

Submission
No 28

INQUIRY INTO STATE RECORDS ACT 1998 AND THE POLICY PAPER ON ITS REVIEW

Organisation: Federation of Australian Historical Societies

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Review of the State Records Act 1998

The Federation of Australian Historical Societies appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Review of the State Records Act 1998.

FAHS is the umbrella body for Australia's community history and heritage associations which number about 1000 and have approximately 100,000 members. Our volunteer members are deeply involved in historical research, the preservation of heritage buildings and the mounting of exhibitions devoted to telling the stories of our cultural heritage.

As a result, our members keenly support:

- the best preservation and presentation of historical and heritage sites, built and cultural, and their role in telling stories through exhibitions and physical demonstrations of our heritage

AND

- the best preservation and management of government archives and to provide efficient access to them for researchers who use them as sources for accounts of our history and heritage.

The current review focuses on consideration by the NSW government to, in effect, merge two existing historical heritage bodies, the State Archives and Records Authority and the Sydney Living Museum. The question is asked whether these two bodies should remain separate or would a single entity be more effective?

We note that there has already been a move towards amalgamation through the appointment of a single Executive Director and the merging of some administrative functions.

FAHS wishes to express deep reservations about the amalgamation:

1. Principally, we believe that the two organisations have very different core purposes and roles and that this makes it very difficult for them to be managed as a single authority.

There is concern in the historical research community that while both institutions have an historical focus and contribute to the preservation and understanding of the state's history and heritage, their purposes, roles and operations are in some respects so different that they are potentially incompatible in the one organisation. SARA is the organisation responsible for the collection and preservation of government archives, while the SLM is responsible for the care and public presentation of a number of built sites and the mounting of related exhibitions.

These are very different functions requiring very different skill sets and expertise.

2. Much of the emphasis in the policy paper is on the ostensible shared purpose of the two organisations in telling stories.

FAHS argues that while that may well be the main role of the exhibition-oriented SLM, SARA's role (like any government archive) is rather to collect, preserve and make available NSW government records. This is crucial for future researchers.

The telling of stories is the role of the researchers, not the archives themselves.

As far as FAHS is aware, in no other Australian State or Territory, or indeed anywhere else in the world, has an amalgamation of this nature been attempted, presumably because it is such an uneasy and even illogical fit.

If the proposed amalgamation were to go ahead, FAHS asserts that this must be done under strict conditions that protect the two current organisations from financial and functional degradation.

1. FAHS recognises that there may be beneficial economies of scale, but we wish to express a specific concern about whether the proposed reforms will enhance the protection of the key cultural assets of NSW.
2. It is critical that any financial gains are treated as resources to be reinvested in the institutions to ensure their optimal ongoing operations, in staff, training equipment, premises, etc.

3. It is essential that the purposes and cultures of the two are suitably recognised, and that a situation of one being treated as subservient and is less well-resourced does not evolve.

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