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## **PARALLEL LIVES**

### **Britain's National Film and Television Archive and Australia's National Film and Sound Archive under threat**

*Ray Edmondson*

*The National Film Archive is more than an institution. It is the manifestation of an idea, and one of the most remarkable, and least remarked, cultural developments of the last 40 years has been the fertilisation of this idea, spontaneously and simultaneously, throughout the world.*

- Ernest Lindgren, Curator, (British) National Film Archive, in 1970

The idea of film as history and cultural memory is almost as old as the medium itself. The film record made of Australia's Federation ceremonies on 1 January 1901 was a conscious attempt to document the birth of the nation for the benefit of posterity. But it was one thing to make the record: another to provide the technical means, and the institutional context, to ensure its survival. The concept of the institutionally distinct film archive would not come into its own until the 1930s and would flower after World War II. The stories of two of the world's most iconic film archives – those of Britain and Australia – are curiously parallel and interwoven, even to the threat of dismantlement which they both now confront.

#### **Beginnings**

The National Film Library, later the National Film Archive (NFA), began as a department of the British Film Institute (BFI) in 1935, spurred by the awareness that the world's silent film heritage – which the coming of sound in the late 1920's had rendered commercially worthless – was in danger of destruction. Together with the equally new Cinematheque Francaise in Paris, the Reichsfilmarchiv in Berlin and the Film Department of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, it was one of the founders of FIAF (International Federation of Film Archives) in 1938. It was FIAF which went on to give practical definition to the institutional concept of the film archive – an autonomous body devoted to the preservation and accessibility of the film heritage. The BFI would continue to be the Archive's parent body until the present day.

In 1937, Australia's Federal Government passed a Cabinet resolution creating the National Historical Film and Speaking Record Library, as a unit of the then Commonwealth National Library (later succeeded by the National Library of Australia).

Through several organisational changes this tiny entity would ultimately become the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA), which was made organisationally separate from the National Library in 1984. As a temporary measure it was placed within the then Department of Home Affairs, pending the passage of legislation to give it a legal personality and independent statutory authority status. For various circumstantial reasons, the intended legislation was never passed, although the Archive grew and functioned as a *de facto* statutory authority.

From the 1950s onward, there was regular correspondence between the two archives. While Australia's archive remained in a relatively embryonic state, the British archive forged ahead, becoming the conceptual and physical alma mater for film archives worldwide: the largest and best realised model of the film archive concept. The author, who entered this field in 1968, was neither the first nor the last Australian archivist to spend time at the NFA in London, observing its methods and learning from its curatorial and technical expertise. It was the NFA which championed Australia's admission to FIAF in 1962 on a "special case" basis, because our archive did not meet the standards of autonomy and expertise by then required of FIAF members. Later, in 1982, a visit and report by NFA Curator Clyde Jeavons was an important step in the course of events which led to the NFSA becoming an autonomous entity two years later.

As it grew, the NFSA's international symbolic importance lay in its pioneering and modelling of the broader concept of the audiovisual archive – collecting radio and sound recordings as well as moving images. This prescient choice was made on its establishment as a separate entity in 1984, when it was a revolutionary concept. The merging of image and sound media, which is now a technical commonplace in the digital era, was still then undreamed of. It was admired and studied for its perceived autonomy and its conceptual basis.

### **The tail wags the dog**

The Achilles heel of the NFA was always its status as a department – albeit by far the largest department – of the British Film Institute. In its early decades, until the 1970s, the NFA maintained its autonomy by internal dynamics. The founding Curator, Ernest Lindgren, doubled as the Deputy Director of the BFI and had the status and influence to protect the NFA's interests. After his death in 1973, however, his successors as Curator fought a gradually losing battle to keep the growing archive intact. While it added television to both its mandate and its name, it became increasingly clear that the tail was wagging the dog. Bits of the NFTVA, as it became, were hived off – stills and posters, costumes, library, access services – and were made into departments of the BFI, no longer under the Archive's curatorial control.

The final ignominy came in 1998, when the Archive even lost its name and identity in a major BFI reorganisation, its elements dispersed in a "BFI Collections" division. While the NFTVA name was quietly restored four years later – thanks to public outcry and another top management reshuffle – the BFI's own declining status and funding base in Britain's bureaucratic pecking order brought dramatic proposals, earlier this year, for

dismantling the collections as well as staff structures. The proposals have horrified the global archival community.

### **Meanwhile in Canberra....**

In just 15 years the NFSA grew from a small 15-person operation in 1984 to a major institution with state of the art facilities and a staff of over 230 by 1999. In June of that year, on the occasion of opening its new building wing, the NFSA unexpectedly changed its name, becoming “ScreenSound Australia/ The National Collection of Screen and Sound”. As in Britain, reactions to the change were adverse and its implications far reaching. The new name clouded the identity and mandate of the institution, and created a running sore which has lasted to the present, notwithstanding the later revision of its subtitle to “National Screen and Sound Archive”.

Although the promised legislation to establish it as a statutory authority had never been passed, and the creation of such bodies was by now politically difficult, the Archive was by 2003 poised to become the next best thing – an “executive agency”. Only Ministerial endorsement was required. Then came the shock. Following a still secret Government review, it was instead unexpectedly placed under the authority of the Australian Film Commission (AFC), a much smaller, narrowly focussed funding and promotional agency with no background in archiving or heritage management. After hasty changes to the AFC Act passed Parliament, this switch took effect on 1 July 2003. This now placed Australia’s archive in a subordinate position very similar to its British counterpart.

The striking feature of this rearrangement was the way it was done. The logic of the marriage was never cogently justified, and the government has repeatedly refused to make public the report or even the terms of reference of the review. The legislative change was so hurried it precluded public discussion. The minimal amendments to its Act merely gave the AFC responsibility for the “national collection”: there was no mention of an archival institution, entity or context, though promises were made that the NFSA’s identity, independence and integrity would be protected. What was expected to be an equal partnership, however, quickly proved to be a hostile takeover.

The AFC embarked on reviews of the Archive to which constituents at first gave willing support and advice, despite a gathering unease. The denouement came on 12 December when the AFC released its *Stage 2 Directions* paper, revealing a radical agenda to dismantle the Archive organisationally and geographically, reduce its visibility and – on the basis of a proposed restructure – remove senior staff who represented the corporate memory. Public reaction was immediate – in the media, on the streets (there were protest demonstrations), on the listserves and in the galvanising of constituency response in submissions, letters, emails, petitions and Parliamentary debate. This demonstrated an overwhelming demand for the protection of the Archive’s institutional integrity and autonomy.

The most remarkable thing about the AFC’s *Stage 2 Directions* paper is not the innumerable mistakes and omissions quickly identified by stakeholders, nor the hostility

to the Archive and its staff which it likewise betrays, nor the lack of justification for its proposals, nor even the agenda which it reveals. Rather, it is the very fact that such a deficient blueprint, which advances far reaching proposals without supporting justification, should ever have been released by a responsible taxpayer-funded authority which, moreover, claims policy-writing as one of its strengths.<sup>1</sup> While AFC CEO Kim Dalton declared it to be “thoughtful and rigorous” it inevitably raises larger questions about the general competence of the AFC itself.

In 1985 the NFSA’s original Advisory Committee produced *Time in our Hands*, a detailed and visionary blueprint for the growth of the new institution which has been followed and vindicated by the test of time: it is now a classic of its kind. On the other hand, the AFC’s *Directions* paper, which summarily dismisses *Time in our hands*, may well be permanently remembered as its antithesis, and a symbol of the vulnerability and fragility of our national institutions.

### **....and back in London**

Only months later, the BFI began to reveal its own plans to dismantle the NFTVA. These involve the downgrading of the NFTVA to a subsidiary department (within the already downgraded BFI), huge budget reductions, the lowering of preservation standards and the large scale disposal of collection material. At the time of writing, the full terms of the plan are still not public, but what is already known has alarmed the international archiving community, as revealed in professional listserv traffic and the activist website [www.filmarchiveaction.org](http://www.filmarchiveaction.org). The prospect of dismantling a vast national asset, accumulated over nearly 70 years, has horrified archivists and the general public alike.

There are similarities between what is known of the BFI plans and the content of the AFC’s *Directions* paper. Both set out a framework for dismantling an institution. But the most striking similarity is one of intellectual perspective and tunnel vision. Neither has advanced a cogent intellectual basis for their intentions, nor comprehended in advance the issues likely to raise the concern of constituents. Both see their respective archives as serving only narrow film industry, film culture and commercial agendas, rather than fulfilling their natural and far broader function in society as part of the national memory, in the same way that national libraries and museums serve that function also. And neither seems to have weighed and considered alternatives to their intended course.

### **Activism**

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<sup>1</sup> The AFC’s website says “the AFC’s role in policy development and as the premier provider of high-quality research, information and analysis continues to grow in response to the increasingly sophisticated needs of a mature industry.”

When governments and institutions fail, the people must act. Not for the first time<sup>2</sup>, grass roots activism has changed the apparently unchangeable. The scale of the outcry over the NFSA and NFTVA is without precedent in my experience.

It was quickly obvious that the Minister and the AFC had not anticipated the public reaction to *Directions* and, as the contemporary media reports show, they handled it badly. The Minister finally forced the AFC to withdraw its most draconian proposals, but significantly it has not heeded the widespread demand to withdraw *Directions* entirely. The written views of constituents now add up to a formidable body of documentation: over 140 submissions, the records of five “stakeholder forums”, petitions totalling over 2000 signatures, countless letters and emails and so on. Stakeholder groups like the Friends of the NFSA, Archive Forum and the Australian Society of Archivists have issued a steady stream of statements and recommendations. The Minister’s and the AFC’s response to this avalanche of protest, exposure and constructive advice has been to ignore it and, in effect, snub the Archive’s constituency. Except, that is, in certain instances where it has engaged in vilification or coercion of individual stakeholders.<sup>3</sup>

The focus of activism for the NFTVA has been the Custodes Lucis group, whose website at [www.filmarchiveaction.org](http://www.filmarchiveaction.org) has progressively revealed and discussed the BFI’s plans and has garnered the best part of a thousand supporters from around the world. Some journalists and professional groups have also had their say, the latter not necessarily in the public arena. Many who have signed up (and all readers of this article can do so) have added their own lengthy comments of concern. The site will, in retrospect, be a remarkable historical document: for now, it’s a gathering voice which appears to have had at least a delaying effect.

### **Cultural differences**

The cultures of film archiving and film making are different, just as the cultures of publishing and librarianship are different. One would not put the British Library under the control of WHSmith or the National Library of Australia under Dymocks or the Australian Writers’ Guild. By the same token, there is a mismatch between the cultures of the BFI and the AFC – which are immersed in film industry and wider politics, film financing and promotion – and the cultures of the NFTVA and NFSA which gain their credibility from being at arms’ length from such activity.

The ethics and interests of film producers and film archivists are sometimes in opposition. An obvious example is the duration of copyright: producers will favour maximising their income through maximising the duration. Archives serving the public

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<sup>2</sup> Graham Shirley’s article, *Activism towards a national film archive* in Cinema Papers, July 1984 documents the ten year process which led to the Government’s decision to separate the NFSA from the National Library

<sup>3</sup> For further reading, visit the AFC’s website [www.afc.gov.au](http://www.afc.gov.au) to read the public submissions, and the transcripts of the stakeholder meetings held in January/February 2004. Also visit the website of Archive Forum [www.afiresearch.rmit.edu.au/archiveforum](http://www.afiresearch.rmit.edu.au/archiveforum) to read a range of statements and reports by the Forum and others. You can add your own signature to the celebrity statement calling for the establishment of the NFSA as a statutory authority.

interest do not favour excessive copyright durations which will limit public access to the shared memory. When such competing interests are brought together in one organisation, which view will dominate?

Large collecting institutions have large budgets, long time horizons and a need for stability. Entrepreneurial bodies like the BFI and AFC have more immediate horizons and fluctuating financial demands. There are obvious dangers in having such incompatible priorities in the same organisation.

### **Legislation and statutory authority status**

The writer's view is that the public interest in both countries would have been best served by both the NFTVA and the NFSA having been created as independent statutory authorities (or the UK equivalent) long ago.

In Australian terms, a statutory authority is a body created by Parliament and accountable to Parliament. It has an enabling Act which defines its mandate, its accountabilities, its identity and its permanent existence. As far as is possible today, it operates, like the judiciary, with professional independence and without fear or favour. It is at arm's length from the ebb and flow of political pressure.

Such structures are necessary to protect national memory and to give a society confidence that the memory will be transmitted accurately and with intellectual rigour. They are necessary to provide the assurance that collections intended for permanent preservation are inside permanent structures and under the control of appropriately qualified professionals. They must operate transparently and ethically to maintain trust.

Neither the NFTVA nor the NFSA are legal entities. They have no independent charter which defines them and protects them. They have apparent, but not real, security. Like a child growing up, both archives have long since outgrown their original settings. The NFTVA has never been allowed to "leave home"; the NFSA did leave home but has never had its adulthood properly recognised. The outcome for both is destructive: the overarching bodies with their narrower world view can only feel safely in control by reducing the status, size, cost and scope of their archives. That is what is now happening.

### **What next?**

Supporters of both archives face the challenging task of rescuing their national icons from unsuitable settings. The task is perhaps more formidable in Britain, because the BFI is not a government body, and turning the NFTVA into a government-funded public institution in its own right appears to be a complex and perhaps unprecedented task.

In Australia, where the AFC is itself a statutory authority, the task is essentially a political one. Draft legislation has long been in existence and the administrative and legislative steps that would be needed are by no means unusual. Unlike the NFTVA, the NFSA has a long history of operating as a de facto autonomous institution and has all the

internal mechanisms for doing so (albeit these have been eroding since the AFC's takeover). Three of Australia's four main political parties – the Australian Labor Party, the Greens and the Democrats – believe the NFSA should be a statutory authority and will move to make it so should they gain power.<sup>4</sup>

The Liberal/National coalition – under whom the AFC takeover occurred – was also originally a strong supporter of statutory status for the NFSA, though obviously not in recent times. Should it return to government, the way ahead is less clear. Inevitably the protests will continue, and since the question is essentially a matter of principle rather than politics, we can only live in hope that good faith and the public interest will ultimately prevail.

The appointment of a well-credentialled Director for the NFSA, Dr Paolo Cherchi Usai, has been welcomed by constituents, though it is a move which, by definition, cannot resolve the fundamental structural contradictions of the Archive's situation. How successful he will be in protecting the Archive's institutional autonomy remains to be seen.

### **The larger picture**

We appear to be living in a time where long standing assumptions about the independence, integrity and permanence of our “memory institutions” are being challenged. In July 2003 the University of Liverpool Centre for Archive Studies (LUCAS) organised an entire conference on the issue of political pressure on archives.<sup>5</sup>

In the United States, archivists are dismayed at the multifarious attempts of the Bush administration to remove from view large amounts of public information on the grounds of “security”. President Bush's move to appoint a new Archivist of the United States without observing due process or consultation has attracted widespread protest from the Society of American Archivists and dozens of other professional bodies. They fear the 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”.

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

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<sup>4</sup> This commitment was affirmed by spokespersons of all three parties at the conference on “the Future of the Archive”, convened in Canberra on 3-4 July 2004 by the Friends of the NFSA and the Australian Society of Archivists.

<sup>5</sup> Visit [http://www.liv.ac.uk/lucas/Political\\_pressure\\_files/review.htm](http://www.liv.ac.uk/lucas/Political_pressure_files/review.htm) for a summary

Film and audiovisual archives are a younger concept than the traditional document archives, libraries and museums. Unlike their older cousins, relatively few of them are protected and empowered by enabling legislation and so are vulnerable to political whim and agendas. If the NFTVA and NFSA experiences are any guide, those who sustain the archive – the grass roots constituency of experts, users, donors, advocates and the general public – are the last to be consulted. It is known that other archives are threatened in various ways but these two are currently most visible to the profession, and given their iconic status, their fate is psychologically and symbolically important. If they are permanently emasculated it will hurt the profession and the global mission of protecting the world's audiovisual memory.

*Disclaimer: Ray Edmondson is a former Deputy Director of the NFSA (1984 to 2001). He is a member of the Australian Society of Archivists, a Committee member of the Friends of the NFSA, and Secretary of Archive Forum. This paper expresses his personal views only.*

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RAY EDMONDSON OAM was Deputy Director of the National Film and Sound Archive from its establishment in 1984 until 2001, and prior to that was responsible for the Film Archive within the National Library from 1968 to 1984. He now heads his own consultancy company, Archive Associates, which is an affiliate of FIAF and SEAPAVAA. He writes, speaks and teaches widely within the international archiving community. His latest monograph, "Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy and Principles" has just been published by UNESCO. He holds several committee/ board posts within the profession, here and abroad. He was the recipient of the 2003 Silver Light Award for career achievement from the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA).



