

Australia's Time Capsule

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Abstract

On Tuesday, 8 August 2006, all Australians have the opportunity to be remembered forever. As part of the 2006 Census of Population and Housing, Australians can choose to have the information they complete on their census form transferred to microfilm and securely stored by the National Archives of Australia for 99 years.

For those Australians who choose the retention option, their personal information will become part of the Census Time Capsule. On 8 August 2105, the National Archives of Australia will release the information from the 2006 census stored in the time capsule for access by the general public.

Genealogists, historians, academics, social analysts and other researchers in the 22nd century will have access to a unique snapshot of Australian society in the early years of the 21st century. Family members from the previous century will become known to them through the information available.

This paper explains how we all can make a valuable contribution to preserving a part of Australia's history for future generations. The history and background of the 'retention debate', the international experience with the public release of census information, and the work of the National Archives in safeguarding and incorporating name-identified census information into our significant national collection are also addressed.

Introduction

On Tuesday, 8 August 2006, all Australians have the opportunity to be remembered forever. As part of the 2006 Census of Population and Housing conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Australians can choose to have the information they complete on their census form transferred to microfilm and securely stored by the National Archives of Australia. After 99 years, the National Archives will make this information available for research.

The retention of name-identified census data overturns the longstanding practice of destroying original census returns once the extraction of statistical data is complete. How did this change come about and what does it mean for Australians – now and in the future?

This paper describes the intense campaign waged by some very determined genealogists and others that brought about this change. The paper contrasts the Australian practice with the experience of some other countries where name-identified census data has been available for research for many years. Finally, it examines the collaboration between the National Archives and the ABS, since 2000, to develop and implement strategies to ensure that Australian census records are preserved, safeguarded and made available for research after 99 years.

The census

The national census provides a snapshot of the nation, which helps define who we are. It underpins Australia's democracy and is crucial to communities, the private sector and all levels of government in the planning and delivery of services and facilities. It also provides a rich resource for wide-ranging statistical research.

The Australian Government has conducted 14 national censuses since Federation in 1901. Censuses have been held in each decade from 1911 to 1961 and every five years thereafter. All people in Australia on census night are required to complete the census form. The confidentiality of information provided by respondents is guaranteed by the *Census and Statistics Act 1905*.

Typically the census asks a range of questions to identify respondents, such as name, address, age, sex and marital status. Questions about family composition, heritage, education, language, religion, health, occupation, income and housing are also asked. The 2006 census has 61 questions including some new ones about access to the Internet at home and participation in unpaid work. On completion of the census, respondents are required to sign the form indicating that the

information provided is complete and accurate. The value of this data for immediate and longer-term research is self evident.

Australians, of course, have a range of views about the privacy of the personal information they provide on their census forms. Some are very protective of such information, particularly as it is provided to government under compulsion. Others are less concerned about the issue.

By guaranteeing the confidentiality of personal information provided, the ABS is confident that Australians will continue to participate fully in the census. The ABS maintains that full participation, and complete and accurate answers to all questions, ensures the integrity of the census.

Traditionally, the ABS has protected name-identified census information by destroying it once statistical data has been extracted. The ABS feared that any change to the practice of destruction would significantly impact on participation rates, diminishing the integrity of the census. The destruction of completed census forms was therefore government policy throughout the 20th century. As a consequence, no name-identified returns exist for any census conducted in Australia between 1911 and 1996.

The practice of destruction prevailed even though other countries retained census forms and made them available for public research after an embargo period, without there being any significant problem with participation in the census.

There was also the issue of the timely destruction of census forms. In May 1971, the *Sydney Morning Herald* revealed that the census forms for the 1961 and 1966 censuses still existed and had been kept to enable new analysis to be undertaken. Once the story broke, Treasurer Billy Snedden ordered the immediate destruction of these old returns and directed that the 1971 census forms be destroyed as soon as the statistical data had been extracted. This news caused little reaction apart from genealogists, who lamented this act of 'historic vandalism'.

International experience

For statisticians, a census return loses its value once the data has been extracted from it. However, during the second half of the 20th century, researchers in overseas countries, where name-identified census data had been retained, found the census an invaluable tool for family, social and other research. This use of historical census records was not imagined or planned by the statisticians.

Britain, Canada, Sweden and the United States of America transfer personal details from the census to their national archival institution for secure storage and research after a period of embargo. The period of embargo varies but represents the average lifetime. This approach balances privacy with the right to know one's family and cultural history. In the United States, the period of embargo is 72 years, in Canada, 92 years, and in the United Kingdom, 100 years.

In the United Kingdom as of April 2006, all censuses taken from 1841 to 1901 are searchable on the World Wide Web. An incredible 165 million names and related details are available.

Despite initial difficulties, the 1901 United Kingdom census website is now operating effectively. The 1901 census website was officially launched by the Public Record Office (PRO) UK (as it was then known) at 9 am on 2 January 2002. The website was designed to provide access to a maximum of 1.2 million users each day. However, by midday on 2 January 2002, 1.2 million users per hour were attempting to access the site. This level of demand continued until 6 January, overwhelming the site and resulting in its closure on 7 January 2002. The website remained closed until 6 August 2002 when it was released again on a limited basis. During this down time, researchers were able to access the 1901 census through the reading rooms of the PRO UK. The website became fully available to the public on 21 November 2002, and has operated effectively since then.

The immediate response to the failure of the website was one of great disappointment both from those trying to access the website and from the PRO UK. Those accessing it now generally report delight at being able to use and view this material online. The United Kingdom National Audit Office has reviewed the release of this website and highlighted implications for future projects, including the release of the 1911 census.¹

The huge demand for online access to the 1901 UK census highlights the interest in historic census records by family historians and other researchers, and demonstrates both the pitfalls and advantages of the Internet as a tool for research. As one of the archival institutions at the forefront of using the Internet to facilitate direct access to our collection, the National Archives of Australia is well acquainted with the sometimes double-edged popularity of the Internet as a research tool.

Genealogists' campaign

¹ Comptroller and Auditor-General (UK), *Unlocking the Past: the 1901 Census*, HC 1259 Session 2002-2003: 14 November 2003.

Drawing on international practice, historians, genealogists and other researchers in Australia have long argued that name-identified data collected through the Australian censuses should also be retained and released after a suitable period of embargo. Stephen Mutch's paper 'Public policy revolt: saving the 2001 Australian census' describes the successful campaign led by prominent Australian genealogist Nick Vine Hall for the retention of name-identified census data.² Vine Hall and other genealogists lobbied politicians, engaged the media and made submissions to inquiries for over 20 years. Eventually their persistence and clever strategies led to a reversal of the practice of destroying census returns.

Vine Hall argues that the census is the only public record that 'comes close to recording the name, address and occupation of every Australian. No other sources, such as electoral rolls and birth certificates come close to national coverage.'³

Another leading genealogist, Malcolm Sainty, remarked in 1982 that while 'the patriots and the politicians, the famous and the infamous will remain recorded, the rest of us will be wiped from every computer tape and join the "statistics" who went before us', unless the census is saved.⁴

Academics, too, supported the retention of the census, arguing that research in Australia had suffered considerably by comparison with other countries because of the lack of name-identified census data. In 1991, a UNESCO report written by archivist Terry Cook added weight to the case for retention by identifying the census as the crucial record to guide government programs and services and the 'single most essential research record for many disciplines'.⁵

A significant early opportunity for genealogists to put the case for retention was presented by the 1978 Australian Law Reform Commission inquiry conducted by Justice Michael Kirby on the privacy aspects of the census. The case for retention was well received, with the 1979 Inquiry report recommending that name-identified census data be stored by the National Archives and released after 75 years.

² Stephen Mutch, 'Public policy revolt: saving the 2001 Australian census', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2002, pp. 26–44.

³ Australasian Federation of Family History Organisations, '2006 Australian Census', Newsflash 10, June 2003, <www.affho.org/projects/census.php>

⁴ Malcolm R Sainty, 'The census question – privacy vs. historical value', *Historic Australia*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1982, p. 56.

⁵ Terry Cook, *The Archival Appraisal of Records Containing Personal Information: A RAMP Study with Guidelines*, UNESCO, Paris, 1991, p. 22.

The Inquiry found that personal information contained in census returns could be adequately protected without having to destroy the completed returns, undermining one of the key planks in the case for destruction. However, while the Inquiry gave hope to those who favoured retention, the government rejected the recommendation to retain the census, reasserting the primacy of the destruction policy. The additional cost involved in securely storing name-identified census data was advanced as one of the reasons the government was not in favour of retaining the census.

Undeterred by this result, genealogists continued to press for change. In 1992, the Australasian Federation of Family History Organisations (AFFHO), the peak family history organisation in Australia, established a census working party to lobby the government to retain the census. Nick Vine Hall became chairman of the working party in 1996. A letter-writing campaign targeting federal politicians was organised and the names of politicians in favour of and against retention of the census were published in the journals of Australian genealogical societies. Before long, the genealogists had secured the support of the Democrats in the Senate but recognised that they needed the support of the major parties if they were to change government policy.

The genealogists found a champion in Stephen Mutch, a Liberal backbencher of the House of Representatives. In May 1996, Mutch raised the retention of the census in his maiden speech. Soon after, Mutch called on the government to establish an inquiry to examine whether the census could be retained at minimum cost without compromising its integrity or the privacy of citizens.

Success followed with the issue being referred, in May 1997, to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs which was chaired by Kevin Andrews.

As expected, the ABS put forward the argument that name-identified information from the census should continue to be destroyed. The ABS also gave evidence that public opposition to retention was, in fact, high. However, the committee expressed considerable reservations about the method the ABS used to measure public opposition and concluded that the evidence did not provide a sound basis for judgement. On balance, the committee concluded that the evidence that data quality of the census would be adversely affected if census returns were retained was not conclusive.⁶

⁶ Australia, Parliament, *Saving Our Census and Preserving Our History: Report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs*, Parliamentary Paper 85/98, 1998, p. 129.

The case for retention was put by family historians and others including academics from the social, medical and environmental sciences. All gave evidence that retention would have substantial social and community benefit.

Much to the joy of the genealogists, the committee recommended unanimously in its May 1998 report *Saving Our Census and Preserving Our History* that name-identified information from future censuses be retained by the National Archives and made available for research after 99 years.

Various embargo periods were proposed to the committee, ranging from 5 to over 100 years. It decided that a 99-year embargo, with public release at the 100th year, would be acceptable to most, as this period is longer than the average lifetime.

In the April 2000 response to this report, the Howard Government accepted this key recommendation but decided that each Australian should be given the opportunity to choose whether the information from the 2001 census should be kept. 2001 was, of course, the Centenary of Federation. To celebrate this significant anniversary, the government promoted this policy change as an opportunity for each household to contribute to the centenary celebrations by making a 'gift to the nation' of their return. The retention of census forms was entirely voluntary and the choice had to be expressly made on the census form. In 2000, the Australian Government passed the *Census Information Legislation Amendment Act* giving effect to the decision to allow citizens to make a choice about the retention of their census returns.

The successful campaign to save the census led by the genealogists shows how determined citizens can bring about a change to a longstanding policy of government.

National Archives and the census

Now you might wonder what role the National Archives of Australia played in this debate. The National Archives is the archival authority of the Commonwealth Government. It stores, preserves and makes available for public access the significant records of government. It provides advice to government on recordkeeping issues and authorises the destruction of records. Its powers, functions and role are set out in the *Archives Act 1983*.

To determine whether records should be retained by the Archives for posterity or destroyed when they are no longer required for administrative use, the value of records is assessed through a process known as appraisal.

In appraising the census records, the National Archives found itself in a very difficult position. It acknowledged the value of name-identified records for a range of research uses and well-proven value to both family and academic researchers. It also had the example of retention of census records by other archival organisations overseas.

However, the Archives concluded that 'the Government's unequivocal commitment to the need to protect the statistical integrity of the census should override all other considerations'.⁷

In the end, therefore, the National Archives authorised the destruction of the 1986, 1991 and 1996 census forms.

This position drew criticism from those within and beyond the archival community who favoured retention. Additionally, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs commented on deficiencies it perceived with the National Archives' appraisal of the 1996 census.

As Mutch notes, the National Archives was in the unenviable position of having to make a decision to keep or destroy the census forms in an environment where destruction was championed by the ABS (and the government), who feared that retention would jeopardise its ability to collect valid census data.

Later when giving evidence before the House of Representatives Standing Committee, the Director-General of the National Archives challenged the view that the only way to protect privacy was to destroy records. This evidence went some way in redeeming the Archives in the eyes of those in favour of retention.

Once the government accepted that citizens should choose whether or not the information on their census form was retained, the ABS and the National Archives joined forces to raise awareness of the value of the census to future researchers. The marketing campaign promoting the retention of the census, which was developed for the 2001 census, was known as the 'Time Capsule' project.

2001 census

So how did this change of policy translate into reality? The final question on the 2001 census return asked all persons in each household if they wanted their return copied, kept by the National Archives, and made publicly available in 99 years. Each person had the choice of ticking the 'yes' or 'no' box. If the question was left unanswered or the census form was left unsigned, this was regarded as

⁷ Mutch, p. 29

a 'no'. All persons had to expressly choose to have their returns kept, if this was what they wanted. This has since become known as the 'opt-in' option.

After census night, all census returns were taken to the ABS data processing centre where they were digitally scanned, allowing the ABS to easily extract statistical data.

As a single return might contain information for up to six people in the one household, there were occasions where different people recorded on a single return had differing views about whether they wanted their information to be kept. The scanner separated the images for those who elected to have their information retained from those who did not. All identifying data for those people who ticked the 'no' box, or who left the question unanswered, was permanently erased. Of course, the ABS retained the statistical data for these people, but not their names or addresses.

The scanned images were then output to two sets of microfilm consisting of 1,422 rolls of film. Both sets of film were transferred to the National Archives and are held in separate, but secure, locations, where they will remain until their public release on 7 August 2100.

Why microfilm?

You might wonder why the returns were microfilmed and why we didn't choose a more modern method of copying. Our specialist conservators recommended the use of microfilm, rather than digital formats, as it has a proven track record when it comes to long-term preservation. 16mm, archival quality, silver-halide polyester-based microfilms have a life expectancy of more than 500 years.

Filming was conducted using a machine known as a digital archive writer. The machine creates a positive microfilm copy of the images at 40x reduction, and the films are processed to international archival microfilming standards.

Quality checks ensured that the images were complete and correct. Any images that were rejected on quality grounds were reprocessed from the digital images. Any films that did not satisfy quality requirements were replaced with completely new films. Splicing of partially rejected film rolls is not acceptable. The Archives has also maintained copies of the processing data for each batch of film so it can use that information for the future management and care of the films.

To ensure that there is no deterioration of the films, our conservators inspect them from time to time. Apart from that, no other access to the films is permitted. The films are not available for any purpose within the 99-year

embargo period, including use by a court or tribunal, police or taxation – so you can be assured the information is totally secure.

The Archives Act was amended to prohibit access to the films for 99 years, and to provide severe penalties for any unauthorised access within that period.

Opt-in results

Nearly 10 million people or 52.7% of those completing the 2001 census opted to have their 2001 return retained. The results varied across the states and territories with the Australian Capital Territory recording the highest opt-in rate (60.2%) and the Northern Territory, the lowest opt-in rate (48.9%). Less than a third of those completing the census answered the question in the negative. A further 15.4% left the question unanswered and therefore their forms were destroyed.⁸

Genealogists were delighted with this result but immediately commenced work to lobby the government to retain forms for all future censuses. Genealogists also hoped to persuade the government to run with an opt-out option which would see forms retained unless the respondent expressly chose destruction. They also continued to campaign to reduce both the number of people opting for destruction or failing to answer the question.

2006 census

The 15th national census will be held on 8 August 2006. The government has decided that the opt-in option will apply again, not only for the 2006 census, but for all future population censuses. When completing their returns on census night, each household will again be asked whether they want their returns copied and made publicly available after 99 years. Once again, the choice is entirely theirs, and they must tick the 'yes' option if this is what they want. If they tick the 'no' option, or fail to answer the question, their name-identified information will be destroyed.

As in 2001, all returns will be digitally scanned allowing the ABS to easily extract statistical data. The scanned returns of those who opt for retention will be microfilmed. Again, two sets of the microfilm will be transferred to the National Archives for secure storage in two separate locations.

The films will be released to the public in 99 years – on 8 August 2105. A 2006 amendment to the Archives Act applies the 99-year embargo to all censuses and repeals the specific amendment made in relation to the 2001 census.

⁸ Mutch, pp. 41-42

The National Archives and the ABS anticipate a higher opt-in rate in 2006 and have again launched a marketing campaign to promote awareness of the issue.

Safe and secure

The National Archives prides itself on its ability to provide safe and secure storage for its archival collection, including the name-identified census data. Our role does not end when the films are first released to the public. We will go on storing them long after the 99-year embargo period has expired.

Every year, several hundred thousand Australians use the National Archives collection through our network of reading rooms and increasingly through our website, where we make digital copies of Australian Government records available for online access after 30 years. A few records, including the census, have a longer period of embargo. However, once released, records can be used by all.

Name-identified census records will provide a wealth of information for future historians and those with an interest in the history and development of Australia. Genealogists, historians, academics, social analysts and other researchers in the 22nd century will have access to a unique snapshot of Australian society in the early years of the twenty-first century. Family members from the previous century will become known to them through the information available in the Archives. So ensure your place in the history of Australia and tick the 'yes' box on your census form on 8 August 2006.

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