

## BEFORE AND AFTER THE LAMB REPORT

An Undergraduate View by GEORGE R. SMITH

**B**EFORE we can appreciate the impact of the W. Kaye Lamb Report we need to know something of Commonwealth archival history prior to Lamb's visit and report in 1973. The first (Commonwealth) Public Archives bill, like all of its successors to date, was never presented to the Parliament. It received Cabinet consideration and deferment in 1927 but was apparently not considered worth reviving after the move to Canberra.<sup>1</sup> The Commonwealth War Archives Committee was established in July 1942, and a provisional Archival Authority was established in 1943. A further draft bill was prepared in 1950 by the Commonwealth Archives Committee. The National Librarian discussed the draft on his overseas visit in late 1950 but further consideration was deferred by the Committee in 1951 pending the outcome of the 'Divorce Proceedings' (consideration being given then to the formation of a separate archives office). Dr Schellenberg visited Australia in 1954. The Commonwealth Archives Office was established in 1961. An Interdepartmental Committee on Commonwealth Archives met between 1962 and 1964. The Commonwealth Archives Office initiated a second building programme in 1966. Dr Lamb visited and reported in 1973 and after a further two years procrastination a Director-General was appointed. Today, just fifty years after the first archives bill died, there are rumours that we are going to have a third try.

Perhaps the earliest indication of interest in things archival by the Commonwealth Government was Commonwealth Act No. 4 of 1911 relating to the Petherick Papers.<sup>2</sup> The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on 22 June 1920 that Mr Groom (Minister for Home and Territories) in a speech at Canberra during the visit of the Prince of Wales, said,

. . . The design adopted for the city provides among other buildings, for a capitol—a building in which will be enshrined the records of Australian achievement and the archives of the nation. It is the foundation stone of this building which Your Royal Highness will lay today.

The report goes on,

The stone laid by the Prince of Wales is the foundation stone of a building to house the national archives. It is interesting to note that the centre of the stone is also the centre of the capital site.

The stone has since disappeared.

Ian Maclean was next on the scene. Now Principal Archivist, Archives Authority of New South Wales, Maclean wrote in 1962 that,

. . . Provisional Archival Authorities were established by the Commonwealth Government early in 1943: but it was not until late in 1944 that a colleague (the newly appointed Archives Officer of the Australian War Memorial) and I (newly appointed to a similar post in the Commonwealth National Library) met together over a group of archives rescued from war damaged Port Moresby . . .<sup>3</sup>

The first organisation of the Commonwealth Archives was a two-tiered affair. The civil departments were serviced by the Archives Division of the Commonwealth National Library, and the defence departments (i.e. Defence, Supply, and the departments of Navy, Army and Air) were

serviced by the Australian War Memorial. In 1952 this arrangement was rationalised and the Archives Division of the C.N.L. became the sole Commonwealth Archival Authority. The A.W.M. retained control over historical war-time operational records.

In 1949 the 'Report of the Hoover Commission on Organisation of the Executive Branch of the United States Government' included recommendations on records management which marked the beginning of a new era in public records administration in the Commonwealth. ' . . . While records making and keeping were indispensable activities in the conduct of administrative business they were also among the greatest consumers of salaries, space and equipment in the internal administrative costs of government . . .'<sup>4</sup> In Australia the Public Service Board was quick to seize upon the implications of the report and in 1950 the Board and the Archives Division launched a records reduction campaign. Records were to be surveyed and earmarked for immediate destruction or transfer to one of a chain of archival repositories to be established in 1950 (and in the following years) in the mainland state capitals.

In England following the 1954 Report of the Committee on Departmental Records (The Grigg Report)<sup>5</sup> a Records Administration Division of the Public Record Office was established. Meanwhile back in Australia, Dr Schellenberg was visiting on a Fulbright Scholarship. During this visit he spoke on the need for archival institutions and on records management, and discussed access problems with senior administrative officers of the Commonwealth Government in Canberra. He also attended seminars in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne on a wide variety of topics vital to archival management. He based his book *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* on his lectures and participation in seminars during this visit.<sup>6</sup>

Following Schellenberg's visit, the Prime Minister's Department circulated to government agencies (in 1955) a document entitled 'Arrangements for the Management of the Public Records of the Commonwealth Government'. This document defined the public records of the Commonwealth of Australia as consisting of all the documents which, having been produced or received by any department (i.e. department of state, office, officer, institution or statutory body of the Commonwealth Government) in the transaction of official business, are preserved in official custody for future reference. This document confirmed the department's responsibility for maintaining adequate records for official purposes and, in the absence of any statutory provision to the contrary, affirmed the department's legal responsibility for all aspects of their management after they ceased to be current. Also in 1955, a circular entitled 'Report on and Recommendations for the Granting of Access to Commonwealth Archives for Non-official Research Purposes' was issued. This access document stated in its recommendations that

the general public may, at the discretion of the Archival Authority, be permitted to consult Commonwealth archives created more than 50 years previously, provided that the department which has transferred any particular class of archives to the custody of the Archival Authority may state in writing to the Archival Authority any reasons why that class of archives would be withheld for a further stated period.

We should note that both documents were issued for guidance rather than instruction. These circulars were probably based on arrangements approved by the Commonwealth Archives Committee in May 1955.<sup>7</sup>

The then Archivist of the University of Sydney, David Macmillan, said in an article in the *American Archivist* in 1956, 'the need to face the problem of storing valuable old records and important current documents is causing earnest thought in many quarters . . .' In 1957 the Public Service Board launched the Departmental Registrar scheme which had two main objectives: (1) to ensure that current record keeping systems were modernised to meet the increasing demand for quick and accurate reference; and (2) to ensure effective disposal programmes were introduced and maintained.<sup>8</sup>

Reporting in 1959, Ian Maclean said ' . . . almost all of the relatively limited resources available were given over to the work of surveying, scheduling, and appraising records and developing departmental disposal programmes'.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of the Report of the National Library Inquiry Committee 1956-57 (The Paton Report) on the future of the C.N.L. in 1961 the Archives Division became the Commonwealth Archives Office within the Prime Minister's Department. The report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Commonwealth Archives (which met between 1962 and 1964) 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 I.D.C. Accordingly, in 1966, Cabinet approved new arrangements for the Commonwealth Archives which vested in the C.A.O. authority to: (1) regulate destruction of records; (2) provide adequate reference and lending services for use by departments and the public; and (3) regulate access to public records by research workers and other members of the public in accordance with approved policies.<sup>10</sup> Departments were encouraged to transfer their archives to archival custody but there was still no requirement that open period records be transferred. There were really twenty-five access policies—access was really at departmental whim.<sup>11</sup>

In 1966 a programme of upgrading and renewal of archival repositories commenced. In Canberra the Australian Archives are now housed in seven separate repositories spread around the suburbs of Barton, Parkes, Kingston and Fyshwick. A proposal for an interim Canberra repository to replace the 'dog kennels' at Parkes was one of the victims of the financial cuts in 1975. It is proposed one day to build a national archives building and proper repositories for Canberra. Canberra repositories presently hold 50,000 metres of records. A purpose-built repository has recently been completed at Villawood, Sydney. This repository has a capacity of approximately 204,000 metres of records and presently accommodates 50,000 metres. Facilities include a climate-controlled film vault and a repair and conservation laboratory. A relay studio (under construction) will allow A.B.C. phonograph and tape recordings to be transmitted direct to air. Brisbane's main repository at Cannon Hill has accommodation for 420,000 metres and is programmed for provision of air conditioning, film storage and conservation facilities over the next five years. The Adelaide repository

at Collinswood was constructed in 1963 and extended in 1966. The existing building is to be extended and upgraded to accommodate 240,000 metres of records. Until recently Perth boasted three repositories. A new building to house 927,000 metres was commenced in 1975 and occupied in late 1976. Movement and consolidation of record holdings was still progressing early in 1977. A permanent repository for Darwin was begun in 1968 and completed in 1976. Special consideration was given to the effects of a tropical climate on archival materials and the building is completely air conditioned. It has been designated a cyclone shelter. Archive facilities also exist in Hobart and Townsville.<sup>12</sup>

In 1971 access conditions were further relaxed to allow public access to records thirty years old or more. 'Announcing the new policy the Prime Minister (Mr Gorton) further specified that "custody of Commonwealth records and control over access to them is the responsibility of the Commonwealth Archives Office".<sup>13</sup> This then is the historical background to the Lamb visit and his subsequent report.

Dr W. Kaye Lamb, a former Dominion Archivist of Canada, was invited to Australia by the Labor Government in June 1973 to advise the government on the development of a National Archives. In the main his terms of reference were as follows:

In broad terms the proposal is that you visit Australia for six weeks or so to advise generally in relation to the development of an archives project. We envisage that this advice would encompass the charter for the National Archives which is to be embodied in legislation, the outline plans for a permanent headquarters building in Canberra and supplementary storage areas, staffing requirements with their aspect of professional qualifications and any other matters relevant to an effective National Archives system which you judge should be brought under review.<sup>14</sup>

During his six week visit, Lamb had ten days of discussions with senior archives office staff in Canberra, and with representatives of Defence, Foreign Affairs and Attorney-General's Departments. He visited the National Library of Australia, the Australian National University and the Australian War Memorial, all of which have extensive archival collections. He discussed staff and classifications and career structures with the Public Service Board. He met the Inter-departmental Committee reviewing provisions for the proposed National Archives Act. He attended a one-day seminar in Canberra sponsored by the Department of the Special Minister of State. He also visited various archival institutions in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth.

When tabling Dr Lamb's report, Mr Lionel Bowen, M.P. (then the responsible Minister) made certain announcements:

The government has decided to upgrade and expand the operations of the Archives Office so as to develop greater public interest in the wealth of historical material which forms part of our national heritage. To this end it is hoped during this session (1974) to introduce legislation to establish within the Department of the Special Minister of State an organisation to be known as the Australian Archives and to be headed by a Director-General (at Deputy Secretary level). The legislation will provide that the Australian Archives have as its broad aim the development of a national archives system which in co-operation with the States and other organisations will ensure the preservation of archival resources which document the history of the Australian nation and which are of national

significance, research value or of general public interest. It will also provide for Australian government agencies advice and assistance for the efficient administration of archives, provide and maintain the public right of access in accordance with government access policy and promote the utilisation of archival resources for information, research, education, cultural and other purposes.

He went on to say the position of Director-General would soon be advertised and,

When the Director-General has been appointed a small task force will be set up under this leadership to examine in detail a number of aspects of this new initiative. . . . The task force will consult with appropriate authorities and within three months of its appointment will bring forward for government consideration specific proposals which will include the further development of the building programme for the national and regional repository/retrieval centres, the assessment of the organisational and staff requirements for these centres, a survey of the needs and interests of users, review of salary levels for archivists and senior departmental registry personnel in the light of the changing archival activities and a programme for the recruitment and training of archivists.<sup>15</sup>

In May 1974, Mr R .C. Sharman, then Assistant State Librarian of South Australia and Editor of *Archives and Manuscripts*, expressed . . . some disappointment that so few initiatives have come from Canberra over the past 20 years'. He commented that

. . . it would be a rash archive fanatic who said that the government was forced to go to the polls because of opposition intransigence over the passing of an archives act, or because the Senate had refused the passage of a bill to grant a new deal to the historians of this country. One wonders, however, whether or not the position of Director-General of the Australian Archives is one which will go if Mr. Snedden comes to power and thus gets his opportunity to cut back the Australian Public Service (or did he merely promise to slow down its growth?).<sup>16</sup>

In the event he did not, and it did not, but still no action from the government was apparent.

Michael Saclier, Archives Officer of the A.N.U. Archives of Business and Labour, and Past President of the Australian Society of Archivists, delivered a paper on the Lamb report to the A.C.T. Branch of the Library Association of Australia in June 1974 which was reprinted in the August 1974 issue of *Archives and Manuscripts*. He says,

Starved of funds, depressed in classification and with a function neither understood nor recognised by those in political and public service authority, the Archives Office has existed in an essentially untenable position for many years. . . . 'Just because I'm paranoid does not mean they are not out to get me'. This could well be the motto for the Archives at the moment for there is no doubt that it is surrounded by hostility and even enemies, individual and institutional, and the reaction to Dr. Lamb's recommendation on the subject of the collection of private papers provides a good example of the kind of special pleadings, innuendo, rumour mongering and plain bloody-mindedness which will be brought to bear when personal privileges or institutional empires are being threatened with some diminution.<sup>17</sup>

Early in 1974 a technical support group was established within Australian Archives to service the proposed task force and to carry out preliminary research. The Director-General, Professor R. G. Neale, was eventually appointed and took up duty in late 1975. There is still no indication if or when the task force proper will be set up or begin operating.

Well, what then has been the impact of the Lamb Report? Not very much at all. Every ten years or so for the last half century some person with an interest in history or archives has said it is time something was done about Australia's historical records. We have had two major consultants report and have had some internal thoughts all of which have largely been ignored. Australian Archives did not expand its staff or activities to any great extent during the period of the Whitlam government. It did have a change of name. New repositories in Perth and Darwin were completed but the proposed north Canberra repository, budgeted for at a very modest five million dollars, was one of the buildings to be deleted from the National Capital Development Commission's 1976-1977 building programme.<sup>18</sup> Many of the disposal schedules developed and approved in the period 1945 to 1965 were allowed to expire for want of staff to update them. A prominent and continuing feature of archival life during the period 1970-1977 is a chronic shortage of repository space and archives staff especially in Canberra and Melbourne. There has been no revolution in access policy —no public right of access as promised so blythly by the then Minister when presenting the report to parliament. We have a Director-General as promised but there is still no sign of the task force which he was to head. Lastly just as we had in 1927 (but with more substance than now) we have rumours that 1977 will be the year of the Archives Act.<sup>19</sup> On the face of the publicly available facts the Lamb Report (like all those before it) has hardly raised a ripple on the Commonwealth archival scene.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. G. Powell, 'The origins of the Australian Joint Copying Project', *Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol. 4 No. 5 (November 1971), p.19, footnote 48 notes that the Parliamentary Library Committee drafted the bill but that it was not presented to Parliament. H. J. Gibbney, 'Prehistory of Archives', *Archives and Manuscripts* Vol. 4 No. 6 (February 1972), at pp.5-6, says the subject was considered by Cabinet in 1928 which then deferred consideration pending further investigation: see his footnotes 15, 16 and 17. For the 1927 bill, see Australian Archives, CRS A2863 (Attorney-General's Department) Bill files, 1901-.
2. Australia. *Commonwealth Acts* 1911.
3. Ian Maclean, 'An Analysis of Jenkinson's *Manual of Archive Administration* in the Light of Australian Experience', in A. E. J. Hollaender (ed.), *Essays in Memory of Sir Hilary Jenkinson* (Society of Archivists, 1962), p.128.
4. Report of the Hoover Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of the United States Government, 1949.
5. U.K. Command Paper 9163, The Grigg Report (on Departmental Records), 1954.
6. T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques*. (Midway Reprint, 1975), p.ix.
7. Report of the National Library Enquiry Committee 1956-57, Appendix 4 of Appendix 2, pp.42-43.
8. A measure of the success of the second objective can be seen from the following figures: in the period 1945-58, 275 disposal schedules were issued; over the next seven years (by which time it is reasonable to expect that most if not all of the original Registrars had moved on) 75 more were issued or re-issued; from 1965 to 1977 only thirty were processed.
9. Ian Maclean, 'Australian Experience in Record and Archives Management', *American Archivist*, Vol. 22 No. 4 (1959), p.392.

10. 'A National Archives System: A Background Paper', reprinted in *Archives and Manuscripts* Vol. 5 No. 5 (November 1973), p.107. See also Note 11 below.
11. C. B. Schedvin, 'Commonwealth Archives and Cabinet: a User's View', in *Proceedings 16th L.A.A. Conference*, 1971, p.233. Refer also to Professor R. G. Neale's address to the First Biennial Conference of the Australian Society of Archivists, May 1977.
12. Australian Archives, 'A Background Paper for use during the I.C.C.M. Conference May 1976'.
13. Statement by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. John Gorton, 30 December 1970. However, see note 11 above.
14. Australia, Parliament, *Parliamentary Papers* 1974, No. 16, Report by Dr W. Kaye Lamb, 'Development of the National Archives', (September 1973), p.3.
15. Statement by the Hon. Lionel Bowen, M.P., Special Minister of State, Canberra, 7 March 1974.
16. (R. C. Sharman), Editorial, *Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol. 5 No. 7 (May 1974), p.163.
17. Michael Saclier, 'The Lamb Report and its Environment', *Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol. 5 No. 8 (August 1974), pp.200, 204.
18. *Canberra Times*, 24 March 1976.
19. Mr L. J. Curtis's paper 'Freedom of Information', presented to the First Biennial Conference of the Australian Society of Archivists, May 1977, gives a little more hope about Archives legislation.