

# Archives moves with the times



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It may be something of a cliché these days, but Australian Archives is certainly poised to enter a new era. So much is happening within the organisation and in the dynamic world of the 'information industry' which Archives shares with other professionals.

In direct terms, the *Archives Act 1983* is being reviewed by the Australian Law Reform Commission, to update our governing legislation. A project to redevelop systems to vastly improve ways of handling information within the Archives is expected to be completed within eighteen months. And in the first half of 1998 the Archives will move to a refurbished building within Canberra's National Triangle, giving us a national physical presence for the first time.

Understandably we are elated by these developments which should help us enhance efficiency, raise our profile, increase visitor numbers and expand our exhibition program.

But some may say is there a place for a national archives in the new millenium? We would respond with an emphatic yes! The future for the Archives, as for other national cultural institutions, depends on its ability to adapt and change to meet the demands of contemporary government and society. We must, of course, remain relevant to society and society's needs.

The Archives is working to a strategic plan which commenced just over two years ago and is intended to take the organisation to the turn of the century and beyond. Integral to that plan is the assumption that the Australian Archives will be the leader and the dominant player in the archival community in Australia. To fulfil that role we have had to readjust priorities and shed some lower-value work to concentrate on the higher-value tasks.

The Archives has also had to become much more a public institution, prepared to state its case and defend it, to publicise its activities in ways it had not dared before and to assert its importance and position as one of the key government institutions in the land. Preservation of archives, for now and for the future, is one of the pillars that enables the rule of law to flourish in our society.

Contemporary issues that the Archives has had to deal with would be familiar to librarians. Technology breeds its own peculiar demons and for archivists the phrase 'electronic records' has a sinister edge. The Ar-

chives has been at the forefront in postulating an approach to long-term management of electronic records which challenges the thinking of traditional archivists. But it is a solution which uses rather than fights the technology and for the moment remains the only practicable solution with existing technology.

The development of this policy typifies the role that the Australian Archives is now playing. It is one of leading, and of forming partnerships and working co-operatively. We work with archives and others, combining our resources to develop solutions to current problems.

Communications technology has added to the challenges. The existence of the Internet and the prospect of its successors have exploded traditional approaches to issues of intellectual property and privacy. The super highway is racing ahead of the existing legislative and management regimes and there is no point trying to legislate them back into place. These are not just problems for the Archives, but are problems shared by all professionals in the information industry.

The Australian Archives has diverse responsibilities for ensuring today's documentation survives for future generations. As the Commonwealth government archives we have to provide workable solutions which can be adopted by agencies within government — solutions which are cost-efficient and require the minimum of intervention to succeed. The Archives is the organisation which must set the standards and guidelines which ensure that valuable records survive and are accessible in the future, irrespective of the technology.

As the national archival institution we also have responsibility for encouraging the development of archives, promoting the use of archives and ensuring that the archival collections provide the widest possible benefits to the people of Australia.

Working in partnerships is essential for success and survival in the 'information world'. With technology bringing the professions closer, common solutions for common problems should be our aim.

And for the Archives, as for others, it means acknowledging that the environment is constantly changing, that technology is relentless in its progress and that modern problems require modern solutions. ■

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