

PAPER FOR THE SEAPAVAA CONFERENCE: "The Role of Friends Organisations" by Andrew Pike

ABSTRACT:

Most cultural institutions in Australia have "Friends" organisations – usually dependent on volunteers and donations, and usually operating completely independently of the cultural institution itself. There are now so many "Friend" associations that there is even a national association of Friends organisations!

The Friends of the National film and Sound Archive was formed in the late 1990s by concerned members of the Archive's constituency at a time when many people felt concern that the Archive was losing touch with its constituency. As its principle aim, the association intended to serve as a bridge between the Archive and its users, both for communicating messages from the constituency to the Archive management, and to help the Archive in getting its message out to a wider audience. It was thus an advocacy group, both to promote the best interests of the Archive, but also to promote the interests of the Archive's users.

As sometimes happens with other Friends associations in Australia, the Friends of the National Film and Sound Archive has often been at odds with Archive management and has actively pursued policies and strategies that the Archive itself cannot endorse, for various political reasons. My paper will examine some of the issues pursued by the Friends over the last few years, and look at its strategies and its achievements and at how its relationship to the Archive management has changed from time to time.

Most cultural institutions in Australia have "Friends" organisations of one type or another. In fact, there are now so many "Friends" associations in Australia that there is even a national association of Friends organizations, not to mention a national newsletter and a national conference where Friends associations compare strategies and experiences.

There are two main types of Friends organisations commonly found in Australia, attached to cultural institutions large and small. One type

is effectively a club, run by the cultural institution itself. Through these clubs, the institution offers benefits to members – such as access to their own Friends’ lounge for coffee or meals, special events or talks, previews of exhibitions, discounts at the institution’s shop etc. Such Friends organisations occur for example at the National Gallery of Australia or at the National Museum. They are good way for the institution to raise funds through membership fees and members’ events, and are a good way for the organisation to communicate with its public through a newsletter or through speeches at members’ functions. Such Friends’ clubs are pleasant and constructive ways for the institution to cultivate favour in the community and among politicians and bureaucrats, and to create a body of public goodwill towards the work of the institution.

But today I want to talk mainly about another type of Friends’ association. These are Friends’ organisations that are completely independent of the institution, driven by volunteers and donations. Such associations may often consult extensively with the institution but will always develop their own agenda and their own political priorities and perspectives. Sometimes these associations may be critical of the administration of the institution or of politicians and bureaucrats with ultimate responsibility for government policy affecting the institution. As we shall see, our association, the Friends of the NFSA, often takes positions which cannot be endorsed by Archive management for political reasons and may sometimes be directly opposed to Archive policy. This is not uncommon. The Friends of the National Museum of Australia was at one stage so strongly at odds with the Museum management that they were ejected from a room that they had in the Museum building. Yet, history shows us that this same Friends organization played a crucial role in campaigning for – and winning - political support for the very formation of the Museum. The Friends of the Australian Broadcasting

Corporation, the ABC, is an especially vocal group with a very large membership, with branches in every state, often organizing petitions or demonstrations in campaigns to re-dress ABC policies and decisions.

While conflict may occasionally arise, positive gains can also be had with an independent Friends' organisation. An independent Friends' association can speak to politicians and bureaucrats in ways in which the institution's managers themselves cannot. For example, the Friends of the NFSA is currently campaigning to achieve independent status for the Archive – arguing that the Archive is not well-served by its current administrative position as a branch of the Australian Film Commission. Obviously the Archive management cannot endorse the Friends' position as it would involve rebellion against the Archive's own parent body and would probably have very negative outcomes for the senior Archive staff. The Friends however is a totally independent body and is not so constrained, and therefore it can lobby with politicians and with bureaucrats on the need for an independent archive, and can campaign in the public media to achieve that goal.

An independent Friends association also has credibility when it promotes and celebrates the work and achievements of the Archive: because of the very fact of its independence, it can have the advantage of objectivity and can talk about the Archive without sounding biased or self-interested.

How to create a Friends organization? Unfortunately, you, as representatives of institutions, cannot create one. By its very nature, an independent Friends' association needs to be initiated by individuals in the Archive's constituency. The Archive can encourage individuals to consider forming such an association – and can even

donate funds to help set up the organisation – but the essence of a Friends' association is independence. In 2001, Screensound Australia, as the NFSA was then called, gave a small grant to the Friends' association for the purpose of buying a computer for the association, to help cover the costs of postage and stationery, and to pay a small fee to a part-time administrative officer. However, Screensound made no attempt to influence the policies and strategies of the association, and the money would not have been accepted by the Friends had the archive so attempted. If grants of money are not possible for your Friends' association, you can still encourage it in other ways. The NFSA today has no funds available that it can direct towards the Friends, but the Archive has other ways in which it can encourage the work of a vibrant and viable Friends group. The NFSA now provides the Friends' association with meeting rooms at no cost, and above all, it has given the Friends a position on the Archive's advisory committee, thereby giving the Friends direct access to the working heart of the organisation.

Encouraging a Friends organisation takes courage for an institution: you may be creating an organisation that criticizes you or embarrasses your parent organisation. But on the other hand it can be an advocate for things you need but which you may not be free to ask for, and it can use the public media to campaign on those issues in a way that you cannot without risking your job.

As a lobbyist, the Friends meets regularly with members of parliament whom we have identified as sympathetic to our cause: we brief them on issues of current concern and often they choose to take up these issues and ask questions in parliament or in parliamentary committees.

The Friends can also forge alliances with other organisations to help advocate the long-term interests of the Archive. Here in Australia, the Friends has collaborated with three other organisations on preparing a significant document on the case for an independent archive – working with the two professional organisations – archivists on one hand and historians on the other – and with another advocacy group, the Archive Forum. By jointly issuing statements, each organisation is more effective than if it had lobbied on its own. The combined membership of the associations represents a body of people big enough to start having some strong political impact.

The Friends of the NFSA was formed in 2000 in direct response to the Archive's decision to change its name to ScreenSound Australia, and to the re-location of the Archive's Sydney office into the commercial precinct of the Fox Studios. Both of these moves triggered a lot of criticism from the industry especially in the independent production sector. Independent producers like Jane Scott and John Maynard felt strongly that the Archive's identity was being taken over by the Fox Corporation and that unnecessary games were being played with a proud national institution. The new name sounded like a corporate makeover that seemed very sinister when coupled with the move to the Fox Studio property.

A group of concerned industry figures including Glenys Rowe, then head of SBS Independent, and Tony Buckley, one of Australia's most eminent producers, formed the Friends of the NFSA with the intention of harnessing the widespread criticism of the Archive and hopefully turning the flak into something positive. We felt that both problems – the name change and the location of the Sydney office – were the product of the Archive being out of touch with its constituency.

Accordingly, the Association set out with the aim of improving communications between the Archive and the film industry, and in a broader sense, with the general public at large. Through a range of activities, we hoped to stimulate discussion and public awareness of archival issues.

The association was incorporated early in 2000, and a distinguished list of major industry figures agreed to become patrons, among them the actor **Bryan Brown**, producer **Patricia Lovell**, the director of BABE, **Chris Noonan**, and internationally renowned director, **Fred Schepisi**.

A committee was formed, and we held forums at both the Sydney and Melbourne Film Festivals to attract attention to the goals of the Friends. Gradually, we gained the support of over 400 members, spread around every state in Australia.

Our Friends' association had to make a conscious decision when it was formed – was it more important to have a lot of members or more important to have funds from membership fees. Today the Friends survives on very little money. Our committee consists entirely of volunteers, and our running costs are very low. Our newsletter circulates mainly by email so our postage bills are virtually non-existent. Our website costs very little to maintain.

Consequently, it currently costs nothing to join the Friends.

Membership is free and is open to anyone, anywhere. You simply fill in a short form and register your wish to become a member. On this basis we now have over 400 members. If we were to charge a membership fee, we would have some income to work with, but we would not have as many members. It was our decision that size of membership was more important than money in the bank. In other

words, our effectiveness as a lobbyist comes from the size and diversity of our membership. Most of the lobbying that we need to do can be done with minimal finance.

A Charter was written that placed first among its goals, the reinstatement of the archive's name. The Friends was an effective lobbyist for the restoration of the Archive's name and the name was eventually restored in December 2004.

Our main goal at the moment, however, does not appear in our original charter. It was unthinkable in the year 2000 that the Archive would ever lose its relative status of independence. Fighting to achieve independent status for the Archive now dominates most of our activities.

Historically, independence for the Archive was something that all political parties in Australia – big and small – agreed upon ... until mid-2003, when the conservative Howard Coalition decided to break this bipartisan policy and take steps to remove the Archive from the Department responsible for the Arts, and place it under the wing of the Australian Film Commission.

After much lobbying, most of it failing to engage the AFC in discussion of any sort, the Friends organized a conference in July 2004 to discuss the future of the Archive. Independence kept coming up as a key issue throughout the conference and a communiqué was issued to the media and to politicians and the AFC from the body of the conference calling for independence.

The conference also recognised the importance of the Archive internationally especially in south-east Asia and the Pacific region, and the need to maintain its status and involvement in regional

professional forums. Its status as a much-admired model needed to be maintained and protected.

Our vision is clear – that the Archive should stand proudly and independently as one of the major cultural institutions of the nation – on equal footing with the National Library, the National Gallery, the National Museum and so on. Like those institutions it should be quarantined from manipulation by the government of the day.

Significantly, the conference was not attended by anyone from the Australian Film Commission, the organization that held the fate of the Archive in its hands, though the incoming director of the Archive, Dr Cherchi Usai, had not then arrived in Australia. We were pleased when he heard about the conference and asked for a copy of the conference communiqué and recommendations.

In essence, it can be said that the Friends' association is in a sense the Friend of an abstract notion of the Archive, an ideal film and sound archive, rather than the specific body that we currently have. The Friends' group wants to promote best practice and in so doing will always be an advocate for the best administrative structure to support best practice. We believe that independence is essential for the maintenance of best practice in the long term.

At the same time, let me stress, the Friends is also committed to supporting the work of the current Archive director, as we see best practice being pursued vigorously by his administration.

We are also very keen to support the emergence of Friends associations in other countries in SE Asia and the Pacific and would be

very happy to co-operate with them in passing on advice and ideas. Please give our contact details to people in your constituency who may be interested, and we will be only too pleased to work with them. We also welcome anyone from South-East Asia and th pacific to join the friends and become a member: as I say, it costs nothing, and you may find our e-newsletter of interest.
