



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

Reference: Treatment of census forms

BRISBANE

Friday, 12 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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Mr McClelland	Mr Kelvin Thomson
Mr Melham	

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

The treatment of forms from future population censuses.

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

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL
AFFAIRS

Treatment of census forms

BRISBANE

Friday, 12 September 1997

Present

Mr Andrews (Chair)

Mr McClelland

Mr Smith

Mr Mutch

The committee met at 9.12 a.m.

Mr Andrews took the chair.

HARRISON, Dr Jennifer, 6 Marston Avenue, Indooroopilly, Queensland, 4068

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the committee's inquiry into the treatment of census forms. I welcome witnesses, members of the public and others who are attending this meeting of the committee. The subject of this inquiry is the current practice of destroying name identified forms after the data is collected and whether or not that should continue. We have taken evidence in Canberra, Perth and Adelaide. We look forward to the contributions today. I welcome Dr Jennifer Harrison. In what capacity are you appearing before the committee?

Dr Harrison—I am a research historian.

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 of 18 July this year. Would you care to make some opening remarks?

Dr Harrison—I appreciate very much the opportunity to talk to the committee today. This is something that I have been very involved with now for probably 17 or 18 years, so much so that I am on record as having written quite a few letters to the *Australian* in the early eighties about it. It is something that impinges on the sort of work that I do to a very large extent. I believe that whereas the 19th century is quite well documented, the 20th century particularly, despite technology, will be relatively unrecorded as far as people go. Things that we have relied on in the past, such as the shipping records for getting people here, are not available for this century in any form that can be indexed, particularly once these things change from colonial status to federal status. As time goes on, the sheer numbers are making it much more difficult for information to be gathered.

We have unique records here for the 19th century, not only immigration but also births, deaths and marriage information. However, the information that is available in England, as a composite of all of those things, is so much more valuable. That has been because of the retention of the census records. I see no problems with a privacy period. I do not think anyone expects there to be a lesser one, although I do note in recent English papers that England is now moving towards a 30-year period, even though they have had a 100-year period for some considerable time, ever since they were released. In the *Daily Telegraph* about a month ago, they mentioned that they were looking very seriously at making the records closed for only a 30-year period. That is an accepted archival practice with a lot of records, and most archives do work on a 30-year privacy period. I have no problems with the 100-year one for census records for the uses that we would be putting them to.

I also believe that the costs involved in recording such information will be infinitesimal compared with the cost of collecting the data, anyway. An enormous amount of money is already spent on collecting that material. By putting it on microfilm, CD-ROM, or whatever course they take to retain it, it would be available to the people who are permitted to use it, such as the Bureau of Statistics, in the meantime, but it would still be there and retained for a longer period.

CHAIR—You begin with the proposition that retention should not affect the quality or value of data given the closure period suggested. The main argument from the Australian Bureau of Statistics in favour of the destruction of the data is that if people are aware that the data is going to be retained that will have an adverse impact on the reliability of the data and the preparedness of people to complete the census forms. What do you say about that?

Dr Harrison—Personally, from my experience I do not believe that this is a big issue. For example, most of the questions soliciting information on the census forms are asked on other forms, and people quite readily give that information. Most people will hand over their drivers licences and other means of identification to anybody in a shop. That would, for example, contain their birth details and that type of thing. The electoral rolls give addresses. There is no restriction on anybody accessing those. One of my jobs is as the Queensland researcher for the Australian Dictionary of Biography, which is very much biographical material. I believe that quite legally and using devices that are very readily available we can find out a great deal of information about most people. I hasten to say that the Australian Dictionary of Biography deals only with people who have died. But we can usually record a tremendous amount of information. It is just that with the census in particular all of this information is collected at one time.

I believe the only question that is optional on the census paper is about religion. I understand that most people choose to answer it of their own free will. I also believe that most people who do answer it do not answer it correctly, if some of the information coming out is right. According to the most recent census, we now have more Catholics in Australia than we have ever had before. I believe that is because a lot of people—and church attendances will verify this—simply are not going to church, but it is a lot harder for a Catholic to say that he is nothing than it is for a lot of other people. I believe that people using this information are very aware of these restrictions that might happen. I also believe that people who do not want to answer any section that they find particularly personal on a census record or anything else simply do not answer it.

CHAIR—Do you think that is the case now? I suppose the two areas of alleged sensitivity are, firstly, in relation to the indication of income levels and, secondly, the indication of personal relationships, for example—and this is a case that is commonly cited—the woman who has had a child given up for adoption and nobody knows in her current family. It might have been a teenage pregnancy, for example. Do you think that—

Dr Harrison—How will that show on a census form?

CHAIR—My recollection is that every second census has a fertility question on it, so it could potentially show up.

Dr Harrison—I would consider that anybody who felt sensitive about that would be giving the information that would be for the family who would be around them and who would be reading it as they filled it in.

CHAIR—But I took it from what you were saying earlier that if there was sensitivity about that, people were probably not likely to reveal that information now.

Dr Harrison—This is still what I am saying, that I do not think they would.

CHAIR—Right. What about the income?

Dr Harrison—As I was saying all along, there will be a privacy period on this. Quite frankly, in 30 years time the income levels will not matter terribly much at all. The other comment that I would make is that a tremendous lot of people now work for the government, and I do not believe that anyone working with anyone in the government does not know what someone else is getting.

CHAIR—That is probably true. You also state that neither the United States nor the United Kingdom have experienced problems of any severity in choosing to retain this resource. Is that a widely held view amongst professional historians?

Dr Harrison—I would say from people who are using the records that some perceptions are different from people who read about it and do not actually use them. I am in the United Kingdom most years using census records. I know I can get them on film here as well. But I think most people are falling over themselves to bless the government for retaining them rather than making any comment about the inaccuracy of them. The other thing I would say is that in the prologue to any census that has been printed so far, and even in the colonial census, the introductions are terribly useful and revealing. These are the general things that put the statistics in context. I believe we are looking at a whole document rather than a selected part of it.

We still get the statistics now, I quite admit that, and we do definitely need the prologues that go with the census. However, the identification of individual people is such a valuable thing to have. I am working particularly on immigration to colonial Queensland, and I am able to check shipping records and death records and marriage records here—for the colonial period, I am stressing, because there is privacy on all of these things recently—against the census records in England and in Scotland, but only some in Ireland because a lot of theirs were destroyed as well.

CHAIR—So what does that tell you that you cannot obtain from births and deaths records from parish registries or from shipping records? What additional value is there in a census?

Dr Harrison—It can give us a whole concept of family. If you look at English and other certificates, Australia has the best certificates in the world; there is no doubt about that. The information that is here is tremendous. The English ones are not correspondingly as good. The Scottish ones are better but they are not as good. They do not have other issue on them; they do not have the brothers and sisters. We can often get the children from death certificates these days, but we cannot get collateral branches. This often is very indicative to us for demographic purposes: what types of families were moving—naturally the families were a lot larger in the 19th century—how many of the families were coming, how many were staying at home and, again, what socioeconomic level were coming. This was so particularly with the Irish ones from 1901. From the 1828 New South Wales census, which is the last one we had, we know how many cows they had.

Mr McCLELLAND—You indicated that having knowledge as to the socioeconomic level is of assistance, so you would be against culling some of the information before retention.

Dr Harrison—I would be. Although this is not an issue for this particular committee, I notice that with the way they are wanting to recast the census forms, they are wanting to drop items such as place of origin. I believe this would result in an absolute lack of information. We have been getting it all along. To drop it now would be absolutely devastating, particularly for 20th century movement, because we are finding now that most people move a lot. They do not move once.

Mr McCLELLAND—Yes. That was an interesting part of your written evidence to us. One historian who has already given evidence has said that the trouble with our history, at least our modern history, is that it tends to be a history of those in power or those in significant positions as opposed to a history of the people. I suppose someone looking back on our period of history now would look at the sorts of people who were in office, which people would not necessarily reflect the multicultural nature of our community if it was a history of the people. So your view is that retaining the—

Dr Harrison—The records will give us the people. History, I always say, is made up of three elements: it is made up of people and time and events, but the greatest of all these are the people. When we actually look at movements of people, it is the individual cases that give lie to the myths that have been created. It is only by looking at lots and lots of case studies and building up the actual individual experiences that we get the overall experiences.

Mr McCLELLAND—Yes, and it would be very easy to trace the contributions people from all over the world have made to Australia, and in terms of—

Dr Harrison—I would always stress that we are all Australians first, but it is one of the lovely things of our life that we are Australian Irish, Australian Scots, Australian English, Australian Germans, Australian Aborigines.

Mr McCLELLAND—Your answer on religion was interesting. If my wife fills in the census she puts our children down as Catholics, but if I fill it in I put them down as Presbyterians.

Dr Harrison—I think this happens to a greater extent than a lot of people would understand. My mother would never fill it in if my father was at the beach house because she was not going to have it on a census that they were separated on the night of the census—that they are living at two addresses. So they were all in the one household.

Mr McCLELLAND—Aside from those little glitches, it is an accurate history.

Dr Harrison—I think it is a wonderful resource. One other aspect that I would like to touch on is the way that resources are disappearing from us right now. We have been blessed so far with what is retained. We are very well served by archives, both state archives and Australian archives. I really am most grateful to all the archivists around. But nearly every archive you go to will tell you that they have great runs that are not accessioned and inaccessible to researchers simply because it takes a very skilled person to be able to determine which material should be kept and which should be disposed of. These gradually probably will be accessioned. But one of the biggest problems against all this now is the growing tendency towards corporatisation and privatisation. While those instrumentalities are within government purview the records are

kept. The minute they go into private hands they are lost.

At the moment another thing that I am prepared to get up on a soapbox about is the Noel Butlin Business Archives at ANU. The university has now considered that they are no longer able to maintain this. This is one of the biggest business archives in Australia. There is nobody looking after private records. If the government surrenders the role of looking after records, nobody else is filling the gap. The costs involved are excessive. It is nothing that appeals to private enterprise. Yet, individually, if you talk to directors of firms, they will say that information they are generating is of tremendous interest. But there is absolutely nothing being done to preserve these records. So if the tendency does go on to divest several of these big organisations, none of these records will be available for people.

Something that I use all the time is the shipping records from the last century. The New South Wales ones are simply excellent. The Queensland ones are not as good, but recently we have cracked the code on them and they are becoming much more useful. But if they had not been kept we would not have information on all those 200,000 people who came to Queensland under government assistance in the last century. Under government assistance it meant that the attraction was so much that people chose not to pay their fare in advance in a large lot of cases because they were given the opportunity to repay it from wages they earned here. Because of this, these people owed the government, so the records that were kept are wonderful because they have government involvement. We even tell the family historians that really nothing has ever been created on their family. It is where they have come into contact with government that the records have been retained in every case.

The government is going to keep on collecting census records. Why are they destroying them? The retention of them is so critically important. I am very involved with the Centenary of Federation Committee here in Queensland and we are looking back now at the turn of the century and we are wanting to pick up what happened there and refocus it for the future. We have got all this wonderful technology, but the technology that is available is not going to make available records of airline tickets for every time I fly out of the country or come back into the country the way that shipping records did record it so well for the last century. We will need to know the dates we flew in and out. Do you remember to tell your grandchildren the dates? Can you tell what you did five years ago? Do you know what flights you went on? Those records are kept—the flights—but how anyone will ever get at them is totally unknown.

The other thing I would say about census records is that they are attractive to a lot of people. You will probably get quite a lot from genealogists in these hearings. They are the very people who will index census records, and this has been proven over and over again. In fact, one of the biggest things that has just happened has been the input of the Church of the Latter Day Saints to the British census records for 1881. These are now available indexed for every county in England and the latest thing has been to put all of these into one alphabetical listing for the whole of England and Wales for 1881.

CHAIR—I am just curious about that. What was the interest of the Church of the Latter Day Saints?

Dr Harrison—The Mormon church has for a long time had it as part of its charter—the tracing of families is important in their church history. Their gospel was released apparently in the middle of the last century or the beginning of the last century. They consider that they have steps to heaven. One way you can

do this is by producing children and that is a step to heaven for you. With zero population growth this is getting a little bit difficult to achieve. They knock on doors and they get probably one baptism per thousand—and baptism, of course, counts. They believe that, by collecting information on their forebears, the forebears can have the gospel revealed to them in the aether and it is up to them whether they accept it or not. But it is part of their policy, and for this reason they have collected listings of people and encouraged all their church members to participate in genealogy.

Therefore, one of the biggest contributions that they have made to the whole situation is the retention of records. They have always used the most up-to-date technology; they were using microfilm when it was barely known at MI5 before the Second World War. In fact, a whole lot of the records they had in Europe before the Second World War are no longer available because they were bombed during the Second World War. The only copies of them that exist are the microfilms sunk into a safe in the middle of the Rocky Mountains in Utah. What they have done as an organisation for the retention of records is absolutely amazing. I say this quite openly—I am not a Mormon but I very much respect what they have done in that way because I believe that it has been of worldwide benefit.

They have done incredible records for Mexico. That is one of their biggest collections. In fact, I understand from very good sources at Salt Lake City that, when Boris Yeltsin took over in Moscow, he immediately rang the church and asked them if they cared to come in and film his records because he did not know how long they would last after another coup; they might be burnt. They immediately sent people off to Brigham Young University to learn all the different Russian dialects so they could read the documents, which is a tremendous input. All we are asking for is for the census to be retained.

Mr MUTCH—Thank you very much for coming in, Dr Harrison. We have heard some evidence from other historians about Australia being a bit of a black hole as far as our family history is concerned because of our lack of census retention. Can you elaborate on how important writing the history of the nation is from this sort of record?

Dr Harrison—I do not think it can be underestimated. It gives you in one document so many different facets of people. It gives you literacy; it gives you religion; and it gives you family composition at a precise date. The fact that the census is held so regularly makes it a very valuable document because you are keeping an eye on it; you are watching children. We can tell apprenticeship levels from the ones in England when they left home and the older children may not be there at one stage. You can tell things like lack of a parent or grandparents living with families; you get a tremendous family unit being built up. This has all sorts of ramifications when it is a three-generation household, whether it is a single person bringing up children or the grandparents bringing up grandchildren. There are a lot of ramifications.

The other thing that it tells us is density of population between urban and regional areas, which is able to be followed. We can find whether people of particular ethnic groups are drawn. Of course this becomes very obvious in the 20th century with projects such as the Snowy River which attracted so many Europeans to that area. But where did they go afterwards? What happened to these people? For a very long time we were able to tell you much more about the 12 convicts who came here with Patrick Leslie than we could tell you about the free people who came with Patrick Leslie to the Darling Downs. This might not be a terribly big issue, but the convicts, of course, were so well recorded because they are all government records: break

the law and you are right, you are recorded very well in great detail.

We started off with this great body of information because we have so many: 160,000 in the first 40 years. We had all these records on them and we were able to build up from that. In the 20th century we have not any of this information. We do have, as I say, the very valuable birth, death and marriage certificates, but they have got problems, too. The only one that you give the information on is your marriage certificate. You do not give any personal information on any of the others. Marriage certificates are notorious for their inaccuracy.

Mr MUTCH—You are a part of the Centenary of Federation Committee. Has that committee taken any formal steps or developed a policy with respect to the retention of census records?

Dr Harrison—We have only had two meetings so far. We are working towards looking at projects that we will be covering. We realise that a lot of what we will be doing here will be based on state money and we are getting budgets and things determined now. We are also looking at practical works. I would very much urge them to take on this as part of it but, unfortunately, because of my particular training I would not urge them just to retain the 2001 census. I think it is a good start, but I believe it is really offering a drink to a dying man. It is giving them a whiff of what could have been and then taking it away from them.

I believe that something like this is so valuable that it needs to be retained—every one needs to be retained. For different reasons I am sure that people who know a lot more about it than I do would say that the five-year one is very successful. However, most other countries do get by with a 10-year one. I would much rather see a move towards having less census taking if it meant that we could retain them and that those sorts of benefits were coming out of it.

Mr MUTCH—One of the submissions that I was reading says that we should concentrate on keeping all these other records: births, deaths, marriages and what not. Has it been your experience that in the past these are patchy?

Dr Harrison—One of the things you begin to realise when you do this sort of work is that every archive has had its problem. Everywhere you go, the information that you particularly want has disappeared. In Ireland they always bomb the law courts—there was a bombing in 1922 which destroyed a tremendous lot of records. Here in Queensland it is the 1893 flood. We always feel that whenever an archivist cannot find anything, it disappeared in the 1893 flood. However, we also had a fire in the Supreme Court in the 1970s which destroyed all the wills made between 1946 and the late 1950s. These are other valuable things that genealogists use a lot. We have used them a tremendous lot for the Dictionary of Biography as well as with the wills and probate index. However, the way that the law has changed so much in that area now, it is not necessary to have a will probated. It is nowhere near as accurate as it used to be as a record or as comprehensive covering as many people as it used to.

There are beginning to be fall-downs in nearly any system that you can name. However, I would say that the births, deaths and marriages are some of the best kept records we have ever had, particularly for the eastern states. Mr Archer in Victoria in 1852 did us all a great blessing with the system that he set up which was loosely based on the Scottish one, but he added in a few extra columns which have proved incredibly

useful to us. If you can get a birth, death and marriage certificate and they are filled out in their columns, they are absolutely magnificent. I understand that I am one of the very few people who have the permission of the Registrar-General to use their records here for the Dictionary of Biography—and this is where we start.

Mr MUTCH—You are a professional historian. What do you say to people who dismiss family historians and the fruits of their research?

Dr Harrison—I have done a lot of lecturing for family historians. I am the Queensland supervisor for the diploma that these society genealogists in Sydney bestow. I believe that they have probably got the most enthusiastic amateurs working for them than anyone I have ever met. The industry that these people generate can only be likened to a beehive. They will not be swerved when they are going after information. My biggest criticism, if I have one, is that it is so focused on one family. We are trying to show them that every family is a very important part of community and that you should not only do your family but also do its place in the community because this is how we get the development of the villages, the towns and the old station properties or something like that.

Nobody is alone; everybody is part of a community anywhere in Australia. I believe that if we can just get them to broaden it, it will be of great benefit to all of them. It is a matter of us all working together. I certainly use genealogy and its methods to teach academic history because they have the focusing and precision of going in. They also do it a slightly different way from academic historians. If we are looking at the origins of the First World War, we will start 20 or 30 years earlier and see all the issues that are building up. With a family historian, you start from the present and you work back. So you are using a different methodology. But the point is that you are really all becoming Sherlock Holmes, and Sherlock Holmes always said that it is a very fearsome thing to make theories without the data. We are wanting the data.

Mr MUTCH—So much for the identity of Australia. What do you think of these much-vaunted privacy principles that they have these days? For instance, they say that records should be kept only for the purpose for which they are taken.

Dr Harrison—I would respect anybody's claim for privacy. I believe that the individual ideas should be preserved to a large extent. Even doing family history, I always say that family history is never meant to hurt anybody. We must respect other people as individuals. However, to counter that, I would also say that every individual is part of a society and part of a community. This is one reason why I think privacy restrictive periods are so effective, because in 100 years time I do not believe many people would give a hill of beans about what information is on these things, whereas if it can be contributing to either individuals or a public role at that time, I believe that it is part of our concern.

Mr MUTCH—But none of the records that you accessed were presumably kept for the purpose of historical research in the future.

Dr Harrison—No, none of them were.

Mr MUTCH—Should that be included as part of why we keep records?

Dr Harrison—I think this is a new movement. I think that, at long last, people are beginning to realise that you need a basis of the past to form a future. People do not learn the lessons from the past. I am not pretending that we should be in the situation where we are trying to preach to them that they do. But I do believe that we can reveal to them that a lot of these problems are not new and that this is the way it was handled then, given those situations at that time. I think this is basically the way we all live; that we do the best we can at that time.

I do believe that these records have been generated for one purpose, and they have been very useful. I believe census records were first brought in for family historians by a solicitor in 1911 in England who was wanting to prove where his client was on the night. It happened to be census night, and he was able to call up the census records to prove where his client was. So he really revealed for the rest of the world then the uses to which census records could be put. I believe there are a whole lot of government records we have not even started on yet. But you have to be very lucky to have the coincidence of being required to prove where you are the night of the census, though, don't you?

Mr MUTCH—Everybody would be making sure they were behaving very well that night.

Mr TONY SMITH—Thanks very much for your evidence, which I have found incredibly interesting. In relation to that wills and probate area, as far as I am aware anybody could go to the registry and do a probate search. You did not have to show you had any interest, that you were a relative or anything else; you could do that. Is that still the case?

Dr Harrison—You would realise that these are state records and not Australian records, so there are individual rules, I should imagine, in every state. However, the situation locally is that, yes, you can go to the registry and you can call them up. But you can probably go back only to about 1986, I understand, at our Supreme Court registry at the moment, because all the other records before that date have now been transferred to Queensland Archives. The Archives works on a principle that all records get a 30-year closure. But you can apply to the head of that department for permission to view any of those things, and usually this is a formality rather than a divisive thing to prevent you. Obviously, there are some records that have a much longer closure period, but wills and probates just come into the 30-year one. I have a letter from the registry of the Supreme Court, and I access wills and so on all the time. However, I would reiterate that there is a tremendous section of the population that these are no longer covering.

Mr TONY SMITH—True, yes. In that context, the information that is available now can be quite sensitive, through court records and so forth. You made a comment in relation to privacy concerns. You say that this documentation would remain completely within the hands of the ABS for selected distribution. I had a constituent see me recently, extremely irate, because the electoral office sells data commercially about enrolments. She got a letter from some commercial organisation which basically offended her greatly. She chewed a piece of my ear over it. In making that comment about selected distribution, are you first of all bringing in the 100-year rule?

Dr Harrison—Or whatever is decided upon. It may not be decided that it is a 100-year rule. I think here I am going along with normal archival practice. It is the head of the department which generates the information who has the ruling and the power to decide who looks at it. This is the same with any archival

thing. I am allowed to look at the wills because I have told the registrar of the Supreme Court the purpose to which I am putting that information. I would wonder that that information would be available to a commercial organisation which was going to do a blanket coverage of people with a mail-out or through phoning. I believe that in the privacy period these sorts of restrictions must go there. I think it is up to the person who wants to use the information to justify why they want to use it. But, again, I would say that a lot of us are working very hard to try to get reasonable levels. There is a responsibility that comes with all these things, and we must make people realise that there is a responsibility; and the purpose is not to hurt people.

Mr TONY SMITH—What do you say to the concerns of people who would say, ‘Look, I want that information destroyed’? The consideration I am giving for that is the fact that I am forced to fill out the form by law.

Dr Harrison—They are forced to fill out a lot of forms by law just for being. You are supposed to register your birth and all those sorts of things. I believe this is part of our way of living these days.

Mr TONY SMITH—Except that people would say that it has been extended. The form started with perhaps one or two pages, and it is now 20 or whatever it is.

Dr Harrison—I believe that if people do not want to fill out the form, they are not going to do it accurately and properly and answer every question, anyway. I believe that there are all sorts of ways they can get around that if they choose to think that it is interfering with what they believe, and you probably will not get a correct estimation. Look at the way people vote. A lot of people resent having to vote, so they damage their electoral cards, anyway.

Mr TONY SMITH—We have all seen that.

Dr Harrison—Yes, you have all seen that. I believe that you are not going to win over those people, anyway. When I was writing letters to the *Australian*, there would be letters published the next week saying, ‘Jennifer Harrison is just a stickybeak.’ I am prepared to wear that in 100 years time for any of those people, but I would also stand by the way I am using the information.

CHAIR—Dr Harrison, thank you very much for your submission and also for coming along this morning and discussing it with us. We appreciate that.

Dr Harrison—Thank you.

[9.55 a.m.]

WESTERN, Professor John, Emeritus Professor, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, and Director, Social and Economic Research Centre, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland

CHAIR—Welcome to the hearings. 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. Professor, we are in receipt of the submission of 17 July signed by Professor Sheehan on behalf of the university. Would you care to make some opening remarks?

Prof. Western—Sure. I will just highlight, I think, certain of the points that are made in Professor Sheehan's submission. The university's case or submission opens by arguing our belief that there are substantial reasons for retaining census information, not necessarily the hard copy but certainly the retention of census information to the extent that it would be possible to link census information with other sources of data such as death certificates, family data, health insurance data and so on. That would be an enormously valuable resource for researchers.

However, that situation has to be balanced against privacy considerations. It is the university's view that safeguards would be essential. The information should be available from the ABS, or the ABS should make information available to bona fide researchers or users. We note that there are many precedents for retention and use of census data in other countries. We then deal with each of the terms of reference. If I can, I will make a comment briefly on the position that the university takes with respect to these.

It is our view that the need to physically retain actual census returns could be avoided if the data was kept and maintained in a machine-readable format at the unit record level. This might have confidentiality implications. This could be partly allayed by storing the unit record data separately and having a name and address link file which could be applied to the unit record data if there was an interest in examining changes over time on a longitudinal basis. We believe that most requests to use data would require only reference to the main data file.

It would be only on occasions when longitudinal studies were envisaged when it would be necessary to use the link file so that individuals could be matched up over time and differences in individual responses tracked in that way. That would provide, we believe, a rich and powerful source of data for meaningful longitudinal studies that are not possible at the present time. The sorts of examples that we give are the history of specific ethnic groups, changes over time in income, changes over time in employment status, a range of equity issues, a range of issues relating to educational achievement, and so on.

We then deal with term of reference No. 2, which has to do with privacy. We say that the issue of privacy is a significant one, and it would require addressing to ensure that confidentiality was not breached or that information was not misused. Clearly, it would require revision to the Census Act to help allay concerns about privacy and access to individual census record data. At present, unit record data is not available. We envisage a situation where unit record data would become available. That would, in our understanding,

require some changes to the act.

The suggestion we put is that the act might incorporate similar provisions to those already in the Privacy Act that currently apply to medical research, where there are 11 privacy principles and a process for ethical review of medical research, and that those 11 privacy principles have to be met if individual researchers are going to access personal records that are held by government agencies of one sort or another. The University of Queensland has an ethics committee that vets research in all sciences—biological sciences, social sciences, health sciences. It might be appropriate under those changed conditions for universities or researchers to be able to demonstrate to the ABS that their research protocols have met the ethical requirements of the ethics committee set up by universities.

There are a number of other issues relating to the use of information that we believe also require consideration. If it were envisaged that there would be contracting out of storage of census forms in either hard copy or electronically, that would require strict guidelines to ensure that no commercial operator could exploit what would be an enormously available database for on-selling personal information.

As to term of reference No. 3, the value of name-identified records for research matching of personal identification on census forms with other agency databases could be a concern for confidentiality reasons but would again be enormously valuable in a research environment. There would need to be set up clear guidelines relating to who could access identified census data as well as the sorts of procedures required for a researcher to obtain the data. Clearly there ought to be guidelines on the categories of individuals who have the right to request information.

Then there is the issue of cost of retention. We believe that retention of hard copies of census forms would be an enormous task. Imaging of the forms, if it is not already done, should obviously be a matter of priority. We believe that, if the records were kept in a computerised format, there would be no need to retain the hard copy. The cost of maintaining or storing computerised records would be significantly less than the cost of maintaining the hard copy. There might be a need to store a small sample of forms from each census for historians. I was listening to the previous person and I got a different appreciation of the use that historians make of the hard copy.

There is a user-pays principle that would also need to be carefully thought out, we believe. A user-pays approach would probably deter many potential users and therefore make the cost prohibitive for a variety of people. At present ABS costs compare less than favourably with costs for the American census bureau and the British census bureau in terms of the ability to obtain data just in a tabular format from them other than the conventional material that is produced for census purposes.

In conclusion, we believe that, provided adequate safeguards were implemented, the ability for researchers to access and use identifying census information could significantly benefit the nation socially, economically and culturally. We would like to see the maintenance of unit records in a computerised format with those unit records made available to bona fide researchers and the ability to link data from census to census, which is not possible at present but would be an enormously valuable research resource.

CHAIR—Thank you, Professor. One of the fears that is expressed about the retention of data in

computerised form is that it is more easily abused and manipulated and that unauthorised access is always a greater risk in that form. What would be your response to that? Do the benefits of retaining data in that form outweigh the detriment of any potential abuse?

Prof. Western—I am not sure that the possibility of abuse is greater with computerised records. If appropriate safeguards are put in place and appropriate password facilities are developed, confidentiality should be assured. If the link files and the unit record files are kept quite separately, the likelihood of being able to link up individually identifiable information would be minimised. In my judgment, the benefits for having that resource available are likely to outweigh the costs. That is not to say that I do not appreciate the problems associated with security, but I believe those are technical problems that can be addressed from a technical point of view.

CHAIR—There has been evidence before the committee that one of the values of retaining data is the ability to take a sample of the census and to use it as they do in the UK for longitudinal studies.

Prof. Western—That is right.

CHAIR—How much use would be made of that sort of material, that sample longitudinal study, by university researchers? Can you give us some idea of the breadth?

Prof. Western—I believe very considerable use would be made of that sort of data source. There is a great deal of work going on in universities—in departments such as sociology, economics and demography—where, increasingly, the importance of doing longitudinal research is becoming apparent. If we are to keep up with best international practice in that area, then the availability of data sources on a longitudinal basis is very important.

To actually go about collecting the information ourselves as researchers becomes a prohibitive activity. To have it already available and to have it minimally analysed—because a lot of the census data is minimally analysed; a lot of it is not even analysed at all in any detail—as a resource that could then be subject to secondary analysis by researchers from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds would be enormously valuable. I think considerable use would be made of it.

Again, it is a question of cost, of course. The way the thing would be costed would also determine the use to which it was put. Research funds are relatively limited and ARC funding is a highly competitive activity to engage in but, given the availability of the data, given the relative ease of access to it, I am quite sure it would be used in a variety of different ways, and in significantly policy oriented ways as well.

Mr McCLELLAND—The census forms that I have looked at seem to be set out in a sort of computer readable format. I would be surprised if the Australian Bureau of Statistics does not already use some sort of optical character recognition technology. One presumes, however—simply because they are not retaining the records of people's identities—that they are not keying in the names and addresses of the people. I suppose that keying in personal details could be a reasonably labour-intensive task.

Prof. Western—I am not sure whether they do that or not. It would be a relatively labour-intensive

task. It would not be a substantial task. They have very considerable tasks already in coding some of the open questions in the census form, particularly the material related to occupation and industry. There is no real other way to do it than the way they presently do it. If they are not already recording names and addresses, that would be an additional task. I do not believe that it would be a substantial task.

Mr McCLELLAND—Your point is that to have it in hard copy would keep it in a cumbersome form for subsequent research?

Prof. Western—I do not think you need it in hard copy. Historians would disagree with me, I suspect, but my judgment is that you do not need it in hard copy.

Mr McCLELLAND—In terms of computer search techniques, it would be easier to access?

Prof. Western—Yes, if you have a link file of names and addresses that is kept quite separate from the unit record file but which can be merged for purposes of longitudinal data analysis.

Mr TONY SMITH—I suppose there are many examples of studies you could do. Can you give us one that you feel would be of benefit in the field in which you are interested?

Prof. Western—You could do a study of long-term poverty, for example. You could consider whether poverty is an inherited characteristic. Do the children of families in poverty themselves move into poverty situations? If you had census data, say over a decade, 15 or 20 years, where you could track certain socioeconomic groups in the community and you could identify changes in their circumstances over the time and you could look at what happened to their children over the time, you would have much better data on which to make inferences about the inheritance of poverty. That is one example.

Another example is in the area of social mobility. To what extent is there mobility in the socioeconomic structure in society? To what extent do people move up the socioeconomic structure? To what extent are children and grandchildren in similar sorts of occupations or different occupations to parents? To what extent is there downward mobility? Again you can track individuals over a period through a career progression or through an occupational progression in a way that we can do with small-scale surveys presently—and which we do—but we work with surveys of, say, 1,000 or 2,000 people. They are not large enough to be able to come to firm conclusions about national trends, whereas, if we had access to census data, we could come to much more reliable and valid information about the nature of the social changes that are taking place in society. Those would be two examples of where that sort of data would be enormously valuable.

Mr TONY SMITH—That would be interesting in relation to Aboriginal people, too.

Prof. Western—Yes, it would.

Mr TONY SMITH—But, of course, then there is the problem of filling out the form and all of that as well.

Prof. Western—Sure.

Mr McCLELLAND—We still have that problem, anyway.

Mr TONY SMITH—Yes. Thank you.

Mr MUTCH—Do you have much involvement at present with the Australian Bureau of Statistics?

Prof. Western—We are users of census data. They are very good. In the preparation time for censuses we get draft questionnaires and materials such as that and we are asked to comment on it. We are involved in that way. We are also involved as users of census data, and they will do special runs for us.

Mr MUTCH—Do they use you as well? The whole purpose of the census is to provide information for policy decisions. Do they use you much to help advise on information that can be provided to government from statistics?

Prof. Western—Not in that sense so much, no.

Mr MUTCH—That seems to me to be the other half of the job. We collect statistics. Then surely, in order to provide proper policy advice to the government, should they not be using people like yourself—

Prof. Western—To interpret the information?

Mr MUTCH—Yes.

Prof. Western—They should. They have certainly not used me in that sense. They may have used other social scientists.

Mr MUTCH—But you are saying that if you could actually use the census name-identified data, the policy decisions that are made by governments would be based on far better information.

Prof. Western—I think so. That is certainly my view, yes.

CHAIR—Professor Western, I thank you very much and, through you, Professor Sheehan and the university, for the submission. Thank you for coming along this morning and discussing it with us.

[10.45 a.m.]

RYAN, Mr Terence Joseph, Management Committee Member and Newsletter Editor, Queensland Association of Local and Family History Societies, 73 Plimsoll Street, Greenslopes, Queensland, 4120

CHAIR—I welcome Mr Ryan from the Queensland Association of Local and Family History Societies.

Mr Ryan—I am also president of the Genealogical Society of Queensland, a family history society which has about 3,000 members.

CHAIR—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 the parliament. We are in receipt of your submission to the inquiry. Would you care to make some opening remarks?

Mr Ryan—I think the submission stands alone. I do not think that there is very much more we can add to it at this time. If you would like some general remarks, during morning tea I was asked what intrinsic value family history has. Firstly, we provide a very stimulating activity for 3,000 members who engage in family history research. Most of our members would be in the senior citizen age group. It is a very stimulating activity and it gives them worthwhile things to do.

As I read in an article some little time ago, it may not be generally appreciated that family historians are generally tourists. They travel around a lot, both within Australia and overseas. A Sunshine Coast tourist found that this is a very significant part of the tourism industry. I do not need to tell you that tourism is one of the biggest industries in this country. We contend that family historians play a very significant part in that industry because they do travel around a lot for their research.

We generally find that the history books are filled with accounts of the doings of the rich and the powerful. Family history involves researching and finding out about a lot of folk history that, without societies like ours and without the research material that we uncover, probably would not be revealed. For instance, in the early part of this century my grandfather was a copper gouger in the Cloncurry mineral fields. He also ran a hotel, which burned down. In those days, the copper was taken from the mines by Afghan camel teams.

That may not be an important historical event in the national sense, but it is part of the folk history of that particular locality. Without family historians, a lot of the details about the ordinary pioneers—the ordinary working people who helped develop this country—would not be told and would not be available. We think that family history has a very valuable contribution to make to the nation.

As far as census returns are concerned, in the library of the Genealogical Society of Queensland, we have on film the 1841 census of Scotland and the 1881 census of England and Wales. Those records are probably among the most valuable records that we have because, by consulting those records, people can find

out details of their family going back to last century—where they lived, their ages, their occupations. We would like to think that perhaps in the year 2070, or whenever, Australians may be able to obtain that sort of information from our own census records.

Finally, we contend that the community pays a lot of money for the gathering of the census. We believe that the government has a responsibility to maximise the return to the community for the money expended on census returns. We feel that providing information that can be used by family historians is one way to increase and maximise the money spent at a fairly moderate cost. That is about all I can add to our written submission.

CHAIR—In your submission, you advocate that only the information on the first page of the census should be retained in situ. I have looked at the 1996 census to ascertain which information in particular you were referring to. I presume you mean questions 2 to 7, that is, the names of each person, including visitors; whether they are male or female; the person's age at last birthday; the relationship of person one to person two; present marital status and the usual address. Is that the information that you believe should be retained?

Mr Ryan—The person who compiled this submission probably did not refer to the census form. I think it was presumed that the first page would include only that information that we would see as being valuable for family historians, thus cutting the costs of storing and recording this information. The sort of information that we would require is spelled out in our submission. It is mainly the persons occupying the premises, their ages and occupations. Off the top of my head, I think that is probably the most important information that we would require.

CHAIR—If you are going to retain information, though, is there not a case for retaining more information than that? For example, take another question which would seem to me on the surface to be of value from both a family and a more general historical perspective, namely, a person's country of birth. Given the pattern of immigration to this country—I think about four in 10 Australians were either born overseas or have at least one parent who was born overseas—there would seem to me to be some significance in also retaining that sort of information.

Mr Ryan—It would be valuable. That information is probably available elsewhere on birth and death certificates and the like. Again, it would be of tremendous use to family historians to have that information available in one place. In our submission, we set out the basic information we want. We certainly would not object to additional information being made available. We would very much appreciate that.

CHAIR—When you say 'retained', is it your preference that it be retained in its hard copy form or on microfiche or by using an equivalent reproduction method, such as a computer record? Do you want to retain a reproduction of the census that has been filled in, or is it sufficient merely to have that information transferred onto computer records, even if it does not appear exactly as it was filled in on the census form?

Mr Ryan—We do not see it as being necessary to retain it in paper form. Increasingly, much of our information and resources are going onto CD-ROM and have been on microfiche and microfilm. The census records I mentioned before from the UK are available on microfilm and, increasingly, CD-ROMs are becoming the vogue. Our society has four computers that our members can access. We now have quite a lot

of information on CD-ROM. We would like these changes to happen, but we would also like to be practical and see that, from the government's point of view, that can be done as economically and as efficiently as possible. If storage in paper form becomes a problem—and we can see certain problems with that—the societies I represent would be happy to see them on CD-ROM, microfiche or microfilm.

CHAIR—Is what you have on CD-ROM a reproduction of the actual form?

Mr Ryan—Do not hold me to this, but I believe it is not. The information is on CD-ROM. Some information is in an index form, particularly in respect of births, deaths and marriages, which is getting a bit away from census forms. You can obtain the index, the dates and the reference number and then follow it up through the state offices of registrars-general. We presume that obtaining this information in the next century would be a different kettle of fish. I do not think we should necessarily look to what has been done in the past.

CHAIR—If the census details were to be retained, do you have a view about the length of time for which they should be retained before being open to general inspection?

Mr Ryan—In our submission we said 70 years. The Genealogical Society of Queensland nominated 75 years. We think that sort of period would be sufficient to overcome any privacy considerations or concerns that other people may have. We feel that we should definitely move in that direction. We are quite flexible, give or take five or 10 years. We have nominated that sort of time span as something to consider.

Mr McCLELLAND—Essentially, you are concerned with retaining information that identifies individuals but you recognise that other information could be contained in the census forms which could be relevant to other disciplines. Is that a fair statement? For instance, an earlier witness said that it would be useful to trace whether there was such a phenomenon as inherited poverty and, hence, an income level would be relevant in tracing that sort of phenomenon?

Mr Ryan—From an historian's point of view it certainly would be. I must admit that that is something that I had not thought of. Again, I cannot see whether in 75 years time this would cause any concern to anyone. That is something I had not thought of. It sounds like a good idea to me.

CHAIR—That was very short and brief, Mr Ryan. Thank you for the society's submission and for your time and effort to come in this morning to talk about it. It has been very useful to have that opportunity.

Mr Ryan—We appreciate both the opportunity to have made the written submission and to have been able to appear here today. We look forward to the outcome of these hearings. Thank you.

[11.05 a.m.]

COLLINS, Mr Peter Noel, Ordinary Member, Queensland Family History Society Incorporated, PO Box 171, Indooroopilly, Queensland 4068

FITZGERALD, Mr Kenneth James, Treasurer, Queensland Family History Society Incorporated, PO Box 171, Indooroopilly, Queensland 4068

KOPITTKE, Mrs Rosemary Ann, Committee Member, Bookshop Convenor, Queensland Family History Society Incorporated, PO Box 171, Indooroopilly, Queensland 4068

MONTGOMERY, Miss Dawn, Member, Management Committee, Queensland Family History Society Incorporated, PO Box 171, Indooroopilly, Queensland 4068

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 parliament. We are in receipt of your submission to the inquiry. I now invite you to make some opening remarks.

Mrs Kopittke—We are representing a society that has approximately 1,200 members, including many family members, so the actual membership is higher than that. Our members make extensive use of census records from England, Wales, Scotland and, to a limited extent, Ireland, where many of the early ones were destroyed. We have also just purchased many census records from the United States, and they will become available to our members in the near future. We see them as a very valuable resource. We would encourage the Australian records to be kept so that future historians can make use of those records here in Australia, as have been available in other countries for many years.

Mr McCLELLAND—You have indicated that you think the privacy concerns are overstated. Is that a fair reflection of your evidence?

Mr Fitzgerald—That would put it in a nutshell. As an ordinary member of the public, I have never had any concerns about the information provided in a census form, and I think that would be fairly common. People who have something to hide would have concerns regardless of the publication of the information.

Mr McCLELLAND—But in any event you have suggested that it would be quite appropriate to have a time lock of 100 years or whatever it might be.

Mr Fitzgerald—That is what we are supporting, yes.

Mr McCLELLAND—Do you think that should dispel any privacy concerns that someone living today might have, for instance?

Mr Fitzgerald—Yes. If there were any concerns, they are not going to be around in 100 years time. I

think even a selected release of information to immediate members of the family should be possible in a lesser time but, for general public access, 100 years seems to be an adequate safeguard.

Mr Collins—Our experience as researchers is that in looking at the 1891 census for England and Wales, you are looking at a photocopied version of the original documents themselves. They are wholly intact. There are no bits left out. Rather than what our previous colleague Mr Terry Ryan might have said, the real value of those forms would be their being reproduced in their entirety and people being able to see in 100 years the way that individuals filled them out. There is a certain humanity and a closeness of the individual that you can see that you cannot do by having someone else interpret those marks on the paper or the information transcribed. As much as people might like to get it exactly right, most of the time—as is the experience of any government department or anyone transcribing anything—they will make mistakes.

Mr McCLELLAND—Do you think microfiche is adequate or do you favour retaining the actual piece of paper?

Mr Collins—It depends on the logistics involved in storing such a massive amount of paper. Obviously our members are aware that, when you have 18 million pieces of paper, and each of those documents is about 10 pages, that would be a logistic nightmare in itself, let alone the microfilming and who should pay for that. Until those particulars have been worked through, it would be desirable to keep it until the time that everything has been microfilmed. The originals could then be destroyed, if that was found to be the most convenient and useful way of avoiding the logistics of storing them. If it was done properly and regularly, then in another six years you would have another census waiting to be microfilmed.

CHAIR—I want to take up a point I raised with Mr Ryan before. Is it possible now to store on CD-ROM the equivalent of the microfilm? You can buy CD-ROMs with the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* or whatever else on them. They bring up pictures, and you can even get ones that have movie tracks and music on them. I am wondering whether in this area the use of technology has moved to the extent of, rather than having rolls of microfilm, having it condensed even further.

Mr Fitzgerald—It is possible. That technology has been available for some time. It is basically a matter of cost. We are looking at a fairly large project. Images do take up a lot of bytes. Until they can improve the storage capacity of a CD-ROM, it may have to be stored in another form—still in electronic form and not in paper form.

Mr MUTCH—Does electronic also include microfilm? By "electronic", do you mean computer rather than microfilm?

Mr Fitzgerald—Yes.

Miss Montgomery—There are in the pipeline things called DRDs, which have about 10 times the capacity of the current CD-ROMs. By the time it is all sorted out, they will probably be just as cheap to use as CD-ROMs are now.

CHAIR—With the progress of technology, that will probably be next year!

Miss Montgomery—Yes. On the privacy issue—I am sure a lot of the people who say that they are concerned about the privacy issue are thinking about the here and now; they are not thinking of a time 100 years from now. They do not want their private business bandied around everywhere now.

CHAIR—In terms of overcoming that perceived fear, is there any role that the family history and genealogical societies can play?

Mrs Kopittke—Maybe we can emphasise the fact that this has been happening in many other countries for a long period. Censuses are still run successfully in England and Wales and all those other countries where their records are available. Obviously they have overcome the fears there. I do not think that Australians are any different from people from those countries.

Mr Collins—It is possibly also a question of degree. In 1828 there were muster rolls of everyone who was known to be alive in the colony of New South Wales, and every detail of those individuals such as was available at the time—short of a photograph—was available and has been accessible by the general public for many years. There is no unravelling of the social fabric because those details are available in the public domain. I feel that in 100 years, from the year 2001, people will be despairing that we were so precious about who we were in the year 2001 that we just pulped that information, such that no-one but the statisticians could draw whatever statisticians needed out of it, and that we failed to leave the real individual flesh and blood component of those census forms. They will be gone for all time.

CHAIR—Do you think we need to retain a census every five years, if we are to retain records, or would every 10 years be sufficient?

Mr Fitzgerald—The English censuses are 10 yearly, and that seems to work quite well. The only thing for the future is that people are more mobile. One of the advantages of the census is to enable you to try to identify your families and where they have moved. It possibly would be a disadvantage to record only certain censuses.

Mr MUTCH—A lot of people think family historians are, with respect, a bunch of fuddy-duddys. They run around and have a bit of fun; it is all harmless but not useful. Would you say that the study of family history plays an integral part in the development of a national identity and is important for history?

Mr Fitzgerald—I think it does. There have been numerous books written. There are whole sections in libraries written by family historians, so it does play a part in our culture. By having the information which would be retained in censuses, it does enable family historians to identify the environment of a particular era. So that is one of the important things I see. We can gather certain statistics from other records, but the census basically gives the environment of the family unit at that particular time—the type of house they were living in, the number of people in the family at the time. That type of information is not readily available from other sources.

Mr MUTCH—Would it be important in building up a sense of belonging to ethnic groups that might have migrated to this country over a period?

Miss Montgomery—It could be.

Mr MUTCH—Are you finding an increasing interest from migrant communities in researching their family histories and their community histories?

Mr Fitzgerald—Yes, it seems to go across all people. It is not just restricted to the UK stock of people. The Europeans are interested. From looking on the Internet, it seems that Americans, Italians, et cetera, are very interested in their family history. I would say that a similar type of trend will happen here. There will be a need for those people to try to trace, and a census is one way of providing that information. You have to remember that in 100 years the need for us to go back to UK or European sources will be lesser and it will be more important for the Australian records to be complete.

CHAIR—Mr Fitzgerald, you have made reference, as a group, to going back to the census records in the United Kingdom. Given the diversity of origin of Australians, I am interested in what census records are kept in other European countries. Is much use made of them in terms of tracing family histories?

Mrs Kopittke—I am involved in the central European group and we—that is, my husband and I—have searched in Schleswig-Holstein and in Denmark. I know that census records are also available for other places in Europe. Of course, they are not so easy for people to read because they are not written in English but they are certainly available. Those records have been kept and are now available on microfilm for people interested in researching from those areas.

CHAIR—I am thinking of the countries which are more popular in terms of immigration to Australia in the last 50 years: Italy, Greece, those nations. Do they keep their census records?

Mrs Kopittke—I do not know about those two.

CHAIR—We can make other inquiries about that.

Mr MUTCH—Some European countries do not keep censuses now but they have a full register of where you live and where you move to, do they not?

Mrs Kopittke—That type of record was kept for some areas for a long period. If you wanted to leave the area you had to get permission. You had to advertise in the newspaper to make sure all your debts were cleared before you left. Also, from a medical point of view, it is important for people to be able to trace their family to find out if there are any inherited diseases. Because census puts people together in a family, it is a great tool to trace a family history. You get not only the head of the household but also brothers, sisters and other siblings, which can help in the detection of medical problems.

Miss Montgomery—There are a lot of diseases which are endemic to certain places in the world or certain types of people or certain characteristics. For instance, if one of my ancestors had filled in a census form and it was still available, I would have discovered from that, if from nothing else, that he was a Negro.

Mr MUTCH—Considering other countries have the full selection of census, do you feel as though we

have a bit of a black hole in our history because we do not have that? Do you find you are very conscious of that? You obviously go to conferences and things with family historians from other countries. Are we really behind the pace when it comes to writing our own history?

Mr Collins—Without a doubt. Take, for example, the fact that you can buy here in Australia, over the Internet, the CD-ROM which holds all of the United States' social security records. How much more private information can you get—being able to call up anyone's social security record from anywhere in the world? In Australia that concept would be so foreign as to cause a lot of distress to people. In other countries there is not this feeling that we are somehow to be protected from the fact that information is gathered via governments for the benefit of society as a whole.

As my colleague was saying, there are sections in the library devoted to the famous and to the egalitarian members of our society who are lucky enough to make it above the parapet where they can be seen, written about, and have their lives, style and physical features recorded. The ordinary folk cannot have a biographical status without things as ordinary to the average person as a census form, which they have no choice about whether they fill in and whether they fill it in correctly, which is another thing. The laws in Australia are quite strict on that; you must comply, you must also do it correctly and you must not tell fibs. In 100 years, where will those millions of individuals in Australia go to see their ancestors fitted into the fabric of Australia in the year 2001? It will still be that same small minority of Australians who made it into the public domain who will have been recorded and written about. The rest will be just as if they did not matter, and that seems unfair.

Mr MUTCH—It is really losing the history of the common people.

Mr Collins—It is. It disenfranchises the individual at corner shop level to the mainstream if the records are destroyed, as a matter of government policy. A government will, in other sections, collect immense amounts of information about individuals and be able to hold that—for instance, state governments hold divorce records and police records. They have a 60 to 75 year ban on them but they remain in the system. There is no automatic carte blanche to destroy those—although, that may change as we go on. But right now at the state archives, you can pull up those records if you have a direct relationship to that individual. There is just a time barrier—60 years or 75 years, and every 30 years it becomes available to be seen.

Mr MUTCH—It is also interesting that in the convict history of Australia women figure prominently, whereas they might not figure as prominently in the history of the last 100 years because they have not come to that public prominence, for various reasons. That could be another thing of interest.

Mr Collins—They are invisible unless they are in forms like the census.

Mr MUTCH—Are we ashamed of our history? Is that why we have not kept census records?

Miss Montgomery—I think up until fairly recently—when I say 'fairly recently', I mean within the last 20 years—people used to not want to say that they had convict forebears but now, in the family history world, if you have not got a convict you are pitied because it is so much easier to find out about them

because everything is there.

CHAIR—The irony of that is that the only ones who can find out are the ones who had convict forebears. It is not entirely true.

Miss Montgomery—They were convicts for such petty things very often.

Mr Fitzgerald—I think this idea of destroying records is possibly to try to convince people to truthfully fill in the form but I do not think that that actually works. If you have spoken to people around census time, quite often, it is a bit of a joke as to how they answer some of the questions. I do not really think that that has a great bearing at all. I was reading in the early English census that there was a reluctance to be open about some of the questions.

Mr MUTCH—If you had an East Timorese refugee under the bed in your third bedroom, would you be revealing them on the census?

Mr Fitzgerald—Obviously not. You are going to tell the government what you want to, no matter who you are. It is just one of those things. It does not matter what country you are in, there will probably always be a bit of a fear of Big Brother overlooking you. There is a reluctance, I suppose, to be completely open.

Mr MUTCH—Would you not think that a lot of people would want to make their mark in history? If you go to any monument around the place people are continuing a battle to scrape people's names off the wall. Have you found that there is an inherent feeling among people that they would like to be recorded? If you came to the 2001 census, do you reckon that there might well be a lot of people keen to participate?

Mr Collins—Without a doubt. There is only one chance, as I was saying before, of posterity remembering you and that is if you have made it into the newspaper. At this stage, in 1997, it would be your birth notice, your funeral notice or if somewhere in your lifespan you made the grade in the public domain. Those individuals who do not seek that out would probably be erased in time because of that parameter. They did not have anywhere else that they would be recorded except for in things like electoral rolls—and they are becoming less fulsome in information. Only a few years ago they used to detail the age of the person, their occupation and the actual number of the street. That is now not the case. Once again, we are shrinking the visibility of even the average person where there is no public disadvantage of knowing about him or her. In electoral rolls—you know this yourself—every bit of information is a valuable way of understanding who it is that you are representing and who is coming through to you.

Mr MUTCH—On a census, if they ever were to be preserved in perpetuity, do you think we should add any more questions such as date of birth or anything like that? Is there anything that is essential that could be included that would be of great benefit to future historians or that could add to it?

Mr Fitzgerald—Certainly date of birth, because you can identify a person more closely.

Miss Montgomery—More specifically.

Mr MUTCH—Anything else?

Miss Montgomery—Country of origin, as the chairman suggested to the previous speaker, should be put in because that really identifies people and it is not always correct on death certificates because somebody else is giving the information.

Mr MUTCH—Do you think the wider public is aware that the census form is actually destroyed?

Mrs Kopittke—I think they are very aware that it is destroyed.

Mr Fitzgerald—It is fairly well publicised. I can picture the ABS showing a picture of them pulping the actual forms.

Mr MUTCH—You are aware of it, but you have a particular interest. Would the average person in the street know?

Mrs Kopittke—I think when the census is done it is widely advertised that it is going to be destroyed to try to encourage people to be truthful. I do not think that many people would be unaware.

CHAIR—Thank you for your submission and also for coming along to discuss the matter with us this morning.

[11.30 a.m.]

WOOD, Mr Peter Matthew, 4/33 Highview Terrace, St Lucia, Queensland 4067

CHAIR—Welcome, Mr Wood. In what capacity are you appearing before the committee?

Mr Wood—As a private citizen.

CHAIR—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 submission to the committee. I now invite you to make some opening remarks.

Mr Wood—I was attending the University of Queensland last year. For a part-time job I was a casual census collector. That basically involved handing out the forms to about 500 homes near where I lived and the collection of them afterwards. The area was mostly university students, middle income, older people and a lot of retirees who live on the fringe of St Lucia. That was basically it.

CHAIR—You suggest in your written submission that there is a level of general reticence about the completion of the census forms and that people have concerns about the information being used inappropriately.

Mr Wood—Definitely. I think a lot of people, especially the working people, had a lot of privacy concerns. They were even worried about me as a collector collecting it. In that case we had a gold envelope in which they could send it straight back to the ABS without even me getting close to it.

CHAIR—Of the 500-odd households that you dealt with, how many would have used the gold envelope?

Mr Wood—Probably 20 total. There would have been a lot more but on a lot of occasions when you said that the name and address would be removed after the initial sorting, and that it was destroyed, that seemed to solve a lot of their problems. Once they heard that, they were fine.

CHAIR—How did people raise this? I know it is hard to generalise, but what would people say?

Mr Wood—When you approached them for the first time, if you just did not leave the form under their door, which you did if they were not there, they were not very keen on the idea of doing it. A lot of the younger people—university-age students—just did not really care that much. They did not think it meant that much to them. That is a general youth attitude, I guess.

CHAIR—Can you say to what extent then it is a product of a general outlook on life which may pertain to anything which relates to some sort of officialdom compared to the census in particular?

Mr Wood—With the census you had to legally fill the form out but there was no real practical way of us making sure that those people provided the data correctly. If you fill out a Medicare form or something like that, you know you have to do it correctly because there are obviously going to be other checks. But with the census form, once it is collected you are faceless. Just through the sheer volume of the forms there is no way that anyone could back check anything. I just feel that they would be less accurate with their data. Examples of that would be, say, a lot of university students live with their girlfriends. They do not consider that to be a de facto relationship, whereas I think the tax office would. On occasions like that, they would just add an extra bedroom onto the house or things like that.

CHAIR—That is one level. What I hear you saying is that, with at least a certain subgroup of the population, there is a degree of unreliability about the information that they provide. For example, if someone is living with a girlfriend or boyfriend, they may be reluctant to actually indicate that on the form. Can I come back to the earlier question—apart from the unreliability—about the impact it has in terms of people not filling it in at all? Apart from the 20 or so cases where people used the gold envelope, were there any cases where people refused outright to fill it in, so that you had to seek the assistance of the person at the next level to visit them?

Mr Wood—That never happened to me, no. Everyone was fine to fill the form out.

CHAIR—Do not take this question the wrong way but I cannot think of a better way of asking it on the spot. The reluctance amongst the younger people and university students, was that across-the-board or were there particular ethnic groups that were more reluctant than others or were there any characteristics of those who were expressing reticence?

Mr Wood—Basically, in the area that I did there was not much ethnic diversity. It was mostly white Anglo-Saxons. Basically the whole area was that.

CHAIR—These are people aged 18 to 21 or 22, general university-age people?

Mr Wood—Yes.

Mr McCLELLAND—If these records were locked away in a time capsule or locked away for a period of 100 years or 75 years, do you think that would be sufficient to remove any reluctance that people might have in providing accurate information?

Mr Wood—If the person was logical about it, obviously they would have no reluctance to it. But they do not know for sure that it is going to be locked away for 100 years. They never know what might get leaked or what might get lost. Even though it is only a superficial passing thought, that definitely would be on their mind, in my opinion.

Mr McCLELLAND—How many people do you think know today that the information is destroyed?

Mr Wood—I basically told everyone. I honestly thought there was a good knowledge by the general population that it was destroyed. I think it was quite boldly written on the inside cover. You could see the

perforated edge that you could rip off. I basically told everyone that the name and address gets ripped off and thrown away. I think there was a good knowledge of that.

Mr MUTCH—Were they aware that it is kept for a couple of years or for a certain period before it is ripped off and taken away? There are still a lot of people who would see it.

Mr Wood—I just told them it would happen after the initial sorting, because that is what we were told. I assumed that as soon as it was put in the boxes for the scanner it was done then. I assumed it was done quite quickly but I could not really say for sure.

Mr MUTCH—What faculty are you in?

Mr Wood—Engineering. I am an electrical engineer.

Mr MUTCH—Are you sympathetic at all to the historians' argument that these census records are essential to writing a history of Australia in the future?

Mr Wood—I think a lot of the questions on it were very direct questions. I do not think that many people are going to be interested in how many bedrooms you had in your house and things like that. The questions in the census are not related that much to history. I heard the argument before about the poverty line and generations following that. I never thought of that until I heard it. That is the only proper reason I could see for it. I do not think historians are that interested in how much money you earned and things like that, that is, how much individual people earned. It is pretty bland sort of information.

Mr MUTCH—It seems to excite social historians. You mentioned that you can track people's health and genealogical pools through the Medicare system.

Mr Wood—Are the Medicare records not kept? Each time you use your Medicare card, that would obviously go on a central computer.

Mr MUTCH—They are not kept on a generational basis. What the geneticists want is a family tree that they can work on, and the census is one way of tracking people so they can create a family tree.

Mr Wood—When the mother has her children, the children go on her Medicare card until they are old enough to have their own. Surely there must be some way you could track it through that without adding that much to the software.

Mr MUTCH—It would be interesting to get Medicare in and ask them about what use can be made of their records.

Mr Wood—Yes, because I remember having my name on my mother's Medicare card when I was young.

Mr MUTCH—People are pretty worried about privacy with respect to their Medicare cards, are they

not?

Mr Wood—Medical records are confidential though, are they not? I think people have a lot more respect for the confidentiality of Medicare than they would from the Bureau of Statistics. I think your medical history is a lot more serious.

Mr MUTCH—I would have thought that the Bureau of Statistics had a very fine reputation for confidentiality.

Mr Wood—I could not really comment that well on that.

Mr MUTCH—You would imagine that university students would be much more difficult people to get to fill in the forms than most other members of the community, being at a time in their development when they are being encouraged to question things. Would you agree with that?

Mr Wood—Yes, definitely. Until they turn 30, I do not think people have any idea about civic responsibility.

Mr MUTCH—How did you find out about the inquiry?

Mr Wood—It was in a local newspaper. I think it was the *South West News* or the *Courier-Mail*. I am not sure. I saw it, and my girlfriend made a passing comment that it sort of related to what I did last year. So I thought I would have a go.

CHAIR—The census collection district or districts that you covered, did that include university residential colleges?

Mr Wood—No. It was broken up into certain blocks. The university colleges were regarded as special areas, and they had special collectors for them. They were not done by general census collectors.

CHAIR—I note in your submission you said:

If people's names and addresses had to be kept with their census forms, there should be many privacy provisions put in place. The only modern feasible storage medium for census data is on a computer database. Names and addresses could be stored separately with some unique identification number that could be matched with their individual data kept on a separate database.

I take it from that that you are suggesting that if the data was to be retained it should be retained in such a way that there are two databases and that there has to be some coded linking in order to link the names to the information that is provided, is that right?

Mr Wood—That is it, yes. The actual keeping of a database, once the data is placed on it, is very cheap. Having the names and addresses kept a bit more secure than the other information would probably put a lot of minds to rest. People would realise it is going to be a lot harder for people to get it.

Mr MUTCH—What do you think people would do if they were given a choice? Let us say we put on the form that we would keep name-identified forms in a vault, or something like that, for 100 years. If the person did not trust us to do that they could tick a box and opt out of that and remain in the system that is there today. Do you think people would accept that?

Mr Wood—Yes, I think they would. I think that is quite a good idea, definitely. It caters for the individual. They can have their own choice.

CHAIR—Thank you for reading the advertisement in the newspaper and making a submission to us, and also for coming in today. It has been most useful.

Mr Wood—Thank you for your time.

CHAIR—Before I close this hearing, I thank all for their attendance. I also thank those who have assisted with the recording of the evidence.

Resolved (on motion by Mr McClelland):

That this committee authorises publication of the evidence received today.

Committee adjourned at 11.43 a.m.