



PRIME MINISTER

EMBARGOED UNTIL 9.30 P.M.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
OPENING OF NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND ARCHIVE BUILDING
CANBERRA, 3 OCTOBER 1984

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Max Gillies has just brought George Wallace back to us all. There's something about our mate George Wallace that's not only entertaining - and he was one of our greatest comedians - but also very endearing. He was the little Aussie battler: independent, never over-awed by authority or pretension. And he always won in the end, as his films and radio shows - preserved in the National Film and Sound Archive - demonstrate.

George is the sort of bloke who'd enjoy a good party like this. The opening of national buildings and national institutions are often solemn occasions. But not tonight: that wouldn't suit George and it doesn't suit us.

This splendid evening has been put together to mark the permanent housing of a new kind of national institution, an institution devoted to the popular cultural expression of our age, and dedicated to the preservation of some of the best manifestations of Australian character and imagination.

This is appropriately a night for light-hearted celebration, because we are dealing with media which are synonymous with entertainment, immediacy, and the stuff of our life and times - and dreams.

But our purpose is serious.

The most popular and pervasive cultural phenomena of our time - moving images and sound recordings - are threatened.

Not only do the laws of physics and chemistry limit their life span - but there is also a widespread inclination to regard such material as expendable or of secondary value.

To succumb to such thinking is to make a big mistake. Anyone with an historical sense would appreciate that a great deal is bound up with the survival and accessibility of this major form of record and art characteristic of our century.

Too much of this great national heritage has already been irretrievably lost.

95% of the silent films made in Australia before 1930 no longer survive.

To put a stop to such losses - the loss of these vital expressions of Australia's national creativity - the Government has established the National Film and Sound Archive.

The Archive will ensure the development of the necessary skills, facilities, ethos and methods, needed for Australia to preserve our heritage. Its work will ensure the acquisition, preservation and continuing accessibility of films, radio and television programs, sound recordings and associated items that are in their own right of lasting cultural value - whether as historical record, art, entertainment, or otherwise.

More than that: the Archive will represent and promote this heritage nationally and internationally. Through it Australians may take due pride in their past, present and future achievements in these media.

The film and sound media have an impressive and distinctively Australian tradition.

Their birth is coincident with the emergence of Australian nationalism nearly 100 years ago.

This makes them, by definition, of particular cultural importance to us.

Indeed, Australia has one of the oldest film industries in the world - our first film (significantly of a horse race - the Melbourne Cup) was made in 1896, years before many European countries began making films.

In that same year Henry Lawson wrote a story called "The Australian Cinematograph", and in doing so presaged the concept - then unknown - of the story film.

In 1906, with "The Story of the Kelly Gang", Australia invented the concept of the modern feature film - subsequently the economic foundation of film industries the world over.

With sound recordings we have almost from the beginning of the medium, produced world-renowned recording artists and film and radio stars. That grand tradition continues and is well represented tonight.

Here we also pay our respect equally to those greats behind the scene, the directors, producers, writers, technicians: the people on the other side of the camera or the microphone.

We all recognise that the travelling picture show man and a spreading network of radio stations kept Australia's sparse and scattered population in touch with the outside world from the 1920's onward.

It shaped our perception of it, it broadened our horizons in those days "when the world beyond was wide".

Indeed, when Australia first introduced the basic wage it was the only country to take the cost of a weekly family visit to the pictures into its calculation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Australians have expressed their national identity most directly and most potently through the screen and sound media.

That is what has so often made Australian films and sound recordings interesting and attractive to people overseas, as much as to Australians.

The establishment of the National Film and Sound Archive is the expression in institutional terms of a need, long felt by both participants and observers, to guarantee the preservation and availability of this fragile but vital heritage.

Its establishment is a cultural landmark for Australia. It also has made clear the Government's intention to see this work given the status and resources it deserves, as well as to see long-standing problems properly addressed and solutions found.

This is the culmination of much hard work and effort by many people. I should particularly like to mention with appreciation the energetic and effective role played by my own Senior Adviser, Bob Hogg in helping achieve this result.

The decision, once announced, was implemented without delay.

This building, which formerly housed the Australian Institute of Anatomy, has been initially refurbished by the National Capital Development Commission in order to allow prompt occupation by the Archive. The National Capital Development Commission, in conjunction with the Archive, is currently preparing plans for the earliest possible complete refurbishment and extension of the building in order to provide the necessary specialist facilities for storage, access, preservation, and for the general public.

The 1984 budget provided for the approximate doubling of funds and included provision for additional staff and equipment.

I expect the Archive to be very busy in the months ahead.

The Bicentennial National Travelling Film retrospective has already been announced as part of the official celebrations in 1988.

The Archive, in conjunction with the Australian Bicentennial Authority, will shortly commence initial planning for this year-long event.

In April 1986, the Archive will host the Congress of The International Federation of Film Archives, the first time such a gathering has been held in the southern hemisphere.

In conjunction with this, the Archive will organise a training school for Film Archive Administrators from developing countries, especially those in the Asia/Pacific region.

On that unprecedented occasion, Australia's stature in film archiving, as well as its special regional role, will be on show to the world and Australia will properly take its place as a responsible and significant contributor to international affairs in this field.

Similar opportunities will be sought in the field of international sound archiving.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Part of the Government's vision for the Archive is that it should be accessible in the fullest sense to all Australians.

While that vision has many facets, and cannot be realised overnight, some important steps in that direction will be taken during the coming months.

As from tomorrow, this building, and this Exhibition Hall, will be open to the public. A simple beginning perhaps, but, I am sure, the start of what will be many exhibitions and activities in the months and years ahead.

As well, access restrictions to the collections, which were introduced over two years ago, are to be progressively lifted as staff numbers are built up.

A copying service will also be provided to radio broadcasters to allow the Australian community to enjoy historic recordings in the collection.

In due course the Archive will release selected material for public sale on videocassette and LP recordings.

The Archive's interstate offices will also provide access services.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are obviously at the beginning of an exciting venture.

I personally have much pleasure in declaring open this building as the permanent headquarters of the National Film and Sound Archive.