

The Noel Butlin Archives Centre: Present and Future

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This paper looks at the relationship between an archives and its research community. It is essentially a report on the work of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre (NBAC) at the Australian National University (ANU) since the “rescue package” announced by the Vice-Chancellor in November 1997. I am assuming that my audience is familiar with the events of 1997, when the closure of this long-established significant resource for business and labour history was only averted after a strong public campaign in which the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History and many of its individual members were major players.

The essential features of the “rescue package” were that the NBAC would be provided with bridging funding for three years, during which time it was expected to raise substantial funds so that it would eventually become largely self-funding; the Centre was to begin charging non-ANU users and depositors; it was administratively transferred from the Research School of Social Sciences to the University Library; and a revised collecting policy was to be developed in cooperation with other related institutions. The University also announced that it intended to construct a new facility to house both the NBAC collections and its own University Archives.

Briefly, the NBAC survives, but could be said to be in an arrested state of development. The resources made available under the three-year funding plan enable the Centre to provide basic services to researchers and to depositors, but not to extend or enhance those services or to have an active collecting program. The Centre now has two full-time and one half-time archivists and a full-time administrator to look after its operations. This is a significant reduction in staff and also means that the Centre has to close for brief periods every few months to do detailed work on collections (and to straddle staff leave).

My role, in the new position of University Archivist, includes responsibility for the “strategic direction” and “management oversight” of the Centre. This involves regular reporting to the University Librarian and extensive liaison with the University’s Development Office in attempts to raise external funds to secure the future of the Centre after the end of next year. An advisory committee to advise on policy and monitor the Centre’s operations, which has representation from the Friends of the NBAC and the Australian Society of Archivists, was established last year. This Committee meets quarterly, but its role is very much advisory and the extent of its influence is somewhat circumscribed by the terms of the rescue package.

In terms of its current finances, the NBAC has sufficient resources to run at its existing level of activity and benefits from the advice of the Library’s finance staff. The amounts raised from reader’s tickets have not been substantial — they are generally less than that received from photocopying each month. The efforts to raise funds from charges to depositors have not been particularly successful to date; they have also been time-consuming as only those organisations whose records are deposited, as opposed to donated, can be

approached and careful research needs to be done to establish the organisation currently responsible for records received from long-defunct organisations. Some depositors have been willing to pay, but others need to be reminded or even informed in some cases that they own records held by the Centre. We are also very conscious that the strategy is risky, for example depositors could opt to destroy their records rather than pay for them to be maintained as a research resource.

Another committee, helpfully named the Advisory Board, composed mainly of influential individuals with business and trade union links, has been set up to provide advice on fundraising strategies. The Board has met only once, but several of its members have assisted in the campaign to secure support from depositors. There are several key issues here — fundraising for archives in Australia is something in which there are few experts (and none at ANU); the current plan is based on an optimistic assessment of likely returns and it has been difficult for us to devise ways of presenting the NBAC as a national research resource which will appeal to potential sponsors.

The proposed archives building project is in abeyance, along with several others at ANU, while the University looks for the funds to cover a pay rise for staff under the current round of enterprise bargaining. The processes of developing a draft specification for a new building and subsequently of examining how the current facility, the Acton tunnel, might be improved have been valuable and we hope that a decision will be forthcoming before too long. This is for several reasons — there is no growth space in the tunnel and it has been found to be well below current building code requirements in several respects, including safety, lighting and disabled access. It is also a fact that people suffer more from cold working conditions than records do from cold storage environments.

But now to turn to more positive news — there have been some important developments at the NBAC since the beginning of last year which demonstrate the continuing ability of the archives to contribute to the general cause of the preservation of non-government records in Australia and which also demonstrate the strength of its relationships with its various communities — within ANU and beyond. The first development is the articulation of a revised collecting policy for the Centre, built tightly on its traditional collecting areas of business and the labour movement. This might sound like a rather mechanical exercise, but it was more than that, as it required examining the very basis of the existence of the Centre and included abandoning the burgeoning collecting area of conservation and the environmental movement. It also leaves a question mark over the fate of the National AIDS Archive Collection, a project that was run from the Centre in the early 1990s. The new policy, which was approved by the Advisory Committee, clearly states the collecting priorities for the Centre and describes its established interests. It transpires that most other collecting archives have not engaged in such exercises recently and few have readily available statements of the rationale and extent of their collecting ambitions.

The NBAC cooperates actively with other archival institutions.

There has been very fruitful cooperation with the University of Melbourne Archives in the area of trade union records since last year. A joint disposal schedule for trade union records

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has been developed and two workshops on using the schedule have been held, one in Melbourne last year and one in Canberra this year. The schedule and the advice of archivists from both institutions on practical recordkeeping issues have been appreciated by union staff. We have also begun to produce a joint newsletter on trade union records. We intend to continue to provide services of this type, which branch out from the traditional archival storage and reference roles associated with collecting archives. In the area of business records, we are working with the University of Melbourne Archives and other interested parties to provide improved access to information about the records of significant Australian businesses. These examples of cooperation are the most important to date, but there will certainly be others, as it is obvious that closer collaboration between institutions is essential if there is to be any hope for the long-term survival of archives outside the government sphere in Australia.

The NBAC has had reduced numbers of visits from researchers this year and last. We cannot do any meaningful comparisons with 1997, as researcher numbers in October 1997 were gigantic, when the threatened final closure was nigh. While we cannot discern any really strong trends here, it seems we are not alone in experiencing this problem and there can be contradictory signs — for example, the number of user visits can decline, but the number of items used might increase significantly over the same period. It is naturally of some concern that there are fewer people coming to use the incredibly valuable archival resources held by the NBAC. It is also worth noting that over the last year or so, there has been growth in use from the “general” user category, including genealogists and local historians, but generally a decline in use from academics and students.

We receive strong continuing support from some academics at ANU, who bring their students along to introduce them to the Centre and its collections. We cannot be certain, but we suspect that the adverse publicity of 1997 may have had a lasting impact on some potential researchers who have avoided topics which would have required use of NBAC collections. One counterbalancing strategy we adopt here is to ensure that in any formal reports the Centre is required to make, statistics on processing of collections and services provided to depositors, such as extensive searches for legal cases, are produced, in addition to the number of user visits. This is particularly important as we now operate within a library where there is a tendency to measure activity predominantly in terms of patron visits, items borrowed and hits on the website. For libraries, the relationship with the vendor of published material is somewhat different from the ongoing relationship between the archives staff and the depositor of records.

Reduced staff numbers and the work involved in seeking financial contributions from depositors mean that proactive collecting is just not possible at the moment. The number and size of transfers received from continuing depositors and new ones has decreased. This has implications for the future relevance of the Centre and its ability to keep pace within its current collecting ambit, let alone to extend to new fields. We might look at reversing the old Anthony Hordern’s motto “While I live, I grow” to “While I grow, I live”. However, the news here is not all glum, as the Centre was able last year to respond quickly and literally rescue the Burns Philp records from the basement of the building in Bridge Street before it was sold as part of that company’s bid to stay alive. Such events should be a thing of the past, but they are not, and this is another reason why institutions like the NBAC need to be adequately resourced to ensure that important documentary sources for our history can be preserved.

The profile of the NBAC within the ANU and Canberra communities has been raised recently by favourable publicity in the media. The Centre and its location, essentially not a news story, were skilfully presented to the local media by ANU’s media people in mid-July on a slow mid-week news day. We managed to get in all three local commercial TV news bulletins that day and on the front page of the *Canberra Times* the next. The story was also taken up subsequently by two separate ABC radio programs. However, this was a one-off: if there are to be any more such efforts, we will have to have something new to report. While we have been told repeatedly that there is no money in Canberra, it seems worth pursuing a higher profile in the local media to build support of other kinds amongst the Canberra populace. The recent public program successes of the once-unknown Australian Archives (now National Archives of Australia) are a case in point here. We are acutely aware that outreach activities take time and divert staff resources from other tasks: but equally, we cannot afford to be in the unappreciated treasure category any longer.

It looks increasingly unlikely at this stage that we will be able to raise sufficient funds to achieve the objective of becoming largely self-funding by the end of next year. To date we have not developed any contingency plans for the future after the end of next year and the signs of finding the funds from ANU are not encouraging. The fate of the Centre, its collections and its staff are in the balance. We are grateful for the support of labour historians and our other researchers and for the activities of the Friends of the NBAC. I must end with a request and a challenge: we need continuing and increased support and new ideas on how to secure the future if the doors are to stay open after the end of next year.