



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

Reference: Treatment of census forms

MELBOURNE

Thursday, 18 September 1997

OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT

CANBERRA

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

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Mr Melham	

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

The treatment of forms from future population censuses.

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

WITNESSES

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AFFAIRS

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Present

Mr Andrews (Chair)

Mr Mutch

Mr Kelvin Thomson

The committee met at 10:33 a.m.

Mr Andrews took the chair.

LEVI, Rabbi John Simon, Rabbinic Director, Australian and New Zealand Union for Progressive Judaism, 82 Alma Road, St Kilda, Victoria

CHAIR—Welcome. The subject of this inquiry is whether the current practice of destroying name-identifying forms after the data is collected from them should continue. We have taken evidence so far in Canberra, Perth, Adelaide, Brisbane and Sydney, and we look forward to various contributions here in Melbourne today. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Rabbi Levi—I am a councillor of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, and I am just about to stop being senior rabbi of my congregation, Temple Beth Israel, and hand over to a successor. I also appear because I am interested in Australian history and I have written three books on the Jews in Australia and I hope next year to produce another with Melbourne University Press. So there are a lot of overlaps in your question.

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 the proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament.

Would you care to elaborate on your views on this question of whether or not the name identifying aspects of the census should be kept—it is not currently kept beyond about 18 months when the material is taken and encoded—and whether there are any uses from an historical perspective that would make retaining the name identifying data useful?

Rabbi Levi—I have felt very worried about the assurances that they are destroying the census forms over the past years because that is what I work with in Australian colonial history. If it were not for the musters and the 1828 census and the subsequent censuses I could not track the people about whom I write and they are my bread and butter. When I go to look at the microfilms of the early Australian population, that is how we learn what really made Australia. Therefore, the anonymity of destroying the forms really concerns me as someone concerned with history.

It is all very well talking about history in terms of statistics but history has people in it so I am in conflict. I probably would agree that they are very sensitive forms and they probably should be embargoed for maybe 50 years—not the statistics obviously but the personal details. But I think they are too important to throw away or to shred.

CHAIR—In the United States, for example, they are archived for 72 years. In the United Kingdom I think it is 100 years.

Rabbi Levi—Fifty would be very radical. A figure between 50 and 100 would be sensible. You only have this chance once to take a snapshot of a whole community. It only happens once every four years and it is just too important to lose unless you think history is just a matter of figures which it is not.

CHAIR—The concern which is expressed to the contrary is that if name identifying data is

maintained then that will lead to a diminution in the quality of the return in that people will fear that it may be misused in some way. Do you have any comments on that?

Rabbi Levi—That may well be so. But those people would probably not answer fully whatever the circumstances because they would be so suspicious of the process. I do not think it would make much difference to the answers people gave. The basic material after all is not really confidential: household, children, profession, place of birth, place where you live and income. If you really want to you can find out most things anyway. You just need to have a bit of persistence.

CHAIR—One matter which has been raised relates particularly to the Jewish community. That is the suggestion that during the second world war the Nazis in some parts of Europe made use of official records for the purposes of identifying Jewish people. My question is in two parts: firstly, is that, to your knowledge, accurate and if so what records were used by the Nazis; and, secondly, which is perhaps more pertinent to this inquiry, is there therefore some residual fear amongst some people, particularly those who were survivors of the Nazi regime, that such misuse of records could occur again in the future?

Rabbi Levi—I am absolutely certain that there would be about 10 per cent of the Jewish community who would not put ‘Jewish’ down because of the Second World War—particularly in Melbourne, where the Jewish community is a survivor community from the Holocaust. In Sydney, the Jewish community also went through the Holocaust but what happened in Hungary, which is the source of many of the Jewish people in Sydney, did not happen in Amsterdam. In Amsterdam, the first thing the Gestapo did was seize the community records, which were very well kept. Therefore, they knew the name and address of every Jewish person. This is remembered. There is a folk memory about that. There is no question about it.

However, Jewish people in Australia also have a dilemma, because if they do not register themselves as Jewish, then there are consequences for the community in terms of time on ethnic radio or schooling or funds for old people’s homes. The Jewish community spends quite a bit of time reassuring people and saying, ‘For goodness sake, put yourself down as Jewish in the census. It is very important to us.’

Maybe 10 per cent is a very high estimate, but nevertheless there are people who would not register as Jews because of the Holocaust. Having said that, when you are a small community, knowing how many kids you have got and knowing what provision you have to make for elderly people has to be very much more accurate than it needs to be in a large community. We depend upon that statistical information and the profile of the community—whether it is a diamond shape or a pyramid shape—and that kind of thing. The census is one of the most important tools for community survival.

At the moment, the census form asks people to voluntarily put down their religion. It makes a number of suggestions and runs out before it gets to Jews, because we are only 0.6 of the population. I have to tell you that that is a put-down. I am sure it is not meant that way. But there is a sort of statistical cut-off; I am not sure where it is. Is it two per cent or five per cent or something like that, after which you put down ‘others’, when you specify the other?

For somebody who is a member of a non-Christian group to suddenly find that you are not there is a bit demoralising. I think the census could be a bit more sensitive to that and say, ‘Other Christian

denominations', or something, then Buddhist, Moslem and Jewish. That would be very helpful, I believe. People make very amazing claims such as how many Jews there are in Australia because they do not really know.

CHAIR—Can I clarify one thing about the Nazis and Amsterdam, just to get that as clear as we can? Was it census records which the Gestapo—

Rabbi Levi—No. That is a good question. It was not the census records. It was the Jewish community's records, which were very good. The same thing happened in Copenhagen, a well organised community. In Prague it was the same thing, but it was hopeless in Warsaw, which had hundreds of thousands of Jews, but did not have that kind of community organisation.

The other thing that should be noted is that in Germany you listed your faith community. Even through the war, the German state paid the salaries of religious community officials. In Berlin the last community official to be sustained as a civil servant, and actually paid a salary, was the rabbi in charge of the cemetery in Berlin. They did not mind paying his salary, and he actually survived the war. Up to 1943, the senior rabbi of the Berlin Jewish community was paid by the German state and then sent to the concentration camp. The Jewish community in Germany had their faith community in their tax records because the community got back money to maintain places of worship, clergy and cemeteries, and that is the system to this day. It is not the census; it is the community records.

CHAIR—If we were to retain the name-identifying census records on microfilm or on microfiche, subject to a quarantine period of 70 or 100 years, what impact do you think that would have in terms of the census returns from the Jewish community?

Rabbi Levi—I do not think it would have much effect, for two reasons. Firstly, the people who went through the Holocaust are now dying. After all, that was quite a long time ago and they are in their late 70s and their 80s. The proportion of people who went through that nightmare is diminishing. Secondly, being part of the Australian community, there would be more Jewish people who would say, 'I am of Jewish background but I am not Jewish by religion.' So there is that factor as well. I do not think it matters much. There will always be a proportion of people who will not list their religion for ideological reasons or because of their scarring. The scars will diminish but the ideological reasons may increase.

CHAIR—What is the practice in Israel?

Rabbi Levi—There they have the Turkish system, the millet system, which the British mandate continued in Palestine, and Israel continued it because it was too hot to handle and to change the status quo was very important. Therefore, every religious community has their own status. If you are Catholic, the church is responsible for your status as married or divorced. It is the same with the Islamic community where monogamy is now the law but you do not have to divorce your other three wives.

The Jewish community also is administered by the rabbinic courts, which causes tremendous problems because the rabbinic courts are administered by orthodox rabbis and 85 per cent of the population in Israel is not orthodox. There is a kulturkampf going on about this but everybody belongs to a religious community

and that turns up on your identity card, which is particularly important because of the security implications. It is an interesting question because there the state does know what religious community you belong to.

There are grey areas because Moslems can marry Christians, according to Moslem law, but their children have to be brought up as Moslems. Israel, of course, does not insist upon that so there are people in no man's land. The same applies to the Jews from the Soviet Union: many of them came with their non-Jewish spouses and their children. But when their children die, where do they get buried? That becomes tragic when they get killed in terrorist attacks or in the army. The orthodox rabbinate intervenes and says, 'You cannot bury them in a Jewish cemetery. They died in this terrorist attack but we do not know where they belong.' It has very real implications because of the fact that the religious communities are responsible for their own cemeteries.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—Let me follow on from a couple of things that the chair was asking about. For the group of people who are concerned, due to those historical reasons, about identifying themselves as Jewish on the census, would that follow through into opposition to a change, if we were to suggest a change in the direction of retention and census records? It is one thing, as a personal and private matter, to say, 'No, I don't feel comfortable about filling this in and I'm not going to.' But do you think it would extend further to people being concerned about a change that would mean that census records were kept?

Rabbi Levi—Probably.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—It strikes me that even if it is a relatively small group of people, and a declining number of people, that there is considerable community sensitivity regarding those things. If people raise those concerns publicly, there would be some concern or sympathy for that expression of view.

Rabbi Levi—I agree. I think some concern would be expressed. You have to go by the rule that everything that can go wrong will go wrong. It is possible that there would be people who would be very obsessed with this but we have never tested it out. It is impossible to know what the Jewish community councils or the Executive Council would decide. It is worthwhile asking them. It is worthwhile writing to the President of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry in Sydney, Diane Shteinmann, and have her raise it. But I would think that community pressure would probably force her to be ultra cautious rather than say that history is very important.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—Yes. Notwithstanding that concern, your own position, as you expressed it at the start, is that 90 per cent would fill it in, and would leave you and others who are interested in these things with records that are of value to you.

Rabbi Levi—Yes. I think to oppose it would be very short-sighted, literally. You would have to mount a campaign to reassure people. I am sure that it has wider implications for the Jewish community. A lot of people are very suspicious now of invasion of privacy. So if it was not this issue with the Jewish community, it would be some other issue with somebody else. I just happen to think that you cannot write history without people.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—Yes. I do not know how widely it has been canvassed in other hearings but it strikes me that it would be possible to have a voluntary arrangement where you could tick a certain box, and that that would result in the records being kept or not being kept.

Rabbi Levi—Yes, kept for historical purposes.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—Do you have any thoughts about an idea like that?

Rabbi Levi—That is a way around the problem. I have thought about that. It could say, ‘Would you have an objection to the census form being kept for 75 years or 100 years for the purposes of historical research?’

Mr MUTCH—Other people are obsessive about filling out census forms. Why would it make any difference if the person says to them, ‘You can trust us, we are the government, we are going to destroy them after a couple of years’. Why would that make a difference to them?

Rabbi Levi—I don’t know.

Mr MUTCH—So you think it might not?

Rabbi Levi—Of course. It is illogical.

Mr MUTCH—The ABS argued, ‘Everyone is so trusting of us. They are happy to fill in the forms because we tell them we are going to destroy them in 18 months’.

Rabbi Levi—The tax department does not say it is going to destroy your form.

Mr MUTCH—No, that is right. I have another couple of questions. I am sure that the Jews made a major contribution in Germany, as they have made major contributions in many societies, but that did not stop the Holocaust. Maybe it stopped problems in some other countries. As an historian and as someone who writes from the point of view of the contributions made by Jews in Australia over a very long period of time, do you feel that that contributes to the feeling of acceptance of a particular community, not just the Jewish community, but any community in Australia, as being part of the mosaic of this nation and having made major contributions to this country?

Also, do you feel that having knowledge of that history contributes to the self feelings of particular groups that builds on their own esteem as having made major contributions to a nation and, therefore, ultimately serves as a major unifying factor in a nation?

Rabbi Levi—I certainly agree with that. That is why I write my books. It is a very important sense of belonging which therefore makes you concerned about issues that are beyond your own community. Once you have a sense of identity and you feel you belong, you are a stakeholder, but I would not like to underestimate the feeling of alienation of people who come to this country and simply feel out of it for a long time. Maybe it is their children who are going to join the mainstream.

I often think some of the members of the community to which I belong carry a kind of passport with a visa in it in their pocket. There is probably no other migrant group after the Second World War that stayed put more than the Jewish community. All the other communities go back. I think a third of the people born in the United Kingdom end up back in the United Kingdom, but the Jewish community stays here. I think as many as 90 per cent stay in Australia.

Those who would leave would leave for Israel and quite often those young people are people who have more relatives in Israel, more cousins, than they have relatives here. Their parents happened to end up in Australia because that was the place where they went after the Second World War.

It is very important for communities to know their own background. The Jewish community in Australia is particularly fortunate because it was their on day one of European settlement. Therefore, its story is amazing. We had a history symposium, a colloquium, in my congregation a couple of weeks ago and Geoffrey Blainey was one of the speakers. He complained, he said, 'There are dozens and dozens of books about the Jewish experience in Australia and there are only about three or four about the Methodists.' There is a strong feeling of identity in the Australian Jewish community, which will get very much stronger.

Mr MUTCH—It is interesting that you said that identity was able to be built upon the basis of early Australian history.

Rabbi Levi—Yes.

Mr MUTCH—What has happened to communities that have come in the interim where the census has not been retained? Would that be a great difficulty for them to be able to write their story?

Rabbi Levi—You scratch a bit at the beginning, yes because you are not there. There are just isolated individuals. Actually, we are a much more mixed group than we thought. If you go back into the early records, you will find, for example, that the First Fleet had picked up a black South African who had been convicted of something or other in Cape Town. They bunged that South African on to the First Fleet. He may well have ancestors and descendants among the top families of Australia by now, but people have not as yet started to search for that. I was going over some material and suddenly noticed that the other day.

Mr MUTCH—I believe there was a Chinese cook as well.

Rabbi Levi—Was there?

Mr MUTCH—I believe so.

Rabbi Levi—I remember that very early one of the first issues of the Sydney Gazette mentions that the Muslims, mostly sailors, had held an end of Ramadan celebration which would have been the first Islamic service here. That takes us back a long way, but then we got very homogenised after the Second World War, didn't we?

Mr MUTCH—With regard to the census in Israel—I am not sure whether you actually got to the

point—do they keep the census records?

Rabbi Levi—I have no idea. I bet they do. That is worth asking the embassy.

Mr MUTCH—Do we know when they take census records?

Rabbi Levi—They certainly announce regularly the size of the different communities because, in terms of politics, it is rather important to know how many Arabs are citizens of the state of Israel and what is the mix of the Arab-Jewish population of Galilee, for example.

I read an article on the Internet this morning about the falling Christian population in Jerusalem, so they must keep pretty up-to-date records. That is a very interesting question. I am sure they do not throw them out—they do not throw anything out.

CHAIR—Rabbi, thank you very much for coming along this morning and discussing that with us.

Rabbi Levi—It is my pleasure. I am very pleased to be able to mention that business about our omission in the religions in the census. It used to be that you had ‘Jewish’ and you checked the box. It was a bit of a shock when suddenly we fell off the edge of the world.

CHAIR—We will put the question to the ABS when they return.

Rabbi Levi—Okay. They will be very cross; I know that.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—They are already cross.

[11.09 a.m.]

JOHNSTON, Professor Allan John, Head, School of Social Inquiry, Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria 3217

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.

We are in receipt of the submission of 7 August. I now invite you to make some opening comments about it.

Prof. Johnston—Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee. As I said, I am representing the university but, more particularly, I am representing staff and students of the university who are interested in conducting social research. My own particular interest and expertise is in history. The submission that I put on behalf of the university is restricted to the third term of reference—that is, the value of name-identified records for medical, social and genealogical research released after a significant period of time.

I begin by acknowledging that the integrity of the census is paramount, and I understand that that is one of the concerns the committee is addressing, but argue that that is not inconsistent with the retention of name-identified records and their use by scholars under appropriate ethical guidelines and rules of access.

The basic rule of collecting and coding information, which I teach my students each year when they are preparing material for analysis by computer and so on, is that it is important to retain as much detail as possible for a few reasons. Firstly, it is possible to eliminate items or to aggregate them but it is not possible to retrieve those items once they are lost or once the aggregation has occurred. It is usually not possible to disaggregate the information.

The second point is that we never know what question society may wish to ask or seek answers to in the future. I think my own research into unemployment in the United States in the early decades of this century is probably a point in question. The sorts of questions I am asking of that information, using manuscript census records there, are not questions that the compilers of the census or indeed scholars of the time may have thought were important but on reflection today we may well think they are important.

The third point is that scholars have access to name-identified material all the time and some of it contains information that is much more sensitive than is contained in the census, and I just quote some examples of personnel records, medical records, immigration records, student records, birth, death and marriage records, vital statistics and church records. These have been used widely for a very long period of time. Scholars also deal with very sensitive issues.

For example, in my own school of social inquiry at the moment there are staff and postgraduate students who are researching into issues such as euthanasia, birthing practices, police corruption, fraud, drug

abuse among women, mothers who sexually abuse their daughters and the role of homosexuals in the police force. I might say we also deal with a number of issues that are not quite so dramatic. But those are common, everyday issues that people in universities are used to dealing with.

The way in which we govern the appropriate use of this material is primarily through an ethics procedure which is based on the NHMRC guidelines—the National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines—which include guarantees on a number of issues which have to do with such things as informed consent, the retention of records in a locked cabinet, anonymity in reported results and so on.

Scholars also enter into agreements with authorities, archives, government departments and so on from time to time and agree to abide by restrictions on the use of material. These restrictions range from issues to do with copyright or, I guess this is at the other end of the spectrum, things such as the Official Secrets Act. For example, from time to time, I have signed agreements to limit the disclosure of material that I have consulted in the Australian National Archives.

I draw the committee's attention to the availability of name-identified census records, after a lapse of time, in many other countries, including the United States, with which I am most familiar. Finally, I point to the fact that until relatively recently we have known relatively little of the history of ordinary men and women or of the ways in which large groups in society have coped with social change.

The change in our knowledge, which has occurred over the last 20 to 30 years, is due largely to the willingness of people like me, historians, to use a wider range of records including oral history. Pre-eminently, those studies are based on access to manuscript census records in France—where the work of the Annales school is usually held up as the example—the United States and other countries.

CHAIR—In your submission you spoke about your own historical research into work, unemployment and household structures based on manuscript United States census records. Obviously, that cannot be done in Australia. What is the consequence of the inability to use those records?

Prof. Johnston—The primary consequence is that it limits enormously the range of questions that we might ask of the past. The primary role of name-identified records is being able to make linkages either between the census and other forms of records like the records of individual firms, employment agencies, the vital statistics such as births, deaths and marriages, church registers and those sorts of records, or between censuses themselves which enables a range of studies to do with mobility, both social mobility on the one hand and geographic mobility on the other.

It does not have to be names. We could have a system in this country of alternative identifiers. For example, the United States has social security numbers which every person in the country has. Having lived in the United States for a few years, I have a social security number. I do not know where it is or what it is any more. The important point is that there is an identifier which is discrete to each individual and that can be traced from one set of records to another to enable those sorts of longitudinal studies of mobility and to enable linkages between various sets of records to enhance our knowledge of the subjects that we are interested in pursuing.

Mr MUTCH—In respect of those identifier numbers, you would still have to be able to link them to the name, wouldn't you?

Prof. Johnston—Yes, that is right.

Mr MUTCH—You would still have to keep the name and address somewhere.

Prof. Johnston—That is right, unless we had a system, for example, where everybody had an identifier and it was reported in all of their activities from submission of their tax forms to their Medicare number to their employment records and so on.

Mr MUTCH—The point is that the number still has to relate to a living person so you can track that person from one census to the next.

Prof. Johnston—Exactly. People would have to know that and remember that. I understand all the other concerns that people have about confidentiality and the debate that went on a couple of years ago about an Australia Card and so on.

Mr MUTCH—What sort of relationship would you have with the Australian Bureau of Statistics? Do they call upon you to contribute to their analysis of statistical collections?

Prof. Johnston—No, not me personally. They do have links with several of my colleagues, particularly the sociology people, and we make a great deal of use of the ABS. It is possible at the moment, for example, to ask the ABS to run a series of investigations on our behalf, and a number of my colleagues do that. The difficulty with that is that it is obviously an expensive way of proceeding. There is usually a very discrete purpose in conducting those investigations and they may well not be the sorts of questions or investigations that someone in 50 years or 100 years time may want to ask of this society on the material that is generated now.

Mr MUTCH—In terms of the contribution that you, as a sociologist, and your colleagues could make to better understanding of governments in order to make decisions based upon census collections, would you submit that the name-identified material would add substantially to the research value?

Prof. Johnston—Yes. At its most simple level we would probably argue that it is important to the census to ask every possible question it can think of and to retain that information. Obviously, that is not realistic. I am sure there are many other questions, other than those that were asked in the recent census, for example, that people would like to have information on. However, I and most scholars would accept that there are probably limits beyond which you will not get compliance because people will just get tired of filling in forms and so on and will not provide the information.

As a starting point, as I said earlier, the more information that can be provided in a discrete form and retained, the better from the point of view of people who may wish to use it either now or in 100 years in the future.

Mr MUTCH—Have you any knowledge or personal experience of the use made of name identified material by sociologists in overseas countries?

Prof. Johnston—Not personally. I am an historian rather than a sociologist and I regret that one of my colleagues who has used such material is not able to come because he is teaching.

Mr MUTCH—Who is that?

Prof. Johnston—Dr Kevin Brown, a lecturer on our Burwood Campus. I had approached him about accompanying me—and, indeed, another of our historians was going to come along as well, but he is suffering from the dreaded flu so was unable to come. I am aware of a number of cases where demographers rather than sociologists have used material in studies, particularly of migration and mobility of that sort.

Mr MUTCH—And that would be of some use in application to current government decision making?

Prof. Johnston—Yes, that is right.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—The ABS expresses a concern that the retention of name identified data affects the quality and value of the data that you are collecting, in that people are no longer candid about what they fill in. Have you thought about that, and do you have a response to that?

Prof. Johnston—I actually discussed this two weeks ago with an ABS representative who happened to be at a conference I was at. He was reporting on some of the surveys and so on that they had done in recent time. His feeling was that there is a two or three per cent non-compliance with the census across the board as it is. I cannot speak for the ABS but I got the impression from talking to him that they did not see retaining name identifiers as a major problem. He was a relatively junior member of the ABS, so perhaps that explains it.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—It is not the official line.

Prof. Johnston—Exactly. I have his card at home: I could pick it out for you, but it might not do his career much good! I would say two things in response. Firstly, perhaps there is a need—as I think Rabbi Levi may have said earlier—for some sort of education program to educate people about the ways in which this material might be used and the safeguards that would be implemented to ensure that it was not misused, in order to overcome that problem. Secondly, if people stopped to think, they would also be aware that there is an extraordinary amount of material already available that is name identified. As I said before, much of that material—indeed, perhaps an enormous amount of it—is much more sensitive, I would have thought, in its content than is material that is related to the census. Thirdly, this does not seem to be a problem in many countries of the world. I am an American historian by training and inclination, and I am not aware that the American authorities believe that the fact that manuscript census material, the original census-takers records, will be made available to people. If I recall correctly, the US time limit on making this generally available is either 60 or 70 years.

CHAIR—It is 72 years.

Prof. Johnston—Yes. I know that they are gearing up to release the 1930 census. It does not seem to be a problem in a range of other modern democracies, and I am not sure why it should be a specific problem in this country, if in fact we are able to engage in some sort of education program to convince the community that the material will not be misused.

CHAIR—I want to take up a point you are making there. In the submission from the Australian Statistics Advisory Council, from whom we will be hearing today, they say about this issue:

Overseas experience is sometimes cited as a basis for retaining Census forms. Both the United Kingdom and the United States retain Census forms. However, this has been a long standing practice in both countries and it is questionable whether a decision on the issue taken today would produce the same outcome. Also, in both countries, there have been recently expressed concerns about the quality of the Census results.

I am interested in exploring with you, Professor, whether there is a cultural difference between Australia and the United States. It always struck me that the United States was the land of the individual, of personal autonomy and of rights to privacy, to an extent that perhaps was not as obvious here in Australia. If that is part of the culture of the United States, why does it not seem to have been a problem that they retain their census records? On the basis of your experience of having spent time in both countries, could you elaborate on that?

Prof. Johnston—That is a very fair point. There are a number of issues, including rights to free speech and freedom of information and so on, embodied in the Bill of Rights in the United States that do mean a much greater legacy of openness and freedom in its most broad definition, and that fact probably enhances that nation's approach to the openness of information like census records. It is probably fair to say there is a different culture. The only thing I could say in response to that is that, having worked in Australian history as well as American history, I do not believe that the Bureau of Statistics has actually ever fully articulated its concerns about compliance with the census in this country. It seems to me that it is more an expression of a concern that is based on some sort of vague notion that, if we do this, there would be a lot of resistance rather than the concern being based on any hard and fast evidence that that actually occurs.

I would also point out that the census bureau already has in place a number of activities between censuses and follow-ups to the census which it uses to try to adjust the figures to take account of the fact that there is not a complete count at the moment and there is not complete compliance. I am not certain of the extent to which that would overcome what they may envisage as a greater problem if in fact name identifiers are retained. But I would perhaps like your committee to put the onus back on those authorities to demonstrate that there is likely to be a major increase in noncompliance if there is a change made to retain the records and to retain the name identifiers.

Mr MUTCH—Does your experience include work on the Canadian census?

Prof. Johnston—No, I am pretty much restricted to the United States.

Mr MUTCH—In terms of culture, they have a background which is Westminster derived and similar to ours.

Prof. Johnston—That is right, yes.

Mr MUTCH—The ABS—or, certainly, statisticians—say they have got a record as good as, or better than, the Australian census collections record; yet they do keep their census.

Prof. Johnston—They do, and they provide access.

Mr MUTCH—They are not keeping the last one, because they would be keeping the paper records and they would be concerned about the cost of storage.

Prof. Johnston—Yes.

Mr MUTCH—But they have, historically, kept their censuses.

Prof. Johnston—I guess that in the digital age the cost of paper storage is not a major problem.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—Coming back to the records, what about a voluntary system, some sort of halfway house where people could tick a box indicating whether they were happy to have the records kept or not happy to have the records kept?

Prof. Johnston—The difficulty there would be that, in order to ensure the accuracy and the integrity of the results, it would have to be all or nothing. If people are self-selecting, as it were, then the results do not constitute a statistically significant sample. The only way one can ensure that outcome is by having a purely random selection from a population of people. I do not know what sort of biases might be built into a voluntary system, but there are likely to be ethnic and socioeconomic differences that would distort the picture that scholars attempting to use that material would have built into their results in future years. It needs to be all or nothing.

CHAIR—You say in your submission:

I believe genuine scholars would support and abide by a system of access restricted to those who have subjected their research proposals to appropriate ethics approval procedures which were also governed by appropriate rules of access and penalties for misuse of the information obtained.

Why do you believe that these ethics procedures are sufficient?

Prof. Johnston—Perhaps the ethics procedures on their own are not. Ethics procedures are slightly different from the use of records, such as census records, because in most cases they do imply some form of written, informed consent. You will see on the documents that I have provided, our ethics form, that the researcher is required to provide a plain language statement to the subjects being interviewed—if it is an interview—and to give certain other undertakings.

The sanctions for us are twofold. Firstly, there will be penalties from the university for misuse of the information, because it is absolutely vital to the university that it follows the procedures: if it does not, it then

becomes ineligible for access to research funding for the Australian Research Council, the NHMRC and a variety of other bodies. Effectively, it would cripple the research operation. That said, it is very much an honorary system, as it were, despite those sorts of sanctions. The value of that process would be that the people who sign off on those forms before they undertake the research do, in effect, acknowledge that there are ethical issues at stake and that there are things that they, as responsible scholars, need to do to ensure that they are not betraying confidences and so on.

I would also see that most scholars would have no difficulty with a system that did embody sanctions. You pointed out, for example, that this committee was not taking evidence under oath, but I would have had no problem about giving evidence under oath and abiding by the consequences of giving misleading evidence—which, I would presume, would form everything from a jail sentence to financial penalties. It would be entirely appropriate for people wishing to have access to census records, even after a period of 60 or 70 years or whatever, to sign a declaration that they would not misuse the material. The advantage of having an ethical procedure—through a university, another institution or some form of professional association—would be a further assurance that people were actually aware of the issues involved and understood them before they undertook the study.

CHAIR—Professor, I thank you—and, through you, the university—for your submission and also for attending today and discussing it with us. The document from the Deakin University Ethics Committee headed ‘Application for approval of project’ is accepted as an exhibit to the inquiry.

[11.36 a.m.]

VINE HALL, Mr Nicholas John, Chairman, Census Working Party, Australasian Federation of Family History Organisations, 386 Ferrars Street, Albert Park, Victoria 3206

CHAIR—We will continue the hearing. I welcome Mr Vine Hall of the Australasian Federation of Family History Organisations.

Mr Vine Hall—I have also sent in a submission on behalf of the Australasian Association of Genealogists and Record Agents, of which I am also the chairman. I appear on behalf of both of those groups.

CHAIR—Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you 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 those two submissions from the Australasian Association of Genealogists and Record Agents of 18 July and the Australasian Federation of Family History Organisations Incorporated of 31 July. Would you care to make some opening remarks?

Mr Vine Hall—I would be very pleased to do that. As the Association of Genealogists and Record Agents is one of 99 members of the federation, I could perhaps just speak to the federation's submission in which I, on behalf of some 50,000 financial members of the subgroups and an estimated 300,000 genealogists throughout Australia, submit that the Australian census should be retained in the archives for 50 to 100 years—or at least part of it should be—for social, genealogical and medical research purposes.

Although my submission is 12 pages and that is all I believe has been put in the printed lists, I would like to draw attention to some of the attachments. In particular, the one called fact sheets 1 to 10 in which I say that AFFHO would like to see data from nine of the questions used in the 1996 census retained. Our proposal is outlined in fact sheet No. 1 of attachment G. For some reason, I understand this attachment has not been put in your papers. I hope that all the committee members would see that. Perhaps I could just expand on what that proposal is so that it is clear what we are recommending.

We are campaigning to retain and subsequently record the following nine items of information which are vitally important to medical geneticists, academic historians, social demographers and family historians: house; household address; age and gender; marital status; relationship, i.e., family structure; birthplace; birthplace of parents, and by that we mean exact birthplace; internal migration; and occupation. These nine questions usually appear on the first one to three sheets of each census return; it may be that they could be put on one sheet if it was going to save a lot of money.

We propose that only the original sheets containing the above questions be retained and be securely stored as soon as the ABS has completed its required data extraction. Suitably safe and fully confidential storage would be available at several Commonwealth locations—for example, the Mint and the Australian Archives. The latter is the official repository for Commonwealth records—such as federal cabinet documents—which are subject to a 30-year no access embargo. That is the gist of our proposal, Mr

Chairman.

One of the arguments put forward by the Bureau of Statistics in their view that the retention of census data would significantly damage their response rate in their statistics is that there is this huge concern in the community that they would not complete the census accurately if they knew that the data was going to be retained.

According to the *Australian National Audit Office report No. 35, 1996-97*, the Office of the Privacy Commissioner only received 120 census related calls in relation to the 1996 survey. Only 80 of these concerned names and addresses. Out of 18 million citizens, one person in 18,000 is hardly significant. That is a point that I would like to stress.

I would also like to draw attention to the aspect of our submission concerning the fact that government policy on the retention of personal records in different categories is very inconsistent. I would like to use the example of Australian military records. I have with me, thanks to my fellow councillor on the Association of Genealogists and Record Agents Bruce Garner, who is in the gallery today, a list of personal questions asked by both the military and the ABS. In terms of the ABS, I am talking about the 1986 and 1996 census—and, by the way, military records are retained. These questions are, in order from 1 to 12: what is your full name? What is your age? What is your relationship in the family? Are you married, single or a widow? What is your permanent address? What is your religion? Are you a citizen of Australia—if not, where were you born? What schooling did you receive? How many years secondary schooling? What was your highest qualification at school? Name the educational institution where you received this qualification? What is your occupation?

I will not speak at any great length on this other than to quickly summarise the balance of them. I would like to table it for the information of the committee and send a photostat to you next week. I believe I can do that. These are the personal questions asked by the Australian military forces on attestations, data sheets and application forms from 1914 to 1966. There is a total of 21 questions, including, for example, No. 14: who is your actual next of kin? The order of relationships is as follows: wife, eldest son, eldest daughter, father, mother, eldest brother, eldest sister, eldest half-brother, eldest half-sister. The point of this: chest size; distinguishing marks? What is your religion? Have you ever been convicted in a civil court? All this information about people who were in the military, I understand, is available, subject to the 30-year rule. I would like to table that.

The last point I would like to make is in relation to the raw material of history about ordinary people. In my view as a genealogist of some 30 years experience, the records of the ordinary people of Australia are very incomplete and it is not true, as the ABS asserts, that there are substitute records about Australians if the census is not available. The census is the only record that records all Australians whether they are Aboriginals, little babies, women, immigrants—all those people who do not leave footprints in the regular records.

Five million Australians were not born here. Many of them come from countries that have been ravaged by war. In the case of Ireland, the IRA blew up the record office in 1922 and lost a lot of their civil records. We genealogists and social historians spend a lot of our working life trying to put humpty dumpty

back together again. There are many large holes in this system. That is why we believe the census is the only true record of the Australian culture and it should be retained according to the UNESCO guidelines. I have outlined these in my submission. They state that four records of any culture are vital for permanent preservation: land records; civil registration records; census records; and some records of a legal nature.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Vine Hall. I have one minor point in relation to the military records: if the military records are retained under the 30-year rule, after 30 years, are they available to anybody who wants to have access to them?

Mr Vine Hall—I am not sure of the exact title of the military record office. It is based in Melbourne and it is in charge of the records. I am not sure whether the records are available to all and sundry or whether they are only available to the people who are concerned in the records or to their legal heirs. I do have a letter on file which I would be happy to supply to the committee about that.

Mr MUTCH—The point that you are making is that they are kept.

Mr Vine Hall—The point I am making is they are kept and they are far more sensitive than the census. Again, they are selective, as are all these other so-called substitute records. They only concern people who happen to be going into military service.

CHAIR—In the submission from the Australian Association of Genealogists and Record Agents, it is stated that the ABS believes that a small degree of statistical accuracy is more important than keeping the history of our culture. Is it the implication of your comments that you think retention of the census forms will only affect the statistical accuracy of the census to a small degree and, if so, on what evidence do you conclude thus?

Mr Vine Hall—That is my view and the view of the associations that I represent. I do not claim to be a statistician, but I can claim to have spent the last 25 years of my life researching the subject internationally. I have become quite passionate about it, and I guess that is fairly obvious. I draw the attention of the committee to one of the attachments to my report, which is the best evidence relating to this. Unfortunately, it is not in the printed papers. It is quite bulky; you cannot include everything. There was a study by Mr Rex Sinnott, a law student at Victoria University in New Zealand.

Mr MUTCH—That is a separate submission; it is in the report.

Mr Vine Hall—It is a separate submission; I beg your pardon. I draw your attention to that submission. That submission relates to Mr Sinnott's study last year. He wrote to the bureau of statistics in countries like Canada, New Zealand, America and England in the British Isles. He asked them about their non-response rates in relation to their census surveys. I gather the percentage was somewhere between 2½ and 1.8 variation and I think Australia is more or less the same. New Zealand would not give a percentage. They had a funny sort of system. Does that answer your question? That is the evidence in countries that do keep the census. In the case of England, where it does not ask the income question, the sensitivity factor does not seem to vary very much in those cases compared with Australia.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—In the submission, you indicated:

Our professional colleagues . . . stare at us in disbelief . . . So does the average Australian in the street when informed of this fact.

There was a public survey going back a month or so. I have not got it here, but my recollection was that the public survey suggested that the majority of people were opposed to keeping the records. How would you square that with your observation?

Mr Vine Hall—I would love to analyse with you the basis of that survey, if there was time. I admit that I have not spent \$40,000 of taxpayers' money on a survey to see if what I have said is true. However, it is based on me speaking to average Australians over many years and on a statement in the publication *Diffusion—International forum for census dissemination*, No 9, December 1991, which is attachment L to my submission. In relation to Australian census surveys the editor commented:

A situation is likely to exist where a large proportion of the population did not believe that census data was kept confidential and yet cooperated in the provision of that data.

In other words, there is a reluctance to do it but they still do it even though they know that Big Brother is going to look at it. That is the only evidence I have. I acknowledge that it is not a funded public survey. I would love to see one; I really would.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—There is another observation about the number of calls of complaint—80 calls now—that came in. Given that in our experience people are reluctant to make complaints, that might represent some much more substantial figure of people who are concerned about these things but not so concerned as to make complaints about issues to do with keeping names and addresses. Also, the number of complaints might be limited by the present assurances regarding confidentiality and destruction. People would be much more concerned if those assurances could no longer be made.

Mr Vine Hall—I believe assurances should be made. I think this helps educate people as to the value of what they are doing. I believe that Australia should consider making an assurance along the lines of the way that they do in countries such as Canada and America. In America, on the front of their census form and in the preamble to the census survey, they say:

The law requires answers but guarantees privacy.

By law (Title 13, U.S. Code), you're required to answer the census questions to the best of your knowledge. However, the same law guarantees that your census form remains confidential. For 72 years—or until the year 2062—only the Census Bureau employees can see your form. No one else—no other government body, no police department, no court system or welfare agency—is permitted to see this confidential information under any circumstances.

I believe if you said that to the Australian population many more of them would appreciate the need for doing a census and they would understand that it was going to be kept for a useful purpose.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—The other thing was where you refer to military records and so on as

matters of a more sensitive nature that are still being kept. There might be a distinction—although the military might not be the best example, given the relevance of conscription—in many people's minds between situations where you voluntarily undertake a career in the army compared with the census, which is compulsory. People might be more comfortable about you giving up certain rights in terms of joining the army or whatever it is.

Mr Vine Hall—That is true; they might be. I cannot dispute that but, again, it is not tested. I believe the ABS assertion that this greater degree of inaccuracy has not been publicly tested in Australia in an unbiased survey. I believe that it should be in the lead-up to the year 2001 survey. I believe that many more Australians, if they were educated and it was explained to them about the usefulness of data other than for statistical purposes, would try harder and would give more accurate responses to the census than they do now. That could well compensate. It is only hypothetical but I believe it should be tested.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—This issue of accuracy strikes me as being almost untestable. Firstly, a survey of people concerning their intentions about how they would fill in a survey is not the same thing as what they do when confronted with it. Secondly, part of the accuracy issue is about whether people fib on the survey, which must be an extraordinarily difficult thing to work out. If people think it is going to be public knowledge, would they fill in the income section differently from the way they would fill it in if they are confident that it is not going to be public knowledge?

Mr Vine Hall—We historians are not proposing that information such as income, religion and how many illegitimate babies you have had necessarily be kept. It could be on a separate sheet. We are very much in favour of privacy. The Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Archives have a good record of keeping information private, as they do with things such as cabinet minutes.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—Continuing on that theme, have you given consideration to the questions that ought to be retained, the access for people with a legitimate interest in them and which areas ought not to be so available?

Mr Vine Hall—We have—in that list that I gave early on. In particular, we are interested in names, relationships, and exact birthplaces. When you are trying to reconstruct the family history, whether it is for genealogical reasons purely or for medical research to trace the descent of some 4,000 inherited diseases, birthplace can be critical in linking one John Smith with another. There are so many people with similar names and, as the population of the earth expands, it is more difficult to prove with available evidence these relationships. Out of the nine items that I cited earlier, if the list had to be shorter, I would take out things like occupation, marital status and so on.

Again, civil registration records in Australia are cited as an alternative source for births, deaths and marriages. Forty per cent of Australians are not getting married any longer. There are test-tube babies walking around all over the place. Many of the immigrants from overseas come from countries where their records have been lost. I am a professional genealogist and any day now a 20-year-old is going to walk into my office and say, 'My daddy was a test tube in Idaho,' or something, 'and I want you to trace his ancestry.' I have to use the sources available. In a census, we would be able to record every Australian and not discriminate. We believe that as historians, we are being discriminated against by not having this right to

know our history.

Mr MUTCH—The ABS say, ‘Trust us. We collect this data and we destroy the source. We have the statistics here. You have got to believe that they are correct. There is no way of going back to the source data.’ I believe that there are scraps of original census returns from the colonial period in Australia and that there have been some studies done to compare this data with published statistics of the period. Can you elaborate on that?

Mr Vine Hall—Indeed I can. Fact sheet No. 6 discusses this very issue. It is called ‘Fact sheet No. 6, Australia Census History’. It says that out of the 158 census surveys taken so far in Australia on a colonial and a state-by-state basis, 87 per cent are lost. However, of the scraps that have survived of colonial censuses, an analysis was done of an early Victorian census—colonial surveys—by Dr George Parsons, now Professor Parsons, of Macquarie University who wrote to the *Australian* newspaper on 22 September 1994. He said in relation to the census retention issue:

I read the background material on which the census statistics from my thesis 19th Century Victoria were based, and I found the published statistics did not follow the raw material.

How can we know what really happened if we do not keep the evidence? I believe that it is a criminal thing to do to destroy the raw material of our history. I have spoken to Professor Parsons and he said he has evidence of this. I am sure that if the committee invited him he would supply a copy of his thesis. He said he would do that. I would strongly urge the committee to consult with him.

Mr MUTCH—I believe you have been the resident genealogist on ABC radio for about 20 years and that you have up to one million regular listeners. What sorts of questions do your talkback audience ask you about census substitute records?

Mr Vine Hall—I am confronted regularly with, ‘I am stuck with my research. What do I do next?’ by genealogists. Because the last census of any substance in Australia was the 1828 census, which was almost at the time of the First Fleet, I am always being asked, ‘If we don’t have the census, what else can we do? What other records are there? Grandpa disappeared in the gold rush. How can I find evidence of what became of him, who he married or how many children he had?’

As a response to those 20 years of questions, I wrote this book, which I would like to table for the elucidation of the committee. This is a summary of 41 record groups for each state and territory of Australia. They are all substitutes, with the exception of one which is called ‘Census and musters’.

I am often asked, ‘What are the alternatives if I can’t find evidence of this person in this place at this time?’ My answer often is, ‘Look in this book.’ It cites over 100 pages of published sources in archives and in libraries. It really is a jigsaw puzzle. As I have said before, it is very embarrassing when I am talking to my colleagues in America. The guide to the whole of America is not as thick as that. Really I would say it is a big problem filling in these huge gaps in the history of Australia. My radio listeners reflect that.

Mr MUTCH—Is this the only real national coverage guide in Australia today on family history

records?

Mr Vine Hall—It is the only one that looks at the big picture. You will find a guide to the archives office of New South Wales shipping records. But it is the only one that covers all states and territories on a record by record group category. It summarises, for example, the surviving census and muster records. It mentions the 1916 secret police census of Australia, which I would love the committee to investigate further. It is a public document and it is referred to in my submission. I understand from recent inquiries about it from some of my colleagues that it has disappeared.

Mr MUTCH—What is it again?

Mr Vine Hall—I have cited it in my submission. It is on page 10 of my submission under closing remarks which read:

Australian government policy is not consistent in the collection, retention and public access to personal data about its citizens. Army enlistment records, hospital patient records, taxation records and census returns in the 20th century are all examples of this. Another is the *Federal Police Secret Census of 1916*—see attachment X.

Attachment X would give you more information. I understand there was some difficulty finding it recently when somebody asked about that record.

Mr MUTCH—What I am getting at here is that we have had submissions that say we do not need a census. We have all of these records all over the place, so why do you not use those records? Are you saying that your volume here shows the gaps in records to the present day?

Mr Vine Hall—I am.

Mr MUTCH—Do you suspect that those gaps will continue or perhaps even get worse in the modern technological age?

Mr Vine Hall—I am quite sure they are getting worse, as was observed in the recent report on the lost children, *Bringing them home*, published by the Australian government in 1997. It says:

As there is no single piece of legislation across Australia governing access to government records, there is no consistency in terms of practices or policies . . .

Many relevant files have been lost or destroyed . . . Between 1973 and 1985, for example, 95% of case files created by the SA Department of Family and Community Services were culled.

The belief was these files would not be of any further use. This lost information is both priceless and irreplaceable to the survivors of indigenous family separations and may well be lost to them forever.

This is just an example of an indiscriminate keep it or destroy it policy. There is no coordinated approach. With the computerisation of records and the fact that paper records are no longer routine, I am very concerned. We have 600 shelf kilometres of Australian archives now and that represents perhaps one per cent

of what they could keep. I am very concerned. In 100 years time, what alternative records will exist?

It is most important that we keep some surveys, such as that on the year 2001, to record the culture of Australia because of this threat from the Internet and the electronic record system. This is not permanent in the same traditional way. You cannot touch it and feel it and know that it is going to last, because it is not going to decay through acid paper or all these different problems that you have with these new mediums.

Mr MUTCH—The lost children issue is obviously very topical. We have also had submissions from sociologists and historians saying that we should retain the name identified census information and allow very special authorised access to it from day one. It has been recommended that the government make all sorts of efforts to try to help those Aboriginal children find their families in cases where they have not been able to do so to date. If the census records were to be accessible for discreet sociological purposes and research, would many of those children be able to find vital data to help them find their families?

Mr Vine Hall—Many of them would because they are capturing, in effect, the oral history of the old generation. Somebody who is three years old today who has Aboriginal ancestry, who grows up and in 20 years time wonders about his or her roots, will have the oral history of their grandfather or father recorded in this census, depending on what the question is, and will then not be denied the opportunity to know from this oral history where his or her connections are. So that is vital.

One of the things that family historians urge all families to do is to gather the oral history from the older generations. The trouble is that you do not have time when you are young; you get busy and it is not until you come close to the grave yourself that you start wondering about these things—and you are the only one left to ask.

Mr MUTCH—Many people think that genealogists in fact collect rocks.

Mr Vine Hall—Tombstones maybe.

Mr MUTCH—What is intrinsically valuable in the pursuit of family history research?

Mr Vine Hall—A social historian or a professor of history would perhaps be a better person to answer this but, in my view, these rocks, these pieces of history, are the building stones of a wider cultural picture. They can draw up a complete perspective, or a slice, of Australian history about ordinary people. It is true that the average genealogist is what you would call an ordinary person. But the typical outcome of a family history buff, you could call them, doing the research and putting their family story back together is that they will produce a book or a pamphlet, they will produce several hundreds copies of it, and they will lodge it, as we urge them to, in the National Library and their nearest council library.

That will become a little chunk of history that would otherwise have been lost, because for the last 200 years we have not had those census records. Then when the social historians use this raw material to get a larger picture, they can draw all sorts of conclusions and start to appreciate the emerging national identity of Australians. They can use these pieces for making decisions on social matters, medical matters and so on. That is my view.

Mr MUTCH—Does it seem odd to you that we have got more census records on the very earliest years of our history but for all our middle history we do not have these records? Is this going to be a black hole in Australia's history?

Mr Vine Hall—It is. We are almost at the critical stage now where we will not be able to write the history of our first 200 years in a realistic way. It is like a huge gulch, like the Grand Canyon, that they do not have in America in their records. The question of census destruction in Australia—and America and England to some extent—did not arise until the 1970s when someone invented this word 'privacy'. The income question was not asked in Australia until the 1970s. The records were just lying around in the archives; nobody knew they were there. In the case of America, New Zealand and England, the reason census records have been retained in identified form is because of lobbying by genealogists. In America, they estimate there are 40 million genealogists. Some of those genealogists are social historians, medical historians and so on. Some of them are hobby people but they have all got a right to know their history. I think it is not quite too late for us to save the situation by at least recording the name and address of every man, woman and child in Australia. When the year 2001 comes along, it would be a great gift to the nation and we would know ourselves better as a result.

CHAIR—Are you saying that if we did nothing else, we ought to retain the 2001 census?

Mr Vine Hall—I believe that would be a huge step in the right direction. I believe that there still could be reasoned argument from those that did not want to keep any censuses. To counter the expense argument, it might be possible to not keep every five-yearly census. Maybe the cost could be weighed against the effect on statistical accuracy and we could do as Canada does. Their policy is to keep it every 10 years. When we compare Australia to overseas countries, we are probably unique in the western world in that we have no census records on a national basis in this century. If you compare it to Canada, America and New Zealand, they have all got some, even though they might say 'We won't keep the next one or we might change our policy and review it'. We have got this huge gap.

Every now and again we should stop and review our position. Otherwise it is going to be too late and we will be like cabbage patch kids. If we want to be proud Australians, we have got to be able to look over our shoulders—

Mr MUTCH—What does 'cabbage patch' mean? That you don't know where you came from?

Mr Vine Hall—Yes. You are just left on a doorstep and abandoned; you do not belong to anything. It is human nature to wonder where you came from and to belong to the larger family. We have been denying Australians the right to know and I think that is wrong. That is why I appreciate the chance to speak to the committee and to elaborate on our submissions.

CHAIR—Do you know how many family histories have been lodged in the National Library?

Mr Vine Hall—I cite in my Australian source guide a book called *Bibliography of Australian Family History* by Andrew Peake, who gave evidence I believe at the South Australian hearing. It was published in 1988 and it lists, on an author, subject and title basis, the published family histories that he could find in

libraries generally in Australia at that date. In 1988 there would have been the same number again published because of the bicentennial fever. There are literally hundreds and hundreds of them published every year now.

I did a survey when I was director of the Society of Australian Genealogists from 1978 to 1988 on how many genealogists actually published something. They do the research, then they get carted off to the nursing home and they die and they throw it in the fire. Has it all been for nothing? My conclusion was that about 10 per cent of people publish something at that time. But you could probably ask the National Library computer under a category of subject. I think it would be a pretty easy question but I am sure it would be very substantial.

CHAIR—Mr Vine Hall, I thank you for the submissions which you have forwarded to the committee and the attachments which will be taken into account in our considerations and also for coming along today and discussing it with us. We appreciate that.

Mr Vine Hall—I am pleased to contribute.

CHAIR—Can I have a motion from Mr Thomson that the book *Tracing Your Family History in Australia, A Guide to Sources*, Second Edition, by Nick Vine Hall be accepted as an exhibit to the inquiry? There being no objection it is so resolved. You are going to send us a photocopy of that. When we receive that we will then accept it as an exhibit.

Luncheon adjournment

[1.34 p.m.]

WEATHERILL, Mr David Watkins, Council Member, The Genealogical Society of Victoria Inc., 5th Floor, Curtin House, 252 Swanston Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3000

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 the proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. We are in receipt of your submission of 18 July of this year. I now invite you to make some opening comments.

Mr Weatherill—I would like to congratulate the parliament for taking the initiative in looking at the issue of the census, because it has been an issue that has been under discussion for quite a while. When you go back through the records, you will find there have been requests for the saving of the census as both a historical record and also as a record made available for people at a later point in time to assist them in tracing families. I know that there are other issues involved and that the medical profession itself has expressed some interest, but I will not venture into that, because it is not an area I am part of. The society would like to thank the committee for picking up the issue and at least looking at saving the census.

We believe that it is a valuable document, especially a valuable historical document, which should be maintained. It provides, at a particular point in time, a snapshot of what the country, state and place was like. It also, further down the line, allows people who wish to look at what has occurred over time within Australia to look at it from a sociological and a family point of view. It would provide a better picture of what Australia was like, depending on the time line put in place in order to save it. It has been a highly used and valuable document in two large countries, namely the United States and England. If there were issues pertaining to privacy and other legal concerns, especially in the United States, from what I understand, they would have been addressed, since the US seems to be a country that takes individual rights very strongly. From that point of view, the society felt that it was important that we put a submission in for the retention of the census.

In our submission, we looked at the 100-year model which the UK currently runs. The US has a lesser time. By that time, the issue of privacy that might exist during people's lifetimes would not be a major issue. As to what is saved, we have made our submission that we are basically looking at the first three pages of the census, which contain general information. Also, for your information, I supplied at the appendices in the back of our submission extracts from the British one as to what is currently available, in case you were not sure about it.

I meant to inform you that the typed versions have been taken from the census film—they do not appear that way. It is just information that I have taken and typed up so that it is a little more readable, whereas the 1881 census, as I note in the submission, has now been produced by a joint publication between the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints or Mormon Church and the public record over there. It is available on microfilm. I believe they are now looking at the 1851 census in England to also come out in a similar format.

There are only two other points at this stage that I would like to make. Firstly, in looking at the use made of the census within the society—by our members who use our facilities—we have a very large proportion of members coming in to trace their family history and making tremendous use of the English census, because it provides a snapshot of the family and whoever else may be with the family at the time the census was taken. The information within the appendices I have provided shows that the census does give an indication as to where they were born and their approximate ages and an overview of the family with regard to occupations and so on.

Secondly, we do have a number of censuses that have been prepared within Australia. We have the 1828 one, which is available in published form at the moment, which also gets used, but it depends whether or not you had an ancestor here back in 1828 in order for them to be picked up by it. As well as that, chapters 28 and 29 in volume 3 of *Historical records of Victoria* have the 1836 and 1838 censuses for Victoria published. Thus, we do have evidence of census material being available for use by people.

We do not see any major problem with it being there as an historical record, given the current situation in those countries that do make the census available. The issues that the government will need to address will be storage, and the cost of maintaining those records and then finally producing them.

However, if we use the English example, that material, should it be made available to the public, is also available for purchase by the public. Therefore, costs can be reimbursed that way. Also, the 1881 one is now available for individuals to purchase if they wish. Again, from the government's point of view, it is a storage issue. Given the fact that the majority of the information is probably keyed in under the ABS role then you have got the computer storage of the data from it.

The society also believes that if the three pages can be maintained then at least those copies should be maintained, whether they be on microfiche, microfilm or preferably even the hard original one, which it is important to keep as well.

CHAIR—The main argument from the ABS against retention is that knowing that the data will be destroyed encourages people, firstly, to complete the form and, secondly, to be more accurate and honest in the way in which they complete the form. What is your response to that?

Mr Weatherill—Friends and relatives of mine in England where the census material is collected know that that information will be made available at a later time. That does not seem to worry them at all. They know that it will be retained for the 100 years. I do not see a problem with that. I understand there are issues regarding privacy and so on, but given the experience of those countries where it is retained and made available after a set time, as I said earlier in my statement, if that was deemed to be a problem I am sure the United States, with its concern for individual rights, would have stopped making it available, and the same with the United Kingdom.

From what I understand from discussions with people in the United Kingdom, there does not seem to be any major issue cropping up as each 10 years comes by with the 100-year provision coming in for the release of that data. Probably the reverse applies, that everyone sits and waits for the day after the 100 years is up for that next set of data, to get hold of it so they can at least follow through on what they are doing.

CHAIR—What is your impression of the attitude of Australians towards the issue? I know this is subjective, but do you think people are concerned about the privacy aspects?

Mr Weatherill—I can only speak for a very small percentage. I can speak on behalf of the council of the GSV because it is an issue that we have discussed. The members of the GSV that I have had the chance to talk with see no problem. As a matter of fact, their argument is there is far more benefit in making it available. It means that they do not have to track through huge numbers of records trying to put together family groups and following movements of families over time. In many cases that material is not available so it becomes a blank spot.

If you are asking me as an individual, I do not have any problems with 75 or 100 years. As a matter of fact, I do not have problems with the information being made available now given the information I have supplied to credit card companies and goodness knows what else. I think a lot of that information is already available and it seems to float around through the computer databases that are available. If it is not then I would not receive all these nice little letters that keep coming to me which I know nothing about. These organisations seem to have a whole lot of information on me. From an individual point of view, I do not have a problem. Those people that I have had the chance to discuss it with do not see a problem with it.

As for the issue of a time line, we would like to argue for a lesser one, the 75 years, but the 100-year period in the United Kingdom seems to be an acceptable one. If that became the preferred option then we have no problem with that.

CHAIR—Have any of the genealogical groups done any public sampling or public surveying?

Mr Weatherill—I can only talk on the GSV and Pat and Jack will talk on the AIGS. They are appearing after me. We did a quick random sample, as I said, through the members that we had that came through. About 100 a day roll through the facilities. Of those that we have spoken to, no-one has had any adverse disagreement with it. As a matter of fact, I can honestly say that from all the ones that I have spoken to, and from the information I have had from other members of the council who have spoken to others, everyone seems to be in favour of its retention. But then it is a captive audience and people who do have an interest in family history. Realising the potential of the material does add a dimension to it that probably the normal lay person does not have.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—There is the issue of whether it might be appropriate to ask people whether they want to have their forms kept for a period and then released to researchers, essentially making it voluntary at the discretion of the person being surveyed. What do you and your group think about that?

Mr Weatherill—That would then mean that you would have a set of historical documents that, at the best, I suppose we could describe as fractured. The group we have would be ad hoc and trying to get a complete overview would be very hard. We would prefer that what is currently used within the UK and the US is what is done. People understand that in both those countries, from my understanding, and it does not seem to create a problem that it is made available. That way, what you have is a complete picture of what Australia, or the state or the area that you are interested in, is about at a point in time.

One of the factors is that if you only make random pieces available, what value is the information, especially if the people that you are hunting for are not there? Do you make an assumption they were not at the place at the time of the census, or are they one of the ones that perhaps voluntarily decided they did not want to do it? How do you overcome the problem, say, that someone in the initial stage may say, 'I don't want it,' but then several years down the track, when they find themselves involved in some sort of family history research, they say, 'Oh heck, I wish I did.' How do you retrieve it from that point?

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—Although presumably, if it were on that voluntary basis, you would find that there were people who were comfortable with having their records kept and that would represent a step forward from the present situation.

Mr Weatherill—It would represent a step forward, yes. It would be hoped that, as with many of the records that we currently have, the government would at least look at the bigger picture and maintain the complete census. Then what you would have would be a complete census at that point. We do keep other records, by statutory or legal requirements. Why not the census?

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—Some of the other countries you have referred to seem to be keeping theirs every 10 years, rather than keeping every census. There must be some value in doing that.

Mr Weatherill—Realising the impact of how much documentation there is available, we did make the request within our submission that if 10 years was acceptable we would be happy with that as that would mean you would have every second census. Granted we do it every five years, so you are going to have a huge wealth of data. I have to be honest and say that it would be nice to keep it every five years because we do have a transient population and in a 10-year period people could have moved two and three times.

When you look at the implications especially for the government or the Australian Archives—whoever is responsible for retaining it—you could have a huge volume of detail. But given computerisation, the use of CD-ROM, hard disk and probably moving into next generation storage data, it may not present the huge volume that we could otherwise see, such as 50 trucks of data being kept each time. The real problem, I have to be honest, is that having it come out every five years does present an issue with regard to making that material available.

CHAIR—Is 10 years the longest period of time that would make retention useful? If I say, hypothetically, 20 years, what would you say about that?

Mr Weatherill—We discussed this at council and we felt that 10 years was an ideal time, probably for two reasons. One is that that is the pattern that has emerged with the UK census, which we are used to. The second was the issue that I mentioned in answering Mr Thomson: that we have population movement, so the longer you make the periods between retention, the true and accurate picture you have of family life starts to diminish. Within 20 years you could have one generation that may not appear in one and not appear in the other simply because in 18 years they have been born and disappeared. So you could miss a component of the family because the time line is just too great.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—The observation you made about credit card agencies or the amount of

data that is kept on us already is a valid observation. It gives rise to general community concerns about privacy, so maybe if we had better privacy arrangements in other areas, people would be more comfortable with the issues involving the census. I suspect that there is a general community concern about privacy issues which is fed by the amount of data that people are aware exists about them in the system already. That is more for us to consider in another context, but it is a valid point.

Mr Weatherill—I think the issue on that, Mr Thomson, is that that is current data. With what we are looking at there is quite a time line. In most cases the majority of people that are dealing with it now will not be around, unless there are radical changes in medical science and in the age people live to, so the issue of privacy is probably not the major one. My concerns are with the information available now. Ten years down the track I guess my lifestyle has changed, so that issue is no longer valid and it is not a concern.

When I made that observation it was really about current information. It is just surprising when you dig into what current information is available. Although we do get some screams, I am surprised that we do not get a lot more, given the availability and amount of data that is collected when you make various applications for passports, for joining firms or organisations, and so forth.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—I think people probably are not aware of the precise amount of data that is held on them and the purposes to which it is put; otherwise there would be more screams. But, as a general observation, I think there is a significant level of community concern about those issues.

Mr Weatherill—A way to overcome that is that if the census data is to be retained, and I hope it is, then at least if what is being saved, and why, is spelt out up-front, you may have better acceptance of it, rather than trying to bury it and having innuendo and rumour floating around as to what is being kept. I get the feeling that if you are up-front with what is being done, you will always have your sceptics and those people with concerns but you may find that the greater population would accept it if they understood the reasons and the structure in place for its maintenance and its release.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—I think that is right. In the realm of extreme sceptics, they probably do not believe that the data is destroyed now.

CHAIR—I presume, in the case of credit cards, that there is a computer bank in Houston or somewhere, from one of these firms, from which you could actually piece together more details about the private life of any individual Australian than you would ever get from the census. If you just traced a person's purchasing pattern over a period of five years, it would probably tell you whether they drink or do not drink, how much they drink, what other activities they engage in by way of recreation and leisure, and things like that. So in a sense, if it is held overseas, there is no control over it from an Australian perspective.

Mr Weatherill—Also, Mr Chairman, we are now moving into smart cards as well, where many of the agencies will have data stored on the magnetic strip. So patterns are already starting to appear, especially with Visa and Mastercard who are now looking at these smart strips for giving an overall view of your purchasing power and what you do.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Weatherill. Can I thank you and the society for the submission and for

coming along and discussing this with us.

Mr Weatherill—Thank you. I understand there is a process that you have to go through, but I hope that the committee does have enough information to be able to look favourably upon the request.

CHAIR—We certainly have enough information—I can say that much.

[1.55 p.m.]

EADE, Mrs Patricia Margaret, President, Australian Institute of Genealogical Studies Inc., 1/41 Railway Road, Blackburn, Victoria 3130

IDE, Mr Jack, Honorary Secretary, Australian Institute of Genealogical Studies Inc., PO Box 339, Blackburn, Victoria 3130

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 parliament 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 of 12 July 1997. I now invite you to make some opening remarks.

Mrs Eade—I am not as articulate as the last speaker but I would like to support everything that he said. On behalf of our members we have been very happy to support the move to retain the Australian census. We know, from the fact that we have great usage of the records in our library relating to census in Britain, in the USA and in Canada that the loss of the census records from Australia has been greatly felt. We have very few substitutes for these records and great use is made of those that are available.

We appreciate that there are a lot of people with privacy problems with regard to saving this information but I do feel that in some instances the protestations for privacy have been louder than those against it, and that is some of the reason that it gets more support than the other. We would support either the 75-year or the 100-year retention of the information. The USA does not seem to have any problem with 75 years. We would like very much to think that the parliament would continue to look into this matter, and we are very grateful that you have given so much time and effort to it.

CHAIR—The argument which is contrary to your position is, of course, that the retention of name identifying information will lead to a diminution in both the number of returns of the census and possibly the quality or accuracy of the information which is recorded in the census. What do you say about that?

Mr Ide—It is a matter of how that material is documented. If it is documented separately from what people might perceive are the more sensitive items—such as their financial position—that objection could be overridden if the information which we are particularly interested in, from a genealogical and family history point of view, is documented on a separate sheet and an assertion is made that this material will be retained for an extensive period of 75 or 100 years. I think that should answer satisfactorily any concerns about this issue of privacy and hence, following on from that, the accuracy or otherwise of the data that is collected.

The other point that should be made—and that we are particularly concerned about as taxpayers—is that so much of this material is accumulated and gathered at quite extensive cost to the community. The statistical part of it, fair enough, is kept and used for a very good purpose, but the essentially personal material, in which we are particularly concerned, is just scrapped and that has very significant value for the future. As it has been mentioned, we are especially conscious of this because of its loss in the past. For a minimal cost, we feel that this should be retained for posterity.

CHAIR—So you would contemplate a census form in perhaps two parts—one with the information which you identified as being necessary to retain or desirable to retain and then a second part with all the other information, including, perhaps, the more controversial issues around financial—

Mrs Eade—It would be the easiest way to go about it. It is easier to keep if you just remove the first sheet. It makes it easier for you to record it then in other ways. We appreciate some of the problems in keeping it in paper: the storage and the additional cost. But these are small by comparison with the cost of running the census anyway, in filming it and the problems of providing in it in, say, 100 years time and whether the facility to read that film is still available, et cetera. We see those problems, but they have been solved somehow or another in England, America, Canada and New Zealand and we think that it is worthwhile doing it.

CHAIR—In England, of course, they actually have less information on the census, so perhaps that is a factor.

Mrs Eade—Yes, that is true. But every little bit is helpful.

Mr Ide—We have probably one of the largest collections of the English and Welsh census in our library at Blackburn and it is available within Australia. We have accumulated this material on microfilm over the last four or five years and this is what has made us particularly conscious of the value and the loss to us in Australia of the corresponding Australian census. It has made us conscious of just how important it is from a genealogical point of view and a family history point of view. Of course, there is the flow-on as far as the medical and genetic aspects are concerned. We do not feel that we are skilled enough in that area to make a presentation in that respect, but we are very conscious of that.

Mrs Eade—A lot of our people have joined us for that reason, so they can trace their family for that particular purpose. We keep that in mind always.

CHAIR—There is a proposition that census name identifying data should be kept, say, every 10 years rather than every census: what do you say about that?

Mrs Eade—I have no problem with that. Ten years would keep it in line with the other censuses in the rest of the world.

CHAIR—And the other proposition that has been suggested is that there be an optional system either to opt in—to tick a box to keep it—or to opt out—to tick a box to destroy it; and otherwise it is kept.

Mrs Eade—This would be unsatisfactory because it would be so fragmented that it would be hardly worth keeping.

CHAIR—You do not see any value in that at all?

Mrs Eade—I do not like the idea very much, I must confess.

CHAIR—Can I put it more bluntly: you would sooner see it destroyed than optionally kept?

Mrs Eade—It is difficult to say.

Mr Ide—I am sorry, can you just repeat that?

CHAIR—Mrs Eade said that she could see no value in that, and I am putting the proposition more bluntly: does that mean that you would prefer to have it destroyed than even have some retained on an optional basis?

Mr Ide—I suppose we would not really go for the second best option. I guess, if it came to that, we would go along that track. We are much more interested in preserving the maximum amount if it is at all possible.

Mr MUTCH—I was interested in your comment:

. . . there is no greater danger to privacy than that inherent in other existing forms of name identifying records.

Can you elaborate on that at all? You are saying that you do not think people would balk at filling out the census forms if it was properly explained to them.

Mrs Eade—If we take our knowledge of this from our members, no. We have had great support from our members every time we have written a letter to the *Age* or written something in our magazine about saving the census. The support that has come from our membership has been almost 100 per cent.

Mr MUTCH—With respect to these other forms of name identifying records, are you finding, in your own endeavours, that they are so patchy that is why you want to keep a national record in the census?

Mrs Eade—This is right; there is so very little that is available to people that they can use. We have a census from 1828 and a partial one from 1841. In New South Wales, we have a list of heads of households that came from collectors' books for 1901. We have a federal referendum which has been indexed from Victoria for 1899. There is not much else that covers a state or a country as a whole. There is very little else that one can use and get the information that one wants.

Mr MUTCH—In your view, the census is a uniquely valuable piece of information.

Mrs Eade—Absolutely, yes. I cannot state just how valuable it is to our members who research in the countries where it is available.

Mr Ide—Electoral rolls and so forth, particularly last century, only talk about males in general, whereas the census will give you the family linkages which are essential from our point of view.

Mr MUTCH—Why should we worry about our family history? Have we got anything to be proud of or that we want to preserve there?

Mrs Eade—I think it is an essential part of our heritage that we should be able to trace our family and write about our family. Being such a young country, we really ought to be able to hang on to our information better than has been done in the past in other places. We need this story of the little people as well as the well known and the famous and the infamous. The little people are the ones who have put so much into Australia being what it is.

Mr MUTCH—So you think Pol Pot was wrong in trying to obliterate the history of a nation?

Mrs Eade—Sorry, I missed a couple of words there—perhaps on purpose.

CHAIR—I think I will rule that question out of order.

Mr MUTCH—So you believe there is an intrinsic value in little old men and women researching their family histories?

Mrs Eade—I do. And we have over 600—probably closer to 700—written family histories on the shelves in our library. They give a lot of value and tell a story. It is a part of Australia's history that should be retained.

Mr MUTCH—Is this of any relevance to kids? Do they gain any value out of this?

Mrs Eade—We endeavour to involve children in family history. If you talk to any history teacher, they will always tell you that they have a little section on family history. We have an annual award for the best family history written by any secondary school student. It is called the President's Award. We also run an annual family history award for the best published family history in Australia. That has been going for 24 years. We had 46 entries last year, which was exceedingly good.

Mr MUTCH—Do you see family history as a way of inculcating in young people a great interest in the heritage of their nation?

Mrs Eade—It is a tremendous stimulation. It does not matter whether you are talking about somebody who is at secondary school or somebody who has just retired—and we get a lot of retirees coming in to do family history when they find they have more time to spend on this, which is something they have been wanting to do for a long time.

Mr MUTCH—Are you finding an increasing interest amongst ethnic communities that have a foothold in our community or are establishing a stakehold in the nation?

Mrs Eade—It is growing. Out Blackburn way we do not have a big demand for that sort of thing. There is not an awful lot of information available, but the demand is growing. There are no two ways about that.

Mr MUTCH—Do you see that increasing over a period of time?

Mrs Eade—It is increasing. That is quite right.

Mr MUTCH—For things like researching the history of women in Australia, would the census be more valuable than a lot of other records?

Mrs Eade—It is hard to say. But there is a great interest in that at the moment, and in the last 10 years a lot more books have been written on women in Australia than ever before, I think.

Mr MUTCH—So there are probably all sorts of gems in the census that we might not have even thought about yet—in terms of future historical research?

Mrs Eade—I would say that that would be correct. The fact that we have not had one in Australia for so long is a great loss. We would like to do all we can to provide it for those who will be here in 75 years or 100 years time.

Mr MUTCH—Do we have a lack of written material—family history books and so forth—because of the lack of census details? Would that affect our repository of national history?

Mr Ide—It makes it more difficult to do your research. What we are looking at here is a very essential tool to facilitate your family history research. You can probably get round it to a certain extent, but you are going to have black spots which a census could perhaps fill in, whereas maybe you have got to take a guess in certain instances. You may be wrong or right. But, if you had access to a census of a particular time scale involved, it could clear up some grey areas.

The other important thing, perhaps, with family history is that, to do a family history properly, you also need to study the history of the state or the area or country to fit your ancestors into the scene, so that you can assess the pressures that were placed on them that motivated them to take the actions that ended up in your own personal situation. So there is a flow-on between family history and general history.

Mr MUTCH—So you feel that the legacy aspect of family history research is important to the development of people?

Mr Ide—I think so. I think it is essential that we know where we came from.

Mr MUTCH—You would have to pick up the good bits then, would you not?

Mrs Eade—The bad bits are interesting too.

Mr Ide—Very interesting.

Mrs Eade—Convicts are very good. It is good to have something like that in your family. You would not have talked about that 20 years ago, but today family history has enabled people to come to grips with that sort of thing and to realise that it is part of our heritage—and a most interesting part.

Mr MUTCH—Could you estimate how many people have an avid interest in researching their roots?

Mrs Eade—We have a membership of about 3,600.

Mr MUTCH—Is that your society alone?

Mrs Eade—That is just our society alone. I think my friend behind probably has about 6,500 members, and that is just the two societies in Melbourne.

Mr MUTCH—That is only people who have signed up rather than those actually interested in the community.

Mrs Eade—That is right. Local municipal libraries are making births, deaths and marriages records much more available. There are a lot of people out there who do their research in the public library system without ever coming to a society, and that is just talking about Melbourne in general. That is not including the little societies all around Victoria and all over Australia. I would imagine that the Society of Australian Genealogists in Sydney would have a membership of probably 12,000.

Mr MUTCH—They say that if you are having trouble tracing your ancestry, you just go into politics and your opponents will do it for you.

Mrs Eade—I have heard that said as well. I often mention that kind of thing in a talk that I give, but we do not encourage people to do it that way.

Mr MUTCH—Do you think it does us all good and that it levels people to realise that we have all sorts of antecedents? Do you feel that that is a fairly democratic process in society to realise sometimes?

Mrs Eade—I do not approve of people doing research for that purpose, I am afraid. It is one of those things—

Mr MUTCH—I was talking in general terms. I was thinking about family history in general. I would imagine that if people realised they had all sorts of antecedents, it might make them less prejudiced about other people.

Mrs Eade—I think that is a very good thought.

Mr Ide—We cannot be responsible for what our ancestors did.

Mrs Eade—No. I can speak only for myself in the fact that it has developed in me a much greater interest in history, both social and local as well as family. My husband complains of the books I buy. They are sitting on my shelf waiting for me to read so that I can write my family history.

Mr MUTCH—Do you think it also adds to the general health and wellbeing of a community when people feel that they belong to something?

Mrs Eade—Yes. It does engender that sort of thing; it really does.

CHAIR—Are general historians of, say, places or communities making use of the family histories that have been written?

Mrs Eade—We have a lot of researchers and historians—who are members of our institute—who come and look at that socially related information.

CHAIR—So there is a secondary use, if you like, of family histories—

Mrs Eade—There is, indeed.

CHAIR—beyond the interest in individual members of a family.

Mrs Eade—Yes, there is; that is right.

Mr MUTCH—Have you found that the ABS has been helpful to you in your desire to retain information? Have they been approachable?

Mrs Eade—Yes, absolutely. We do not have that problem there. We always get an answer to a letter which is always good.

Mr MUTCH—So far it has been no, and that is it.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for the submission from the institute and also for coming along and discussing it with us today.

Mrs Eade—Thank you very much indeed for the opportunity.

[2.19 p.m.]

MACLEOD, Mr John Denis Stuart, Chairman, Australian Statistics Advisory Council, PO Box 10, Belconnen, Australian Capital Territory

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. We are in receipt of your submission dated 24 July 1997. Would you care to make some opening remarks?

Mr Macleod—Thank you, Mr Chairman. I would like to make seven points, if I could, as an opening remark. Since the submission, I have had a chance to read some of the other submissions—the first two volumes of them. I will address my remarks to those and not repeat what is in the submission we have made to you.

Firstly, let me state the obvious: the council comprises up to 22 members from a very wide range of Australian society; all states and territories are represented on the council; the membership is changing frequently—it is not the same membership at all—and, as we have said to you, we have considered this question of the retention of certain census data and forms seven times since we have been in existence. I have been present at all but one of those and on each occasion it was a unanimous decision of the council.

Secondly, I want to say something in a personal capacity. I have spent 50 years as a researcher in Australia and overseas, so I think I can claim I know something about research methodology and so on. In that time I have used the ABS data very extensively indeed. I have had occasion to ring the ABS and ask them questions, to quarrel with them, but always, as a practice of proper research, I have tried to understand their position, why they are doing what they are. I have found them extremely helpful, open, cooperative, and only too pleased to talk to you. They will come and address learned societies if you ask them. They have got nothing to hide. I regret that quite a number of these submissions in these first two volumes did not understand the ABS position at all and made a lot of wild statements which simply cannot be justified.

Thirdly, and it is a very important point, the Australian Bureau of Statistics is always ranked in the first two statistical agencies in the world. We have got very few government agencies in this country that can meet that standard. Bill McLennan, as you know, was seconded to the UK to head their statistical service, and Dennis Trewin spent a time in New Zealand in the same capacity. It says something to me that people of this standing can head up statistical agencies elsewhere in the world and do an excellent job while they are there.

So what we have is an agency that meets best international practice. Again, let me repeat, very few Commonwealth agencies meet that. I suggest to you, Mr Chairman, that when it comes to a matter of professional advice about statistics and statistical practice, you should consider their evidence very carefully because of the high international standing of the agency.

Fourthly, a lot of the submissions refer to the UK and the US retention policy. As far as I can see

from the submissions that I have read, very few of them seem to understand much about the quality of the data that is collected in those two countries or the problems they have had; nor are the costs and the benefits ever addressed by the submissions. The benefits are addressed, but the costs are not. It is the council's view that the costs outweigh the benefits.

Fifthly, most of the genealogists, as I have seen them in these submissions, freely admit that there are other sources of this information. There is no question about it. They are not arguing about it; they are admitting it openly. With births, deaths and marriages, for example, the Australian records are very good by world standards; they admit that. There are electoral rolls, telephone books, trade directories, and you can go on and on. Who knows in the modern electronic era what we will have in 100 years time or 70 years time, whenever it is suggested we might want to go back to the 2001 census data. One idea at the moment is a chip for each individual that will retain data on every quarter hour of their life, and it will fit on a chip the size of a 10c piece. Who knows, in 100 years time, what sort of data we will have?

The case for the census seems to be that all of this information is in one place and it will save a lot of work if you could go to the one place and collect it all there. Here again, of course, we have got a question of costs. What is the cost? And is there a benefit in that, compared with the genealogist going and looking at other sources of the same information? Cost is something that I would like you as a committee to consider very carefully. As you know, there are two points in a cost: one is the cost of getting inferior responses from the public, and the other is the financial cost to the ABS budget.

The ABS, like all Commonwealth agencies, has been subject to restraints on the amount of money it can spend. The council understand why that it is and, in fact, the council believes that is likely to continue. There is not suddenly going to be a floodgate opened with a whole lot of new money available to the ABS.

The ABS response to this restriction has been to improve its productivity quite significantly. But the real problem is that we are keeping our resources of the ABS in those areas of the community which we collected many years ago which, for shorthand purposes, I call the 'goods producers'—miners, farmers and manufacturers. We are grossly and inadequately covering the service sector which is 70 per cent of the economy, and that is where the growth is and where the growth in jobs is.

The council has been urging the ABS for years to increase the resources in this sector so that we can measure it, so that people like yourselves in parliament can have the facts with which to work and think about, say, the huge problem in the unemployment area in Australia at the moment. We are not collecting data on the areas where there is the fast growth in jobs.

Those of you who have got any representation of the tourist industry in your electorate will note the hullabaloo from the last budget cutback, which cut back census accommodation collections for tourist accommodation. The tourist industry is very annoyed. It is a very large industry, much larger than anybody has submitted in evidence here. The tourist industry wants that collection reinstated. In fact, it says that data on tourism is quite inadequate.

I suggest to you that if by any chance—and I hope you do not—you reject our advice on this matter, you must address the question of where the money comes from. If you are able to get out of the Treasurer

additional funds for the ABS to cover the cost of this not inconsequential cost, you must raise the question: is that the best way to spend that money? The council's view clearly is that it is not; there are much higher priorities than this which deserve any additional resources that can be put to the ABS. The genealogists, of course, have not addressed this in any of their submissions.

The second question is that if you say there is no extra money but you are still going to force the ABS to do it, then what collections should the ABS cut back? Of the things that it is currently doing, which ones should they cut out? Again, none of the submissions have made suggestions on what they might be, so that you as a committee might ask, 'If we cut out, say, unemployment figures monthly and retain the census—the data on name, address and so on—is that a good trade-off?' We have not been given the evidence for this, as far as I can see.

The labour market is one of the big drawers on the ABS resources. It is a logical place to cut back if you are going to say cut back. I think, therefore, you have to say to yourself: what is the priority for this issue that we have got in front of us? Is it more important that we get on and measure the fast growing sectors of the economy more adequately, or should we cut back some other areas? If so, what?

Finally, there are a number of important submissions in these first two series—the Grants Commission and the electoral issues—which the council believes are important. That is all I would like to say in my statement.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Macleod. You made reference at the outset to the membership of the council and its board changing. Are there representatives of the general public? Are there representatives of historians, family historians, genealogists? Just who does make up the council?

Mr Macleod—There is a wide spread of people. I have got a list here, if you would like to see it.

CHAIR—Maybe that is one way of answering it, if you are happy to table that.

Mr Macleod—Yes. It covers the council since it was first established. In answer to your question, there are no genealogists specifically representing genealogy on the council. There have been very distinguished historians there. There is, as I say, a wide spread of people represented, not just bureaucrats and so on. For example, Yvonne Bain, a very distinguished member of the women's movement in Australia, is a member of the council. That shows you the spread of people sitting there. It is interesting also that none of the state governments has ever raised the concerns that are in here.

CHAIR—Does the council seek representations from the general public as to the matters it is considering?

Mr Macleod—Not actively. We do not put an advertisement in the paper saying, 'We are considering it. Would you like to make a submission?'

CHAIR—You said that on seven occasions—I think that was the number—the council had resolved in favour of the destruction of the census forms. Was there any public comment or canvassing of public

opinion by the council in relation to any of those decisions?

Mr Macleod—No. We rely on the knowledge of the members of the council, most of whom are very knowledgeable in matters of statistics and are used to working in that area.

Mr MUTCH—In each of these inquiries, are you briefed by the ABS?

Mr Macleod—Certainly, and you would expect us to be.

CHAIR—The decision about the destruction of the census forms was made by the Treasurer in 1971. That was against, as I recall, the existence of the Australia Party and a campaign in relation to the collection of individual privacy information. Do you think those concerns are still the same in the community as they were at that time?

Mr Macleod—Yes, I do. I think the evidence from the UK and the US is compelling on this. Whether you like it or not, I do not think the Australian public trust Canberra.

CHAIR—When you say the evidence from the UK and the US is compelling, can you elaborate?

Mr Macleod—The poll tax in the UK, as stated in the ABS submission, caused havoc at the census collection. The US is currently going through enormous problems with a lot of its statistical collections, including the census. The quality of both of them is not as good as ours, and it is showing evidence that people are wary of Big Brother in Washington or London watching them.

CHAIR—But does that not illustrate that it is particular events at particular times that lead to wariness—that is, the campaign by the Australia Party, the Mrs Thatcher or Mr Major poll tax. It is in the light of particular incidents rather than the general view of the public.

Mr Macleod—Yes, it is. You have to remember our multicultural society—if you read this, you would hardly believe there was one. A lot of those people who come and become very good Australian citizens do not come from the same democratic background as others. There is, I think, a lot of concern about privacy and what is known centrally. Let us take Medicare; presumably, the records are centrally available. There is no demand, as I see it, from any of these genealogists for that to be released publicly after 100 years or whatever. If you really were concerned about medical matters that is a mine of information.

CHAIR—Is it not the case that it is the information which is available in the short term and collected in the short term which provides more detail and information about individuals? For example, I am thinking of the Health Insurance Commission records relating to Medicare and the taxation details held by the tax office. If you happen to be paying child support payments, there are the payments in relation to that. There are the family payments, social security payments, et cetera, without getting into the private realm of credit cards and banking details and credit ratings and things like that.

I suppose this question can be fairly asked: if reams of information are kept about all of us by a whole range of sources, some of which are almost entirely private and over which the government has

virtually no control in terms of controlling the use of that information, to put what might seem a blunt question to you, Mr Macleod, are we not being a bit precious about the census?

Mr Macleod—No, I do not think we are. The bureau, under its act, has reassured Australians to some extent about the privacy question. The ABS is saying to you as professionals that they value that very highly and it is reflected in the quality of their output, which has few equals anywhere else in the world. They are saying, ‘Do not endanger that quality.’ As I say, none of these submissions address the quality issue.

Mr MUTCH—Do you think the Canadian census is of high quality?

Mr Macleod—Yes, Canada is the one ranked with Australia as good quality.

Mr MUTCH—You know they retain the census?

Mr Macleod—Yes, I do.

Mr MUTCH—Who makes these rankings? Everyone keeps saying that Canada and Australia are the tops. Who decides that?

Mr Macleod—They are judged by peer group users of the output. They are not Australians voting on it.

Mr MUTCH—Can you support that? I have heard it a couple of times, but I have not actually seen anything to support that.

Mr Macleod—If you wanted confirmation you would go to the IMF or the United Nations and you will see there working on very complex statistical issues, top people from the ABS in Canberra and from Stats Canada and so on. The other evidence I would give to you is Bill McLennan’s appointment to head the UK statistics office. That was a feather in the cap of Australian statisticians. He did a terrific job when he was there.

Mr MUTCH—Would you say that your advisory council is independent of the ABS?

Mr Macleod—Yes, very independent.

Mr MUTCH—Very independent?

Mr Macleod—Yes.

Mr MUTCH—I saw on your letterhead that you are based the Cameron Offices, Chandler Street, Belconnen.

Mr Macleod—That is the ABS office.

Mr MUTCH—Is your secretariat made up of officers from the ABS?

Mr Macleod—Yes.

Mr MUTCH—Is Mr McLennan an ex officio member of your organisation?

Mr Macleod—Yes, but let me go back to your earlier point. Almost any matter that we discuss will have the relevant ABS head of the area come and talk to us and brief us. If we are talking about the consumer price index, we will have the head of the consumer price index branch come and talk to us.

Mr MUTCH—Presumably, on the seven occasions when you looked at and considered retention of census records, you undertook your own inquiries?

Mr Macleod—That is why we are there under the act, to bring a wide spread of community interest and have it available to Mr McLennan as a second opinion.

Mr MUTCH—Did you invite sociologists to make submissions to you?

Mr Macleod—No, but there is no reason why anybody could not make a submission to us if they wanted to.

Mr MUTCH—Do you invite people to make submissions to you?

Mr Macleod—Yes, from time to time, but it is rare. We do not have those resources.

Mr MUTCH—So you basically just sit down and discuss it amongst yourselves?

Mr Macleod—Yes, and to some extent it is the way you act. You do not always ask for public submissions before you get up and debate something in the House; you are there because you are representative of Australians, and so are we. That is what we are there for.

Mr MUTCH—The list that you have just provided to us does not note the professions of the people. Who appoints these people and on what basis are they appointed?

Mr Macleod—The Treasurer appoints them in his official capacity. That is usually on recommendation from me or the chairman.

Mr MUTCH—Have you got sociologists and so forth on it?

Mr Macleod—We have had.

Mr MUTCH—Are academics on it?

Mr Macleod—No, very few. The sort of thing that the ABS wants advice on is not a professional job

of calculating X, Y and Z. They are experts on that; they want more a broad community viewpoint.

Mr MUTCH—Sorry, what was your own profession?

Mr Macleod—Economics.

Mr MUTCH—Economics, and you have done research in the economic area then?

Mr Macleod—Yes.

Mr MUTCH—Have you been provided with a copy of an AGB McNair survey conducted under the authority of the ABS?

Mr Macleod—Yes.

Mr MUTCH—Have you read the questions that were asked?

Mr Macleod—Yes.

Mr MUTCH—Do you consider that survey to have any credibility?

Mr Macleod—Yes, although you notice we did not quote it in our submission. That is a survey and it is one of some surveys of similar kind. We did not quote that.

Mr MUTCH—Yes, but I am more interested in your view of the efficacy and integrity of that survey.

Mr Macleod—Any survey is only as good as the response rate and the questions in it.

Mr MUTCH—Did you note the questions?

Mr Macleod—Yes, I have seen the questions.

Mr MUTCH—I am interested in what steps you took on the seven occasions to form an independent view about the retention. Perhaps you might be able to provide us at a later stage with the evidence that you received. We are interested in knowing what evidence you received to support your strong conclusion that you would support the ABS. What independent evidence did you gather?

Mr Macleod—Let me go over it again. Can I use another example? Take the consumer price index revision which is going on now, which is far more important than this. In that case we get submissions from the experts in the Bureau of Statistics. We ask them for the options in front of them and we review those options. We then satisfy ourself that the ABS has consulted. On this occasion they have consulted very widely in the community indeed and after they have consulted they come back and tell us what they have learned from that consultation process. With due respect, I do not want to be bragging, but the council is made up of people who are knowledgeable in this area, statistics, and they are there to use that knowledge, in

the same way as you do to vote in parliament on issues of importance to the Australian community. We are there using our knowledge. If we want to go away and ask people ourselves—and we frequently do—we go out and ask people.

But, in terms of going through say this exercise that you are going through of advertising and saying, ‘Would anybody like to make submissions to the council?’ we do not have those resources and we have never done that sort of thing.

Mr MUTCH—Did you have a meeting of the advisory council to authorise the submission that has been made?

Mr Macleod—Yes.

Mr MUTCH—You would say that the vast majority of people on the council then thoroughly endorse this view?

Mr Macleod—On each occasion, except the first when I was not there, it has been unanimous.

Mr MUTCH—Does that mean everyone was there and voted?

Mr Macleod—No. Everybody who was there voted.

Mr MUTCH—Anybody who happened to be there?

Mr Macleod—Yes. We get very high attendance rates. We only have three meetings a year.

CHAIR—Mr Macleod, there may be some good reason for this, but why would the council need to restate its position seven times? What is it that keeps coming up that you need to restate it? Usually bodies have a policy position and unless somebody says something different, it remains a policy position.

Mr Macleod—Yes, it is. This is the biggest single collection of the bureau; therefore we are regularly briefed on all aspects of the census. We want to know about it because it is the biggest single collection and it costs a lot of money. The price index one is another example of the same sort of thing. Every time that is reviewed, each five years, we go through the same process all over again just to make certain the new members of the council have a chance to say what they think. If anybody has changed their mind they can let us know. If state governments or territory governments have a different point of view, they can let us know. That is why we revisit it all the time. When each census comes up, we look in detail at the whole program for the census and the output.

Mr MUTCH—What is your opinion of a submission we have received from Professor Allan Johnston, the head of School of Social Inquiry at Deakin University who says:

Much of this interest stems from the inherent need for identifiers in order to conduct many forms of research in fields such as social and geographic mobility studies, demography and household and kinship studies . . . sometimes with

current applications and real economic value.

Do you think there is value in that type of research?

Mr Macleod—Being a researcher, I believe all research has got a value. So you cannot expect me not to support anyone who is researching anything so long as they are doing it properly. ‘Yes’ is the answer to that. I could give you a list of 10,000 items in addition to that that it would be nice to have. Your problem is to say, ‘Given the limited research, which ones can we have?’ The ABS produces data that is public, and there is the ability to go and pay for additional, more detailed data so long as it does not reveal the name of the party providing the data. For example, you cannot find out what BHP said in a return or whatever. So researchers, and he should know, can do that and they do get very detailed data from the ABS.

Mr MUTCH—But he is talking specifically about the need for the name identification tag to be brought from one census through to another census in order to conduct these types of studies on a longitudinal basis.

Mr Macleod—It is the same with labour market studies. There is a great demand for labour market people to know about longitudinal patterns of employment—for instance, where do people start off when they leave school and what do they do? That would be far more valuable than this.

Mr MUTCH—So you think that it would be good if we could keep the census name-identified data but you are concerned that the value of keeping it does not compensate for what you conceive to be the lessening of the quality of the data collected by the ABS?

Mr Macleod—Yes, the quality of the data of all collections, not just that collection, the cost of doing it and the alternative use you could put it.

Mr MUTCH—Have you looked into the Canadian situation at all? From what we have heard, they either lead us or we are up there with them in terms of the quality of their census. Up until I think the last one, Canada has always kept their census but, based on the cost of retaining the paper forms, they have decided not to keep that last one. However, they are in the luxurious position of having kept so many that they can make that decision for this one. How can you reason that ours would be so adversely affected when they are considered to be leaders in this field yet they do not seem to have that problem?

Mr Macleod—First, you have to ask about the quality of the census data here. Secondly, stats in Canada and the ABS meet all the time and they exchange senior staff. There is very little that one does that the other does not know precisely about. It is a very healthy relationship where they spark each other off, and good ideas come from it and best practice comes from it. The history of what we have done here is important. Since 1971, or whatever it is, we have done it this way and Canada has done it in another way.

Mr MUTCH—But if we wanted to we could adopt the Canadian system and we could also achieve their success—

Mr Macleod—At what cost?

Mr MUTCH—Are you talking about financial cost?

Mr Macleod—Quality and financial cost, and the cost of other data that we could have collected with the money. That would be a better use of the money. This is what I keep saying to you: if you have any more financial resources, let the ABS decide the best way to use them.

CHAIR—It seems to me, listening to your submission, that your argument is essentially twofold. One is the cost, which has two parts to it—cost which relates back to the inferior response, which is, in a sense, a quality issue, and cost in terms of the additional cost in having financial resources to retain the data. The cost argument in terms of finances is one which we can make a judgment about. For example, if government said, ‘Yes, we want to retain every second census in name-identifying form and we are going to provide X million dollars to do that’, whilst you may argue and we could all argue about whether that is an appropriate priority, nonetheless it is one which largely would meet that financial cost objection. Therefore, it seems to me that your primary argument is essentially one about quality, that the responses will be inferior and that the costs will outweigh any benefits that flow from it.

Mr Macleod—Yes, that is correct, and I am saying not only the response to the census, but to other collections as well.

CHAIR—That is what I want to explore. When you talk about the quality and the costs, can you elaborate on precisely what you mean by the quality, and what are the costs? If we have to make a judgment, which you are urging on us, to say that the costs will outweigh the benefits, how do we judge this? What factors should we take into account to weigh this up?

Mr Macleod—The first factor is quality, how important is quality of census output? That is why I suggested to you that the submission of the Electoral Commission is important, and the Grants Commission. Getting an accurate idea of population numbers in Australia—states, local areas and so on—is very important.

CHAIR—Can I just stop you there. I want the detail of this in a sense. How much quality diminution, in your estimation, can we put up with before it becomes a factor and you would say that now the pendulum has swung over and it outweighs the benefits? Let me go back a step. Let me accept that there might be a decrease, in your terms, in quality. How do we measure that decrease so that we can say that if it is a minuscule decrease then it does not outweigh the benefits, but it must reach a certain point? How do we judge that?

Mr Macleod—You should ask the bureau that. That is a professional question rather than a council—

CHAIR—I will.

Mr Macleod—It is a good point. You are asking is one per cent under count, non-response or poor response or whatever, a significant figure? I would put it to you that when it comes down to your local electoral area it is important. If you were from the Northern Territory, you would find it also very important. It means big money to you if you get the count wrong. That is an important point.

The second point is that we have got these high standards there already. Do we want to start reducing the standards of this and other collections as well? Why should we try and get them?

CHAIR—I do not think anybody would claim that any collection is 100 per cent perfect or accurate.

Mr Macleod—True.

CHAIR—Therefore, it has to be a matter of judgment about where the cut-off point is. If it is 99.9 per cent accurate now and it will become 99.8 per cent accurate, can we wear that? This is all hypothetical. We might say yes, but if it becomes 90 per cent accurate, we might say that that is too big a burden to pay. That is why I am interested in trying to explore how you determine the change. I do not wish to sound disrespectful, but it is easy to say quality will be diminished. Surely, we have to try and tease out what that means precisely.

Mr Macleod—Definitely. I agree with you.

CHAIR—I should pursue that with the ABS?

Mr Macleod—Yes. I can get an answer for you if you like, but I would have to go to the ABS.

CHAIR—I am happy to pursue it with them, but I am interested as to whether your council had looked at those sorts of issues in terms of saying not only that we are fearful, or we are advised, or we intuitively believe that quality is going to be diminished, but that we have sought to measure that in some way.

Mr Macleod—Yes, definitely.

Mr MUTCH—Has your council ever considered that there might be some cultural or historical value in retaining the name-identified forms? Do you think there is any value in historical, cultural terms?

Mr Macleod—Again, go back to the question about research. Yes, I am sure on that. I am a researcher, so I like data. On the other hand, I have to accept that there is a limit to what we can have. In all research the question is: is the information already available anywhere else?

Mr MUTCH—We have heard evidence that there seems to be a concern that to date the information we have had from other sources has been patchy and that there is no consistent policy of retention of those various sources. There is even a possibility that technological advances have led to less retention of information, because of the medium upon which information is collected.

Mr Macleod—Yes. I think you can take that argument both ways. The way technology is moving, you could have much better resources which are much more accessible at home. You will not have to go to a records office to get them in the future. There is no doubt about that. The question is really whether this is a priority.

Mr MUTCH—It is the centenary of our federation in the year 2001—

Mr Macleod—I accept that.

Mr MUTCH—That is one of the points that have been made. I think the Archives Advisory Council suggested that it would be nice to be able to save the 2001 census, to mark the centenary of our federation.

Mr Macleod—We have to be a little careful about being a little bit pregnant here.

Mr MUTCH—I know you are independent of the ABS—or that is what you have stated—but I wonder if you have had—

Mr Macleod—If you were at one of our meetings, you would soon see that. You are welcome to come.

Mr MUTCH—In that respect, I suppose you could say the Archives Advisory Council is independent of the Australian Archives. Have you had discussions with them on this question?

Mr Macleod—No.

Mr MUTCH—Never?

Mr Macleod—Not with the council, no. I hope they are independent.

Mr MUTCH—You have not had discussions with them about why they think that the name-identified information should be retained?

Mr Macleod—No. I read it in here, and I—

Mr MUTCH—Would it not have been a good idea to have had discussions with them—since you have considered the matter seven times?

Mr Macleod—Do you think they have considered the reasons the ABS has for not retaining them?

Mr MUTCH—I am sure they have.

Mr Macleod—Have they?

Mr MUTCH—We will have to ask them. They are coming up.

Mr Macleod—Ask them.

Mr MUTCH—We will ask them, for sure.

Mr Macleod—When they made their submission, had they seen the ABS submission here?

Mr MUTCH—We will ask them.

Mr Macleod—Because it is obvious that most of these people have not. You would not expect them to have seen it. When they wrote their submission, the ABS was writing theirs, so they did not have a chance to see it.

CHAIR—When Mr Mutch was asking about the 2001 census, you said something about being careful about being a little bit pregnant. Can you elaborate on what you meant by that?

Mr Macleod—I am very concerned about that idea. Economic history was one of my two subjects at university, so Australian history is something that I am strong on. The occasion of 2001 is a very important one, in my opinion, but I am very concerned about whether, if you depart from a quality standard, you can ever go back. Do you sow the seeds in someone's mind, so that they think, 'Wait a minute, they said they weren't going to keep this stuff, but they kept it last time.'

CHAIR—Don't you think that, if, as part of this centenary of federation and the marking of the beginning of a millennium, there were an advertising campaign from not only the Australian Bureau of Statistics but the government generally to say that this is something which is one of those national projects which we are going to undertake to mark these events, that would placate the Australian people?

Mr Macleod—No. Secondly, I do not think that that would be a priority in the celebrations for 2001. If I had a list of things I wanted to do, I certainly would not put that on it.

CHAIR—No, I understand that, and that will not be an issue.

Mr Macleod—But I think the answer is no. Once you do it, I think you will sow the seed in their minds that not only the census but the household expenditure survey and all the other things that are there—the monthly employment collections and so on—will be done in the same way.

CHAIR—Have you ever consulted with something like the Communications Research Institute to see whether a campaign and a form of words and a project and an endeavour could be made to not only retain name-identified forms in the census but possibly improve the quality of the collection in that process? Since they can do it in Canada, has anyone undertaken a project here to determine how the ABS would do it—if we said to them, 'We are asking you to do it'—to retain the quality?

Mr Macleod—I will go back to the first point about whether we have consulted with that research group we talked about. The answer is no. On the other hand—to go back to my point—here you are dealing one of the best two professional groups in the world. Every time the census comes up we get a detailed briefing from them on what they are proposing to do, why they are doing it, and what the considerations and options are. The sort of thing that you are suggesting is the sort of thing we would expect them to consider. If they need to go and get outside advice on how they design the form, or what sort of advertising they should have, they would go and get it.

Mr MUTCH—Have you actually seen any evidence that they have actually taken that and looked at it seriously?

Mr Macleod—Not that point, but other aspects of the census, yes.

Mr MUTCH—But they have never really made a project out of saying, ‘How could we do this if we really had to?’

Mr Macleod—No, because they are saying to you and us that they do not think it is a priority and that it would do damage to their collections.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—Just to come back to that area of cost which the chairman was teasing out with you regarding the additional collection costs, and so on: where do they arise, and what kinds of extra costs are said to arise from a change in the arrangements?

Mr Macleod—First of all, there is the form itself and the explanation to the people who are filling it in that you have changed the policy—the sort of thing that we are getting from this side here, the advertising campaign, or whatever you have got to do to reassure people. Then there is the encoding of that information and finally the storage of it. The chairman asked what sort of a number we are talking about here. I really do not know, although the sorts of numbers that I have seen—back of the envelope numbers—are very significant. If we had that sort of resource, we could put it to good use elsewhere in the bureau. We are talking about many millions of dollars; we are not just talking about a few hundred thousand.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—The other area of the cost of inferior responses—I guess the chairman asked this question—is how you get a feeling for what might occur in terms of inferior responses. Could you make any predictions about inferior responses and what the cost of that might be?

Mr Macleod—I suggest when you ask them that you ask them about the UK and the US and their experience with censuses recently when they have had some pretty poor responses.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—When you say ‘poor response’—

Mr Macleod—In terms of quality and reliability of the data, it is a question—in part anyway—of how many people do not respond. If you, say, undercount Aborigines in the Northern Territory, it is pretty serious. So you have got to have some feeling for how good you are in actually getting a proper response. In terms of some of the statutory requirements for accurate population numbers, electoral boundaries, Grants Commission, and that sort of stuff, let alone the private sector, which uses this data far more than the public sector—a lot of market research, for example, is based around the census data—the importance of having confidence in reasonable accuracy—and this is where you have got to ask the ABS what is reasonable—is very important. If that is astray, then some serious misallocations can occur.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—When you referred to reliability before, how is that determined? It strikes me that everything else gets judged against the census data for its accuracy. How do they decide in the UK or US that a particular census has been less reliable or less accurate than its predecessor, or a census

conducted here?

Mr Macleod—Again, I think you should ask the ABS that detail. They will tell you, though, about the two recent examples. In one case they have no faith at all in the data, and in the other one they knew it was significantly understated—the census.

Mr MUTCH—Hypothetically, if you had earned an extra \$100,000 on the black market last year and you had not disclosed it to the Australian Taxation Office, if the census collector came to you and said, ‘We want you to fill in the income details and we can assure you that we’ll be destroying these forms in 18 months. Put all of your illegal earnings down on the census return, and also whether you have an illegal immigrant under the third bed in your spare room,’ would you be putting that detail on the form simply because of an assurance from the ABS that they were going to destroy it in 18 months?

Mr Macleod—If I had illegal income, I would be unlikely to disclose it to any government—local, state or federal. I would be highly suspicious of whoever knocked on my door wanting that information.

Mr MUTCH—Is that not the point, then?

Mr Macleod—No, I do not think so. The important thing is the number of people. That is the crucial number. Their religion, or whether they are left-handed, right-handed or whatever, is useful, but it is not the critical point. The critical point is how many there are and where they are in Australia.

CHAIR—Mr Macleod, I thank you and the council for the submission and I thank you for coming along and discussing it with us this afternoon: we appreciate it. The document headed ‘Past membership of the Australian Statistics Advisory Council’ is accepted as an exhibit to the inquiry.

Resolved (on motion by Mr Thomson):

That the committee authorises publication of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

I thank all those who have participated in the public hearing today, and I thank Hansard and the secretariat.

Committee adjourned at 3.07 p.m.