National Archival and Library Institutions Ministerial Group

Submission – Chris Szekely, Chief Librarian, Alexander Turnbull Library

Introduction

It is pleasing that this review seeks to ensure that “records documenting New Zealand’s history and culture are collected and preserved as taonga for current and future generations, and are as accessible as possible for all New Zealanders.” This goal is an exact match to the statutory purpose of the Alexander Turnbull Library as defined in the National Library Act.

This submission posits that the considerable experience and expertise residing in the Turnbull Library presents an opportunity that could benefit documentary heritage collections held in other institutions. It also cautions against any change that adversely impacts the Turnbull’s current statutory mandate.

What are the two or three key challenges for the national archival and library institutions (Archives New Zealand, the National Library of New Zealand and Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision)? What is the most urgent challenge?

- **A national vision and leadership** - There is no clear or coherent articulation of why documentary heritage is important, the social and economic benefits it brings to national culture and identity, and why anyone should care. The sector, and relevant agencies and institutions are unlikely to ever optimise their contribution until a national vision is clearly spelt out, resourced and led with conviction.
- **Digital preservation** – digitally-born material is the most fragile of all collection items, prone to loss and technological corruption. Digital preservation is also expensive and requires ongoing research and development. The overwhelming bulk of New Zealand-generated information is digitally-born, and we’re already losing most of it. A national approach to digital preservation and digitisation is of critical urgency.
- **Mātauranga Māori** – Treaty settlements are adding impetus to long-held Maori aspirations, particularly in relation to Te Reo and taonga. While the Alexander Turnbull Library has some capability in this area, most institutions do not. I know of no institution, Turnbull included, that believes it is adequately set-up in this regard. Yet there is tremendous opportunity to work with Maori to develop unique approaches to managing taonga and kaitiakitanga.
- **Operational resourcing** – ongoing operational funding cuts over the last several years have left the National Library, and the Turnbull within it, severely weakened and demoralised. These are now manifesting in staff cuts and service closures. This is an area of immediate concern, and rates as the most urgent challenge.

Does the position of National Librarian have the independence and authority necessary to carry out the responsibilities of that position? Why/Why not?

No. The National Librarian does not have the necessary authority to carry out the responsibilities of the role. As such, neither does the Chief Librarian of the Alexander Turnbull Library, the other statutory role that exists within the National Library. Neither role is able to exercise meaningful influence or sector leadership as 3rd and 4th tier managers in a large organisation with divergent functions and competing resource demands.
What changes, if any, would you suggest to the role or structure of the National Library?

The National Library has responsibility for a range of aligned functions, including services to schools, public libraries and publishers. This submission focuses only the function of documentary heritage, which is currently delivered primarily through the Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL).

The National Library Act specifically assigns the Turnbull Library with the following statutory purpose: “to preserve, protect, develop and make accessible for all the people of New Zealand the collections ... in perpetuity and in a manner consistent with their status as documentary heritage and taonga.”

I strongly urge against any change to role or structure that weakens the Turnbull’s mandate to deliver this purpose. Ideally, its role and positioning should be strengthened.

What opportunities exist for the National archival and library institutions to work more effectively together in collecting, preserving and providing access to New Zealand’s documentary heritage? In particular, what opportunities exist in relation to digital preservation and access?

The Turnbull Library has been active in the documentary heritage space for over 100 years. It therefore has considerable and longstanding experience in the care and protection of taonga across a range of formats. Its expertise, collections and facilities are recognised as world-class, with acknowledged strengths in the areas of conservation, repository management, audio-visual preservation, and more latterly, digital materials. These factors, combined with a curated approach to developing collections and the underpinning donor relationships, account for the Turnbull’s reputation as a trusted institution.

There is clearly an opportunity to explore how these strengths can be leveraged to benefit documentary heritage in other government or national institutions. However, I urge against any change that sees these responsibilities removed from the Alexander Turnbull Library’s management under the leadership of the Chief Librarian.

What does the public need in the next 30 years from the national archival and library institutions?

In a western democracy like New Zealand, citizens should rightfully expect that the documentary record of their community, culture and country will be collected, kept, and cared for, and be there for them and their descendants when they want or need it. This has been a central principle to the Turnbull’s philosophy for many years. It’s a view that lends itself well to a national approach.

The public needs to have confidence and trust in its national archival and library institutions. The Turnbull Library, and by extension, the National Library has demonstrable evidence of existing and longstanding public trust. The NALI review presents a terrific opportunity to leverage this across several national institutions.

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