

**Submission
No 31**

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

Organisation: Professional Historians Australia

Date Received: 9 April 2020



Submission to the INQUIRY INTO THE STATE RECORDS ACT

About us

Professional Historians Australia (PHA) represents over 500 professionally accredited historians across all Australian states and territories. The PHA and its state and territory associations are committed to advocating historical perspectives in public debates concerning interpretations of history and the keeping of documentary, environmental and other historical records.

Response to the Policy Paper on State Records Act 1998 (NSW)

PHA commends the New South Wales government for its resolve to support and value the state's history, archives and material collections. It also endorses all efforts to encourage responsible record keeping that underpins good governance, decision making and transparency, and to ensure government records are available to the public.

- The PHA therefore supports the view of its NSW and ACT branch that the primary role of the State Archives and Records Authority in NSW is recordkeeping regulation; management and access to State archives; and commercial storage and associated services for government agencies.
- It also applauds the aims stated in the review of increasing the visibility of the archives, enhancing community engagement and supporting the use of archives in telling the history of the state.

An important question, therefore, is how best to achieve these laudable aims and how to distribute responsibilities and fund activities. As PHA NSW & ACT has pointed out in its submission, the focus of a state archive should be on encouraging excellence in public office recordkeeping practices and ensuring compliance, as well as improving access to records. This is a big task, especially in the digital age, which poses new challenges to collection of records and archiving practices.

- To help achieve the goals of access and history making, historians must be represented on the governing board of any new entity that emerges from this review. This is critical to promoting a historical perspective in decision making both within the State Archives and in government more broadly.
- The PHA supports the recommended reduction for the open access period to 20 years but cautions that implementation must be mindful of privacy concerns, the handling of sensitive information and freedom of information legislation.
- The PHA cannot endorse the creation of a new executive agency comprising State Archives and Records Authority and Sydney Living Museums. While it welcomes the aim of placing history at the heart of the state's cultural policy, it is not convinced this will be achieved by the amalgamation of the State Archives and Sydney Living Museums. While there may be some administrative savings in such an arrangement, the danger is that the remits of, and funding for, both entities will be diluted by the merger. Moreover, history making embraces many more institutions and actors in the state: galleries, libraries, other museums as well as universities and independent historians.

Professional
Historians
Australia



- For that reason, the PHA supports the PHA NSW & ACT's suggestion of creating a position of State Historian, whose role would be to foster collaboration across the state's cultural institutions in telling the stories that have shaped the social, historical and cultural identity of NSW.
- It also recommends the State Archives and Records Authority a) develop a program of annual fellowships to enable historical research using the state archives and b) explore funding mechanisms for staging exhibitions and other outreach activities.

Carmel Black

President, PHA Australia contact details and date