

As published in *The Age (Melbourne)* 25 August 2004, and (under different titles) in the *Courier Mail (Brisbane)* 25 August 2004 and *The Canberra Times* 26 August 2004

HOW POLITICIANS ARE SUBVERTING NATIONAL ICONS

Ray Edmondson

“People die, but books never die. No man and no force can abolish memory. Books are weapons...for freedom”. So said U.S President Franklin D Roosevelt on 6 May 1942, mindful of Nazi book burnings, as of other historical attempts to suppress knowledge and rewrite history. It was for ideals such as these – freedom of thought, access to information, and the faithful transmission of history – that World War II was fought.

Such ideals are achieved in democracies through institutional structures – archives, libraries, museums – which professionally preserve and provide access, and can do so without fear or favour, secure in the knowledge that they are permanent, autonomous, clearly identifiable bodies, protecting the common memory and, like the judiciary, above the ebb and flow of political whim and intervention by the government of the day. Parliaments guarantee this by giving such institutions legislative protection as statutory authorities, ultimately accountable to Parliament, rather than the government. But that principle is now increasingly under assault in some western countries.

The Society of American Archivists, along with dozens of other professional bodies, is alarmed that Roosevelt’s current successor, George W Bush, has moved to appoint a new Archivist of the United States without due process or consultation. They fear the National Archives’ independence is being compromised and have called on the U.S. Senate to hold open hearings on the matter. The Senate has previously declared that if the Archivist was appointed “arbitrarily, or motivated by political considerations, the historical records could be impoverished [or] even distorted”. Archivists well know that while Governor of Texas, Bush intruded into the independence of the State Archives and caused the withdrawal of some documents.

Comparable concerns are spreading in Australia. Perhaps the best known, though certainly not the only, example is the recent controversy over perceived politically-motivated appointments to the board of the National Museum of Australia, leading to a review of the Museum, the premature departure of its Director, Dawn Casey, and intrusion of what many believe is a revisionist, politically palatable presentation of Australian history.

Concerns over board-stacking, funding cuts, political interference in appointments and operational matters are now the common currency of discussion in professional circles. Unlike New Zealand, Canada and Britain, where transparent mechanisms screen out

inappropriate and political candidates, appointments to the boards of national institutions in Australia are opaquely within the gift of ministers, constrained only by any qualifying requirements in the relevant Act.

To see the dangers, consider the recent fate of our internationally admired National Film and Sound Archive (aka ScreenSound). It had for so long operated as if it *were* a statutory authority, that most people forgot it had no protective legislation. In May 2003 its vulnerability was revealed, following a Government review of cultural institutions whose report, and even terms of reference, are still secret. From July 2003, it was “integrated” with the much smaller and dissimilar Australian Film Commission (AFC), a funding and promotional agency. Stakeholders had no chance to comment, and cogent reasons for the move were never stated. They lie buried in a Cabinet submission, locked up until 2033.

The AFC, having received the Archive on a plate, prepared to make a meal of it, chopping the institution up into pieces for easier digestion and submerging its identity. Only immense - and obviously unanticipated - public outcry delayed their hand, as the voices of thousands of professionals, eminent persons and ordinary people from around the world were expressed in public rallies, submissions, forums, letters and petitions. Yet this avalanche of input has been ignored, while the Minister has studiously avoided putting archivally qualified people into Board vacancies.

The existence of an unstated agenda is obvious, and no attempt to give the brutal takeover an intellectual basis has been thought necessary. Even persistent scrutiny at Senate Estimates Committees demonstrates that the AFC is effectively unaccountable. While professional and constituency groups maintain the rage, the AFC either ignores or demonises those who have the temerity to challenge it or question the wisdom of the Government’s actions, and pursues its agenda by stealth.

What could better demonstrate the vulnerability of our supposedly permanent and professionally independent national icons? Without protective legislation to define its functions, autonomy and governance, the Film and Sound Archive was easy meat. The National Museum and the other institutions – like the National Archives, National Gallery, National Library and Australian War Memorial – have their enabling Acts and are harder to subvert. But governments which opaquely control board appointments and funding, conduct secret reviews and ignore informed feedback have more subtle options.

The National Film and Sound Archive may yet be saved by the election. The ALP and the Greens have publicly declared their policy of “de-merging” it as a separate statutory authority. Whether the Coalition would ultimately return to good principle is less clear. The present AFC Act, hastily amended in June 2003 to add reference to a “national collection” – but none to an archival institution or ethos – is totally inadequate as a legislative basis for protecting a vital part of the national heritage.

Is this a foretaste of a frightening future for all our national icons?

RAY EDMONDSON OAM is an international archival consultant who has authored UNESCO's standard manuals on the principles and philosophy of audiovisual archiving, and the preservation of documentary heritage.