

For immediate release

## SAVING THE NATION'S MEMORY BANK

More than 150 leading Australian writers and scholars have signed an open letter sent yesterday to the prime minister expressing dismay at the government's failure to adequately fund the National Archives of Australia - 'Australia's memory bank.'

Nobel laureates J. M. Coetzee and Peter Doherty, former Victorian premier Ted Baillieu, and former ABC chairman James Spigelman are among the signatories. Doherty is one of three Australians of the Year, with Professor Fiona Stanley and Sir Gus Nossal.

Among writers represented are Helen Garner, Stan Grant, Gail Jones, Thomas Keneally, David Malouf, Henry Reynolds, Tim Winton, Tara June Winch, Alexis Wright and Clare Wright. Twenty winners of Prime Minister's Awards for Non-Fiction, Australian History and Fiction are on the list.

Many distinguished historians have joined the group, including the Regius Professor of History at Cambridge, Sir Christopher Clark, and the Regius Professor of History at Oxford, Lyndal Roper. Both are Australian. Clark called the predicament of NAA 'a shameful state of affairs.'

The letter comes in response to government inaction on the Functional and Efficiency Review of NAA by former finance secretary David Tune, presented to the Attorney-General eighteen months, which, among other recommendations, called for urgent additional funding for the digitisation of disintegrating magnetic tape and film, to the tune of \$67 million over seven years.

No additional funding was provided in the federal budget on 11 May, although the government is to spend \$500 million replacing the twenty-year-old Anzac Hall at the Australian War Memorial.

At Senate Estimates on 27 May, the assistant to the Attorney-General, Senator Amanda Stoker, described the loss of irreplaceable records as 'part of the ageing process' and 'business as usual.'

'The National Archives is one of Australia's premier cultural institutions,' says the letter, which was drafted by Graeme Davison, Emeritus Professor of History at Monash University, a former member of the NAA's advisory council. 'It has always enjoyed the support of governments of both persuasions...'

'We were disappointed, therefore, that in a budget that increased the funding of other national institutions, and made very large investments in the expansion of one of them, the Australian War Memorial, no allocation, even of interim funding, was made for the National Archives of Australia.'

The letter also stressed the primary role of the National Archives as a backstop of government and mechanism of accountability: 'As the institution created by parliament to maintain the official records of the Commonwealth, the National Archives is one of the pillars of our democracy,' says the group. 'It makes decision-making more transparent. It holds governments, past and present, to account.'

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## Saving the Nation's Memory Bank

### An Open Letter to the Prime Minister

We write as friends and supporters of the National Archives of Australia. Some of us are historians, including multiple winners of Prime Minister's Awards, some are independent writers and researchers, and some are former members of the National Archives Advisory Council. We have differing political viewpoints but share a deep love for the knowledge of Australia's past embodied in its archives and libraries. We are writing to you because we fear that the integrity of the nation's premier memory bank, the National Archives of Australia, is in jeopardy and to urge you to secure its future.

As the institution created by parliament to maintain the official records of the Commonwealth, the National Archives is one of the pillars of our democracy. It makes decision-making more transparent. It holds governments, past and present, to account. And in the words of Justice Michael Kirby, it 'holds up a mirror to the people of Australia'.

In this respect, the National Archives is not like other cultural institutions, such as museums, galleries and opera houses. Its most important users have yet to be born. The value of many items in its collection may not become apparent for many years because we simply do not know what questions future inquirers may ask. Only in recent years, for example, have researchers begun to tap the riches of the National Archives' repatriation records, the largest continuous record of the health of any people anywhere, for medical as well as historical research.

We welcomed the comprehensive review of the function and efficiency of the archives conducted by Mr. David Tune and endorse his incisive analysis of the challenges now facing it. He shows beyond doubt that large parts of the collection, including fragile and irreplaceable film and paper records, are in danger of disintegration and loss without investment in urgent conservation and preservation work. Successive cuts in the form of 'efficiency dividends' have weakened the National Archives' capacity to undertake this essential work. Even the routine work of retrieving and clearing records for researchers has been compromised to the point that researchers can no longer undertake projects based on the archives with confidence that the records will become available in time.

The National Archives is one of Australia's premier cultural institutions. It has always enjoyed the support of governments of both persuasions. In 2011 its reputation as an international leader

in digital record keeping and preservation was recognised by UNESCO with the prestigious Memory of the World Prize. In the report he presented the government in January 2020, Mr. Tune helpfully identified the needed works and cost offsets that will allow the archives to ‘stay contemporary in the digital age’.

We were disappointed, therefore, that in a budget that increased the funding of other national institutions, and made very large investments in the expansion of one of them, the Australian War Memorial, no allocation, even of interim funding, was made for the National Archives of Australia. We were further alarmed by the tenor of remarks attributed to a representative of the government that ‘all sources degrade over time’, that this was ‘business as usual’ and that the National Archives should look for philanthropic support, rather than government funding, to finance preservation of its records.

The National Archives is not a charity that should have to shake a tin or secure buy-in from the public for support. It is a legislated responsibility of government and should be adequately funded from public revenues. No other national archive is reliant on private funds for its core functions of preserving the records of the national government. The funding recommended by Tune for urgent digitisation (\$67m over seven years) is modest when compared with the historical importance of the records and their value to posterity. We understand that some of the recommendations of the Tune Review await further consideration by government, but strongly urge you to provide interim funding in order for this essential work to proceed, and reaffirm your support for a vital institution.

For further information, contact

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## A NOTE ABOUT THE LIST

There are more than 150 signatories to 'Saving the Nation's Memory Bank'. All are identified with a substantial commitment to the written word and to careful research. All are Australian, and from every state, including those now based in the UK, the US, Europe and China. The list is explicitly non-partisan, unapologetically intelligent. Nobody knew who else was signing; we did not want the coercion of a crowd. They include:

Two Nobel Laureates: J. M. Coetzee (Literature), Peter Doherty (Medicine)

Three Australians of the Year: Doherty, Sir Gus Nossal, Professor Fiona Stanley

One Liberal premier: Ted Baillieu (Patron, the Public Record Office of Victoria)

Distinguished novelists: Helen Garner, Gail Jones, Nicholas Jose, Thomas Keneally, David Malouf, Tara June Winch, Tim Winton, Alexis Wright

Regius Professors of History: Sir Christopher Clark (Cambridge), Lyndal Roper (Oxford). Both are Australians.

Among distinguished non-fiction writers are Michelle Arrow (The Seventies), Frank Bongiorno (The Eighties), Gabrielle Carey (Puberty Blues), John Carroll (Ego & Soul), David Christian (Big History), Ross Coulthart (Charles Bean), James Curran (The Power of Speech), Jim Davidson (Lyrebird Rising), Mark Davis (Ganglands), Philip Dwyer (Napoleon), Sheila Fitzpatrick (Everyday Stalinism), Bill Gammage (The Broken Years), Stan Grant (Talking to my Country), Paul Ham (Young Hitler), Chloe Hooper (The Tall Man), Barry Jones (Sleepers Wake), Marilyn Lake (Creating a Nation), Meredith Lake (The Bible in Australia), Richard McGregor (Asia's Reckoning), Stuart Macintyre (Reds), George Megalogenis (The Australian Moment), Henry Reynolds (Why Weren't We Told?), Peter Stanley (Lost Boys of Anzac), Maria Tumarkin (Axiomatic), Don Watson (Weasel Words), Nadia Wheatley (Charmian Clift), Clare Wright (The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka)

Political biographers: Philip Ayres (Malcolm Fraser), Troy Bramston (Paul Keating, Robert Menzies), Judith Brett (Alfred Deakin), John Edwards (John Curtin, Paul Keating), Ian Hancock (John Gorton, Nick Greiner), Jenny Hocking (Gough Whitlam)

A great grandson of Alfred Deakin: Tom Harley, co-founder of the Menzies Research Centre

Previous director-generals, National Archives of Australia: Ross Gibbs, George Nichols

Previous director-general, National Library of Australia: Jan Fullerton

Previous members of National Archives of Australia advisory council: Graeme Davison, Ian Hancock, Helen Irving, Paul Santamaria QC

Historian of ASIO: David Horner

Official War Historian: Peter Edwards

Twenty winners of Prime Minister's Awards for Non-Fiction, Fiction and Australian History.

University pro/vice-chancellors: Kate Darian-Smith, Stephen Garton, Glyn Davis, Brian Stoddart

Jurists: Stephen Charles, David Harper, Jim Spigelman (also former chairman of the ABC)

Businesswoman: Margaret Jackson, Eve Mahlab, Barbara Yeoh

Publishers: Louise Adler, Kathy Bail, Ivor Indyk, Julianne Schultz