a lot of useful information. It is not totally foreign in this country.

**Mr MUTCH**—What we are finding is that people are coming out of the woodwork in this inquiry. What other departments should we be looking at, with regard to universities? We found Professor DeBats from the American studies department, but you are from geography, population and environmental management. There must be other university academics who would be interested in this question. I was wondering whether this has been raised at a university level, rather than just department by department.

**Dr Steele**—I notice there is a general submission from Adelaide, from Professor O’Kane, I think. I do not know whether that is the only one. With regard to demographers, it would certainly be very close to their hearts. Economic historians and historians—

**Dr O’Dwyer**—Virtually all the social science disciplines.

**Dr Dasvarma**—Yes, sociologists.

**Dr Steele**—Yes, that is right. I think the interesting one will be Lisel’s question, too, in that in Australia, it is a tragedy. We have made a big investment in GIS equipment. It is very expensive. You have spent six months trying to find a topic that will allow you point-level data, or give you access to point-level data. Usually, it is deemed as very sensitive; you cannot get it. Compared to other parts of the world, this seems rather a tragedy, doesn’t it?

**Dr O’Dwyer**—Absolutely. I think GIS has huge potential for health and medical research, medical geography and environmental health research as well. But the data is the main obstacle.

**Dr Dasvarma**—The point to be stressed is that, as Dr Steele mentioned, researchers are not interested in tracing an individual’s secrets. We take the individual data to build up the aggregates and then get the results out. That point is to be stressed to the populace also. If they are afraid of losing their privacy or confidentiality, they have to be assured of those things—that researchers are not interested in going back and hunting them down.

**Dr Steele**—If they remove the identifiers at an early stage, you are bound into the aggregates they have decided on. No matter how circumstances change, you cannot go back and re-do it. I think that is the tragedy. We think there are ways around it, certainly for longitudinal data—not giving the individual researchers access to the identifiers. I think it is more difficult with GIS, but there must be some way. Every university research institution has an ethics committee. They certainly vet researchers before they go into the field. I think provisions could be strengthened to examine the output of that research, too. That is probably the weak link—to vet it before it gets published, to make sure again that the privacy provisions are kept to. But there must be ways around this. Again, researchers are only interested in individuals as a means of building up an aggregate.

**Dr O’Dwyer**—Researchers have always been bound by confidentiality concerns in any social research. The census is really no exception.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Dr O’Dwyer, in terms of the GIS, you mentioned the implication that that might have for medical geography and so on. What sort of implications? Hypothetically, if you have the census from 100 years ago, what sort of work would you be able to do on it now? Let us say that that is what they will be able to do in 100 years time.

**Dr O’Dwyer**—I guess the most immediate issue that comes to mind is patterns in health that differ over time according to where people live in relation to industry. If we can measure, in terms of metres, even, how far people live from a certain industry like a smelter or a foundry, we can match that over time and see whether there has been change with increasing population density, different building styles, or whatever. The temporal dimension is quite important.

**ACTING CHAIR**—You would cross-reference that with other records, I suppose, in terms of what their cause of death was and stuff like that?

**Dr O’Dwyer**—Yes.

**ACTING CHAIR**—There being no further questions, thank you very much for your submission and for attending the hearing. The hearing is suspended until 2.15 p.m.

**Luncheon adjournment**

[2.13 p.m.]

**ROACH ANLEU, Associate Professor Sharyn, President, The Australian Sociological Association, c/- Sociology Department, Flinders University, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, South Australia 5001**

**ACTING 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 parliament. We have received your submission. Do you wish to make a statement in relation to the submission?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—Yes, I would like to make a short statement. I begin by thanking you for the opportunity to appear before this committee. I will make four short points if that is appropriate. Firstly, I would like to emphasise that social scientists are concerned with doing longitudinal research as well as other forms of social research in order to document and decipher patterns, changes and shifts in our population. Longitudinal research obviously gives a very different picture than does cross-sectional research which you can, of course, compare over time.

In the light of this interest in longitudinal research, it is very useful and it would be very useful to be able to cross-link census data with other large data sets such as birth and death material, crime statistics and health data. I also point out that longitudinal data, of course, would be very relevant to policy makers and we certainly are in need of Australian data rather than relying solely on overseas studies.

The second point I would like to make is that social scientists—and I am using a broader category here than sociologists—are not interested in individuals' personal identity per se, but it is a means to an end. We are interested in an individual's attributes—for example, occupation, family status, et cetera—and its association with other individual level attributes, and in looking at how they change over time. The only way of being able to look at these changes over time is having access to some identifying information which can allow us to look and measure those individual level attributes. Aggregation and anonymity loses that capacity. To give an example, let us say that we are looking at occupational mobility in the category of lawyers. We can see that the category of lawyers has not changed over time. But that information cannot tell us whether people have moved in and out of that occupation and which kinds of people—whether it is women, whether it is people from rural areas, whether it is people of certain family status or family size or whatever. So looking at the shifts in, say, that category, which appears to have remained stable, would be really interesting and important for understanding labour force movement and occupational mobility, either upwards or downwards.

A third point that I would like to make is in relation to the retention of actual forms. The position of the Sociological Association is that it is not necessary for the actual paper forms to be retained. What we are interested in is the identifying information which is the means to gather information about individuals' patterns, shifts, changes and movements. Of course, historians may be interested in the actual paper forms for various archival research. That is not my field of expertise, so I will not comment on that.

The fourth and final point I would like to make is in relation to safeguards for the protection of

identity and confidentiality which TASA, the Australian Sociological Association, does not seek to compromise in any way. Certainly, questions of confidentiality and privacy and the safeguard of individuals' identities are extremely important, and we recognise that. In fact, we have a set of ethical guidelines which guide our own research and concern with such issues as privacy and confidentiality.

I have a couple of suggestions in relation to potential safeguards for protection. First of all, if the record linkages were performed by employees of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, that would then build in some of the protections that already exist in relation to the processing of census forms. So it may not be social researchers that know the identity but the links could be done and tables generated from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, for example, or another relevant government department.

Another point that I think is very relevant, and is a new development in terms of social research in Australia, is the abundance and growth of ethics committees. Certainly, as a graduate student, my research did not go through an ethics committee about 15 years ago, but at the moment there are very rigorous and appropriate committees set in place at various institutions, including universities, to safeguard a variety of issues which can be generally put under the subheading of ethics. If it is clarified to people who are completing census forms that the data may be available for social research which is independent of the government, I think that may serve to quell fears of Big Brother, for example, or the concerns that the Australia Party had at some point, and which are echoed in the Australian Bureau of Statistics's submission.

A final suggestion, however—and this does present various problems for researchers—is that individual census form completers may have the possibility of indicating whether or not they would agree to have the information released for social research. This raises a problem of bias that certain kinds of people might agree to have the information released. On the other hand, it puts the onus for the decision directly on the shoulders of the person who is completing the information.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Thank you very much. I might start just by asking a couple of questions. In terms of the period for which the census forms should be kept confidential, do you have a view on what would be a reasonable period that would ensure that there is no decrease in the quality of the census and that privacy of the individuals is protected, but also that the information can be used?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—That is a really tricky question in a sense that from the point of view of the social researcher it is most advantageous to get early access to information so that the data is somewhat recent, not from 20 or 30 years ago. Without consulting with the members of the association, I think we would like to see access to census material as soon as possible. But there would be no need from the point of view of sociologists necessarily to retain that information for centuries or decades. Again, historians may have a different viewpoint, but I think we would like to see access to the individual records as soon as possible, especially if the research involves linking it with other social and demographic characteristics, for example, crime statistics or health statistics. For this kind of information to have some policy implications, if the data is 20 years old then one can say, 'What's the point of doing some research?'

**ACTING CHAIR**—Sure. Could you expand on that with the linkage to crime data or health records? What sort of research would be involved there?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—Again, it would really depend on people's interest, but we could look at things like family status, occupational history, type of work performed and then link that up with crime statistics. Perhaps by way of an example, let us say that a census reveals that we have a high level of unemployment or that people tend to be working much more part time or in service type jobs. We also have crime data which shows that crime levels are increasing. I am being over-simplistic to make a point. There is a correlation. Someone jumps to the conclusion that unemployment and casualisation of occupations leads to crime. However, we do not know from that conclusion that it is actually people in service type occupations or who are unemployed that are actually engaged in criminal deviance. We can make that correlation, but we do not know whether it is people from particular segments of the labour market who are engaged in criminal deviance. Having more information on the actual individuals to make those links and to make some more informed decisions would be useful. Again, it is the characteristics of the individuals which are important, not the identity. Identifying information is necessary in order to get information on the individual characteristics, but the identity of the actual person is of no interest to social scientists.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Regarding that, if the census forms were to be kept for 75 or 100 years until all the individuals involved in the census were not around, would that be of any benefit to sociologists?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—Do you mean in terms of doing historical research—would that include having access to recent censuses as well as censuses that were taken say 75 years ago?

**ACTING CHAIR**—The proposition that has been put to this committee has been that the census be retained for 75 or 100 years and then released for research.

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—I guess it would be of interest to historical sociologists. In terms of Australian sociology, we have a considerable amount of historical sociology. I am talking here about areas that I am individually familiar with, such as crime and the legal profession and occupations, but most of the research that is currently conducted by sociologists is current research. While many researchers do rely on the census, inevitably, we have to collect our own data, which is an alternative but a very expensive alternative.

**ACTING CHAIR**—At present, you would make considerable use of the ABS data but the aggregate data would be for the census?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—Certainly.

**ACTING CHAIR**—But it would be that the name-identified data would enable you to do longitudinal research, which could be linked with other things?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—That is right, yes.

**Mr MUTCH**—You obviously have a lot to do with the ABS in terms of using their material. Have they ever asked you to make submissions to them or to present views to them about the possible uses of census information in the past?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—To me, personally?

**Mr MUTCH**—It was your association that I was interested in.

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—I have been involved with the executive of the Australian Sociological Association since 1992 and I have not been aware of any direct correspondence between the ABS and the association.

**Mr MUTCH**—Is this the first occasion you have actually put forward a submission relating to retention of census for that issue?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—Yes.

**Mr MUTCH**—I was very interested in comments you made earlier about the use made by Australian sociologists of overseas data. Is that a frustrating thing for you? How would you rate census information in terms of its value compared to other sources of information?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—I did refer to the use of overseas studies by sociologists, certainly, but by others as well. I am sure that whenever governments make decisions they look at the research out there; and much of the research out there is conducted in North America and Great Britain. Certainly it is a source of frustration in terms of teaching sociology as well as doing social research that much of the material comes from overseas. There is often a sense that what researchers have discovered in the United States is directly transferable to what goes on in Australia. Some sociologists might conclude that quite happily, but I feel that that is very inappropriate. I feel that we are fully competent and able as social researchers—we have some very good people in Australia—and that we should feel more confident to carry out our own research and view it as reliable.

With that said, the census is extremely important to many researchers—not all of them, of course. The census is important because it is Australia-wide and it is state by state. So people can get really good macro views of, say, the occupational structure—changes in occupations and changes in people's employment status. Because it is so comprehensive, it gives a much better picture of what is going on in Australia, which can then complement other social science research that is more localised. For a researcher or a team of researchers it would actually be impossible to get a data set of the size and magnitude of the census. It would obviously be just far too expensive. So, inevitably, researchers rely on random samples and local studies and attempt to make some generalisations. Researchers always go to the census in order to see what the big picture is and where our own individual research fits into the big picture.

**Mr MUTCH**—The whole thing with the ABS and the statistical information is that governments make decisions based on the collections. But what you seem to be saying to me is that governments would also make decisions based upon the academic use made of the material and the reports of sociologists and so forth which would contribute then to the government decision making processes. In that respect, would you agree that, in Australia, we are making government decisions with one arm tied behind our back because the fruits of the statistical collections are not being able to be utilised by sociologists?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—Not being able to be utilised to their fullest extent. I think that policy makers from government departments and in the private sector, as well as politicians and members of governments,



rely on social science research data, but they could get more information and more specific information by enabling greater access to identifying individual information to enable longitudinal research. We take a census every five years, but to what extent can we really understand shifts in what is happening to people; whether they have migrated; which kinds of people have migrated; and which kinds of people have moved into different kinds of occupations? That kind of information is now quite limited.

**Mr MUTCH**—Do the ABS see sociologists and researchers as being their right arm in this respect?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—I cannot speak for the ABS. I do not know what the ABS—

**Mr MUTCH**—Has the relationship been reasonably good with sociologists working with the ABS?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—A sociologist works with ABS data. I cannot comment on particular or professional relationships between social researchers and individual members of the ABS.

**Mr MUTCH**—Did you say you had 500 members?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—Yes.

**Mr MUTCH**—Would many of those have a background in the ABS?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—No, I do not think so. I do not think there is much crossover between social researchers and the ABS.

**Mr MUTCH**—Funnily enough, you would expect there to be, wouldn't you?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—Although with that said, and I do not have information on this, I imagine that a lot of our graduates do get jobs in the ABS, for example, so that is probably a bit of a contradiction of what I said. But in terms of our members, and that is the capacity in which I am appearing today, there is not much crossover in personnel or employment with the ABS—although certainly sociology graduates would be hired by various government departments, including the ABS. Certainly many social researchers rely on ABS published data. For example, I have done some work in the area of the professions—in the legal profession in particular—and in relation to crime. The first thing that I do is see what the ABS has done and have a look at the census data. Any social researcher who did not would really be foolhardy. I think it is a source of data. I must add that it is becoming an increasingly expensive source of data as many of the data sets and tables which previously have been free are now quite expensive. But certainly many social researchers would not collect their own data ever and would simply look at material that the ABS has generated.

**Mr MUTCH**—Do you have input into the questions the ABS asks?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—I cannot answer that, I am sorry.

**Mr MUTCH**—The law one is of interest to me because I have a law degree but in the last census I noted that that did not come out because what they asked for was your highest academic qualification and

your present occupation, so in one of your surveys I would be missed.

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—Yes, so would I actually. That could be got around if identifying information could be retrieved. We could ask people, after their highest academic qualification, ‘How many others do you have?’ In terms of the machinations of the ABS and the construction of the census, I know that some sociologists have been working on the occupational classification which is often a source of much social science research—how to classify occupations. No doubt that would have been incorporated by the ABS or at least taken note of. But precisely the influence that social researchers have on ABS policy decisions about what kinds of questions to ask and how to frame questions, I am not able to answer.

**Mr MUTCH**—That is very much in-house.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Regarding the information from the US and UK, that would not be name-identified census data. That would be longitudinal studies that presumably have been very expensive for the researchers to carry out. Is that correct?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—That would be correct. I understand, however, in the United Kingdom they make available to some researchers a one per cent sample of their census which involves identifying information. I do not know how widely available and what protections are put in place. But one per cent of the census—individuals, not households—is available for social research. There is attrition and they replace attrition with one per cent of the new births for England and Wales.

There is a whole variety of research. Some of it is published and, of course, published research has absolutely no identifying information in it at all. Again, social scientists are interested in the cross-tabulations in the association between various variables, such as marital status, sex, age, occupation, location, type of work. They are not interested in the individuals, but the identifying information is sometimes the only way of getting information on all those other variables and linking them so as to look at what has changed and who has moved in and out of categories between two censuses. We cannot tell exactly who has moved in and out of the categories.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Does your association have any concerns that releasing the census, whether it is now or in 75 or 100 years, would affect the integrity of the data?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—We feel that, by putting in place careful and appropriate protections, the integrity of the data can be maintained. We would not advance having a blanket release of the census data, such as, for example, putting notices in the newspaper that anyone who wanted to do some research on the census could come down to the local Australian Bureau of Statistics and get the forms. We would certainly be opposed to that.

However, for bona fide researchers who undertake various commitments to the ABS and who have gone through appropriate ethics committees, which exist in all the universities and various other research institutes, there could be some mechanisms for ensuring that the information the researcher obtains is confidential to that research and that there is some kind of legal privilege vis-a-vis those researchers’ access to the named information that may be an appropriate protection. By the same token, if individual researchers

could indicate to the ABS what they would like, maybe members of the ABS could generate the information and pull out the data without giving the researchers any identifying information, so in that way it would all be in-house.

I would like to emphasise that the association is very concerned with ethical research; that individuals who have provided information are fully aware of the potential for that information to be used, in whatever way, and that by filling out the form they essentially consent; or, alternatively—and this is not such a good compromise in one way because it does lead to bias—that individuals who complete the census could subsequently answer the question: ‘Would you be prepared to have some identifying information released for social research purposes?’

I have had a look at the ABS submission and where opinion polls suggest that citizens are reticent to have confidential information released, we would want to know a little further as to what the conditions would be under which they might agree to have it released. Maybe they do not want to have it released to the taxation department or Social Security, but maybe they would not mind having it released to academic researchers or researchers who have no direct relationship with the Australian government so that it is independent of the government. That said, we would of course hope that members of the government and the Public Service would be interested in looking at the results of the research. But the relationship is quite different.

**Mr MUTCH**—As sociologists, are you experienced in surveying people and in formulating surveys?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—Yes.

**Mr MUTCH**—Have you had a look at the survey that was done by the ABS? I am sure the committee would be happy to provide you with a copy of it, because you might be interested in it.

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—I have just seen various quotes from the survey. I do not have a copy of it.

**Mr MUTCH**—We had a number of questions we asked about the methodology used and it would be most interesting to have your feedback on that survey and whether it was effective. I also want to ask whether or not you know, or could have a look at, how you would phrase questions or a campaign to encourage people to appropriately fill in a census based on retention, and whether this can be achieved? One of the problems we have found is in finding expert advice in this area, when the ABS has a very firm view. It is very hard to find people with their expertise, frankly, away from the ABS.

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—Yes, within sociology, we have some quite eminent sociologists who have used and worked with census data to a much greater extent than me and who spend a lot of time getting big tapes of data and working with the tapes of data on the computer. Yes, certainly, there would be individuals who would be fairly competent in assessing the results of an opinion poll. Without having seen it, often questions can be leading questions, or they may not be very specific, so that when someone says, ‘Would you agree to have the census data released?’ people think, ‘Oh, no.’ It would be an immediate response, without thinking it through. Even specifying, within the survey, under what conditions people would be happy for maybe one per cent of the census to be released—it does not have to be the whole census, but five per cent or one per

cent—people might think, ‘Well, my chances of coming up are pretty low.’ So that will not affect the quality of the data.

**Mr MUTCH**—Do you know of any work that has been done at all on whether people would be prepared to agree to fill in a census, knowing that the information was to be retained? Have you seen any work on that?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—No, I have not seen any work. I have not looked, I must say, but I have not seen any. Perhaps I could ask you: before 1971, the identifying material and the forms were actually retained—

**Mr MUTCH**—In Australia?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—Yes.

**Mr MUTCH**—I do not think so.

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—Wasn’t it a decision of the Liberal government to destroy all forms and all identifying information?

**Mr MUTCH**—For a period, they were retained.

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—So they were not released to researchers?

**Mr MUTCH**—Unfortunately, the end result is that we do not have them.

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—That is right, we do not have them now, but at one point they were there. Again, it is a different time period. Is anybody aware of whether or not the data decreased in quality because people were aware that the census forms were retained for a number of years? We do not know.

**Mr MUTCH**—This is the burning question because it is very hard to get information on that. The other question, of course, is that if you ask anyone, ‘Did you realise that the name-identified returns weren’t kept,’ I think you would find that a lot of them would be very surprised.

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—Yes, I agree. Also, when you ask people, ‘What would you do?’ that might be quite different from what they actually do. We could get a sense that people would not fill out the forms properly, appropriately or completely if they knew that the census forms were retained. However, what they actually do might be quite different from what they say they might do.

**Mr MUTCH**—Would you say that we are not selling ourselves short if we said it was a national tragedy that we have destroyed our census forms in the past?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—I would say that would reflect the sentiments of the TASA executive. In fact, if I may use an adjective that one of the executive members used, she described the practice of destroying the

census forms as barbaric. We spend a lot of time collecting this information and then are very pleased to destroy it. I emphasise that the issues of privacy, confidentiality and ethical social research are at the forefront of the minds of most social researchers.

We do have the very isolated cases of various forms of plagiarism, misuse of information and concocting results, but these are very unusual incidences and are not the norm. I think ethics is the way to go—to promulgate professional ethics and a sense of what is appropriate and ethical research on the part of researchers. I think that citizens, if they are fully aware of this context, may be much more likely to not even contemplate filling out the census inappropriately or incompletely. I think most citizens consider the census to be such an important document that it is essential for it to be filled out completely.

**Mr MUTCH**—To go back to this liaison between sociology and the ABS, wouldn't the ABS as a matter of course use you and your profession to do work for them, so that they can advise the government on decisions the government has to make? Is that not a big deal?

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—I do not know that the ABS would view social scientists or sociologists in that way and whether they would of course automatically contact various professional associations, such as sociologists, geographers or economists. From my experience from within the association, the ABS does not contact us and has not contacted us. However, I imagine that the ABS does call for tenders for various types of research. In that context of competitive tenders, social researchers would put forward tenders and perhaps be granted tenders.

**Mr MUTCH**—I just thought there would be a huge buddy system between the universities and the ABS in relation to research.

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—No.

**Mr MUTCH**—Maybe it is something that we need to develop.

**Prof. Roach Anleu**—Yes. There are certainly not those links. Again there are individual links between individuals which are obviously based on personal familiarity, friendship, knowledge or the fact that they went to university together. But as two institutions working cooperatively, certainly the Australian Sociological Association and the ABS as two organisations do not have an ongoing cooperative relationship. It is much more individualised than that.

Individual social researchers use ABS data. ABS personnel may subcontract various research projects to sociologists. Individual sociologists may be seconded to the ABS for a year. I have been aware of individuals who have been seconded to the ABS, but it is much more of an ad hoc and unusual arrangement rather than a to and fro, consistent and long-term relationship.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Thank you very much for your evidence. I would like to thank everyone for their attendance here today. Before I close the hearing I will call upon Mr Mutch to move that the committee authorises publication of the evidence received today.

Resolved (on motion by Mr Mutch):

That, pursuant to the power conferred by section 2(2) of the Parliamentary Papers Act 1908, this committee authorises publication of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

**Committee adjourned at 2.48 p.m.**