

State Records Act Review - PHA (NSW & ACT) opening statement

Inquiry Hearing date: 1 July 2020

Dr Lisa Murray:

I'd like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we meet on, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

On behalf of the Professional Historians Association of NSW & ACT, I thank the review committee for this opportunity to place before you the perspective of our members and that of historians more broadly.

My name is Dr Lisa Murray and I work full-time as a professional historian in the local government sector. I am the current elected Chair of the PHA. And I am joined by my colleague and association member, Dr Michael Bennett, who specialises in Native Title historical research. We have both been accredited members of the PHA for 20 years.

The PHA commends the government on valuing the state's history, archives, and material collections, but point to the devastating effect that ongoing budget cuts have had on the State Archives of NSW and its ability to manage and provide access to the collection, a fact highlighted by many submissions.

The association agrees with the principles that define the four policy outcomes in the public policy paper dated 8 January, however, we question whether some of the proposed reforms are the best way to achieve these policy objectives.

We also question the policy outcomes that SARA and SLM responded to in their submissions. They both cite policy outcome 4 as: "A single institution will act as custodian of the documentary and built history of NSW." This was not a publicised policy outcome. To avoid any confusion, I wish to make it clear our association does not agree with this policy outcome or proposed reform.

We are perplexed by the absence of any detailed analysis of the current legislation and even the proposed changes are light in detail. The public have been presented with a brief policy paper which shifts the focus away from record keeping and archival access – the whole purpose of the State Records Act - and instead proposes a merger of the archives with Sydney Living Museums to create an executive agency. Where is the business case or cost analysis for this?

The PHA rejects the assertion by the Chair of the State Records Board in his evidence before the committee that professional associations are merely "protecting the territory of specialists". The PHA are advocates not only for the profession, but for the practise of history and for the public who are interested in these things that support a democratic society, namely: transparency, public access to records, and historically-informed debate.

Dr Michael Bennett:

The State Archive is not created for entertainment and is not simply a cultural collection. It is a service for the citizens of New South Wales. Exhibitions may raise awareness, market the archives and activate the collection, but they are not the primary function of a state government archive. The State Archives does not need to merge with Sydney Living Museums to achieve the activation of the collection.

The State Archives should be focussing upon continually improving and expanding access to the records – to arrange, describe, preserve, digitise and catalogue the records so that community members from all walks of life, including Aboriginal people, can identify the records they want to see.

For example, the archives has a depth and breadth of records relating to Aboriginal people that is only partially understood; and those records have a deep personal and cultural interest to Aboriginal people of NSW. Rather than exhibitions, resources could be diverted to gaining a deeper understanding of this archival material.

I wish to draw to the Committee's attention that there has not been an Aboriginal archivist employed there for almost 10 years – their role in cataloguing material and connecting with the community and making it accessible to the people has been left unfilled.

The State Archives needs to lead the way in record keeping practices and, along with all government departments, be responsible for ensuring that the business of government is preserved through its records.