

# National Library of Australia

30 September 2022

Ref NLA22/1251

Dr Carmel Black  
President, Professional Historians Australia  
PO Box 9177  
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Dear Dr Black

## Submission from Professional Historians Australia

Thank you for outlining your concerns regarding access to the National Library of Australia's (NLA) collections, and the circumstances that have led to periods of restricted access to parts of our collections.

First, we need to note that access restrictions do not apply to 'almost all manuscripts' held by the NLA. The Library's Level 4 provides storage for approximately 11.5km of the Library's 279km of physical collections. This 11.5km comprises approximately half of the Library's Manuscripts collections (with the rest stored on Level 2 and at one of our two repositories in the suburb of Hume); half of the Library's manuscripts collection remains available for use. Level 4 also provides storage for our Asian rare books, with the majority of the Asian collection stored on Level 3 and therefore available for use. Other rolling restrictions affect relatively small portions of our collection for short time periods.

There are two separate sets of access restrictions in place over the next year, arising from two quite different causes.

### Roof replacement

The first relates to the need to replace the Library's roof, which was severely damaged in a January 2020 hailstorm.

Replacing the roof is a complex, lengthy and costly process, due in large part to the presence of significant volumes of asbestos in the Level 5 (plant and equipment floor) ceilings immediately below the roof, and above the roof battens themselves. The majority of the cost of replacement is being met by the Commonwealth's insurer; the Library Council has approved draw-down on the Library's cash reserves to meet the difference. This project will be complete around July/August 2023, with most works complete by end March.

Our contractors have implemented many measures to protect collection material stored on Level 4, and we believed that these 'above the roof' measures would be sufficient to protect the collection from leaking during the highest risk period – the roof replacement itself.

We were wrong. After several leaking events, and with a third La Nina with us, we concluded that above the roof measures could not reduce risks to an acceptable level. The only sure way to protect Level 4 collections (save moving the entire collection – see below) through another unusually wet season was to securely wrap all shelving and compactus units in an inert waterproof polyethylene material until works are complete. Wrapping the units securely necessarily means we cannot retrieve or reshelve material.



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We understand and greatly regret that this decision will cause significant inconvenience and delays for researchers. We could have made this decision early this year – when replacement of the roof itself commenced. However, this would have seen these collections unavailable for more than 12 months, rather than the expected 6 months that is now the case.

### **HVAC replacement**

The NLA relies on its Heating, Ventilation and Air-Conditioning (HVAC) systems to keep its collections safe (through temperature and humidity control to our stacks) and to create a safe and pleasant environment for the Library's visitors and staff.

The Library's HVAC is many decades old and well past the end of its useful life. The Library is currently progressing Phase 1 of HVAC replacement. We drew on our appropriation to complete Stages 1 and 2 of five Phase 1 stages. The Government provided funding for Stage 3. These works will be complete in the second part of 2023. At this stage, we have no further funding to continue this work (Stages 4 and 5, or Phase 2). If further funding is made available to progress or complete the project, rolling collection closures will be a reality for several years to come.

Replacing our HVAC necessarily requires replacement of old ductwork – which itself contains Asbestos Contaminated Material (ACM) and lead paint. The ductwork sits directly over our shelving and compactus units. It is impossible for us to replace ductwork without securely wrapping collections underneath and in the vicinity – again, in the same inert waterproof material. For this reason, and for obvious reasons around staff safety, it is impossible for us to retrieve and refile collections while this work is progressing. The complexity of our HVAC design, and the presence of latent conditions (asbestos, lead paint, non-compliant wiring and fire systems) means that we need flexibility in our project planning – which itself can lead to short notice periods of impending collection closures.

Again, we understand the inconvenience this means for researchers.

### **Collection storage**

We understand that you and other researchers believe we must have options to move collections rather than close access to them. We do not.

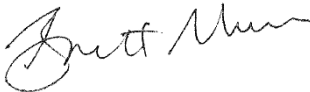
The Library has now exhausted all available storage at its four sites: the Parkes building itself; two repositories at Hume; and premises leased from the National Archives of Australia. We have 18km of material stored at the NAA premise, which we must vacate from mid-2025. At this stage, we have no storage solution for this material.

There is no leasable library-suitable storage in the ACT or surrounding districts. Our colleagues at the State Libraries of NSW and Victoria have confirmed they are unable to assist by leasing storage to us on either a short or long-term basis. We are unable to use a commercial storage facility as this would require every collection item to be barcoded for retrieval, a project we have previously confirmed would run to millions of dollars.

We have approached Governments of both persuasions numerous times about the need to provide forward storage. We are working cooperatively with our portfolio Department, who understand the urgency of our collection storage need. Our Department have also conducted a very thorough assessment of capital and other sustainability needs for the National Cultural Institutions. While our needs are well understood, we also need to acknowledge that we are in difficult national and global economic circumstances, and the Government will have many calls on its resources.

We hope that this provides some context around our decision-making. We accept that it does not assist current researchers with what are very real problems around initiating or completing historical projects, funded or otherwise. However, we hope you and your members understand that our first duty is to protect collections for future generations, that we have diligently and thoroughly examined all options open to us, and that the decisions we have made are the best possible in our circumstances.

Yours sincerely



The Hon Dr Brett Mason

Chair



Dr Marie-Louise Ayres FAHA

Director-General