

COMMENTS ON THE STAGE 1 AFC PAPER BY RAY EDMONDSON

Submitted as an email to Kim Dalton and Sabina Wynn on 1 November 2003

Dear Kim and Sabina,

I am about to leave for a series of commitments overseas, so the comments that follow are personal and rather hasty, since I received the paper only on Thursday and have had little time to consider it. I don't have time to write something shorter (!).

It is a great pity that the deadline is so tight, since I think it will be impossible for stakeholder groups to put together considered joint responses in time and some cross-discussion would be beneficial to everyone. Accordingly I am copying these comments to the chairs of Archive Forum, Friends of NFSA and FBIOHG.

The comments are keyed to the section and paragraph numbers in the discussion paper. Let me say at the outset that I think, on the whole, it is a good paper with some astute insights, and most of it does not require any further comment from me than I have already given. Of course there are crucial issues that the paper does NOT cover, but I am staying within its own parameters here.

Incidentally, where the paper talks about 'international' archives I presume it means "overseas" or something more geographically specific. I don't know what an 'international archive' is except that to me it suggests higher status than 'national archive'. I'm not trying to be picky, just precise.

A: INTRODUCTION

While the "integration" of the AFC is a *fait accompli* legally and politically, and while it seemed to me likely to result in a net improvement in the Archive's situation, it is a union that was nonetheless formulated in secret and rushed through parliament without the benefit of stakeholder consultation, and without even the due process of coordination consultation with interested bodies such as the other national collecting institutions. The publicly stated rationale (paras A1 and A2) declares no philosophical basis for the action; "coordination" could have been achieved without it.

Since the ethos of a major national collecting institution is quite different to that of a funding/promotional/advocacy agency it has yet to be demonstrated whether they can effectively coexist under the same Act and in a common administrative structure. There are salutary examples overseas, such as the unhappy history of the British Film Institute, which suggest otherwise. I hope we do not repeat the BFI's mistakes and in fact turn them on their head.

It is as well to be blunt about this at the outset because I must hope that the Archive's recent history of obfuscatory publicity and misleading comment is now a thing of the past. Such things contradict archival ethics. If there is a philosophical vacuum at the heart of this arrangement it must be honestly recognised for what it is. Only then can a constructive *modus operandi* be developed.

Administratively and curatorially it is crucial that NFSA maintain its integrated institutional character and separate identity, in control of its own collection, professional relationships and the full range of archival functions (including public programs), and be protected from pressures to hive off activities and position them elsewhere in the AFC. It may be part of the AFC but it needs to be clearly distinct from the AFC's traditional functions. The obvious reference points are "Time in our Hands" and more recent professional documents such as the UNESCO "Philosophy of

Audiovisual Archiving". (That I happen to be the scribe of the latter is incidental; what matters is its status as a UNESCO standard.)

Accordingly, phrases like 'integration of functions and programs' and 'integrated structure' (in A4) worry me greatly.

B ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

B1 It's 'The Last Film Search', not 'Picture Search'.

I know it's not meant to, but this sounds more than a little patronizing! In world terms the NFSA has been quite a remarkable achievement by any standard, and recognised as such. It has many innovative and pioneering developments to its credit, and it has in certain areas led the global AV archiving field and influenced its thinking, often punching above its weight and its remoteness. It has unfortunately not been particularly good at documenting and presenting its own history, not least because we Australians still tend to adopt the 'cultural cringe.'

It is incumbent on the AFC to gain a full and accurate appreciation of the NFSA's history and achievements. It doesn't seem to have this at the moment.

C NEW MISSION etc

1.2 A fundamental problem is that the NFSA needs more than just a (constantly changing) mission statement and objectives: like the other national collecting institutions, it needs the philosophical structure underneath of which mission and objective become the natural expression. It has lacked that in the past because it lacked legislation, governance documents and a charter. It now has, or can have, all these things. They must be put in place first before any mission statement is adopted – otherwise we'll be repeating past mistakes. On this I refer you to the relevant documents on the Archive Forum website and especially the charter from TIOH.

1.6 I note in passing that the arguments advanced for retaining 'Screensound' are essentially negative. These very arguments were deliberately ignored in 1999 when introducing the name change. It is ironic that they are now invoked in its defence. In relation to (c), I would have thought that 'NFSA' offers better possibility for maintaining identity within the AFC than the non-specific "Screensound" ever could.

1.9 We should keep feet on the ground in talking about digital technology. It is a hugely complex issue for archives and libraries around the world and is producing as many questions as answers. In additions, archives have to cope with facile political assumptions about 'digitising everything' which are a long way from what is either desirable or possible.

2.3 The issue is more complex than this, for other archives as well as this one. There's a good deal of corporate history which must be taken into account so that we don't reinvent the wheel or revive old mistakes. Curatorial specialisation is crucial, but that doesn't necessarily mean a stark structural divide between 'film' and 'sound'. Some painful lessons about this were learned in the 1980s.

2.5 to 2.10 Yes.

2.6 Yes

3 In making overseas comparisons it needs to be borne in mind that the archives visited for this study were, with one exception, all in Western Europe. The world of AV archiving is now far larger and more complex than this particular atypical sample. Moreover the visits were very short, and so necessarily superficial. It is important not to place more reliance on the resulting observations than they can bear.

It also doesn't follow that the NFSA has to model itself unthinkingly on the practices and priorities of Western Europe (another painfully learned lesson). We may all learn from each other, but Australia is its own place and we do what is right for us.

3.3 I'm not sure this argument is really true. They mightn't do it at certain European archives, but servicing the general public directly is characteristic of many archives in many countries. In an Australian democracy it's just as proper and necessary a function for the NFSA as it is for the National Library or National Archives. Care must be taken to avoid the AFC's traditional perspective as a servicer of the industry being imposed on the NFSA.

3.8, 3.9 Yes

3.10 Yes, but I think this is a large subject.

3.12 Not necessarily. There are other archives who do this on a significant scale. In the Australian setting it's a valid and cost-effective means of providing access and a strategic way of distributing parts of the heritage around the country. Some archives do make money in this way; I doubt if the NFSA does make a net profit, and that was never the original motivation anyway. The program needs to be reviewed and needs a formal policy and defined curatorial standards, but it remains valid.

3.13 This is a curious question. Revenue raising is valid per se. Most major cultural institutions develop 'products' (look at the National Library, National Museum etc). It's a fundamental aspect of access – the fulfilling of a basic part of the ethos to present collection material to the public in contextualised ways. It IS part of the role and purpose of a national film and sound archive – how could it NOT be? The question is not whether, but what is produced and why. It is one thing to produce a contextualised DVD of a restored feature film or a CD of radio serial episodes. It is another (and more dubious) thing for the NFSA to be a de facto film maker producing compilation documentaries, for example. The dividing line between the two is fuzzy and requires judgment and guidelines but there is a difference.

3.15 Is there anything wrong with nostalgia or social history or individual requests? All the major collecting institutions cater for it. It is a proper thing for the Archive to cater for it too. This is an Australian perspective on our heritage: it is a right of access, for which there is no real alternative in many cases. It does not matter whether some of our European counterparts see it differently: their settings and societies are different. Put another way, I do not think there is a single activity carried out by NFSA which is not also carried out by one or more other archives elsewhere in the world. We might have a wider breadth than most, but I doubt that we do anything that is actually unique.

4 I think the views in this section are well taken and most need no more comment from me.

4.2 The formal procedures are crucial. I think a properly constituted committee, representative of stakeholders and logical areas of expertise, needs to be set up by and reporting to the AFC Board. It needs to be focused entirely on the needs of the Archive – a replacement for the former Advisory Council and its predecessors. We could debate its structure and terms of reference, but I think its necessity is a given. There needs to be a transparent forum where stakeholders can talk to each other as well as to the AFC.

The Committee will do a job that the AFC Board, by definition, cannot do. If such a committee is not set up as a formal consultation mechanism, I have no doubt it will happen informally anyway and that would be far less satisfactory. The lessons of history are clear enough.

As a closing thought, I cannot avoid the feeling of déjà vu about the current process. In its basics, we are going over a lot of the same ground some of us traversed in the 1980's in getting the Archive out of the National Library, and it feels like we are having to prove the same points yet again. It's a sad comment on the way the Archive has been dealt with by its overlords during the last 20 years, but there it is. If there's one thing that does make Australia's NFSA unique, it's that.

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