

**Submission
No 32**

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

Name: Dr Rosemary Webb

Date Received: 9 April 2020

Inquiry into the State Records Act 1988 and the Policy Paper on its Review

Submission to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Issues, re the above. :

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this proposal.

My submission is informed by a familiarity with Archives, both as historian and researcher, and also as having worked at the National Archives of Australia in the 1980s and 90s. While I have no professional experience of working in museums I am a frequent visitor/ user at Sydney Living Museum sites. I am an active member of the Association for the Study of Labour History (Labour History Australia) am a current member of Federal Executive and President of the Sydney Branch of the Society. I am therefore well informed on the functions, commonalities and differences between the SRA and SLM.

I submit here my observations on the proposals, taking into account the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry and the intended Policy Outcomes. Given my fields of expertise, this submission emphasises issues regarding Archives.

The Review will have a critical impact on elements of the information society in New South Wales, particularly for the SRA. It is without argument that legislation relating to government and society requires monitoring and review in response to fundamental changes in society - the functional climate and context of an agency's work. Regarding the State Records Act legislative review appears to be appropriate at this time. However, I am deeply troubled by the suggestion that the SRA and SLM should become a 'unified institution'. I believe the intent of the proposal is at odds with the disciplines and professional mission underpinning each institution.

NSW Archives and Museums do not exist independently of their global institutions, and that connection should be considered in any structural change resulting from this review. Both the SRA and SLM are State agencies and cultural institutions under the umbrella of national and international professional bodies (internationally, the International Council of Archives/ ICA and International Council of Museums / ICOM) ultimately overseen by UNESCO. Significantly they connect to separate UNESCO conventions, highlighting their recognised differences. For ICOM the World Heritage Convention aims to protect heritage of outstanding universal value for current and future generations. Thus, the core mission for museums is to protect, preserve and provide access to 'natural and cultural heritage'.

In contrast, the mission for Archives (and also Libraries) as epitomised in the Hague Convention 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict' is that they be 'repositories of collective and individual memories, knowledge, and achievements'. Zgonjanin 2005 highlights that

records fulfilling these functions are targeted during armed conflicts.¹ That is, they are seen as critical to the identity of target parties. Their vulnerability lies in their being less easily popularly identified than sites of cultural heritage similarly targeted.

I cite these examples in support of my argument that the SRA and SLM, while each important repositories for social and cultural recording, are too different for their distinctive missions to be blurred by merger. To 'unify' these agencies would constrain and diminish both.

It is important in review to maintain the integrity of both organisations; the need to acknowledge and conserve their differing functions/ purpose/ disciplines; the need to recognise and respect the core concepts underlying each organisation. These concepts can be summarised for the SRA, as supporting governance and embedding historical administrative records and, for SLM, as conserving and providing access to cultural narratives or 'stories'. The SRA exists for functions to do with the records of the State, essentially government administrative records. While these might include some artefacts, such artefacts relate to the business of government. SLM on the other hand preserves the history and 'stories' of the people of the state, socially generated records and artefacts with no necessary connection to government or governance.

The thread which runs through the policy paper, notably at Policy Outcome 3.1 and ToR 1(d)(iii), the insistence on stories, conflicts with the purpose of the SRA - the collecting, conserving, preserving and managing the matter of government records. It also raises the question of ensuring managed research access to Archives. How are custodial responsibilities to be observed and preserved if the agencies are merged?

It is important that the Review address the meaning of 'stories'. I submit that, whilst stories allow a people a narrative of its history, they also necessarily allow for creative interpretation of that narrative. Stories do not require, and indeed should not have, the rigorous oversighting essential to the proper management of government records, record keeping and collections. Stories are not core purpose for the SRA.

I urge that the members of the Committee of Review consider the proposals in the light of the International Bodies and Conventions cited in this submission.² I ask that the Committee takes these observations into account in determining its recommendations.

(Dr) Rosemary Webb
Sydney, NSW

¹ Sanja Zgonjanin 'The Prosecution of War Crimes for the Destruction of Libraries and Archives during Times of Armed Conflict' in *Libraries & Culture*, 2/40, 2005

² ICOM <http://www.icom-cc.org/> ICA <https://www.ica.org/en/mission-aim-and-objectives>

Notes:

1. Alan Ventress ‘Support by the New South Wales Government for the Archives Authority of New South Wales 1960–98 and State Records New South Wales 1999–2012’ in *Archives and Manuscripts* 1:41, 2013
2. UNESCO Archivists Stress Importance of Archives for Information Society, 2012, http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=6407&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.
3. International Council of Archives (ICA), Mission, Aims and Objectives
“Archives constitute the memory of nations and societies, shape their identity, and are a cornerstone of the information society. By providing evidence of human actions and transactions, archives support administration and underlie the rights of individuals, organisations and states. By guaranteeing citizens' rights of access to official information and to knowledge of their history, archives are fundamental to identity, democracy, accountability and good governance”.
<https://www.ica.org/en/mission-aim-and-objectives>

