

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

CONCERNS RELATING TO ARCHIVES NEW ZEALAND

Media reports and comment in informed circles suggest there should be concern that the bitter conflicts of the 1990s, culminating in litigation between the Department of Internal Affairs and stakeholders over the former's stewardship of Archives New Zealand, could again arise. From its establishment under statute in 1958, Archives New Zealand (formerly National Archives of New Zealand) was placed within the Internal Affairs administrative fold. As a number of studies have demonstrated, in particular Dr Julianne Molineaux's 2009 Auckland PhD thesis, this was not always a happy arrangement. Hence, for nearly a quarter century, ARANZ, backed by researcher organisations, campaigned consistently, sometimes vigorously, for a measure of autonomy for the institution, then for independence from the parent department. The incoming Labour government's 1999 announcement that the National Archives would become a stand-alone government department was therefore widely welcomed and warmly applauded.

Yet in 2011, after ten years as a separate department, Archives New Zealand (ANZ) was reincorporated into the Department of Internal Affairs (DIA). The stated rationale was enhanced efficiency. Reservations then expressed by knowledgeable stakeholders before the Select Committee hearing submissions on relevant sections on the State Sector Management Bill 2010 were simply dismissed by Ministers Ryall and Guy, and by the State Services Commission: the integrity of the institution would be safeguarded and effectively 'nothing will change'. Yet in little more than three years what the State Services Commission (SSC) conceded was 'a well functioning department' has been reduced to an apparently dysfunctional departmental business cluster. The fears expressed by submitters to the 2010 Select Committee – still available on the New Zealand Parliament website – have been proven soundly based.

What we conceive as issues of growing public concern include:

1. The return of the institution, in terms of governance and control, to its sorry pre-1970s status as a subordinate business unit within a DIA branch.

For more than a decade prior to the 2000 severance from DIA, the Chief Archivist was accorded Deputy Chief Executive (DCE) status and was a member of DIA's Senior Management Team. That statutory official is now third-tier, responsible to a DCE, with no direct voice in decision-making at departmental level.

2. This has resulted in the authority of ANZ as the auditor of government recordkeeping being severely diminished by reduced status within DIA.

Although public sector Chief Executives legally remain responsible to the Chief Archivist for proper recordkeeping within their organisations, the prospect of any real control being exercised by a middle-ranking departmental official is doubtful. Moreover, while the recently released Report on the State of Government Recordkeeping 2011/12 might suggest all is well, as a correspondent to the NZ Records Listserv observes, there is curiously no comment on media reports of breaches of the Public Records Act 2005.

3. These matters have led to consistently poor morale within ANZ, and a strong staff belief that there is a lack of knowledge about, and respect for, the institution in the DIA hierarchy.

A 2013 DIA Engagement Survey, which seeks to measure the commitment of employees to their employer, found that 5.9% of ANZ staff could be classified as 'Engaged', 53.5% as 'Ambivalent', and 43.6% as 'Disengaged'.

4. Both in the ANZ leadership group and layers below, qualified senior supporting staff are rapidly exiting.

Since the amalgamation into DIA, the annual turnover of ANZ staff has escalated, with this especially evident over the past 12-18 months. Of particular concern is the regular departure of experienced and professionally credentialed staff, to the extent that earlier this year the leadership group was almost devoid of such officers.

5. The recent appointment of a professionally non-qualified person to the key statutory position of Chief Archivist.

Within days of the unexpected February resignation of Chief Archivist Greg Goulding, the transfer of a senior departmental official to fill the post was announced. While the announcement stressed the appointee's managerial skills (which may well have been needed), there was no indication of the specialist knowledge required to properly exercise

the Chief Archivist's statutory professional functions, a matter of even greater concern given the erosion of the professional support base.

6. DIA's recent advertising for a 'Deputy Chief Executive Information and Knowledge Services', without reference to that officer's responsibility for ANZ (or for that matter for the National Library), arguably demonstrates the lack of importance attributed by DIA to its stewardship role.

The emphasis is on recruiting 'a highly capable individual to head a group of long-standing and important functions that sit at the forefront of the digital revolution'.

7. A wide perception within professional communities of a hamstrung, insignificant and largely ignored Archives Council.

The Council's key role is to advise the Minister, yet there is an impression that from the time the decision to reincorporate ANZ into DIA was made it has generally been retrospectively informed of decisions already made. There are also suggestions that requests for information have been denied by officials.

8. Concern of staff at the ongoing 'colonisation' of ANZ's purpose-refitted Wellington building by other sections of DIA.

In addition to space already given over to other departmental functions, including former display space, it has recently been rumoured that some existing holdings, including associated reference collections, may be downsized or relinquished to further free up space for other tenants.

9. Following the Government Digital Archive Project (GDAP) debacle, there is growing concern over threats to the integrity of electronic finding aids, in particular ARCHWAY.

The costly collapse of the GDAP has already been well canvassed in the media. It is understood that the creators of ARCHWAY are no longer associated with the system and that the ability of DIA IT staff to afford full support has been questioned

10. The transfer of the Treaty of Waitangi and other constitutional documents from ANZ to the National Library building is deeply resented by staff and outside supporters, is considered professionally unsound, not to mention unduly costly, and clearly indicates that ANZ in the eyes of DIA lacks sufficient prestige to display these documents.

With over \$2 million (out of a budget of \$7 million) having already been fruitlessly spent, on the basis this will 'make the Treaty more accessible to the public', it is surely time to end this folly. As elsewhere internationally, the nation's founding document should be genuinely in the custody of the institution established as 'the memory of government', not exhibited in another DIA unit.

11. Concern that ongoing advocacy of 'a long term strategic partnership' between ANZ and the National Library may be cover work for a move to the Canadian model of amalgamation of the two institutions (disastrous in that country, and abandoned as a model elsewhere).

As far back as the initial 2010 reintegration proposals, Official Information Act requests revealed that SSC officials had advanced merger as a model that might be considered for the future. The evidence emanating from Canada indicates that the administrative experiment launched there has not only damaged the functionality of both institutions; it has also resulted in the serious alienation of professional and public stakeholder groups.

12. There is a widespread conviction that the assurances made following the 2010 amalgamation (by Ministers, SSC, and the then Chief Executive of DIA), that effectively 'nothing will change', are worthless.

Scrutiny of the 2010 submissions, by archivists and information professionals, researchers, former senior public officials, lawyers, and others, indicates conclusively that the problems outlined were clearly perceived in advance, it being predicted that without especial care the ethos and functional capability of ANZ would be adversely impacted.

The undersigned, founding members of ARANZ, each have around 40 years close association with the operations of Archives New Zealand. Our concerns are not advanced lightly. In setting them out we intend no personal criticism of individual officials, or indeed of the Department of Internal Affairs itself. We recognise that over a decade has elapsed between ANZ's departure from and return to DIA, also that the 2011 forced remarriage was conceivably an outcome neither sought nor necessarily welcomed by DIA. Our belief is that after ten years there is within the administering department a lack of full comprehension of ANZ's appropriate status and roles. Our hope is that the adverse impacts discerned may be speedily addressed, and that a more appropriate relationship between ANZ and the department can be developed. If you

share our concerns it could be helpful to convey this to the Secretary for Internal Affairs, Mr Colin MacDonald, and/or the Minister, Hon Peter Dunne.

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