

**Submission  
No 50**

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

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The Hon Shayne Mallard MLC  
Chair, Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues  
Parliament House  
Macquarie Street  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Chair,

**RE: REVIEW OF THE STATE RECORDS ACT 1998 & HISTORIC HOUSES ACT 1980**

For cultural intuitions and collections, access is the best proxy measure for public value. It is the duty of public institutions who hold public collections to ensure that they strike the right balance between guardianship and the democratic principles of access.

Far too often – whether due to lack of space, underfunding or outdated attitudes – public collections are left to languish and be forgotten. Millions of dollars of public money are spent collecting and preserving vital, beautiful, emotional and highly socially relevant material only for it to sit in storage, beyond the reach or, worse, beyond the memory of the public who own it.

It is the foundational principle of access that underscores this review of the *State Records Act 1998* and the *Historic Houses Act 1980*. The proposals outlined in the ‘*State Records Act 1998* and the Policy Paper on its review’ present a cogent and compelling prospect to create a new cultural institution that is dedicated to placing history at the forefront of cultural programming in this state. This is something that New South Wales is lacking and the institutions at the centre of this proposal, Sydney Living Museums (SLM) and the NSW State Archives and Records Authority (SARA), are well-placed to illuminate our history – pre- and post-colonisation – as the first state and site of first contact.

The proposed new institution will have custodianship of both the State Archives Collection and the property portfolio of SLM – a formidable collection of assets with astonishing cultural, social, artistic, economic, architectural and civic value. Imagine the socially and historically significant sites maintained by and opened to the public by SLM having access to an endless collection to interpret within them.

This new institution will leverage these assets for a significant return; that is, to engage people in history, let them learn about archives and entice visitors to return to their sites again and again. The sites managed by SLM are wonderful interpretations of certain periods in our history. In this respect, they are engaging for visitors but struggle to be repeatedly so. The potential to unlock them from their Havisham-like stasis lies in marrying them with a collection like the State Archives Collection. They will then truly be living museums, bringing new stories, documents, objects and material to entice audiences back repeatedly. Look at examples such as The Met Cloisters, whose heritage sites are enhanced by displaying fashion, jewellery, archival material and all manner of objects in the amazing architectural setting. Some are connected directly to the place; the vast majority are not. Yet, the experience of seeing this material in a special setting is extraordinary. You

can have a fantastic visit to the Cloisters but by visiting one or more of their other sites your experience will be even more greatly enhanced. This is the potential for the new institution, which will have a world-class set of assets.

The State Archives Collection is a globally significant archival collection that documents the wielding of colonial power in exquisite detail, and contains billions of stories that possess staggering relevance. Although much progress has been made to increase awareness of and engagement with the Collection, more needs to be done to open this collection and continue the work being done by SARA to ensure that the Collection is attractive and relevant to a diverse and contemporary public. The best way to do this is to ensure strong professional archival standards, to maximise discovery of the Collection, and to work across the GLAM sector so that other professions, such as curators, historians and even the public, are involved in surfacing the content and sharing it today and tomorrow.

Archival collections, particularly ones the size of the State Archives Collection, are inherently academically organised. This is for good reason – the sheer vastness and interconnectedness demands supreme levels of professional attention. A consequence of this is that, too often, the general public are less inclined to explore it unilaterally. This is why Reading Rooms attached to many of our State Archives are experiencing dwindling numbers – even from the core audiences of academics and family historians. This is why there is pressure on them to close, because access is the best proxy measure for public value.

Access is also a fundamental concern of the many professions that underpin and make operational archives, museums and libraries – all of which are under the care of the NSW State Archives and Records Authority (SARA) and Sydney Living Museums (SLM). It is discovery, by other Archivists, Curators, Historians, Academics, Librarians, Genealogists, Logistics Professionals, Registrars, Conservators and, hopefully, the general public, that drives the need for documentation, cataloguing, arrangement, description, context and collection management that adheres to nuanced and contemporary conventions, like the Series System. Naysayers have stated that this proposal will come at the expense of documenting records other than the SARA image series, at the expense of addressing backlogs of unprocessed material, at the expense of creating administrative history, and even at the expense of good, old-fashioned archival disciplines. This type of thinking is misguided and anachronistic, as is saying that focusing on access will take the institution away from its core mission, but it is access that drives the need for strong collection management disciplines such as arrangement, description and context.

With my focus on access and the audience engagement philosophy I have driven since becoming Executive Director of SARA, more has been done to document and describe archives for public discovery than ever before – 600,000 new items have been made discoverable this financial year alone and some 430,000 are from non-image series. In addition, 211 consignments (almost 1.5km) of unprocessed backlog material has been arranged and described.

In both instances, this is far greater than has been achieved under previous administrations, a number of which have expressed to me that this proposal will weaken the focus on archives and collection management disciplines when the results achieved with this philosophy have been the opposite. In fact, the refusal to open our minds to contemporary or progressive approaches to the management of our Collection is, perhaps, precisely the reason there is a backlog. The insular and

covetous approach to management of the Collection displayed by previous leadership has only served to result in poor public awareness of one of the State's most valuable cultural assets. The regulatory aspect of SARA's current operation will also remain a strong focus under the proposals and will involve additional authority in relation to the building of the Collection. This new institution will be able to approach building the archives with a collections acquisition methodology, which would yield greater sensitivity to documents of future value and significance.

Archives must do more to show the public – and politicians, media, philanthropists, children and young people – that they are living organisms, not closed, insular repositories of 'old' material. In this regard, Archives have lagged behind their Museum, Gallery and Library peers. The proposed creation of a new cultural institution that innovatively pairs significant sites of built heritage with an archival collection that tells the story of who we are and how we have been shaped into what we are is a highly unique and innovative idea. It will place NSW at the forefront of cultural thinking – bravely stating that history is important and relevant; then, now and always.

Moreover, this institution will be in a position to make history attractive and relevant to contemporary audiences.

In my opinion as the current chief executive of both SARA and SLM this proposal represents the future for both institutions, and it is a far brighter, more relevant future than one that proceeds along our current, separate paths. I cannot state this too strongly.