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SUBMISSION TO THE REVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT FILM FUNDING SUPPORT

This submission refers to the request for comment on **whether current agency functions and structures are appropriate** (box on page 13 of issues paper) and proposes future arrangements for the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA), which is currently part of the Australian Film Commission (AFC). It may be made public.

Joint public statement

On 10 July 2006, our four organizations released the attached statement *Independent Statutory Authority Status for the National Film and Sound Archive* together with an accompanying media package. The statement and the package are attached and are hereby submitted to the Review. Although the statement was prepared before the Review was announced, it has proved highly prescient and directly relevant to the Review. We ask that its assessment of the relationship between the NFSA and AFC, and its recommendations, be carefully considered.

Inappropriate context for a national memory institution

The issues paper makes only passing references to the NFSA, and then only to its film-industry-related functions, which – while important – represent only one aspect of its role as the public guardian of the national sound, radio, television and film heritage. It is therefore inappropriate that its funding arrangements and structural attachments are viewed as a subset of the film industry. The Australian War Memorial is not a subset of the Department of Defence or the defence budget; the National Library and National

Gallery are not funded as subsets of the publishing industry or the arts funding agencies. Like them, the NFSA should be funded in its own right for what it is: a separate national memory institution of comparable stature.

Why the NFSA was created

The NFSA was created in 1984 from elements of the National Library. In 1985 an expert advisory committee set out the vision for the new institution, affirmed its name and affirmed the Government's intention that it be created as a separate statutory authority. The NFSA represents the audiovisual heritage in its own right as part of the national memory, affording it equal status with 'older' media. Like other memory institutions it has its own distinctive professional worldview and philosophy. (Attachment 1 in the *Statement* provides a historical summary).

Recent history

The role, work and status of the NFSA has been seriously compromised in recent years by two policy decisions, made under the aegis of DCITA, which appear to have been based on a misunderstanding of the NFSA's character as a national memory institution.

The first was the rebranding of the institution in June 1999 with a commercial, market-oriented name, **ScreenSound Australia**. Following sustained criticism the original title **National Film and Sound Archive** was reinstated in December 2004: a tacit admission that the rebranding had been a mistake.¹

The second was the NFSA's "integration" with AFC in July 2003 to create "synergies" – in reality, a forced marriage, without any philosophical basis, of two dissimilar entities. This decision, too, has clearly been a mistake – and one which has threatened the very survival of the institution. It has attracted international concern and criticism. The attached *Statement* provides a thorough analysis of the issues and the events of the last three years.

Both these decisions had certain features in common:

- They were reached in secret and not tested beforehand with the NFSA's peers and constituency organizations – indeed, such consultation appears to have been deliberately avoided
- They resulted in the waste of millions of dollars in public funds
- They offered no cogent rationale or philosophical basis
- Public promises and predictions about the well being and advancement of the institution were made but never kept nor fulfilled
- The outcome never gained the endorsement of the NFSA's constituency, and diverted its energies into protecting the institution rather than developing its potential

¹ The sequence of events is currently the subject of a doctoral research project at Charles Sturt University.

Future direction

Recent history invites a natural concern that this Review will result in yet another unfortunate and secret decision to again reconfigure the NFSA, or subordinate it to yet another entity, inevitably sparking yet another wave of protest and activism to protect it.

It is disturbing and puzzling that policy decisions over the years seem to have moved in every direction except the obvious and only satisfactory one: the **creation of the NFSA as a statutory authority in its own right**. It is a mature institution which has long since been ready for such a step and at times has come very close to attaining it. There have been numerous calls in recent years for the Government to finally make this a reality.²

It has been speculated in the media and elsewhere that one outcome of this Review will be the abolition of the AFC and the dispersal of its functions to other bodies. Should this happen it provides **a logical opportunity to take the long overdue step of giving the NFSA its statutory base**. The concluding paragraphs and Appendix 2 of the attached *Statement* propose a way forward.

Submitted by:

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And on behalf of:

Catherine Robinson

President, Australian Society of Archivists Inc.

Prof. Chris Puplick AM

Chair, Archive Forum

Prof. Desley Deacon

President, Australian Historical Association Inc.

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Attached:

- *Statement on independent statutory authority status for the National Film and Sound Archive*
- *Executive summary*
- *Media package*

² See, for example, the petition at <http://www.afiresearch.rmit.edu.au/archiveforum/petition.html> signed by many prominent Australians.