

As published in *The Canberra Times* 18 December 2003

AFC'S DIRECTIONS PAPER BIASED AND SUPERFICIAL

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When the National Film and Sound Archive was separated from the National Library as a new institution in 1984, a 12-person advisory committee, chaired by historian and film maker Joan Long AM, was set up to develop the grand plan for the new institution. After 14 months, 80-odd submissions, various public meetings and workshops, the committee produced *Time in our hands (TIOH)*, a challenging and comprehensive vision for a national audiovisual archive built from first principles. Vindicated by time, the vision has been internationally admired and imitated, and *TIOH* has served as a solid and still valid template for the growth of a national institution which has been a world leader in its field, including in the development of professional policies, philosophy, technical and managerial expertise.

The Australian Film Commission's (AFC) 'Directions' paper on the future of the Archive, now known as ScreenSound Australia, is a horse of a very different colour. Summarily dismissing *TIOH*, it presents a vision for the *destruction* of the institution. The Archive as we know it, with 230 staff, will disappear into the much smaller AFC (60 staff), its resources plundered to boost other AFC programs and ambitions, leaving a rump operation that will be little more than a collection inventory with technical facilities attached. The *Australian Film and Sound Archive*, as it will henceforth be known, will be reduced to a mere branch of the AFC. And even that may not survive the next reorganisation.

As a blueprint, 'Directions' is a sorry piece of work. It is superficial, often poorly researched and inaccurate, and its author(s) demonstrate limited understanding of archives and archiving principles – and of this archive in particular. It is strong on assertions but weak on supporting data and figures. It is unclear how the new proposals will actually work in practice, but that they will involve considerable staff turnover and dislocation is obvious.

It is biased. Throughout, it conveys a laudatory impression of the AFC's superior knowledge while pointing up the Archive's perceived deficiencies. It has tunnel vision, viewing the Archive through the relatively narrow perspective of the current Australian film industry and screen culture. The Archive's audio dimension gets short shrift, as do broader non-industry responsibilities, collecting older material, and paper and object holdings, to name a few.

AFC CEO Kim Dalton recently pointed out that the paper includes new ideas and changes requested by staff and stakeholders. True, but it also pointedly *ignores* key issues stressed by both. Pleas to maintain the professional autonomy, identity and structural

integrity of the Archive as a national institution have fallen on deaf ears. Nor is there a word about the underlying philosophy and ethics of audiovisual archiving, on which all else should be built, and which the proposed new structure blatantly contravenes. Stakeholders who contributed comments earlier in the review may recognise their constructive criticisms applied to the Archive's disadvantage in ways they never intended.

The AFC, says 'Directions', wants to build trust and dialogue. Why, then, is the window for comment (deadline 23 January) confined to the holiday break when everyone's away? Or why is future stakeholder consultation relegated to a low-level committee meeting once every 6 months? Why has the AFC already pre-empted major proposals in the paper by abolishing eight senior management positions?

The paper heavily emphasises potential "synergies" between the Archive and the AFC. Yet none required amalgamation. All are achievable by normal, commonsense cooperation between government entities. So why was 'integration' rammed through with such haste and determination? Those who, like me, trusted Government assurances that all would be well have had their worst fears realised. This is no partnership. It is a hostile takeover: a destructive marriage of incompatible bodies, totally different in character and culture. The Archive, although the larger one, is defenceless. It has no director or council, and now the AFC has purged its senior management in a pre-emptive strike. How can it argue for itself in this unequal relationship?

Through no fault of its own, our national audiovisual archive has had a rough time in recent years. A foolish name change - unexpected and unexplained - muddied its identity (*screensound* is actually a technical term for sound tracks). Now the equally unexplained AFC merger threatens its continued existence. *TIOH* recommended statutory authority status for the Archive, comparable with peer institutions like the National Library and National Museum. Government agreed. But it never arrived. The amended AFC Act, under which the Archive now falls, does not even recognise – much less guarantee - its existence as an entity.

The Archive's public guardians have failed it – and all Australians. The fragile heritage of collections, skills and knowledge it protects is now in the hands of non-archivists. Will it be safe? Or can the mistake be undone?

There are six words I can't get out of my head.

Trust me. I'm from the AFC.

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