



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**COMMITTEES**

**Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee**

**Report**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 25 May 1998**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 25 May 1998  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Andrews, Kevin, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr ANDREWS** (Menzies) (1.00 pm)—On behalf of the Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, I present the committee's report entitled *Saving our census and preserving our history*, together with the minutes of proceedings and evidence received by the committee.

Ordered that the report be printed.

**Mr ANDREWS**—As Australians, we are familiar with the practice of filling in a census form. Holding a census is an event which now takes place every five years. The last census was conducted in 1996, and the next census is scheduled to be held in 2001—a year of reflection, for many of us, on our lives and history. 2001 is the first year of the new millennium and the year in which we celebrate the centenary of Federation in Australia.

Censuses are conducted on behalf of the Commonwealth government by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The main purpose of the census is to accurately measure the number of people in Australia on census night to provide a reliable basis from which to estimate the population of each state and territory. The information from the census is used to produce statistical data for use by governments, academics, industry, businesses and private individuals. Following each census, the practice since 1971 has been to destroy the forms once all the statistical data has been extracted and the forms are no longer needed for processing.

The principal issue before the committee in this inquiry was whether the name-identified census information should continue to be destroyed or whether it should be retained and made available for possible future research use. In drawing together all the arguments, committee members agree that saving name-identified census records—with appropriate safeguards—rather than destroying them would make a significant contribution towards preserving Australia's history. In the words of one witness, the census is simply 'too valuable to throw away'.

The committee recommends that name-identified information contained in forms from future censuses be retained. The committee also recommends that these records be closed for a period of 99 years and that no researcher have access to the records until they are made available in the 100th year. It is to be a stated purpose of the census that name-identified information be available for possible future research. As a safeguard, the committee also recommends that legislation be implemented to give effect to these recommendations. As a further safeguard, only officers of the National Archives of Australia or the Australian Bureau of Statistics are to process or handle census information.

The committee has thoroughly considered the arguments presented to it on a range of issues, including the effect on data quality of retaining census forms, privacy concerns of individuals, the value of census records on various research and the costs of retention. The committee found that there are passionate advocates on each side of the debate. On the one hand, the committee has heard that retaining name-identified census information and liberalising the policy on access to census data would inevitably lead to a devaluation in the currency of the census.

The principal proponent against the retention and possible future use of census information was the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The ABS argued against the suggested changes to the current policy on the grounds that the retention of census information would have an adverse impact on data quality. On this view, an adverse impact on data quality would occur if census information were retained. Persons would be concerned about the confidentiality of their information because of possible adverse consequences for their privacy. These concerns would lead people to be reluctant to provide accurate and full answers to the questions asked on the census forms. ABS believes that this would set in train a loss of trust in the data collection of ABS in general, with consequent adverse impacts on the whole of the data collections of the ABS.

On the other hand, many researchers argued in favour of retaining name-identified census information for possible future use by researchers after a significant period of time. The committee heard evidence that similar census records which had been kept and released in other countries after a significant period of time had proven

to be most valuable resources to researchers undertaking historical research. Many claims were made about the usefulness of name-identified census records for researchers in fields such as demography, sociology, history, genealogy, epidemiology and other medical fields.

The committee was not persuaded that general immediate access should be provided for any research purpose. However, it is persuaded that a period of 99 years in which the data is not available generally provides adequate safeguards in the circumstances. The committee believes that saving the census for future research—with appropriate safeguards—will make a very valuable contribution to preserving Australia's history for future generations.

In conclusion, I thank the members of the committee for their contributions to this inquiry. I also thank the committee secretary, Claressa Surtees, and the adviser on the reference, Cathy Barber, for their efforts. I commend this report to the House. (*Time expired*)