

A NATIONAL ARCHIVES SYSTEM A BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

NOTE: This is a background document, issued to those who attended the Seminar on a National Archives System, Canberra, on September 1, 1973, under the auspices of the Department of the Special Minister of State, and in the presence of Dr. W. Kaye Lamb, formerly Dominion Archivist of the Public Archives of Canada. It is not meant to be a definitive statement of the policy of the Australian Government on the subject. It is hoped, indeed, that as a result of Dr. Kaye Lamb's visit, something more substantive in the form of an Australian government policy on national archives may be developed. This document is not, however, that substantive statement.

When consideration was first given to the question of making information from official records available for public use the problem at issue was seen simply as one of ensuring that records would eventually become accessible for use by historians and others interested in events from the remoter past. It would have been enough – indeed it would have been enlightened – if arrangements had been made for those sections of the government's records long since devoid of administrative significance to be broken off at intervals from the main body of records and deposited – as so many fossils – in a museum-like institution.

There was then a need to satisfy the interests of a relatively small and narrow section of society. This could be done by providing an organisation which could tell those who were interested in how the government used to work, which could ensure that important older records were preserved, integrated and made accessible, and which could give users all the information they may need to carry out their researches. In other words existing needs could be met by establishing what would then have been regarded as a traditional archives institution.

It is apparent however that the uses to which public records are put have changed dramatically. The records of government together with those of scientific research, commerce, church administrations and individuals – to name only some areas – are being used for the widest variety of investigations, many far removed from the traditional pursuits of the professional historian. Some of them – demography for example or land utilisation – are of direct and immediate relevance to the national quality of life. Records are also being used by a wider variety of people (final year students being trained in the use of primary evidence; those undertaking researches of various kinds, scholarly and otherwise, into current areas of government activity; planners seeking information often available in no other source from which to extrapolate future developments and needs; educators seeking to enrich school programmes; learned or amateur groups concerned with the history of transport, communications, industry and the like). Records available for public use have become a community asset – a unique national heritage.

In respect of the records of government there is, within an increasingly informed and questioning public, a growing number of people who for a variety of reasons wish to acquaint themselves with the structure and processes of contemporary government and who wish to acquire information not only about how it works but also about what it is doing.

There is at present no system or organisation which is equal to the task of meeting the widespread and close public involvement with the Australian Government and its records. The existing records management and public user functions discharged by the Commonwealth Archives Office together with the network of regional repositories which it maintains in each State and two Territories provides a nucleus capable of expansion and development to meet these needs. Moreover, there remain to be resolved many questions relating to the national development of archives at all levels in areas which require national initiatives and co-ordination.

Some action has already been taken by the Commonwealth Archives Office in respect of records of the Australian Government to:

- * investigate and record the structure and workings of the Australian Government at all periods including the present
- * oversight the destruction of records
- * integrate records and prepare them for general use
- * explain to the public both the workings of the Australian Government and the nature of its records
- * provide in each State capital, Darwin and Canberra, reference services and facilities at which the public can make enquiries and consult records
- * release records for public use in accordance with a uniform access policy.

Problems which remain include:

- * definition of functions, authority, and scope of activities of the National Archives
- * establishment of recognised and satisfactory criteria for retention/destruction of records
- * formulation of a comprehensive policy on access to furnish the National Archives with authority to enforce its provisions
- * establishment of a comprehensive service for users including preparation and distribution of adequate finding aids
- * establishing the rights of the public and assigning to the National Archives responsibility for carrying out its legislative provisions in this area
- * making archival resources known to the general public including programmes for the publication of documents.

Looking at records and archives other than those of the national government, it is apparent that there is still much to be done which has either remained undone owing to the lack of resources or has been rudimentary, unco-ordinated and lacking the impetus which only a comprehensive national archival programme can give.

Cabinet has approved in principle the development of archives legislation to be introduced during this year. This is being framed with reference to the proposed Freedom of Information legislation. Planning has begun on a National Archives Headquarters building.

The government has secured the services of Dr. W. Kaye Lamb, formerly Dominion Archivist, Public Archives of Canada, to act as consultant on the development of the National Archives System. The purpose of this seminar is to introduce Dr. Lamb to the views of academic users, representatives of leading archive bodies and others interested in the field in order to help him reach a definition of the role of the National Archives.

Brief history of archival arrangements for the Australian Government

Prior to 1942 no formal arrangements existed for the preservation of the vast majority of records of the Australian Government other than patents records, records relating to World War I which were held in the Australian War Memorial and some important collections of papers of an archival nature which were preserved in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library.

Impelled by the need to preserve records relating to Australia's activities in World War II the Curtin Government set up the War Archives Committee to arrange for the preservation of war records. The Australian War Memorial and the then Commonwealth National Library were designated as archival authorities, the one for the defence group of departments, the other for the civil departments.

An attempt was made in 1943 to establish basic rules on disposal of records. Each department was given complete responsibility for deciding how long it wished to retain records but was instructed not to destroy records except with the approval of the appropriate archival authority. The two archival authorities were to act as provisional repositories. Records designated as not being archives by the archival authorities in collaboration with each Department could be destroyed (subject to certain requirements) without further sanction.

In 1946 the War Archives Committee became the Commonwealth Archives Committee, charged amongst other functions with submitting recommendations for a permanent national archives system. Pending the establishment of such a system it was to advise the Government on General Archives questions and to lay down principles to be followed by Government agencies and the provisional archival authorities.

As part of a programme for the more efficient management of departmental records initiated by the Public Service Board in 1949 arrangements were made to provide for the transfer of records of permanent or further temporary value to repositories specially established in all mainland State capitals under the control of the Archives Division of the Commonwealth National Library, which hitherto supplied repository facilities only in Canberra and Melbourne. In order to avoid setting up two systems of archival arrangements the Commonwealth National Library became the sole archival authority for all Departments. It was agreed however that the Australian War Memorial should continue to be the repository for the records of the Fighting Services and such records of the service departments as were deemed to be directly concerned with the operations of the Fighting Services.

Following a request in 1953 by the Chairman of the Public Service Board that further thought be given to the question of preservation of Government records the Prime Minister's Department circulated in July 1955 the document entitled **Arrangements for the Management of the Public Records of the Commonwealth Government**. At the same time the Chairman of the Archives Committee distributed for the guidance of the Departments a document entitled **The Report on and Recommendations for the Granting of Access to Commonwealth Archives for Non-Official Research Purposes**.

The major difficulty with these arrangements was the emphasis on the view that government agencies were themselves legally and to some extent administratively responsible for the management of public records – even after they ceased to be current – and that the archival authority had merely a devolved responsibility for certain aspects of managing semi-current and non-current public records. Such an emphasis left the archival authority without standing in the event that a department failed to observe the spirit or letter of the administrative arrangements for the management of archives or attempted to prescribe the way in which the archival authority should organise records transferred by them.

Such an approach encouraged the view that each department should establish its own individual access policy, whereas it would have been preferable to emphasise the need to work towards a uniform policy. Under these conditions – requiring departmental officers to examine documents prior to release and in certain circumstances to examine manuscripts drawing on Government Archives prior to publication – there were inevitably delays in access clearance resulting from difficulties in sparing time from current work for this activity.

When after 1958 the Commonwealth Archives Committee ceased to function there remained no co-ordinating or consultative machinery for devising and administering uniform policy – particularly but not exclusively in regard to access. There was uncertainty about the precise responsibility of the Commonwealth Archives Office in respect of government records other than those defined as “archives” in the 1955 **Arrangements for the Management of the Public Records of the Commonwealth Government**, specifically in respect of public records which remained in the custody of departments.

In 1961 following the establishment of the National Library of Australia the functions and archival arrangements in respect of official records formerly administered by the Archives Division of the Commonwealth National Library were transferred to the Commonwealth Archives Office.

Problems arising from the administration of the 1955 rules were identified and set out by the Interdepartmental Committee on Commonwealth Archives which sat from 1962 to 1964. The Committee recognised one fundamental deficiency – lack of a constituted authority to decide questions in respect of

archives which were not obviously within the province of a single department or agency. This lack militated against consideration of particular problems and issues from the point of view of the government as a whole. The Committee saw a need for the establishment of an authority to apply and regulate Government policy on questions of ownership of public records, disposal of records, transfer from one type of custody to another, and questions of access. **The report of the Committee was never presented to the Minister.**

There was however a heightened awareness of the problems associated with the existing archival policy following the investigations of the Interdepartmental Committee. Accordingly in 1966 Cabinet approved new arrangements for government archives which vested in the Commonwealth Archives Office authority to:

- * regulate destruction of records
- * provide adequate reference and lending services for use by departments and the public
- * regulate access to public records by research workers and other members of the public in accordance with approved policies.

Departments were encouraged to transfer records wherever possible. To ensure consistency in implementation of access, applications by members of the public were to be directed to the Chief Archivist. Access to records originating before 1923 was regulated by the Archives Office subject to restrictions applied to certain documents or classes of documents (including Cabinet records). Access to records originating after 1922 or to records in one of the restricted categories was regulated by government agencies. There was still therefore no single authority responsible for granting access to Government records and there remained the problem of inconsistencies in application of the policy as between applicants by different government agencies.

As from January 1, 1971 conditions of access were changed to allow public scrutiny of records thirty years old or more. Announcing the new policy the Prime Minister further specified that "Custody of Commonwealth records and control over access to them is the responsibility of the Commonwealth Archives Office". Thus for the first time regulation of government access policy was vested in a single authority – the Commonwealth Archives Office under the overall supervision of the responsible Minister.

Towards a National Archives

Concerted and comprehensive action is now required to establish a National Archives on a footing which will enable it both to assess and meet the needs of all users and to deal effectively with the developing needs of government. At the same time it is necessary to define its role in respect of a national archives policy which recognises records as a community resource.

A growing number of people and organisations are aware of the potential of records for research and planning. It is necessary to make sure that the recorded information maintained by government, business, science and industry, and bodies in all fields is fully utilised and – within limitations on access and use of this information – readily available to those whose needs it can meet. To do this the existing awareness of records as an essential source of information must be fostered and extended both among those bodies responsible for recording the information and among potential users.

Steps must be taken to ensure the preservation of all records of national significance and that comprehensive guidance exists for those seeking information from archival sources at all levels including National and State Government records, records of industrial and commercial organisations, church administration records, records of research bodies, and papers of prominent individuals. Such guidance must be provided by a system sophisticated enough to show connections between the related records by disclosing not only administrative relationships between records produced by government administrations, private organisations, individuals, etc., but also functional and possibly subject associations between such records. Thus a national archival

policy should look towards a system of integrated finding aids for all archival material to facilitate research.

Any system for ensuring the preservation and accessibility of archival information must take account of the way in which information is produced, recorded, and transmitted as part of the normal processes of administration.

For centuries most formal business has been done on paper. When the bulk of paper became too great in an organisation some of it could either be transferred to another storage area or destroyed. Hitherto the same approach has been taken with government records and to meet public needs it was enough to provide a system which would ensure that all important records were preserved, safely integrated at some central repository, in due course to be made accessible to the public.

The majority of present day business is still being conducted on paper. But in recent years substitute means of recording information have appeared and are rapidly being utilised in connection with a growing variety of activities. The day will be reached – possibly well before the end of the present century – when the majority of business is recorded on tapes and film.

The appearance of these new forms of record poses problems as far as preservation of information is concerned. Tapes can be re-used and many will have to be as a matter of economics. It is just as important to regulate the “wiping” of tapes as it is to regulate the destruction of paper records. But because of the much greater cost of tapes as against paper it may well be necessary for government and other organisations to make a budgetary allowance to cover costs where tapes cannot be re-used because of the historical significance of the data which they contain or its vital importance for areas of research unrelated to the administrative process which resulted in the information being recorded. In the case of records on film the problem is different. Here it is a matter of ensuring that where appropriate a satisfactory master negative is produced so that reading copies – which deteriorate markedly with use – may be made as required.

It is an essential pre-requisite for ready accessibility that all government records should be integrated. The most effective means of achieving integration is for records to be brought together in a common repository which is under the control of the authority responsible for conserving and preparing records for public use. Bringing together records in this way avoids the hazards to which older records in particular are exposed from the movement and dismemberment associated with increasingly frequent changes in administrative arrangements. It also allows records to be preserved and controlled in a uniform manner and the interconnections between agencies, series and individual items detected and made known. Each official and public enquiry for information can thus be answered by an expert and centralised reference service utilising the entire record resources of the Government. For this reason it is essential that in further developing its archival arrangements the Australian Government avoid the problems associated with separate repositories maintained by government agencies and the deposit in separate museums or historical units of archival material.

The general objective therefore, must be to create a system which guarantees the preservation and accessibility of all types of recorded information for the broadest possible use by the community as a whole. A comprehensive National Archives system must be constructed which:

- * does not emphasise or reflect yesterday's or today's structure of government but provides equally for the flow of information from the first to the latest developments in what is a continuing uninterrupted interconnected series of events
- * defines and regulates the stages at which all classes of information on the business of government must be made publicly available
- * is embodied in a series of legislative and administrative measures which together define the obligations of those within the government service, establish the rights of the public, ensure that information and records are

preserved and made available as freely as possible, and set up an identifiable and accountable authority to discharge defined responsibilities.

The need for legislative authority for the steps to be taken is imperative. Legislation is now in force in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria. The advantages of legislation are that it makes clear the rights and duties of those concerned – both inside and outside government – with the preservation of records and the accessibility of information. It will be necessary to give legislative authority to:

- * creation of a publicly accountable archival authority with defined administrative responsibilities
- * definition of the body of information and record materials which is to be brought under legislative provisions and in particular to define such terms as “Australian Government Record”, “Australian Government Archive”, “Australian Government Agency”
- * definition of obligations in respect of the management, protection and preservation of Australian Government records and archives to be observed by all government agencies
- * establishment of efficient policies and administrative procedures for the orderly disposal of records
- * establishment of defined obligations on agencies to deposit records in archival custody and not to dispose of records except in accordance with archival procedures
- * definition of responsibilities of government agencies for the compilation and control of current records and the preservation and well being of the records insofar as these responsibilities affect the archival quality of the material
- * provision of powers for the recovery of official records out of official custody
- * definition and codification of access policy taking into account community standards and the requirements of government
- * definition of public rights in respect of access, including arrangements for appeal and review
- * provision of appropriate facilities and services to assist both the public and government agencies in using public records
- * integration of services to users at a national level in order to facilitate research (e.g. a National Register of Historical Research)
- * provision for pooling and exchange of information on technical matters related to archives and records preservation (e.g. conservation and repair, storage facilities and conditions)
- * provision for participation by the national archives body in the formation of a national association of professional archivists and the formulation of standards for the training and qualification of those involved in archives and records management
- * provision for co-operation and exchange of information between the national archives body, other archives institutions, and those involved in records management and for the establishment of machinery for joint action
- * establishment of standards and procedures for the identification, preservation, and storage of records of national significance from whatever source and on whatever subject and encouragement of nationally consistent policies of preservation, access and retention/destruction in all fields
- * provision of comprehensive finding aids at the national level (e.g. a National Register of Archives) and publication/distribution of finding aids, select documents, microfilm sets, etc.
- * consultation with research interests to assess requirements as they affect disposal of records and provision of services and facilities
- * foster research using archives and research into archives matters.