

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Inquiry into the State Records Act 1998
Submission to the Standing Committee on Social Issues

I have worked as a professional historian since the mid-1970s, mainly searching archives and manuscripts, particularly those held in the State Library of NSW and NSW State Archives and Records Authority and from 1981 to 2010 I worked under contract to the Historic Houses Trust of NSW for a substantial part of each year.

For the Trust I undertook primary research for the restoration of Vaucluse House, Elizabeth Farm, Hyde Park Barracks, Elizabeth Bay House, Government House, Sydney, and for major exhibitions (some as curator) and for scholarly publications. In the heritage sector I have also undertaken major research projects for the National Parks and Wildlife Service (Greycliffe House and Throsby Park), NSW Public Works (Camden Park garden) and the National Trust of Australia (NSW) (Tomago House, Golden Vale and more recently Old Government House, Parramatta). A former component of my practice was archival research for litigation purposes in the Supreme Court of NSW and the High Court of Australia.

I fully commend a review of the State Records Act 1998 especially given the vast changes in record keeping including the growth of digital records.

I would welcome improved access to records held in GRR (obviously with obligatory time and privacy restrictions). These records are currently in limbo land with access depending on the agency's record officer's attitude to retrieval or the fact that boxes of records have (or had) been transferred with insufficient documentation to enable retrieval. The latter a relatively recent mission impossible for me when it was revealed that when the agency was about to undergo building renovations a large volume of records was boxed with inadequate documentation by casual staff then sent to GRR.

Definitely State Archives should not only have greater control, there should be mandatory reporting to the authority when such renovations or an agency's move to new accommodation will affect movement of records. Examples in the past: the staggering loss of records each time the Public Works Dept and Government Architect moved office. And in the 1990s a visit to the Dept of Mineral Resources to search mining leases for a High Court Appeal revealed that some of the earlier registers and records of expired leases had been destroyed by the department (with the officer remarking their loss could make certain Native Title claims problematical).

It would also seem that some records officers (engaged because of their digital expertise) have insufficient interest or appreciation of earlier paper archives and the processing of them.

Re opening up access. If the trend is to reduce restriction from 30 to 20 years, there are certain records that should still require stringent access conditions, particularly those for medical and mental health, prison and courts where individuals may still be alive (there has always been discretionary access for matters such as genetics). It must be a firm policy so that Archives staff at Kingswood are not harassed by voracious family historians with a sense of personal entitlement.

The Policy Paper relating to the Review of the State Records Act 1998 also refers to a proposed merger of State Archives and Sydney Living Museums. There is no solid detail concerning the proposal, in fact it seems to have been thrown in as an afterthought.

Without any detail, and vague mentions of 'synergies', the proposal seems quite illogical, even ridiculous to contemplate. With such a proposal one would normally expect the circulation of a discussion paper that would lead to more constructive or meaningful comments.

I viewed the online meeting between Dr Lisa Murray, president of the PHA and Adam Lindsay. When asked to elaborate on the 'synergies' of a merger Adam Lindsay referred to three since he became Director of State Archives and SLM: IT, HR and Accounts (?). Those processes could be handled elsewhere and not the stuff of a merger.

Mr Lindsay then reported the new exciting synergy of the collaboration in an exhibition with the State Library of NSW and that State Librarian, John Vallance was very enthusiastic. This of course is nothing

new – John Vallance will be continuing the tradition of his predecessors of generous loans to the HHT/SLM since the 1980s and the Bligh/'Rum Rebellion' collaboration in 2008. Given that both are relatively new to their positions, they may not be aware of the library's loans to the scholarly exhibition, Songs of Home, at the Museum of Sydney in 2019.

Mr Lindsay mentioned the possible acquisition of properties. Were it to be a public building then certainly State Archives would hold the major sources of information for its restoration, such as Hyde Park Barracks, first and second Government House, Sydney, and Old Government House, Parramatta. Should the property be a private residence to become a house museum the major source would be the collections (especially manuscripts and pictures) of the State Library of NSW (for example, Wentworth Family papers for Vacluse House; Macarthur Family papers for Elizabeth Farm, Lyndhurst, Elizabeth Bay House and Camden Park garden; the Windeyer papers for Tomago House). However the collections can be complementary when searching for information on the owners, occupants and workforce of the properties, for example searches are undertaken at State Records of early birth, marriage and death registers, wills, probates and deceased estate lists of assets, sometimes bankruptcy papers and land titles primary applications. While for the workers also convict and immigration records and naturalization papers.

Nevertheless research for the restoration/conservation of buildings and grounds and on their owners and occupants requires more expertise than an archivist's knowledge of the records. A merger would not substantially benefit research of any new property acquisitions. Archives staff do not necessarily possess the requisite historical knowledge, nor do they have expertise in the various national and state libraries' manuscripts or pictures collections, or the understanding of the philosophy of presentation of museums (house or otherwise) and may not identify seemingly inconsequential information that can shed light on significant aspects of the properties or occupants.

Mr Lindsay also mentioned that he wished to lift the profile of State Archives – particularly through exhibitions – that so many people were unaware of the institution. However State Archives has unwittingly to some extent contributed to this suggested lack of awareness. Since allowing its records on Ancestry I have noticed the trend of family historians to cite Ancestry as the source with no acknowledgement of State Archives. Similarly with State Archives providing so many excellent indexes and records online it is not surprising that numbers attending the reading room have decreased and not necessarily a lack of awareness. Every family historian in the state would be aware of the existence of State Archives.

If State Archives considers mounting exhibitions will raise the profile, it does not require a merger, simply a negotiation for use of the gallery at the Museum of Sydney or a space at the State Library of NSW. House museums are not suitable for exhibitions in terms of climate control and security nor philosophically are they intended for such. Certainly not the State Archives' unbelievably dreary exhibition of The Queen's Album at Government House. In comparison the recent exhibition Marriage: Love and Law is very good and is an impressive use of archival records. However exhibitions are expensive to mount and time-consuming particularly as works on paper can be displayed for only 6-12 weeks and require constant monitoring and replacement.

State Archives staff should be used to process and conserve government records, they should not be diverted from their essential primary role, particularly as reduction of access restrictions will substantially add to their processing workload. HHT/SLM Foundation funds according to public records are too low to be drawn upon to fund exhibitions as has been suggested.

The merger as explained by Mr Lindsay in his interview with Lisa Murray would suggest that the two halves would not be equal, that State Archives would have a higher status. This is of concern and could mean an unlevel playing field when decisions are required concerning the expenditure of available funds, and not helped by the Executive Director's limited knowledge of archives and no apparent experience with house or history museums and their contents. Should a merger perchance proceed the size and extent of the organisation would require an Executive Director with demonstrated expertise in the field of archives, house museums or heritage buildings.