

RECORDS MANAGEMENT NEGLECTED IN RECENT PUBLIC SERVICE INQUIRIES

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The last eighteen months have seen the tabling of the reports of inquiries into the South Australian,¹ Victorian,² and Commonwealth³ Public Services. None of these reports gives particularly thoughtful treatment to issues of archives and records management. The South Australian report has already drawn critical comment in these pages.⁴ The Victorian reports virtually ignore records management and archival issues altogether. And the Commonwealth report, while giving brief mentions both to archives and to registries, does so in an inadequate manner without even referring to the concept of records management. With the announcement that the New South Wales Government is to conduct an inquiry into its public service, it is worthwhile examining the inadequacies in the treatment of archives and records management in these other recent inquiries, if for no other reason than to demonstrate the need for the archival profession to indicate more articulately in future its standpoints on important issues.

The poor run given to archives and records management in these reports is also something of a disappointment when contrasted with some overseas, and particularly North American, predecessors. For although the McCarthy (N.Z.),⁵ Fulton (U.K.)⁶ and Devlin (Eire)⁷ equivalents did not offer much in this area, the Hoover (U.S.A.)⁸ and Glassco (Canada)⁹ inquiries gave substantial impetus to the archival and records management professions, not only within their own countries but elsewhere.

The Glassco Report, which appeared in 1962 but which is still widely read, devoted its 650-page first volume entirely to the question of the management of the public service. This first volume was divided into four sections:

1. A Plan for Management
2. Financial Management
3. Personnel Management
4. Paperwork and Systems Management.

That fourth section really has been important in placing records management within its total context of public service management, as this structure indicates. The fourth section looks at correspondence, forms, directives, mail, files, libraries, records, archives, departmental historical sections, automatic data processing, office equipment, work study, quality control systems and procedures, and management services.

A quotation from the introduction to the fourth section will indicate the way in which the Glassco Report grasped the central significance to public service efficiency of sound records management:

Your commissioners are directed to inquire into and report on the organization and methods of operation of the departments and agencies of the Government of Canada, and to recommend changes which will promote efficiency, economy and improved service.

In the public service, as in private enterprise, administrative processes must provide for speedy communication of accurate information. Records

and systems are therefore essential to good management, and their design must be efficiently ordered so that timely decisions can be taken with full knowledge by the right people, at a reasonable cost. The common danger, calling for constant surveillance, is that superfluous information may be recorded and too freely circulated, thus clogging the channels of communication and wasting public funds.

This report therefore treats with the systems and procedures in use and their suitability: it examines the major problems which result from the necessary handling of large volumes of records . . . it deals directly with what the public call 'red tape', the internal paperwork of public administration . . .

It is hardly necessary to emphasize the importance of this subject. Unless administrative procedures are well conceived and carried out two major losses result. First, the performance of public servants and the conduct of public business is seriously impaired. Second, the money costs of inefficiency, by reasons of the great volume of material handled, are very substantial, running literally into many tens of millions of dollars annually . . .

For Glassco, the records management perspective, closely linked to systems review, represented a basic conceptual framework by which to approach questions of public service efficiency.

Alone of the three recent Australian reports, the Corbett Report took up this orientation. Perhaps because its Chairman was a Canadian, it did not ignore this aspect of Glassco's contribution. To briefly recapitulate what was reported in the August 1975 issue of this journal, the Corbett Report proposed that South Australia should establish a new Government Information Department, of which a Records Management Services Division would be a component. But it failed to indicate clearly the relation between the proposed Records Management Services Division and the existing State Archives. And it proposed, perhaps strangely, that government department libraries should be run by the new Records Management Services Division. Among other things, the Records Management Services Division was to have the paperwork management consultancy function. Records Management did not miss out, then, in this inquiry, but the omission of reference to the State Archives at least suggests that a not altogether integrated view of it was taken. Moreover, the association of the records management unit with an Information Department is not necessarily to put it in that central place in the framework of government which some theorists have seen to be desirable in view of its service-wide management role.¹⁰ (Of course this criticism is not hard and fast, since the particular role and stance adopted by the Information Department, and the power and status accorded to it, may give it what is needed.)

The Reports of the Board of Inquiry into the Victorian Public Service (the Bland Reports) make no reference to archives or to records management, although one may draw inferences as to the views of the Board of Inquiry from statements such as the following:¹¹

in the long term, the P.S.B. is seen as the provider for most of the Victorian instrumentalities and agencies of a Personal Management Advisory Service as well as the repository of expertise and skill in the areas of O. & M., A.D.P., work simplification and so on . . .

Presumably, records management is one of the series included in 'and so on', but one might have expected to find some explicit discussion of archives and records management issues.

There are two reasons for expecting that the Board might have discussed these issues. In the first place, the Board's terms of reference, contained in an Order in Council of October 1973, called on it to look at the role, organization, structure, management and staffing of the Victorian public service, and to recommend action considered necessary to improve its effectiveness, efficiency and economy. While a consideration of records management issues may not be among the prime prerequisites of such a study, it is surely something quite pertinent to assessing efficiency and economy on a service-wide basis, even if there were no outstanding particular issues in the field deserving attention.

But, and this is my second reason for thinking that the Board might have given attention to records management issues, the 1970 Public Records Advisory Committee raised several points of service-wide significance in relation to records management which were beyond the scope of the Public Records Act itself, and which therefore remain as issues to be considered by a wider inquiry of the type which the Board was. One of these issues is the imaginative if problematic notion suggested at paragraph 6.17 of the 1970 Report, which proposed 'that legislation should require agencies of the State to make and keep records which would provide a full and accurate knowledge of their activities . . .'¹² Now perhaps it is that the phrase 'full and accurate' is too imprecise to be implemented by either statute or unambiguous administrative instruction, but the idea behind the recommendation is at least worthy of consideration by a Board of Inquiry into the public service. It is not just a question of Hasluck's notion of the telephone as a thief of history, although that problem is true enough still. It is also the problem, recognised by theorists of freedom of information, that under certain circumstances public servants will *prefer* not to fully document their activities. And, from a management point of view, it is true that nearly all recent public service inquiries have emphasized a need to increase public service management accountability; and accountability generally (as for example in financial accounting) is very much dependent upon the quality of records which are available.

Another example of a loose end from the 1970 Report is its recommendation at paragraph 6.21:

that agencies be required to carry out a programme of records management designed to promote the maintenance and security of those records which ought to be permanently preserved and to facilitate the disposal of those records of temporary value', under the guidance of an officer of sufficient status and authority, who would be advised and assisted by the officer in charge of the public record office.¹³

This too is something which an inquiry into the Victorian Public Service might well have taken up. Perhaps there has already been substantial progress in this direction. If so, the Inquiry might have assessed the progress for the benefit of those interested. Unfortunately, the Board's omission from consideration of these and whatever other issues in records management may be current in Victoria seems to imply that the Board did not regard records management as an area which an inquiry into service-wide management, economy and efficiency need look at.

The Report of the Royal Commission on Australian Government

Administration (the Coombs Report), resulted from a much larger inquiry than either the Corbett or Bland exercises. The first full inquiry into the Commonwealth Public Service for forty years, it had a large staff, spent many dollars on research and consultancies, and made hundreds of recommendations. Yet for the same two basic reasons for which the Bland reports were disappointing from a records management point of view in the Victorian context, the Coombs Report was disappointing in a Commonwealth context. These two basic defects are first, a failure to see the significance of integrated records management to service-wide efficiency, and second, a failure to take up and comment upon the agenda of unresolved issues raised by previous relevant discussions in the area — in this case, for example, issues raised by Dr Lamb's Report on the 'Development of the National Archives'.¹⁴

To develop the first point a little, let me emphasize that, unlike the Victorian Board of Inquiry, the R.C.A.G.A. did mention both archives and registries. But it did so briefly, confusedly, and without any integrated vision from a records management perspective. In fact, the R.C.A.G.A. did use an integrating concept to group archives, registries, libraries, statistics, A.D.P., etc., together for consideration, and that is the concept of 'information services'. But the concept of 'information services' is a wide one indeed. To use it requires the grouping of quite disparate activities together; invites the adoption of rather blunt generalizations about 'the whole information field'; and in the case of the R.C.A.G.A. led to the suggestion of a little adhocery in the form of a 'Commonwealth Information Advisory Council', which would be *inter alia* a joint advisory council, for the Australian Archives, the National Library and the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The adoption of a slightly more specific integrating concept — that of records management — to look at archives, records management, and registries might have offered the Commission sharper analytic tools than those it used.

On the second point — the criticism that the R.C.A.G.A. failed to pick up the agenda of unresolved issues in the area — it may be argued that the Commission at least ought to have picked up some of the points made by Dr Lamb. Whether or not a task force may have been in the offing, Dr Lamb's recommendations ought not to have escaped consideration by an inquiry of the size and with the wide terms of reference of the R.C.A.G.A.

Instead, where the R.C.A.G.A. did touch on archives and records management issues, it did so from a monocular viewpoint, as if in ignorance of the agenda in these areas. This may be demonstrated by quoting the three sentences which constitute the R.C.A.G.A.'s contribution to archival thought:¹⁵

The Australian Archives is charged with providing access for those within and outside the Administration to papers no longer in current use in departments. Because of the content of the papers, access to them is less readily available than it is to papers held by the National Library and other libraries. While for some papers, the maintenance of a closed period is justified, standards appear to be excessively severe and the Commission believes that restrictions on access should be kept to the minimum consistent with safeguarding strictly defined national interest and the right of individuals to privacy.

This passage suggests that the R.C.A.G.A. view the Australian Archives as little more than a rather secretive manuscript library, which ought to try to be more liberal, an impression confirmed by the immediately following recommendation for this 'Commonwealth Information Advisory Council'. Notice carefully the functions assigned to this Council, which is to comprise, under an independent Chairman, the Australian Government Statistician, the Director-General of the National Library, the Director-General of Archives, representatives of departments and representatives of 'community groups': The functions of the proposed Council would be to advise on:¹⁶

- (a) the development of policies for the generation and efficient use of information within government administration, and for making the information available outside the administration;
- (b) desirable changes in the form and content of information made available by each of the three main sources;
- (c) desirable improvements in users' access to particular classes of information;
- (d) the priorities to be attached to proposed developments.

The rationale given by R.C.A.G.A. for this proposed Council was as follows:

Each of the main sources of information, including the Bureau of Statistics, the National Library and the Australian Archives has major problems of its own to be resolved. The administration has problems of its own, some of which are of direct relevance to these main sources. The need to tackle these separate problems has tended to inhibit the development of a coherent policy and strategy for the information function generally. This tendency may well be intensified if the structure of separate advisory bodies envisaged develops along the lines now proposed . . .

This really is confused and obscure. What is meant by the assertion that 'the administration has problems of its own, some of which are relevant to these main sources'? Is it suggested that the 'administration' has problems, and that these problems cause problems at the 'main sources'? Is it suggested that the information in the 'sources' could help the problems of the 'administration'? What is this 'administration' anyway (the government of the day? government departments as a whole?), and in what sense is it a distinct entity separate from the three institutions named? What are the bounds of this 'information function generally' to which the Commission refers, and what would a coherent strategy and policy for it contain? What are the 'lines now proposed' along which the structure of separate advisory bodies might otherwise develop?

This is in sharp contrast with the Chapters on 'Management of the Public Records', 'Records' and 'Archives' in the Glassco Report.

Another part of the R.C.A.G.A. Report is headed 'Registries', but it does not make use of the concept of records management at all. This section quotes some findings of Cruickshank and Partners, a firm engaged by the Commission to prepare a consultancy study of registries, to the effect that 'those registries which had least trouble in keeping to set procedures in an orderly way were those which received attention from a relatively senior departmental officer . . .' This appears to suggest that, in the view of the Commission, the problems in this area

would be solved if registry people were better at keeping to 'the prescribed procedures' — certainly an interesting panacea. The Commission therefore recommended that:¹⁷

- (a) registries be more effectively integrated into the managerial and administrative structure and process of departments and agencies, with better lines of communication to improve services and resolve problems;
- (b) group organisation of registry staff be investigated by departments not using these methods; and
- (c) training be improved for registry users and staff.

There is no consciousness of paperwork or records management in the Canadian or American sense.

A few further comments which the Commission makes in introducing its own summary of the Cruickshank and Partners Report in Appendix Volume 4 further illustrate the level of Commission thinking on these matters: 'the Commission was also made aware of the problems of starting a registry through its own initial difficulties in this area'; and 'the Commission's understanding is that the Board's general principles and basic approach to this area have remained unchanged over a quarter of a century. Is this a good thing? Are some changes necessary?'¹⁸ One would have thought that it was the role of a Royal Commission to answer such questions as well as to pose them.

To sum up, it would seem that the R.C.A.G.A. did not come to grips with the range of issues which have to be considered in order to reach a coherent and adequate view of policy in the archives and records management area, and further, that it ought to have done so as part of its role. Where the R.C.A.G.A. did touch on issues in the area — as with its recommendations on making access easier, putting more senior staff in charge of registries, or establishing a Commonwealth Information Advisory Council — it often failed to substantiate its recommendations with supporting discussion of adequate depth.

Certainly, everyone agrees that access should be extended as far as possible. But how far is that? What criteria should be used? How should archival access criteria relate to other access concepts, as for example those contained in Freedom of Information proposals?

Certainly, registries should be looked at, but why not use a wider frame of reference and look at registries within the total framework of records management? There may be merit in the involvement of more senior officers in registry work, but that is a very old suggestion, it has been tried in various places before; why not review what has happened and recommend on that basis? As for the Commission's view that registries need 'better lines of communication to improve services and resolve problems', just what, in operational terms, does this mean?

Again, with the idea of a Commonwealth Information Advisory Council, there may be some benefits from institutionalising co-operation among the three 'information sources' named and representatives of their customers. But there would also be benefits in having separate advisory councils, and in having no advisory councils at all. The argument the Commission adduces in support of its suggestion is simply

not adequate. The Advisory Council is envisaged as having responsibility to develop policies for the 'generation of information'. Is this a proposal like the 1970 Victorian proposal referred to above, by which agencies would be required to make and keep records which would provide a full and accurate knowledge of their activities? Or is it a proposal to do with making the production of certain statistical tables mandatory? The Report in no way makes it clear. After all, the generation of information is an activity almost inseparable from the business of government; could a Commonwealth Information Advisory Council really make policy on the generation of information in a meaningful way? Another thing the proposed Commonwealth Information Advisory Council is supposed to do is to develop policies for 'The Efficient Use of Information'. Once again, this concept is not enlarged upon. What measures can we draw upon to determine the relative efficiency of two information users?

None of the three recent major inquiries into government administration in Australia have given to archives and records management issues the adequate and integrated kind of treatment which is exemplified in the approach of the Canadian Glassco Commission. While it is very difficult to determine objectively the conditions giving rise to such a situation, one might speculate that a significant contributing factor might have been an inadequate readiness on the part of archivists to put their professional concerns before the inquiries. Certainly, at least one archivist made a personal submission to the Board of Inquiry into the Victorian Public Service,¹⁹ and it may emerge that there have been weighty contributions on these topics to R.C.A.G.A., although in a brief check I could find very little. But on the whole, it seems as though the archival profession has not so far been able to take up the opportunity offered by such inquiries to remove misconceptions about archives and records management and to contribute through these inquiries to public policy formulation processes. With the advent of the Australian Society of Archivists we may hope that such omissions will not recur in the future.

I would like to conclude with some sobering findings from the report of the Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration. According to the Commission, at paragraph 10.7.1,²⁰

Information is power . . . The classical dictum of Lord Acton that all power tends to corrupt has application to this as well as other forms of power . . .

If these findings are reliable, then a person's corruption must vary with the amount of information he has; and it would follow that all our archival authorities (with their miles of shelving and thousands of cubic feet of information) are very corrupt indeed. It's a worrying thought.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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6. *The Civil Service*, Vol. 1: Report of the Committee 1966-68, Chairman: Lord Fulton. H.M.S.O., London, 1968.
7. Report, Public Services Organization Review Group 1966-69, Stationary Office, Dublin, 1970: devotes four thin paragraphs to these areas at p.152.
8. Report on *The Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government of the United States of America*, Washington, 1949, and especially the later Task Force on Paperwork Management led by Emmett J. Leahy.
9. Report, The Royal Commission on Government Organization, Queen's Printer, Ottawa, 1962.
10. 'Views of Leading Archivists on the Position of an Archives Agency in Government Administration', Appendix III of *Report of the Public Records Advisory Committee*, Library Council of Victoria, Melbourne, 1970.
11. *First Report of the Board of Inquiry into the Victorian Public Service*, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1974, p.112.
12. *Report of the Public Records Advisory Committee*, Melbourne, p.11.
13. *Ibid.*, p.12.
14. *Development of the National Archives*, Commonwealth Parliamentary Paper No. 16, 1974.
15. *Op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p.352.
16. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p.353.
17. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p.348.
18. *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, p.52. Volume 4 contains summaries of several consultants' papers under the heading 'Information Services'. None deal with archives.
19. See *Final Report*, 1975, p.81.
20. *Development of the National Archives*, Vol. 1, p.345.