

***FRIENDS OF THE NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND ARCHIVE in cooperation with
AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY OF ARCHIVISTS (ACT Branch)***

COMMUNIQUE

**STATEMENT AND RESOLUTIONS OF CONFERENCE ON “THE FUTURE OF
THE ARCHIVE”**

On 3-4 July 2004, one year after the merger of the Australian Film Commission (AFC) and the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA, aka ScreenSound and “the Archive”), the Friends of the NFSA and the Canberra Branch of the Australian Society of Archivists convened a conference in Canberra to discuss **The Future of the Archive**.

The conference applauded and supported the appointment of Dr Paolo Cherchi Usai as Director of the NFSA and acknowledged his future role in directing and developing the NFSA.

The conference discussed a range of issues concerning the future of the Archive and made the following key recommendations:

- 1 That the AFC address in detail all the responses to its December 2003 “Directions” paper
- 2 That the NFSA be established as a statutory authority separate from the AFC
- 3 That national public programs remain an integral part of the NFSA
- 4 That the NFSA’s comprehensive role and support base as a national custodial institution based in Canberra be affirmed and developed

The conference recognised the changing role of archival institutions in a digital age and the importance of making archival collections more accessible through a variety of means. It also considered the proper role of the NFSA within the larger context of Australia’s custodial institutions. To these ends the conference formulated a general statement and also passed detailed resolutions, as set out below.

Statement

If war is too important to leave to the military men, as the politician in Lloyd George said, then national culture and identity is too important to leave to the politicians.

National cultural collections are public property and national treasures. The stakeholders have a civic duty of cultural stewardship over them, and the management of these cultural assets in a governmental but not a political function.

In particular, we recognise that a civic duty of cultural stewardship exists for those people whose creative labour has produced the materials in the archives, museums and libraries; for those whose intellectual effort identifies the value of the collections; for those whose labour curate and preserve the collections; and for those who use the collections.

In the first instance such institutions should be answerable, like the Auditor-general, to the Parliament as representative of all the people, and not to the government. Having such institutions report to Parliament is symbolically and actually to recognise that their role is to serve the public interest, as principally identified by the organisations themselves.

We call on the Australian Commonwealth Government to legislate to quarantine important national cultural institutions like (but not limited to) the National Library of Australia, National Gallery of Australia, National Museum of Australia, Australian War Memorial, the National Archives of Australia, the National Maritime Museum and the National Film and Sound Archive from the manipulation of the government of the day.

Resolutions

Character of the Archive

1. This conference commends the professional excellence and expertise of the staff of the Archive and recognises their contribution to the field of visual and audio archiving, nationally and internationally.
2. The conference believes Archive staff, as individual professionals, should be free and empowered to express their views in public forums on matters of policy and principle without fear of intimidation or recrimination.
3. The conference affirms the importance of sound archiving as embracing a vital part of Australia's cultural heritage

4. The conference recognises the importance of the NFSA internationally and regionally, and the necessity of maintaining its status and involvement in international professional forums. Its stature as an admired model needs to be maintained and protected.

Integrity and autonomy

5. The conference asserts that there is a fundamental symbiotic relationship between proactive national public programs, education programs and audience development, and collection development, and recommends that they be co-located and managed in a single, integrated organisation under the Archive's own name.
6. The conference asserts that the Archive must retain complete control of its own publicity, branding and public image.¹
7. The conference calls on the Minister to ensure that the AFC respects and observes the Government's stated commitment to the Archive's autonomy, integrity and identity.
8. Within the AFC the Director of the Archive should have at least the same autonomy and scope as the position traditionally enjoyed when the Archive was attached to the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts.
9. The conference asserts the professional principle of the Archive having final control of its own collection. Given the present structure, the AFC should declare that the Director of the Archive has ultimate responsibility for the control of the national collection.

"Directions" paper and consultation

10. The conference notes that the AFC has not yet responded to the over 140 submissions on the "Directions" paper, issued last December, nor to the issues raised in the January/February "stakeholder forums". The AFC should publish an immediate progress report on the current state of analysis of this input.
11. The conference calls upon the AFC to formally withdraw the "Directions" paper, as it is an impediment to constructive discussion and planning for the future.

¹ The context of this recommendation is press releases and public statements from the AFC concerning the Archive's Longford-Lyell lecture and the presentation of its reconstructed version of "The Sentimental Bloke" as high profile events under the AFC's, not the Archive's, brand.

12. The conference calls upon the new Archive Director to acknowledge and openly consult with the widest possible social and cultural constituency of the Archive.

Status and governance of the Archive

13. In the public interest and in recognition of the importance of our national cultural organisations, the Government should immediately release the 2002-2003 review of cultural institutions report, including the terms of reference and recommendations.
14. The conference calls on the Minister, the AFC Board, the Shadow Minister, and the Arts spokespersons for the Democrats and Greens, to read the conference papers on governance, and invites them to respond with comments to the Friends of the NFSA [Email: friendsofarchive@hotmail.com ; the papers will be forwarded separately in due course]
15. The conference endorses the commitment of the Australian Labor Party (ALP), when elected to government, to dissolve the merger between the Archive and the AFC and to create the Archive as a statutory authority, as originally intended in its foundation document "Time in our hands". It affirms this as a matter of principle, not politics, and urges the present government to return to this view so that the Archive may enjoy bipartisan support.
16. The conference calls on the ALP to commit to broad consultation and to the passage of legislation creating the Archive as a statutory authority, to be called the National Film and Sound Archive, within 12 months of being elected. The legislation should reflect, among other things, the need to preserve the existing cohesive and integrated structure of the collection. In the interim the AFC should act only as caretaker of the Archive.
17. Meanwhile, as a first step towards the AFC Board becoming more representative of the Archive's status within the AFC, the vacant position of Deputy Chair should be promptly filled by an archivally qualified person.
18. Pending achievement of statutory authority status, this conference calls for the Archive's Advisory Committee to be independently chaired and to report directly to the AFC Board. The Committee's composition should accurately reflect the diversity of the Archive's constituency. The conference commended the proposal of Archive Forum as a workable model.
19. This conference calls for the reporting structure of the AFC to be amended so that the Director of the Archive reports directly to the AFC Board.

20. Should the present Government be returned in the forthcoming election, and decide not to create the Archive as a separate statutory authority, this conference calls for the AFC Act to be amended to ensure that the Archive is recognised and its integrity is protected in line with the resolutions passed by this conference.

Indigenous collections

21. The conference acknowledged the unique historic, social and cultural value of the Indigenous Collection and the crucial importance of its preservation, development and accessibility in accordance with due protocols.
22. The conference commended the Archive and its Indigenous Reference Group for their achievements in development of policy and curatorial practice in managing and cataloguing the Archive's indigenous materials. It urged the ongoing operation of the Reference Group, with its experience and views of protocols, as a permanent feature of the Archive.
23. The conference noted the inaccuracies and omissions in the relevant section of "Directions" (2.11) and rejected its recommendation to establish an indigenous unit in Sydney.
24. The conference commended the AIATSIS submission to the AFC, and urged that it be kept in view as a reference point. It also noted the complementary roles of AIATSIS and the NFSA and saw value in the continued development of this proven working relationship. It further noted the importance of basing the work in Canberra, with the proximity of access to other national custodial institutions such as the National Library and National Archives.
25. The conference recognised the wide ranging use made of the indigenous collection, with its value for personal, family and academic research as well as program production.
26. While acknowledging the difficulties of retaining indigenous staff in a field which may not yet be particularly attractive, the conference urges the Archive to continue encouraging the development of both indigenous and non-indigenous specialists in the management of indigenous materials. It encourages the skilling of staff in both groups in general archival disciplines and in formal courses here and overseas.