



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

Reference: Treatment of census forms

WOLLONGONG

Friday, 3 October 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

**STEPHENS, Miss Michele Johanna Callaway, Publisher, Australian Family
Tree Connections Magazine, P.O. Box 322, Gosford, New South Wales
2250 411**

**THORBURN, Mr Raymond John, Director, Australian Genealogical Education
Centre, P.O. Box 75, Kiama, New South Wales 2533 403**

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND
CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

(Subcommittee)

Treatment of census forms

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Friday, 3 October 1997

Present

Mr Mutch (Acting Chair)

Mr Kelvin Thomson

The subcommittee met at 11.30 a.m.

Mr Mutch took the chair.

ACTING CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the subcommittee's inquiry into the treatment of census forms, and welcome witnesses, members of the public and others who are attending this meeting of the subcommittee. The subject of the inquiry is whether the current practice of destroying name identified forms after the data is collected from them should continue. We have taken evidence so far in Canberra, Perth, Adelaide, Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne, and we look forward very much to hearing the views of people in Wollongong.

THORBURN, Mr Raymond John, Director, Australian Genealogical Education Centre, P.O. Box 75, Kiama, New South Wales 2533

Mr Thorburn—The Australian Genealogical Education Centre is also termed the Kiama Family History Centre, for the reason that it rolls off the tongue a little easier. I hold a position as a council officer and as a professional genealogist or family and social historian.

ACTING CHAIR—Mr Thorburn, although the subcommittee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. Mr Thorburn, we have not received a written submission from you. Would you like to make an opening statement to the subcommittee?

Mr Thorburn—Certainly. I feel that the census as we have it at the present time, being virtually non-existent in Australia—certainly from 1901—is a great problem. Whilst at this point of time that particular period would certainly not be of any great import because of the privacy buffer that is usually established of about 100 years, I really feel that to open up the 1911 census in maybe 10 years time would be of great value to social and family historians. But that is not going to be the case.

We have had quite a lot of interesting facts and figures coming out of previous censuses, particularly the UK censuses, that are reasonably complete. But unfortunately the only Australian census—or perhaps New South Wales census, in its more correct form—of 1828 is perhaps the only one that we can really get anything out of. The 1840 census and then the 1890 census, of which the enumerators' books are kept, are merely demographic in nature. I really feel that, if the censuses could be maintained and the information contained therein in future could be kept for future reference—albeit in a hundred years time—it would be of great advantage to not only family and social historians but also other people interested in such facts and figures.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Thorburn. Perhaps you could outline the role and function of your centre.

Mr Thorburn—The Kiama Family History Centre is unique, and I am using that word in its every sense. There are other areas that have resources in various repositories. We have got a reasonable amount of those covering Australia, New Zealand and many overseas areas. But the uniqueness of the centre is because of the fact that it is council operated, open seven days a week in regular hours and has a staff of approximately 40 volunteers to aid people in the research work that they are trying to achieve. It is also the fact that we are not just a research and advisory centre. We go out in lateral practical extensions using genealogy as a social history tool in school educational programs; we have five of those running at the present time. We also involve ourselves with quite a lot

of indexing. In fact, to this stage we have published nine very important indexes so far on microfiche; they range from 10,000 entries up to 80,000-odd entries. Some of those are of international importance. In fact, a few of them are in university libraries in Germany at the present time.

There are a couple of other fields that we get ourselves involved with. One is with the Molecular Genetics Laboratory at the University of Sydney, which is run by Associate Professor Dr Garth Nicholson. It works out of the Clinical Sciences Building at Concord. The work we do with them is in trying to identify family members of subject families who are at risk from various genetic disorders of a neurological based complaint that they may be working on and researching. The work we do with adoptees goes hand in with that. We work very closely with adoptees. Many of them are referred to us by word of mouth, but invariably by people from the Family Information Service at DOCS; births, deaths and marriages; and, on one or two occasions, the Post-Adoption Resource Centre.

ACTING CHAIR—With respect to that, say census data was available for discreet research from day one: would that be of any assistance in the work that you are doing with respect to genetic and neurological disorders and adoptees?

Mr Thorburn—Not in the amount of information that has already existed in censuses in the past. It may be of advantage in creating environmental directions, perhaps with a family that we can identify in a particular area. It may be an advantage with the English census where you can see that members of a family were all working in a particular area, in an iron foundry, and were all subject to certain problems which may be environmentally induced—things like that would help.

But unfortunately the genetic complaints are not all terminal, and subsequently may not even appear on a death certificate. So there are certain things that we could possibly achieve from census information, but it depends whether that information is retained as pertinent information in a census.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—There are a number of issues that come up. I take it you are putting the view that making census records available to researchers would be of assistance to you in the work that you do—is that what you are saying?

Mr Thorburn—Certainly in family and social history research, yes.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—Do you have a view about this issue of an appropriate period during which the records ought to be closed before they are able to be accessed by researchers?

Mr Thorburn—We have been conditioned to the past criteria of 100 years with the British censuses and Scottish censuses being opened and accessible to the public after 100 years—the Scottish one seems to come out a little before the British one. Here in

Australia, unfortunately, we do not have that criteria to work on, although the 1901 census in fairly demographic form is available at the present time.

If that same criteria were maintained, I do not think there would be a great deal of problem with genealogists—although we would love to know what happened yesterday. We regard the privacy of people's information uppermost. I think in many cases there would be no upset about 100 years.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—Have you given any thought to the idea of people being able to voluntarily indicate whether they want to have the records maintained or subsequently disclosed? It does strike me from listening to various witnesses that you have a pretty hard line being run by the ABS saying, 'No disclosure. No retention,' then, on the other hand, others are saying, 'All records are to be held and made available at a subsequent date.' Have you thought about the possibility that people could indicate whether they prefer to have the records retained or not?

Mr Thorburn—It is something I have not given a great deal of thought to. I must also say that there are a lot of people out there who would like the speed limit to be opened up completely and a heck of a lot of other people who would not. I think that, once the law is brought down, the law should be observed by everybody.

In cases where there are certain little boxes that you can tick on census forms and others that you do not want this to be done and you do not want that to be done I suppose there has to be some respect given to that. I feel myself that the general information from either census forms or people's general knowledge that you have about people is even today fairly readily accessible anyway in some cases. I wonder whether there is really any privacy anymore.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—That does raise some other issues that we have also discussed with other witnesses. On that point, you might like to give us an indication of what sources you are making use of in the absence of having access to the census data and what you regard as your most valuable sources of family history?

Mr Thorburn—Certainly the most valuable source of family history is the birth, marriage and death indexes. That is for starters. From then you get full certificates. The certificates are open to a little bit of discussion because the veracity of the information on it depends on who the informant was. In general, those records will be the primary records that people will be looking at.

Second are the electoral roles. That is another very important source of information, particularly looking at movements of people. The census comes in in almost the same category as that. With the British census we can take a reasonable parallel on what we would like to see in Australian censuses which we have not had in the past. There is a certain amount of problem getting into English censuses, apart from the 1881

census, which has been, if I can say, regurgitated to a totally alphabetical listing. That enables you to get into it a lot easier.

From a census form you can determine the movement of people and the fact that a person may have been living in a particular parish, a particular street and a particular town in a particular county. In your effort to try to find more information about that family, you could run up the wrong path if it were not for the little column on the right-hand side that says they were born in a totally different county. That enables you to then go to that county. There are guidelines throughout these that you can take notice of and continue a good research pattern.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—One of the things the ABS says is that, if the records are to be retained and disclosed, that will impact on the accuracy of them—that is, people will fib in terms of income, religion or whatever if they think the records might become a matter of public knowledge. Do you have any view on that—in particular, any view on the veracity of English census records and other records you work with?

Mr Thorburn—I think the English census records are fairly straight. I do not think people told fibs in those days for that purpose, but I do believe that, if there is any thought of fibbing in the future because of some opening up of these records in maybe a hundred years time, there has been a lot of fibbing in the past as well—whether they will be opened up or not. I do not think that holds water at all.

ACTING CHAIR—With respect to census records that we do have in Australia, how many families in their research of their history would access those census records, and what use would they make of them?

Mr Thorburn—It is very, very difficult to pre-empt what information would be made available in the census. I dare say there are a lot of questions in the present census forms that may never see the light of day in a general opening up of these—particularly sensitive medical records and things like that. Yet, by the same token, there are some areas of medical research that could make great use of that information if perhaps a person with those qualifications and with that particular thing in mind was able to access that on a reasonably private basis.

In general, the information that would be in the census should be able to take you from point A to point B in family movements in 10-year increments and perhaps let you understand the social circumstances that a family was in—that is, why they moved from point A to point B. Perhaps it was because of job related migration. That has certainly happened in the past here in New South Wales for a variety of reasons, with great internal migrations from the South Coast to the Northern Rivers and things like that. In general, the information there would probably be the normal thing that would take you from point A to point B and onwards in certain research projects.

If we go back to the 1828 census, which is the only census that New South Wales has ever retained that had any real guts about it from the point of view of the information contained therein, that gives you information on the status of a person. It gives you their age, the ship they may have arrived on and if they were new arrivals or not born in the colony. Information on whether they were born in the colony, came freely, were a ticket of leave holder at the time and that sort of thing is all down in the 1828 census. The fact that they may have worked in a particular area for a particular person is in there as well. You can then go to the index of that particular census and go to the reels of that census and find a complete household, which could be of great value. That is something you can do now with this new 1881 census of England.

ACTING CHAIR—The ABS say there are other ways we can do this research, that other sources of material will be available in 100 years time. Is the census intrinsically valuable for this sort of research, and what do you think of the ABS's submission that there will be so many other records available in the future we will not need to access census records?

Mr Thorburn—I would like to know what other records would be available in future before I could make any comment on that. The fact is that I know the census records that we have used in the past—particularly with British censuses—have been invaluable. I dare say that any censuses that are retained in Australia for use in 100 years time may be very valuable if, in 100 years time, people are intensely interested in family and social history research as they seem to be today.

Other records that are available in Australia at the present time are shipping records. The New South Wales records are the best shipping records in the world of assisted passengers. They give you a lot of information to be able to nail a person back to a parish or to an actual townland in Ireland—which is not a town; it is a particular plot of land. Those sorts of things are invaluable too.

Whether similar information will be made available for future by the Australian Archives opening up their records of migrant records and things like is something that is in the ether at the present time.

ACTING CHAIR—Why should we be interested in helping family history researchers? The census is collected so that governments can make decisions on the here and now. Why should we be interested in keeping records for the use of family historians in 100 years time? Why is family history research of any value to the nation?

Mr Thorburn—I think family history and research are the bricks and mortar of social history. I think this is being recognised even more now by academics. Some years ago family historians were considered sort of fringe whackos. Fortunately, now these same academics are realising that, without the personal stories, recollections and experiences of people in the past that have been dug up by family historians, a lot of the presumed events

of the past may have had quite a different outcome to what has been put in history books.

One of the things that we tended to do in the past was to record great events—the events of battles, treaties, generals and things like that. Very little credence was given to the history, if indeed they thought there was a history, of the plight of the farm labourer or the cotton worker in Bradford or wherever. This is now starting to come out and come out strongly.

I think the great majority of people coming out here to Australia were fairly lowly people, both occupational-wise and in the economic strata that that may have been in in their own areas. I am not just sounding out the British isles for this; I am looking at other areas in Europe. For example, if we look at the people in certain particular areas of Italy who have come out.

The people in the northern part of New South Wales with New Italy were actually brought out through a scam by a Frenchman who wanted to set them up on some island in New Caledonia. It was only through the New South Wales government's benevolence that they were able to come to New South Wales. It created an entirely new settlement for them there. There is a social history there of their deprivation in their area of their home country. It is only through recording that through family history that this material has even come available.

ACTING CHAIR—So in your experience would the fact that we do not have census data available create a bit of a black hole in the writing of the history of women, ethnic groups, working people and so forth in this country in comparison with the United States, England and other countries which do retain their census?

Mr Thorburn—I would say it is another important tool; I do not say it is the be-all and end-all—it certainly is not. It gives you a chisel rather than having to reshape a screwdriver, if you get my point.

ACTING CHAIR—Your centre seems to be extraordinarily well patronised. Do people pay a fee for accessing your records?

Mr Thorburn—They do.

ACTING CHAIR—What sort of fee would they pay?

Mr Thorburn—We have a charge of \$6 a half day and \$10 a day, with a concessional rate for senior cardholders. We have a quarterly ticket and a yearly ticket as well.

ACTING CHAIR—How many people go through your centre doing research?

Mr Thorburn—That is really hard. That is something I did not arm myself with and it is something I do not take a great deal of notice of. Perhaps I should.

The amount of advice we give over the phone and over the counter to people who come into the place, phone us or write to us and who do not actually do work within the centre itself is quite amazing. We consider ourselves not only a research and advisory centre but also, as I mentioned, a very important part of a social assistance program, particularly with our work with medical research and adoptees.

ACTING CHAIR—Are you subsidised in anyway, or are you working on a cost recovery basis?

Mr Thorburn—We are working on a cost recovery basis. Council would like us to be totally self-sufficient because we are one of the very few entrepreneurial activities that council have ever got themselves involved with. Unfortunately, we are still working on a deficit after being open for nearly nine years. That deficit has been brought down to a fairly small amount these days in comparison to other council operations, but I must say that council would certainly like us to be self-sufficient.

ACTING CHAIR—You do not see these centres everywhere. What was the rationale behind council putting such a commitment behind a centre such as this?

Mr Thorburn—The original plan of the centre was that it was going to aid people who found their origins in the Kiama-South Coast area. People often came to Australia in the early days and found themselves there almost as a nursery. Illawarra was the garden of New South Wales in those days, and that is the title of Cousins's book—*Garden of NSW*. Subsequently, as they got on their feet, they made their move from there to other places.

As a business person in Kiama many years ago, I saw many people coming down there saying, 'Yes, we found our great-grandfather came from Gerringong, Jamberoo or whatever.' A submission was put to council some years ago to try to set up a small research centre that would enable people who were coming down on the basis of finding their family background—albeit in the local cemetery—to get a bit more information. That burgeoned to become a submission from the local council to the steel cities assistance program, a federal government initiative of something like 11 or 12 years ago, where the federal government gave certain monies to organisations and/or councils in areas that were economically depressed because of the downturn in the steel industry at that time. So areas of the Newcastle and Hunter region, the Illawarra and also Whyalla were able to put in submissions on the basis of raising the economic base of that particular area either through an increase in tourism or through an increase in employment, and the council ran on the tourism basis.

There was a lot of lobbying to achieve that, because I think there was a lot of interest in sporting fields and things like that and not a great deal in the cultural and

historical aspects of things. But I must say that we are one of the few centres—in fact, we may be the only one at the present time—set up on that initiative that is still in existence.

Here again, I think it is because of council's commitment to the cultural and historical background of the town that that has been upheld. I do think that the council needs a big pat on the back and great kudos for their courage in setting up something like this. They put something like \$3¼ million into the project over and above the moneys received from the federal government in the initial grant and created the centre and the new library in the same building. They need great kudos.

ACTING CHAIR—What proportion of your patronage comes from outside the Illawarra—outside this area?

Mr Thorburn—An amazing amount. People come up from Victoria, for instance. A lot of people come through from Melbourne because they know about the place. They have their holidays in the area simply because it is there and because they can kill two birds with one stone: they can see wonderful sea and sand and all that sort of thing as well as do some research work. We have had people from Tasmania come over—again, because the place is there. They have found more things here in our centre, because we have a very strong Tasmanian component, than they have been able to find on the island themselves.

ACTING CHAIR—You would, I take it, maintain that register of people who come to visit you so you have a record of what sort of patronage you have?

Mr Thorburn—Yes, we have two registers, but whether everybody writes in those registers is something else again. It is like a visitors book, and people from as far as away as Ireland and America write in the visitors book—it is surprising. The general work that we do, though, is basically on a research basis or helping people with research. But we also—I must make mention of this—do a lot of commissioned research for people who, perhaps, live at Wyalkatchem in Western Australia or somewhere like that and just cannot get to a particular research centre or an area where certain sources are available. We can perhaps do that work for them on a paid basis.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you very much for attending the committee's inquiry this morning. My apologies: I will not be able to attend, but the subcommittee looks forward to visiting your centre this afternoon. I will make time on another occasion.

Mr Thorburn—Thanks very much.

[12.04 p.m.]

STEPHENS, Miss Michele Johanna Callaway, Publisher, Australian Family Tree Connections Magazine, P.O. Box 322, Gosford, New South Wales 2250

ACTING CHAIR—Welcome. Although the subcommittee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament.

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

Miss Stephens—No.

ACTING CHAIR—Do you wish to make some introductory remarks?

Miss Stephens—Not that I can think of. The submission was put together in rather a hurry, but then again I did not want to spend too much time and overwhelm you with unnecessary pages. I thought you would get enough of those, so I kept it fairly succinct and covered the topics that I thought were of importance.

ACTING CHAIR—Could you please describe the *Australian Family Tree Connection Magazine* and what sort of information is published in it?

Miss Stephens—It is a monthly magazine that I created nearly six years ago to benefit people who were researching their family history, particularly to enable them to make connection with other unknown descendants of their family lines. I did not want to have the situation where someone in Perth was doing research into a family and someone in Sydney was doing the same. I wanted to be able to let them connect. That was the idea behind it. It has gone on a little bit from that and has quite a low level educational content, bearing in mind that it is available through newsagents to the general public. It is very hard to only write for one level; I am trying to produce a magazine that relates to people at all levels of research.

ACTING CHAIR—How often is it published?

Miss Stephens—Every month.

ACTING CHAIR—How many people receive it?

Miss Stephens—I have not had an audit yet. It is around 5,000. It might be just over—10,000 is the next milestone.

ACTING CHAIR—You recommend in your submission that name-identified census records be kept. Could you please elaborate on why you hold this view and what sorts of uses could be made of census records if they were retained?

Miss Stephens—My first and foremost reason is that it is information that relates to the general public, so I think we should have some say in what happens to that information. There are many reasons why I think they should be kept. They could be so beneficial for so many different areas—medical science is one and social history is another. We do not know what is around the corner. There may well be other fields that require this information. To throw something out that is irreplaceable and cannot be rescued is a bit final.

ACTING CHAIR—You indicate in your submission that you believe the census could revert to being taken every 10 years rather than every five years so that some of the cost savings resulting from this could be used to fund the retention of census forms. Could you elaborate on that?

Miss Stephens—I picked that up through reading the various legislation. I thought about that and I really do not fully understand why we need to have our census taken every five years. Countries like the United Kingdom and the United States of America with far larger populations have only ever required theirs every 10 years. I think if they can plan accordingly we should be able to as well.

ACTING CHAIR—Have you had any feedback from the recipients of your magazine on the question of retention of census forms?

Miss Stephens—Yes, very positive, very supportive. In fact, many of them pestered their federal MPs to get them to agree.

ACTING CHAIR—You state in your submission that:

strong evidence exists, at least in the USA, to show that retention of Census information has no deleterious effect on the quality of the data obtained—

Can you elaborate on this?

Miss Stephens—I located that in connection with the US census. I have not brought it with me. There was a study done I think in the 1970s by someone named Singer. I have got it somewhere in the filing cabinet. I probably should have attached that.

ACTING CHAIR—We would be happy to receive it if you would like to send it.

Miss Stephens—Yes. In that regard, I got something off the Internet earlier this morning. It is called the ‘Summary of Audit Report No. 35 of 1996-97, 1996 Census of

Population and Housing'. It is something that has been filed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. I notice under the heading 'Performance measurement' it says:

The ABS has undertaken appropriate benchmarking practices, by comparing its performance against that of other relevant national statistical collection agencies involved in undertaking periodic Censuses of Population.

I would really hope that they would benchmark internationally rather than just nationally. I will leave this document with you. That ties in with the study that has been done in the US. I think the ABS needs to have a look further offshore perhaps.

ACTING CHAIR—Family research is sometimes characterised as fuddy-duddy activity and of no value to anyone. What is your view on that?

Miss Stephens—I do not agree at all. I think family history from a personal point of view helps put the jigsaw puzzle together of who you are and all the various generations that have gone before you who helped to make you. Not many of us have our family history compiled going back five, 10 or 15 generations. Basically that is what family history is.

I was speaking with a psychotherapist the other day who has recently subscribed to my magazine. She specialises in the area of family therapy and counselling. She finds from her patients particular value with some of them in helping to sort out their problems. Taking their mind off it and going back and then coming forward again can often have the result of putting everything into place. I like that. I found great therapeutic benefit in doing mine—a stress relief perhaps. But there are other benefits too. It is not fuddy-duddy at all. It is very much for mums and dads; it is for everyone.

ACTING CHAIR—What is your view on retaining only the 2001 census as a commemorative activity?

Miss Stephens—I think that would be a start but I would not like to see that be the only one that is retained. I am very sad that they were destroyed in the past. I firmly advocate retaining them all. At least if they have them there under embargo, decisions can be made as they are warranted and as time progresses, but if they are destroyed those decisions cannot be made at all. It is very final.

ACTING CHAIR—Should this embargo be total or for how many years or should there be access to certain types of research?

Miss Stephens—There should be a long embargo before public release but I can see the benefit of earlier release in certain circumstances for specific needs, particularly genetic research. It would not help them to have to wait 75 or 100 years. Research would have to meet certain criteria but that could be established in advance.

ACTING CHAIR—As far as the geneticists are concerned, what sort of embargo period would you recommend?

Miss Stephens—I have lobbied for 100 years. Other people are lobbying for 75 years. I am happy with either. I do not have any firm feeling. I am not saying that it has to be 100 if the rest of the population says that we will release it after 75 years. I would be very happy about that.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—To follow up the response you gave about who conducts research; in my own family setting my impression is that the older people get the more likely they are to conduct this kind of research or the more interested they get in their own family circumstances. I have a theory about young people regarding themselves as immortal and therefore not taking the same interest. But the closer you approach mortality the more you get interested in your place in the scheme of things and follow through where you came from, your own origins. Do you have that sort of feeling about those people who are interested in your work in your organisation?

Miss Stephens—Not now. I did once. My children have that picture. I think technology has changed all that. To go back to the starting point, I think a lot of people are very interested in their family tree when they are younger and they say, as I did, 'Yes, one day. When I'm retired I'm going to do that.' I was retrenched so I got an earlier start. I think people in their 20s and 30s start thinking about it.

I think the advent of technology such as the Internet, particularly with its e-mail capabilities and the ability to be talking to people all around the world in a matter of a few hours, has encouraged many people to start doing it now rather than waiting until they have retired or they have got more time on their hands. I definitely notice that more and more younger people are taking it up.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—Your submission says:

I have observed for many years, with increasing alarm, the Australian Bureau of Statistics change from its former "quiet, sober-suited professional government department" to today's "vulgar marketing-oriented corporation" image.

You might like to elaborate on that.

Miss Stephens—I find this a vulgar waste of money. Being in the publishing business, I know a little bit about what printing costs.

ACTING CHAIR—What is 'this'?

Miss Stephens—It is the ABS *What Figures*, which is a regular publication that comes out about four times a year. It is a multi-coloured selling product.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—What kind of product is being sold?

Miss Stephens—It is all based on the census; information that they have extrapolated from the census. They have gathered all our information for free and now they are selling it. That really does offend me.

The ‘old’ ABS was not like that. I am old enough to remember the ABS in the 1950s. I remember the yearbooks they put out. In the 1950s it was quite a small book and it had all the facts and figures you needed to know about what Australia had done in the past 12 months. I thought they were very professional, very quiet and very sober and just got on with that task. The ‘new’ ABS has taken a mighty leap into the commercial arena, which I think does not sit as well as it should with what many people think a government department or a government agency is.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—I am not from the market side of politics, but given that it is collected at public expense or taxpayer expense, why shouldn’t they be trying to make money from it or recover costs?

Miss Stephens—I have no objection to that, but I do not think they have to be quite so blatant about advertising it. Given that they have got a monopoly, the commercial area and government departments—now that it is user-pays—are going to buy the products anyway.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—So the marketing is superfluous?

Miss Stephens—I do not know that this advertising creates that many more sales.

ACTING CHAIR—Even in the United States they do sell census name-identified information after a period of embargo. Wouldn’t you advocate that as a long-term potential use?

Miss Stephens—Absolutely, I have no objection to them selling it. I just do not think they need to do this advertising. I think they would find their product sold anyway, even if they had it in little black and white sheets. People need that information for their business. So the ABS could save a lot more money and maybe make a profit for the government out of it.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—Your submission also says:

. . . many Australians think that all information from many Censuses has already been retained.

I think the ABS would dispute that vigorously. I was having a look at the census form for 1996 and it is a bit ambivalent about this. In the area of confidentiality, it says:

Your completed form remains confidential to the Australian Bureau of Statistics as required by the Census and Statistics Act. No information will be released in a way that would enable an individual or household to be identified.

Clearly, if what you are suggesting was adopted by the committee and then the government, then they could no longer make the claim. On the other hand, I think a person reading this would not necessarily get the impression that the records were being destroyed. So they have an each-way bet with it?

Miss Stephens—That statement changed on the 1996 census compared with what was on the 1991 census. It gave me great heart when I saw the sample census form prior to the census being taken. I thought perhaps we do have a good chance of having the 1996 census returns retained.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—Because the 1991 census said they would be destroyed?

Miss Stephens—It has a very different statement on the front of it. I do not know. This is the one that is in the book and I do not—

ACTING CHAIR—We might be able to ask the ABS why it was changed.

Miss Stephens—Yes. This is not a whole form. It is a reduced one. I used to have a complete one and I have given it away unfortunately. But, yes. I believe that, when you talk about the census with the general public—people you talk to in the street or in the dress shop or in the post office—greater than 50 per cent of the general public do not realise the censuses are being destroyed once the ABS has extracted its data. They assume that they are being kept anyway. When you tell them no, they are destroyed, they get quite a shock.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—The only other question is the same question I asked Mr Thorburn about the possibility that people could tick a box as to whether they wanted their particular records retained or destroyed. What do you think about a voluntary approach to the issue?

Miss Stephens—I imagine that, if that were done, it would create further work later down the track. I do not believe it is done in either the UK or the USA—it is just mandatory that people fill in the form, as it is here; and it is stated on the front of them that the records will be embargoed for 100 years or 72 years and then released to the general public, and the general public accept that.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you, Miss Stephens. Would you like to make any concluding remarks on behalf of your readership?

Miss Stephens—Just that I am very pleased to have this opportunity. Thank you very much for inviting me. I am looking forward to the result with great anticipation.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you very much. Thank you all for attending here today. I would also like to thank those who are recording the evidence.

Resolved (on motion by Mr Kelvin Thomson):

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

I now declare this meeting of the subcommittee closed.

Subcommittee adjourned at 12.23 p.m.