

To: National Archives of Australia
By email: information.management@naa.gov.au
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Review of selection principles for national archives

The History Council of Victoria welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the review by the National Archives of Australia of the principles that guide the selection of records and information for permanent retention in the National Archives' collection.

The Council is the peak body for history in Victoria, with the objective of furthering historical literacy and awareness and inspiring public engagement with the past, their identity and the world today. The Council includes representatives from cultural and educational institutions and heritage bodies; history teachers and curriculum advisors; academic and professional historians; and local, Indigenous, community and specialist history organisations.

The National Archives summarizes its selection principles as:

- Government authority, action and accountability
- Identity, interaction and rights and entitlements
- Knowledge and community memory

The History Council of Victoria endorses these three selection principles. In particular, it supports the vision behind the third of these: "to keep information that has substantial capacity to enrich knowledge and understanding of Australia's history, society, culture and people. We select information with the highest significance and value to communities and society."

We are concerned therefore that the review summary states that "Only a small proportion of all information created or received by Australian Government agencies is retained by the National Archives. It would be impractical as well as costly to keep everything indefinitely, nor does everything have permanent value." There are several points that we wish to emphasize in response.

First, the interests of government record-keeping and those of historians and the wider public are not necessarily aligned. There have been many cases, in Australia and overseas, where records deemed to be of little significance at a government level (individual records, for example) have come to be valued as a rich source of information which can be used to illuminate the experience of whole generations or cohorts of Australians.

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Second, as a corollary, what is seen to be of “significance” to historians and the wider public may change across time. Again, there are many examples from Australia and overseas where records (such as demographic data) have been destroyed as insignificant only to be regretted as potentially invaluable. We can never fully anticipate what future researchers will require, and retention should therefore always err on the side of generosity.

Third, a consequence of these points is that the National Archives should seek greater involvement of academic historians in advising on the selection or sampling of records from the lower levels of the administrative hierarchy.

Finally, we are aware of the financial challenges of migrating digital records from obsolete formats. However, the value of such records in fulfilling all three of the NAA’s selection criteria is undeniable. Australia pioneered the methods for appraisal and selection of digital records, and our systems were widely adopted internationally. It is essential that our National Archives remain proactive in this regard.

We have several specific comments in addition:

- p. 3, Selection Principles, 1. Government authority, action and accountability, point 5: there should be consideration of ways of accounting for changes over time in understanding of what might be considered “controversial, innovative or of considerable public interest”?
- p. 5, second dot point: “organisations” should be included after “persons”.
- p. 5, Other Considerations, dot point 1 (Integrity, Reliability and Completeness): evidence of “unauthorised access and deliberate or accidental alteration or removal of information” may be useful for future researchers but should not in itself justify non-inclusion.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment.

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