



**SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS –
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECT**

The attached submission is presented for the information of the Inquiry.

The **Friends of the NFSA Inc.** is an independent membership organisation which exists to support the NFSA Act, advocate for and promote the NFSA, provide volunteer support, present public programs based on the NFSA collection, and serve as a focus for the NFSA's constituency.

Founded in 2000, the Friends has historically worked to defend the professional integrity and independence of the NFSA, including the campaign leading to its creation as a statutory authority in 2008. The Friends' mission, history and activities can be accessed at www.archivefriends.org.au

We would be happy to provide further information as requested and would be happy to appear before the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ray Edmondson'.

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16 June 2020

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**SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE PARLIAMENTARY BUSINESS COMMITTEE JOINT
COMMITTEES PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS –
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECT**

**SUBMISSION FROM THE FRIENDS OF THE NATIONAL FILM AND
SOUND ARCHIVE (NFSA) INC.**

Submitted 16 June 2020

Reason for submission by Friends of the NFSA

In noting the terms of Reference for this Inquiry the Friends will concentrate on one aspect: “the need for this work.” In particular the Friends query the expected benefits from the forecast \$500m investment in the Australian War Memorial (AWM) project in comparison to what might be achieved by investments in other national cultural institutions including the National Film and Sound Archive.

The lack of overall cost benefit analysis is at odds with approaches the Government follows in other areas of policy such as the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS). We believe a relatively small investment focussed on the ongoing major digitisation of the NFSA collections would reap major cultural and historical benefits to the Australian community.

Overview/Executive Summary

As one of the pioneers in the creation of the audiovisual era, and a contributor that punches above its weight in creating sound and visual content, Australia deserves a world leading institution devoted to the “popular cultural expression of our age.” Attachment A provides background on the NFSA.

For the last few years, the NFSA has been in retreat. Between 2008/9 and 2016/7 government funding was static, representing a decline of about 20% in real terms. Staffing was also reduced by about 20%. (The NFSA’s annual reports for 2008/9 and 2016/7 show that the Government’s allocation to the NFSA fell from \$25,082,000 to \$24,416,000, and staff numbers from 202 to 164 (full time equivalent)).

Unfortunately a decade of “efficiency dividends” and associated funding cuts has led to a significant reduction in the resources devoted to the NFSA with a commensurate loss

of public profile. Current management is attempting to overturn the closure of many of its public activities and to increase progress in digitisation.

Other national cultural institutions such as the National Archives are also suffering from a lack of Government funding with the National Library recently announcing that as a direct result of diminishing ongoing funding it would need to scale back its Asian collections.

The “efficiency dividend” hits small organisations such as the NFSA and other similar institutions particularly hard, as they have little room for budget flexibility. Any reduction in activities cuts into “muscle” rather than “fat”. The inappropriateness of such an approach was shown by the recent Government decision to temporarily top up the funding of the National Library. Staff losses compound the problems through loss of expertise, collection knowledge and corporate memory.

In the case of the AWM the deleterious impact of efficiency dividends has been offset by special financial allocations such as that for the current building project.

Whilst not arguing against the role the AWM plays as a national memorial to commemorate the sacrifices made by Australians in time of war the allocation of \$500m for yet another building extension signifies a skewed and unbalanced investment strategy for our national cultural institutions.

There is no evidence that in making this allocation the Government considered what benefits the broader Australian community could derive from an equitable distribution across the whole range of our cultural institutions. For example, a relatively modest amount of funding compared to what is being invested in the AWM would allow both the NFSA and the National Archives to significantly advance their work in digitising their collections.

Restoring the NFSA’s funding levels would allow it to turn its attention to rebuilding its activities and public profile nationally and internationally. In addition, a one-off “special” appropriation to the NFSA would enable it to fund the ongoing major digitisation program at a sustainable level without disruption to other NFSA functions and in keeping with Australia’s UNESCO obligations for the preservation of the national documentary heritage.

The NFSA’s existing collection of analogue audio and video tapes must be digitised if their content is to survive. Playback machines are now obsolete and the skills to operate them are disappearing. As a working technological museum the NFSA is engaged in this transfer process now, but it is proceeding at one third of the rate necessary if the work is to be completed by the internationally adopted benchmark of 2025. While even this limited rate is an increase on previous years, it is, unfortunately, being achieved at serious

cost to the NFSA's public presence and accessibility because of continuing financial difficulties.

All memory institutions have constantly growing collections, which must now embrace the deluge of digital content, games and social media . Since 2008 the NFSA's national collection has doubled in size, while the staff to manage it has been reducing.

A small proportion of the \$500 million being devoted to the AWM extension could make a vast difference to the NFSA's ability to carry out its national obligations. The same could be said, in greater or lesser degree, for the other cultural institutions.

ATTACHMENT A: THE NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND ARCHIVE

Introduction

The Commonwealth of Australia was born with the audiovisual era.

In 1901 we became the first country to be born in front of a movie camera: there is a precious record of the Federation ceremonies in Sydney which still survives. In 1906 we invented the feature film.¹ We became the first country to include a weekly visit to “the pictures” in calculating the basic wage.

Our social history is documented in our radio and television broadcasts. Our music and speech has been recorded since the invention of the phonograph. Our lives are immersed in the digitally born and mediated audiovisual world.

The audiovisual heritage has a central place in our national consciousness.

What is the NFSA?

The NFSA is Australia’s national audiovisual archive – the custodian of its film, radio, television, audio and born-digital heritage. It is the largest institution of its kind in South East Asia/Pacific and is internationally respected.

The establishment in 1935 of the National Historical Film and Speaking Record Library made Australia one of the earliest countries to formally provide for the preservation of its audiovisual heritage. A long and uneven history as part of the National Library and its predecessor eventually led to the establishment of the NFSA as a separate institution in 1984. It was seen as “a new kind of institution....devoted to the popular cultural expression of our age, and dedicated to the preservation of some of the best manifestations of Australian character and Australian imagination”. (Prime Minister Hawke’s speech on the opening of NFSA’s HQ, 3 October 1984).

Well before Bob Hawke’s involvement, the creation of the NFSA was championed in Parliament by Liberal Senators David Hamer and Chris Puplick, the latter becoming the first chair of the NFSA’s governing board when it ultimately became a statutory authority on 1 July 2008. Between 1984 and 2008 the NFSA was an “outrider” of its portfolio Department before an ill-judged merger with the then Australian Film

¹ UNESCO’s *Memory of the World Program* recognizes **The Story of the Kelly Gang** (1906) as the world’s first feature film.

Commission in 2003. Advocacy groups, including the Friends of the NFSA, successfully campaigned for the NFSA's independence and establishment as a statutory authority in 2008.²

Current position of the NFSA

This impact of ongoing funding cutbacks and the loss of public profile has meant that the NFSA is now a poor cousin of other major memory institutions in Canberra, such as the National Gallery, the Australian War Memorial, the National Portrait Gallery and the National Library.

This loss in funding has been through inflation (average 2.2%) plus the “efficiency dividend” whereby all Government agencies are expected to reduce operating costs by a fixed percentage each year – currently 1%, although it has gone as high as 2.5% during this period. The “efficiency dividend” hits small organisations such as the NFSA and other cultural institutions particularly hard, as they have little room for budget flexibility. Any reduction in activities cuts into “muscle” rather than “flab”. The inappropriateness of such an approach was shown by the recent Government decision to top up the funding of the National Library and finance special projects at the Australian War Memorial. Staff losses also entail the loss of expertise, collection knowledge and corporate memory.

Into the future

The NFSA is in a Catch 22 situation. It cannot increase digitisation without further reducing other activities. It cannot restore its public profile without reducing preservation and acquisition work. Restoring its budget to an adequate level is the only way to improve both and fulfill its legislated mandate to both preserve and provide access.

² The PhD thesis *National Film and Sound Archive: the quest for identity* (Edmondson, Ray, 2011) provides a history of the institution up to 2008.