

# International Conference of Archivists 2019 – Solidarity Forever

The 2019 International Conference of Archivists was a fantastic opportunity for professional development, speeches and networking. Much has already been written on the conference's fantastic speakers and presenters so I will be brief in my recap of them. The experience was incredibly valuable and I am grateful to the Australian Society of Archivists for allowing me to take this opportunity.

What I wish to focus on in-depth were the professional development opportunities and many conversations I had with our fellow archivists. I had the good fortune of meeting a great many wonderful people and skilled professionals and spoke at length with most of them. In all our conversations, we addressed and readdressed opportunities and challenges of modern archival work. Despite coming from a variety of locations and backgrounds, many of us had the same story.

I had known for a great many years (even prior to entering this profession) that archivists are poorly funded, underappreciated (if not invisible), direly overworked and under-resourced. But, my discussions with others in the industry showed me the extent and scale of these challenges.

I spoke to representatives ranging from the most wealthy and powerful banks in the nation, to prestigious sandstone universities, to the tiny local historical societies and national institutions. Despite this variation, we all had the same story. Each and every single person I spoke to had horror stories of invisibility and under-resourcing. To highlight the lack of exposure we get even in the information sector (let alone the general public), one person related to me an anecdote about an anonymous librarian being convinced that GLAM stood for Galleries, Libraries **And** Museums.

In the broader spheres of life, very few people respond knowingly when they ask about my job and I reply that I'm an archivist. I've taken to telling people a shorthand of "I'm like a librarian for dead people," which is deeply imperfect, but much more comprehensible to someone on the street. The public at large does not understand our mission, and I strongly feel that the key to funding and resources is being in the public eye and letting people know about our mission. If they know, they will care. If we are visible, our communities will support. This was most clearly illustrated by Timoci Balenaivalu from the National Archives of Fiji - his talk was about a distrust of government institutions. By going out into the field and showing the community the value of archives they were able to dispel mistrust and build support.

As archivists, there is a deep solidarity amongst us. It is not a poetic exaggeration to say that we are the last line of defence between history and obscurity, fact and myth. We share the bond of this important work, as we share our current hardships. I can say with utmost certainty that none of us are in this profession for the money.

Seeing this solidarity in purpose, solidarity in woeful material need, was for me the single most valuable experience the International Conference of Archivists offered. I return to my work with a great number of questions. Why are we so universally overlooked? Why are people only interested in preserving the past when it is too late? It's a question that keeps me up at night. At a time of great disruption in how we live and work, a seismic shift in information creation and transfer dwarfing the effect of the invention of the printing press; our work is more

important than ever. The endless format-treadmill of digital technology and the depreciation of analogue techniques are proving to be a difficult challenge in preserving our collective heritage. Yet despite this pressing need we - *universally* - fight for funding, for space, for recognition. Many talks were about the reinvention of material space. Mine was alongside Peter Lester from the University of Leicester and Odile Welfel  from the French National Archives. Perhaps our spaces are our first steps in finding our recognition.

The 2019 International Conference of Archivists was a wonderful opportunity. I met so many dedicated and passionate people who I have every confidence will prosecute their duties to preserve the past with the utmost zeal. But I cannot help but worry. Zeal will not clear space for more records.

By collectively advocating our mission to everyone who will listen, and to those who *need* to listen we can improve our collective lot and carry out our task – preserving our past for the good of our future.

In solidarity,

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