



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

National Archives of Australia

SPEECH

Tuesday, 23 February 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Ludwig, Sen Joe

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Question No.

Senator LUDWIG (Queensland—Special Minister of State and Cabinet Secretary) (6.42 pm)—by leave—I make a ministerial statement on ensuring access to the National Archives of Australia. The Rudd Labor government is committed to assisting individuals in their search for information about themselves, their families and their country. The vast holdings of the National Archives of Australia provide a rich resource for academics, researchers and other interested groups, whether they are searching for information on the dramatic events that shaped our nation's history or the decisions that touched individual lives. Each family's history forms part of the fabric of our national story. That is why the National Archives is today hosting Shake Your Family Tree Day to encourage more Australians to see what information they can unearth about their own family.

Today I can announce that the government has responded to community concerns about the closure of the National Archives of Australia's Darwin, Adelaide and Hobart offices and will guarantee that a physical National Archives presence will be maintained in every state and territory. The stand-alone National Archives offices in Darwin, Adelaide and Hobart will remain open in each instance until a permanent solution involving co-location with a local organisation has been found.

This solution aims to remove the operational inefficiencies inherent in running stand-alone offices of the National Archives in each jurisdiction. It will also reflect the changing reality, which is that people overwhelmingly access records online today, while ensuring a National Archives presence in every jurisdiction and maintaining local access to the services provided by the National Archives.

The November 2009 decision to close these National Archives offices was a fiscally responsible decision. The offices in Hobart, Adelaide and Darwin are the National Archives' smallest offices, with the lowest visitor numbers. Each of these offices costs over \$800,000 per year to operate, with the Darwin office costing around \$1 million. Yet visitor numbers to these offices are low: in 2008-09 they totalled just 337 in Darwin, 720 in Adelaide and 635 in Hobart, compared with 22,290 nationally. This equates to an average cost to the Australian taxpayer of over \$1,000 to \$3,000 per

visit—a cost which is simply unsustainable in today's fiscal environment.

I do understand the importance of maintaining a National Archives presence at a state and territory level—after all, that is where Australia's history emerged. The Rudd government has listened to the concerns of the local community, academics, researchers and other interested groups over the proposed closure of National Archives offices. I seek leave to incorporate the remainder of the statement in *Hansard*.

Leave granted.

The remainder of the statement read as follows—

I would like to acknowledge the work done by my colleagues including the Member for Solomon, Damian Hale, the Minister for Indigenous Health, Warren Snowdon, Senator Trish Crossin, the Member for Lyons, Dick Adams, the Member for Hindmarsh, Steve Georganas, the Member for Franklin, Julie Collins, the Member for Port Adelaide, Mark Butler, and the Minister for Sport and Youth, Kate Ellis, in representing constituents' concerns over the closures. I also acknowledge the work of all of the individuals and members of historians' and archivists' societies who have highlighted the significance of the local offices of the National Archives, and I thank them for their contribution. I also recognise the petition on the office closures tabled in the House of Representatives earlier this month by Julia Irwin, the Member for Fowler.

National Archives repositories around the country hold many records containing important information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their history. I would like to particularly emphasise the fact that the Government will not change existing access arrangements for records relating to the separation policies imposed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; these access arrangements were strengthened in response to the landmark 1997 Bringing Them Home report on the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.

The reality is that fewer people are visiting the National Archives in person to access their records. Instead, the country has moved to an online environment: in 2008-09 more than 1.9 million records were accessed online compared to 57,000 records accessed in reading rooms nationally. Demand for online access to records is expected to continue to increase apace, and the National Archives is developing plans to provide digital access to ever more of its records, including those currently held by the National Archives in Darwin, Adelaide and Hobart.

In today's society, we need to explore other ways of ensuring access to archives other than a fully functioning National Archives office at a cost to the taxpayer of up to \$3,000 per visit. In what is a very successful partnership, the National Archives already co-locates with the state institution in Victoria. The National Archives will be required to work with local cultural heritage institutions and other organisations in pursuit of further co-located reading rooms and record storage facilities. In this way, the Government can ensure that the National Archives maintains face-to-face services in all jurisdictions, while shaping its operations in a way which will meet the needs of future generations.

The Rudd Government is committed to ensuring continued public access to records documenting Australia's history. This is part of our broader aim of restoring trust and integrity in the use of government information through improved transparency and accountability. The Rudd Government is committed to promoting a pro-disclosure culture across government, and ensuring that Australians can realise their right to access government information.