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Sydney Morning Herald

'The memory of the nation is at risk' with National Archives desperate for funds

By [Katina Curtis](#) and [Shane Wright](#)

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Recordings of wartime speeches given by John Curtin, tapes of the Stolen Generation royal commission and even the records of the Bounty mutineers could disappear forever without an injection of cash into the National Archives.

Years of funding and staff cuts have caught up with the archives, which is struggling to prevent the disintegration of unique pieces of Australian history, including the personnel files of RAAF non-commissioned officers from World War II and papers for suffragettes Adela Pankhurst and Celia John.

[National Archives Director-General David Fricker stands among the archives boxes at its Canberra repository in 2012. *CREDIT: COLLEEN PETCH*]

Even surveillance films taken by ASIO, video of the 1998 Constitutional Convention and original films of early Australian Antarctic research expeditions are at risk as the Archives struggles to protect 384 kilometres of records that are growing rapidly every year.

Nicola Laurent, president of the Australian Society of Archivists, of which the National Archives is an institutional member, says it's highly concerning it has come to the point where such important records are at risk.

"It would be a devastating loss to the nation's memory and to the history of the country. It is really critical that these materials are saved," she said. "We shouldn't be in this position that we're now desperately trying to save materials."

Many photographs and motion pictures are on acetate film which suffers from so-called "vinegar syndrome". The film develops a vinegar smell and then becomes brittle, shattering under any tension.

Other holdings are on magnetic tape or in a digital form which has become obsolete, some are on nitrate film while more are on paper that has also started to deteriorate.

[John Curtin's speaks at a rally on October 12, 1942. Audio tapes of his speeches are under threat.*CREDIT:ARCHIVES*]

Recordings of speeches made by John Curtin during WWII are on magnetic audio tape, as is the Stolen Generation and the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody royal commissions. The 1853 to 1881 clerical register of births, deaths and marriages for people on Pitcairn Island, which carries records of the men who mutinied aboard the Bounty in 1789, is susceptible to acidic ink which destroys paper fibres.

The Archives, like many smaller government institutions, has suffered from constant reductions in real funding levels. It has fewer employees today compared to 2013-14.

These cuts are also affecting its ability to process applications to view records from academics and people looking into their family history. At the end of March, there were 22,230 applications on the waitlist.

Constitutional law expert Anne Twomey says the Archives is at risk of not fulfilling its fundamental role as "the memory of the nation". She has previously had requests take more than seven years to process – with [documents arriving well after the book she needed them for was published](#).

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These days, she advises would-be researchers against taking on projects that lean heavily on archival work, especially if they involve foreign affairs or Defence papers.

However, she notes the delay often comes from departments taking a long time to clear records as well as a growing inclination towards secrecy and designating decades-old records as having "ongoing sensitivities".

[Professor Anne Twomey advises researchers against projects heavily reliant on archival material due to the long delays in accessing it.*CREDIT:LOUISE KENNERLEY*]

Last year, Professor Twomey sought access to the legal opinions of Maurice Byers, the solicitor general from 1973 to 1983, for a lecture she gave in his honour. Those covering the turbulent end of Gough Whitlam's government had been opened in 2011 but she had to apply to see the others. For once, the response was prompt and Professor Twomey read the material.

"Two weeks later, I get an email from the National Archives saying, 'Oh dear, sorry, we pressed the wrong button, actually they're secret and you can't have them'," she says. "To the extent there are any ongoing sensitivities, they're all in volume one, which is already open, and they're not in volumes two and three, which are the ones they are keeping secret. So we end up in this sort of bizarro world."

An ongoing issue is the sheer volume of material the Archives is required to collect from government agencies.

In 2019, agencies created 2986 terabytes of digital records and data plus 92,966 shelf metres of physical records. The same agencies in 2019 already had 13,634 terabytes of digital records and 241,453 metres of physical records.

A terabyte can hold the equivalent of 250 movies or 6.5 million PDF pages.

The archives holds 384 shelf kilometres of records itself, the equivalent of Sydney to Gundagai on the Hume Freeway.

National Archives director David Fricker, in evidence to a parliamentary committee this month, revealed the institution is at risk of breaching its own Act because it is struggling to maintain all of its records.

He said the Archives was different to other collection institutions as almost all of its records were unique.

[David Fricker said the institution is at risk of breaching its own Act because it is struggling to maintain its records. *CREDIT: ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN*]

“If we lose records then they are permanently and irretrievably lost. We can’t go to another institution and ask for a copy of theirs,” he said.

“The memory of the nation would be placed at risk. When you lose records of the government, then you of course reduce the transparency and accountability of government, the integrity of government processes and the trust that people are able to place in government.”

Mr Fricker told the same hearing it would cost about \$25 million to save the audiovisual collection.

The [Tune review](#) of the National Archives, released in March, recommended the government fund a seven-year program to urgently digitise at-risk materials, for a total cost of \$67.7 million.

Assistant Minister to the Attorney-General Amanda Stoker said the government would respond to the Tune review this year but it would not be rushed.

In New Zealand the government last year allocated \$35.7 million (AU\$33 million) to convert its 271km of records to digital files.