

[SITUATION OF THE NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND ARCHIVE]

Broadcast talk on ABC Radio National *Perspective* program, 17 September 2004

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A nation's memory is defined by what's kept in its great libraries, museums and archives. We recently saw the tragic destruction of heritage in Iraq and Afghanistan, while we in the West continue to take for granted the security of our own similar institutions. Freedom of thought, access to information and the faithful transmission of history are cornerstones of democracy. Our structures guarantee it, don't they?

In Australia, important institutions like our National Library and National Museum are statutory authorities. They have specific legislation securing their independence, permanence, identity and mandate - and their freedom to work professionally, without fear or favour. Like the judiciary, they are above politics, and accountable directly to the Parliament, not the Government.

But these fundamentals are threatened in the West too. Currently, American archivists are opposing the Bush administration's "information lockdown", which, in the name of "security", hides large areas of what used to be public information. In April this year, President George Bush tried to appoint a new Archivist of the United States without due process, despite the US Senate warning that an arbitrary or politically motivated appointment could lead to their historical records being impoverished or distorted.

Similarly, in Australia, there are growing fears for the independence and accountability of our own cultural institutions. Board stacking, funding cuts, political interference in appointments, and even in the interpretation of history itself, are worrying professionals and the public too. Unlike New Zealand, Britain and Canada we have no transparent mechanisms for screening out unsuitable and political board appointments: they are simply a ministerial gift of the Federal Minister for the Arts.

The starkest example is the fate of our globally admired National Film and Sound Archive, also known as ScreenSound. Established in 1984, it protects our film, broadcasting and sound heritage. The institution has worked *like* an independent statutory authority for so long that people forgot the enabling legislation, devised in 1985, had never been passed. Last year, following a still secret Federal Government review, it suffered a takeover by a much smaller and very dissimilar organisation, the Australian Film Commission – a funding and promotional agency. The takeover was rushed through and stakeholders had no chance to comment, and no time to evaluate the decision. The real reasons, sadly, now lie buried in a Cabinet submission, locked up until the year two thousand and thirty three.

Given the Archive on a plate, the Australian Film Commission prepared to make a meal of it, chopping it into pieces for easier digestion and sucking away its identity. Only immense, and unanticipated, public outcry stayed the Film Commission's hand, as the protests of thousands of archivists, eminent persons and ordinary people from around the

world were voiced in public rallies, and hundreds of submissions, meetings, letters and petitions. Yet Rod Kemp, the Federal Arts Minister, has remained silent while the Film Commission has shamelessly flouted government promises to protect the Archive's integrity and independence. Even persistent scrutiny at Senate Estimates Committees has been futile and stonewalled. The Australian Film Commission has been effectively unaccountable.

The existence of a determined agenda is obvious. The avalanche of stakeholder advice, comment and protest has disappeared into a black hole in William Street, and the Minister has twice squibbed opportunities to put archivally qualified people into vacancies on a now seriously unbalanced Film Commission board.

As a funding authority, the Australian Film Commission has the power of patronage over film and cultural organisations. But it has no leverage over the archival community, whose professional forums don't rely on its money and can speak freely. That community has been outspoken in its condemnation of the failure of the Film Commission to heed expert opinion.

Inevitably, the unprotected Archive is compromised when loyalty collides with professional principles and historical integrity. While the amended Australian Film Commission Act recognises the national collection, it doesn't recognise the archival institution which brings it into existence. So there is no basis for trust in its permanence, nor its accountability, nor its professional independence above politics.

The incoming Federal Government should immediately make the Archive a statutory authority, separate from the Australian Film Commission. The Labor party, the Greens and the Australian Democrats agree. The Coalition, so far, does not. Whoever forms government in October this year must do the right thing by the nation, and by the National Film and Sound Archive. Give the Archive its freedom. It has waited long enough.

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(739 words)