

## REFLECTION ON REPORTS OF THE WASHINGTON CONGRESS

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RECENTLY some articles and comments have been published by participants of the VIIIth International Congress on Archives in Washington D.C., September 1976. Although all Congress papers are still to appear in *Archivum* it is already interesting to look at the impressions gained by the people attending the Congress and to deduce some trends.

The decision to select the theme *Archival Revolution of Our Time* for the Congress is in itself indicative. Even if every paper did not vindicate this concept of, as Ian Maclean calls it, 'archivist's version of future shock',<sup>1</sup> Margaret Pamplin<sup>2</sup> and Jean Imray<sup>3</sup> agree that at least a steady evolution of archive services is taking place throughout the world. However, some of the presented papers dealing with the mechanization in conservation and the future involvement of the archivist in automatic data processing, stand out with their revolutionary trends. These and other papers seem to cover matters which will be of great interest to the Australian archivist.

By presenting *The Archival Implications of Machine-Readable Records* Lionel Bell convinced Jean Imray that in some respects 'we shall have to start thinking in a new dimension and the sooner we equip ourselves to do so the better'. A move in this direction is one of the Automation Committee's projects which includes a manual on machine-readable records, a bibliography and a lexicon. The same Committee considers a general automation system for archival use. Ian Maclean stated that the Congress made it obvious that the archivist in the next decade will have to enter the field of current information retrieval analyst. Automatic data processing should provide accelerated production of finding aids and speedier retrieval.

The other new trend—mechanization and innovation in conservation techniques, as presented in *Technological Improvements in the Preservation and Reproduction of Archival Documents* by C. Crespo—should be closely studied in Australia. A related question was also raised: is information to be more important than the preservation of the physical object?

Regarding disposal it should be noted that in countries where archival institutions have been established for some considerable time, archivists concentrate rather on destruction than retention (Great Britain retains an estimated 1-2% of her records as opposed to Luxemburg 98%). This calls for a different approach to appraisal and the preparation of disposal schedules. Strong guide lines are needed for appraisal. Kremnov's noted objective criteria as against the archivist's *fingerspitzengefühl* (as reported by M. Pamplin) should serve as a warning against the use of the latter because it is entirely subjective.

Another aspect arises when the concept 'Activist Archivist' (a session provided by the Society of American Archivists) is analysed. The traditionally conservative role of the archivist is questioned. It was

suggested that moral judgement and commitment to redress social evils is required of an archivist. This is debatable, but, if applied, would have to be considered when appraisal of records takes place. Guide lines to the future needs of research would be invaluable. Should universities partake in discussion concerning the policy of appraisal and destruction rather than, as suggested, researchers and the general public? Many other questions ought to be considered: how far should one be concerned with individually sensitive information as opposed to the general benefit which can be provided by statistics through computerized data for future national use? How important will be quantification methods, especially in the fields of social science and history? What can be considered substitute material? The Australian Society of Archivists could try to provide some leads by inviting debates from concerned bodies.

New ideas regarding access were brought up at the Congress: a single, national reader's card; the use of semi-public and private records; providing archival service 24 hours every day.

As a good example for future plans serves the National Records Centre in U.S.A. which includes a Microfilm and Reproduction Branch working on a payment basis for all government agencies and also giving advice on microfilming projects if the agency intends to do its own microfilming. Australian archival institutions should also have a say in the standard of microfilming. As experience has shown material for microfilming is occasionally prepared by persons unfamiliar with the records and record-keeping systems. A quality control for the finished product should be supervised by archival institutions.

Another problem, just as valid for Australia as for other countries, is archival ethics. The attitude of repositories towards collection is important. We should eliminate the competition element be more idealistic and cater for the needs of the researcher not the glorification of a particular archival institute.

It was emphasized at the Congress that in some states in the U.S.A. 'local records are still at tremendous risk' (as reported by J. Imray). What is the situation in Australia? Does it also depend on some office staff which local records are kept and which are destroyed? The Australian Society of Archivists should press for an appropriate legislation where necessary.

As a conclusion it could be noted that one of the primary tasks of our Society should be working towards an aim to make Australians aware of the need to value the national heritage contained in archives.

The many points raised in this article might seem to provide an Herculean task, however, let us not retire 'to the solicitude and silence of archives' as expressed by Dr D. Abello in 1973 and quoted by Margaret Pamplin. Surely, archivists can keep step with the dynamics of living and be helpers and organizers as well as the keepers of 'dead records'.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol. 6 No. 8 (February 1977), pp.388-92.
2. *Archives*, Vol. X111 No. 57 (Spring 1977), pp.5-11.
3. *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, Vol. 5 No. 7 (April 1977), pp.482-89.