Public Archives and National Information Policy

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This paper, slightly edited, was tabled at the second meeting of the Australian Libraries and Information Council held on 29 October 1982. It deals with some major areas of concern to public archives institutions, proposes two projects and suggests that the Council defines the problems with a view to improving the chances of survival of public archives in Australia.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to outline a few of the problems confronting the administrators of public archives institutions in Australia, and to suggest the extent to which these have a bearing upon the formation of national information policy. These problems are occupying attention at this present time because of the demand expressed by many Australians for readier access to information about the decisions made by governments, and about the history of their country. The severe restrictions placed upon budgets of Australian government authorities, including archives authorities, have made it difficult for archivists to meet the demands placed upon them, and public awareness of the problem presented by fragility of paper has brought home to Australian archival and library authorities the serious extent to which our archival heritage is threatened.

Background

In each state in Australia, and in the sphere of the Commonwealth Government, programs are under way to bring together original written, printed, and like materials which will be useful for the study of this nation's history. This is a shared operation, in two senses. It is shared between commonwealth and state authorities (and to a lesser extent, by local governments); and it is shared between libraries on the one hand and archives authorities on the other.

The pattern in Australia is complicated by the fact that in some states, and in the commonwealth sphere, archives authorities are entirely separate from and independent of libraries; whereas in others the State Archives come within the operation and control of the State Library authority. In

one State, South Australia, a change is taking place whereby the official archives institution is being separated from the State Library organisation and established, through new legislation, as a distinct division of the new controlling department, the Department of Local Government.

In New South Wales and Victoria there are public archives authorities (the Archives Office of New South Wales and the Public Record Office of Victoria) established by statute, and independent of State Library control. In Tasmania, Queensland and Western Australia the control of archives is vested by statute in the State Library authority, and the archives institution comes under the administrative control of the State Librarian.

The pattern is further complicated by the fact that the commonwealth and each of the states have a long-established historical collection, and a concomitant program of bringing together non-public records of various sorts, in order to support the study of the history of this country, or at least of the pertinent part of this country. In New South Wales, the Mitchell Library's resources and the adjacent material in the Mitchell and Dixson Galleries constitute collections of outstanding importance, which are relevant to the study, not only of Australia, but also of the Australasian region, including New Zealand and the South West Pacific. In the other States, the collecting field is more restricted, though some materials in the La Trobe Library within the State Library of Victoria relate to the history of other parts of Australia. In Tasmania the Walker, Crowther and Allport Collections, in Queensland the John Oxley Library, and in Western Australia the Battye Library, harbour original material relating to the history of their respective States. In South Australia the intention is to develop and extend the range of the South Australian Collection to include manuscript material which hitherto has been collected by the South Australian Archives.

In Canberra the National Library has a rich collection of manuscript material relating to Australia, but the official archives of the commonwealth are the responsibility of the Australian Archives. Nevertheless a large sphere for collecting material relating to the nation as a whole remains open to the Library, and is vigorously pursued.

Government Archives

It has been necessary to explain the present pattern of collecting various types of historical material in order to bring out some important points with regard to programs of collecting, arranging and describing public archival material, and making it available for scholarly and other exploitation. In each governmental sphere in Australia — that of the commonwealth, each of the states, and the Northern Territory — there is only one authority entitled to collect and arrange government archives, or public records. Because public money is expended in both the original creation and the subsequent management of public archival material, because the information contained in this material covers a huge and

diverse area of human activity, and because it is possible for governments wrongly advised to place quite unjustified and vexatious obstacles in the way of the exploitation of government archives, it is a matter of great importance that public records should figure very prominently in any statement of national or state information policy.

By their very nature, archival materials come into being in order to further the administrative or executive acts of the bodies that create them. This applies whether the archives are created by government bodies (so becoming public archives) or by private firms, voluntary bodies, professional associations or individuals (so becoming private or corporate archives). However, because public archives are formed in order to further public policies, they have a continuing value, when their specific executive or administrative purpose has been realised, to provide information to the public in whose name and for whose well-being the original administrative action was taken. Thus public archives are the residual documents left for public scrutiny once the acts or transactions that brought them into being have been achieved or completed. If government activity can be likened to the operation of a computer, archival materials are the print-out, as it were, of that activity.

Government Records and Freedom of Information

Because of the immense and increasing complexity of government activity, there is a danger that public administration will become less and less answerable to the popular will. Governments, like all large organisations, are finding it easier to hide their activities behind the impenetrable wall of obfuscation and obscurantism. There is a danger that the answers to parliamentary questions will not reveal the essential facts sought. Bureaucracies of all kinds find it easy enough to perpetuate their own existence, pursuing programs without policy direction and repeating exercises by ritual and rote. Government bureaucracies are no exception.

To counteract this directionless onrush, and to bring governments back into the real world where they might answer to the people who elected them, the Freedom of Information (FOI) Movement was born. Its success can be judged by the fact that half a dozen western democracies in various parts of the world have passed FOI legislation. In Australia, the FOI Act is about to come into operation.

The principle behind Freedom of Information is not very different from that which has, for many generations, motivated historians to seek access to public archives. Historians have, of course, sought access to documents so that historical research might be pursued, with a view either to teaching or to publication, or to both. The FOI movement gains its strength from the urgings of journalists and civil libertarians, and from the perfectly understandable wishes of individuals seeking access to files which deal with their own cases. The two movements — FOI on the one hand, and access to public records for research purposes on the other — go hand in

hand in that they both seek unimpeded access to documents which reveal how the public authority has managed the stewardship it has exercised on behalf of the people.

FOI has imposed, and will increasingly impose, upon governments, the necessity to release public records of a very recent date. Whereas scholars seeking access to historical records for research purposes have seldom wanted documents less than ten years of age, an FOI request is likely to concern very recent material indeed. It is too early yet to assess the effect of FOI legislation on public archives in any way, but it is clear that there are some dangers. Will the public servant or the politician, being aware that a member of the public might be granted permission to view a report which he is writing, and that very soon, be less likely to tell the truth? Will the substance of government communication be changed because of the possible early public exposure of what is being written? FOI enquiries are likely to focus on individual documents. Archival documents must be preserved undisturbed within the context in which they were created — as parts of files, sub-series, series, groups and so on. If an FOI enquiry lights upon a particular document, might it be separated from its context, either accidentally or purposefully, in the process of being brought forth for FOI purposes? Is there a danger that public servants will create "shadow files", consisting merely of the documents they are willing to make available for FOI inspection, so making it possible for the genuine file containing information as to what actually happened, and why, to be kept in obscurity?

All of these possibilities, and others, consititute a serious threat to the integrity of the archival record, and need to be considered in any statement of public information policy.

Scholarly Demand For More Recent Records

The FOI movement is not the only focus for seeking earlier public access to government records. Increasingly over recent years, historians in the universities and other teaching and research insititutions have tended to investigate topics of more recent times. Emphases placed on historical study in some areas have tended to the examination of large bodies of "particular instance" papers. The modern welfare state has brought into being huge quantities of such records, especially in such areas as social security, veterans' affairs administration, medical insurance, immigration, the implementation of factories and shops legislation and various aspects of taxation. Where research deals with sociological factors operating in society, these records are invaluable. The research worker is concerned, not with individual cases, but with groups in society whose probems, influences or other dynamic characteristics can be measured. There is certainly more of this type of material available in 20th than in 19th century records; thus the historian has been inclined to urge upon government his need to examine records of more recent date. This in turn

has led to the earlier deposit of departmental files into archival care.

Genealogical Research

Family historians have placed archival sources under great pressure in recent years. Genealogical research differs from other types of investigation in that it focuses on the interests of an individual, or at most a family, and does not cast light on the larger issues or major events of history. The genealogist may discover his great-grandfather was born in the year of Trafalgar, was married at the time the corn laws were repealed, and died when the federation of the Australian colonies became a reality. He probably does not reflect on any of these coincidences, and certainly the events he is investigating appear, at first glance at least, not to illuminate, or even be illuminated by, events on the world stage. Genealogical research illustrates, probably better than any other activity carried on by libraries and archives institutions, the type of service which gives great satisfaction to the enquirer without conferring any significant benefit on the rest of society. Staff in archives institutions and historical resource libraries are effectively tied down in the pursuit of inconsequential information for an insatiable public.

The Labour-Intensive Nature of Archives Work

It is of the nature of an archives institution that its resources are, almost without exception, unique. It is also unlikely that any procedure will ever be found whereby the original materials of an archives institution can be made available for use outside the institution. Visiting scholars may sometimes be permitted free access to the shelves, and even to the stacks, but it will only be members of an informed and skilled elite amongst the scholarly public who can gain access to information without constant guidance and assistance from professional staff. Casual enquirers usually have to be shown so precisely where to find what they are looking for, that professional staff find it easier to do the work for them. The staff has no option (save that of refusing the query) but to carry out research for the enquirer who writes or telephones and has no opportunity to visit the institution in person.

All of this means that staff time in archives institutions is devoted, to the near exclusion of other and perhaps rather more important work, to assisting historical research workers and to answering enquiries, some of them of rather a trivial nature.

Meanwhile the work of preparing guides, inventories, indexes, and calendars of official records has had to be neglected; if not neglected, it has certainly taken second place in some institutions. It is true, of course, that some institutions in Australia (especially the Archives Office of New South Wales) have established enviable reputations as compilers of finding aids to their records. Nevertheless, it is indisputable that professional staff time has been taken up in institutions all over the country with the preparation

of replies to individual enquiries, while the need for compilation of guides and schedules has had to be given second priority.

Australia's Growing Interest In Its Past

There has been a demonstrably heavy and increasing emphasis on the use of archival sources in Australia in recent years. Many different factors have influenced this, including the occurrence of 150th anniversary celebrations in states of the "second generation" of Australian settlement (Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria), the approach of the bicentenary, the influx of non-British migrants into Australia after World War II (fostering a renewed interest in the predominantly British migration movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and also in some small earlier occurrences of non-British settlement), the greater sophistication of the Australian community, the proliferation of colleges of advanced education in the 1960s and early 1970s, and the growth of opportunities for leisure. Australian society now includes a larger percentage of older people, who have the means and the ability to seek out data on the early history of their state, or their district, or their family. Movements such as the National Trust have stimulated interest in the history of monuments and buildings. Increased emphasis on the importance of the environment has kindled a curiosity about things as they were, or are imagined to have been, in earlier times. The loosening of ties with Great Britain has stimulated the growth of a latter day Australian nationalism. In view of the realities of the world situation, that nationalism is not expressed in terms of jingoism or "Australia über Alles" bombast, nor in extreme xenophobia. It is, however, expressed in a deepening concern to document and to understand the Australian experience. All of this means that archival resources will be more earnestly and, it is to be hoped, effectively used. It also means that they are in danger of being "used up".

Deterioration of Paper

The conservation of Australian archival resources looms as the largest problem that their custodians will have to tackle in the last decade of the 20th century and well into the 21st. Almost all paper made since the 1880s has been based on wood pulp, in the formation of which chemical substances are used. The early rag paper, on which almost all of the earlier records were written, will outlast more recent paper. Modern processes of paper production involve the use of acidic materials, residues of which accelerate the degradation of paper. The atmosphere in modern industrial cities frequently contains sulpher dioxide which, in the presence of moisture, can form sulphuric acid. The heavy use to which some of our archival records are subject adds a new dimension to the problem of disintegration of our archives.

Archives institutions in Australia face a major crisis in this area of conservation. Though conservation laboratories have been established in a

number of them, the huge accumulation of documents that are known to need treatment, and the much greater number of documents that would be found to need treatment if thorough investigation were made, will confound even the most ambitious restoration program. In fact, no government archives institution has launched or is likely to be able to launch, a program to cope with the problem.

Microfilming Programs

The establishment of microcopying programs in all archival institutions may provide an answer of a sort to the problems discussed in the latter sections of this paper. Obviously, microfilming will not solve the problem of deteriorating original material. It will, however, prevent the further deterioration caused by excessive handling of material in heavy use in archives institutions, and as reproduction of further copies of microfilm is comparatively inexpensive, the same process will help distribute more widely the sources of Australian history. The Australian Joint Copying Project has enabled microfilm copies to be made of historical source material held in the Public Record Office, London, and in other repositories in Great Britain, as well as of some material from Ireland and the continent of Europe. The resulting rolls of film produced in this project have been made available to various co-operating libraries in Australia, and this is a good example of a project of distributing the raw material of historical study so that it is readily available to scholars who want it. A program of copying materials of prime importance in the archives institutions of Australia would also be well worth investigating.

Publication of Finding Aids

Similarly, some planning ought to be done for the publication of guides to the use of key series of documents in Australian archives institutions. As long ago as 1954, when Dr TR Schellenberg, Director of Archival Management in the United States National Archives, visited Australia, a program of publishing inventories of pre-federation archives was announced. Some State Archives have established and maintained a program of producing such finding aids, or something similar to them. The majority have not. Though there can be no centralised direction in this matter, and therefore the degree to which an institution observes the overall timetable of production will depend upon its own assessment of priorities, and possibly on outside influences as well, it is nevertheless desirable that the nature of the problem be investigated, and some recommendations prepared.

Conclusion

This paper has dealt with several major areas of concern to public archives institutions, and has proposed two programs — a microfilming project, and a planning operation for inventory preparation — which might assist. It has also drawn attention to the major threat facing archives institutions — and indeed those libraries that preserve material for

posterity — in Australia: that is, the threat of document disintegration.

It is suggested that the Australian Libraries and Information Council should set about finding ways of further delineating the problems and presenting suggestions for action to improve the effectiveness, and the chances of survival, of the archives institutions of this country.

Editor's Note

Along with the above paper tabled at the Australian Libraries Information Council meeting was one called "Archival arrangement for machine readable records and scientific data records", a topic not dealt with by Robert Sharman. The second paper is actually a copy of a memo by the CSIRO Archivist to the Chairman of the CSIRO Committee of Review: Administrative Arrangements. The author Colin Smith feels it is not suitable for publication in its present form, but will re-write it for the next issue of *Archives and Manuscripts.*