



INDEPENDENT SCHOLARS ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA INC

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Senator the Hon Michaelia Cash
Attorney General
PO Box 6100
Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
29 June, 2021

Dear Senator Cash

Subject: Funding Increase for the National Archives of Australia

I write on behalf of the Independent Scholars Association of Australia Inc. (ISAA). ISAA was founded in 1995 as an Australian-wide association for the promotion of scholarship. Our members include academics and scholars from engineering, medicine, sciences, arts, administration, law, economics and diplomacy.

The recent publicity surrounding the funding difficulties being suffered by a statutory institution alarms us greatly. The comments of Assistant Minister to the Attorney-General, Amanda Stoker made in response to the adverse publicity reflect poorly on the Government. We are aware of the impact of years of funding and staff cuts on the capacity of the National Archives of Australia (NAA) to fulfill its statutory functions under the Archives Act, 1983. The NAA has a fundamental role in preserving 'the memory of the nation'. This is a grave responsibility, not one to be confined to a new IT system or a funding appeal. The under resourcing of the nation's archives raises bigger questions about the Government's commitment to the NAA charter.

The reductions in funding for the NAA are placing key records from Australia's national collection at risk. Urgent action is needed to prevent their disintegration. These unique records include: recordings of wartime speeches given by John Curtin; tapes of the Stolen Generation Royal Commission; personnel files of RAAF non-commissioned officers from World War II; papers for suffragettes Adela Pankhurst and Celia John; original films of early Australian Antarctic research expeditions; and records of the Bounty mutineers.

The report from the Functional and Efficiency Review of the National Archives, led by David Tune, which was released in March 2021, highlights the ongoing underfunding NAA has experienced and its impact on operations. The Report recommends the government fund a seven-year program to urgently digitise at-risk materials, for a total cost of \$67.7 million. ISAA calls on the Government to implement this key recommendation and to respond to the review.

An ongoing issue facing the NAA is the volume of material that it is required to collect from government agencies each year. In 2019, agencies created 2986 terabytes of digital records and data plus 92,966 shelf metres of physical records. There must be adequate funding for the necessary staff to manage transfers of this material.

Furthermore, historians and researchers using the NAA collection have expressed longstanding frustration about the time it takes for the NAA to clear documents that are more than 20 years old. Additional staffing is required so that these documents can be released for research in a timely way. The NAA has fewer employees today compared with 2013-14. The \$700,000 allocation in the 2021 federal budget will make little impact on the NAA's ability to meet its statutory obligations.

ISAA believes that proper investment in the NAA will have a significant positive impact on open government, interoperability, and long-term data and information management across

government. It needs to be properly funded to ensure that government remains accountable, records of the past are accessible, and that the digital records we are creating now will be available for future generations to access.

On behalf of ISAA's membership we call on the Government to take immediate action in response to the recommendations of the Tune Review to ensure the NAA remains a leading archival institution that is well-resourced to care for the digital and physical records of the nation and has the capacity to meet the expectations of the research community wishing to access the collection.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Shirley Randell AO, PhD
President
Independent Scholars Association of Australia

Cc Hon Mark Dreyfus QC, MP, Shadow Attorney General