

New South Wales Parliamentary Archives

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This article is based upon a paper presented to the Annual General Meeting of the Sydney Branch of the Australian Society of Archivists on 23 April 1982. The Archives of the Parliament of New South Wales were established in February 1981. They are, at this time, the only Parliamentary Archives in Australia in existence as a distinctive entity. What follows is a brief history of the events that led to the appointment of the first Archivist; a description of the actual records; an explanation of the arrangement and description procedures, and of the computer indexing project; and a brief discussion of the problems that were encountered.

Historical Background

The establishment of the Archives of the New South Wales Parliament was bedevilled by the inaction and short-sightedness that is the all too common lot of many archivists. Eventually it was an "act of God" that precipitated a minor crisis and led to a decision.

The idea was first raised in 1974 by the Clerk of Printed Papers of the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales. He suggested to the Archives Office of New South Wales that they contact the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly and raise with him the subject of the appointment of an Archivist to "have the care and control of the records".¹

Subsequently the Archives Office sent a letter to the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, Mr J. Cameron, who was, also, a member of the Archives Authority of New South Wales. This letter dwelt upon the legal right of the Archives Authority to exercise its custodial powers over the records of the State Parliament, a function that was dependent on the definition of public office as enshrined in the Archives Act. The Act defines a public office as "any department, office, commission, board, corporation, agency, or instrument of any kind, performing any functions of any branch of the Government of New South Wales"², and, in the opinion of the Crown Solicitor given in 1966, excludes the records of the State Parliament. Mr Justice Collins, Chairman of the Archives Authority, also maintained that the records of Parliament had complete immunity from the provisions of the Archives Act since Parliament was an institution *sui generis*. The letter to Mr Cameron, mentioned above, put the opinion of the Archives Office "Parliament is not a 'Public Office'

within the terms of this definition and the Archives Authority therefore has no right, legal or otherwise, to the custody or control of Parliamentary records".³ Since State Parliament had shown no commitment to proper care of their early records, this denial of responsibility by the Archives Office left the continued existence of the Parliamentary archives to the whims of fate, which are notoriously unkind to mere paper documents.

It would, however, be unfair to suggest the Archives Authority displayed no interest in the fate of the records. Their letter to the Speaker went on to say "Nevertheless many of the records... are of enormous value... Their preservation is therefore of the utmost importance. One way of ensuring this would be to appoint an official Parliamentary Archivist."⁴ The Speaker replied "I will ensure that immediate consideration is given to this suggestion."⁵ Nevertheless, despite this exchange of correspondence and a meeting between the Principal Archivist and the Speaker, nothing came of these tentative overtures.

The matter rested in this state of limbo until March 1975, when an unusually heavy fall of rain and a blocked drainpipe caused the basement room, in which the records were kept, to be flooded to a depth of three feet. This event aroused a certain amount of consternation among the staff of the Legislative Assembly, since Members Rolls, which contain signatures of all members of Parliament, were stored in this room and consequently were under water for some time. The disaster was even mentioned in the Legislative Assembly by the Acting Speaker.

I have given approval to the Clerk to remove from the offices all papers and documents considered necessary to be removed for safe keeping... I thought I should advise honorable members of that situation in view of the number of questions that I have been asked about the matter and in view of the great importance attached to the keeping of the records of this House".⁶

As thus foreshadowed the records were removed from Parliament and eventually stored at the Government Records Repository, Kingswood. Despite this minor catastrophe there was still no definite action to revive the idea of appointing a Parliamentary Archivist.

Although nothing further seems to have occurred for the next five years, moves were in fact being made behind the scenes to establish the Parliamentary Archives. In September 1980 the Public Service Board contacted the Principal Archivist concerning a submission from the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly about the appointment of a Parliamentary Archivist. The Public Service Board indicated that it would support the creation of such a position provided it was on the Archives Office establishment. The Principal Archivist then recommended to the Archives Authority that it support this suggestion and on 10 December 1980 the Premier's Department advised the Principal Archivist that approval had been given for the creation of the position, to be known as Assistant Senior Archivist, Parliament House. This designation kept the position within the

organisational structure of the Archives Office. An initial appointment was made in February 1981 and the present incumbent commenced duties in May 1981.

The statement of duties of the position explains the lines of responsibility and the specific functions of the Archivist:

Responsible to: the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly

Responsible for: the care and custody of the Archives of the New South Wales Parliament, including:

1. Preparing Disposal Recommendations for the consideration of the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly;
2. Accessioning and processing the archives of Parliament under the professional supervision of the Principal Archivist, Archives Office of New South Wales;
3. Supervising the conservation and repair programme;
4. Preparing guides and finding aids to the Archives, preparing selected guides for publication;
5. Answering enquiries from Members of Parliament and officers of the Parliament using material in the Archives;
6. Answering written and telephone research enquiries from the public;
7. Preparing reports and statistics as required;
8. The performance of any other duties which may be assigned by the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly.

The statement of responsibilities is somewhat misleading in referring without qualification to "the Archives of the New South Wales Parliament..." for none of the post-1855 records of the Legislative Council have as yet been handed over to the care of the Parliamentary Archivist.

The Records

When the basement storeroom was flooded in March 1975, approximately one-third of the loose documents, as well as 94 bound volumes, including the Members Rolls, were soaked. The Legislative Assembly appealed to the Archives Office and staff were soon provided to move the records to safer, dry accommodation in the State Library. After initial drying of the loose documents there the records were transferred to the Australian Archives repository at Villawood, where they were dried in a large loading dock which has separate air-conditioning from the rest of the building. This work was supervised by the Australian Archives' Conservator, Neville Corbett, who reported on the state of the records before and after the drying procedures. The report said in part:

The bulk of the material collected consisted of large bundles of documents measuring up to 12 inches thick tightly clinched between filingboard with straps or string... All bundles collected were soaked, there was a strong smell of mould, and many were already slimy... The Australian Archives vehicle... delivered the material to Villawood Archives Repository where it was laid in rows on the floor of the loading dock to drain... The bundles were then hand dried with blotting paper... The bundles were sprayed with a Thymol

mixture... Fans were arranged to circulate the air and flush it out of the loading dock... The outside of the bundles dried out after a week. The process was hastened by transporting the bundles on conveyors out of the dock and into the open air when the wind was in a favourable quarter, (south to south-west, and therefore dry)... A daily inspection was made and when the bundles were dry enough the bundles were arranged on metal shelves... Periodic tests with the electronic moisture probe were made to confirm the drying rate.⁷

It was also recommended that the records be fumigated as a matter of urgency by the Queensland State Archives. This suggestion was agreed to by all concerned, the work was carried out in Brisbane and the records were returned to the Government Records Repository at Kingswood, N.S.W. Here they were stored in standard archival boxes until their transfer to the city premises of the State Archives for arrangement and description.

The records in custody can be broadly separated into two distinct groups. Firstly there are those records created by the legislature itself i.e. the Legislative Council in the years 1824 to 1855, and in the Legislative Assembly, from 1856 to the present. These records are predominantly manuscript, and consist of bills and tabled documents. The tabled documents include despatches, Governors' addresses, statistical returns, reports of select committees, petitions, oaths of allegiance, etc. They are supplemented by the control records created for the bills and tabled papers, namely Registers of Papers, and Indexes to the Registers; and some correspondence. The second broad group consists of those records created by the staff of the Legislative Assembly as "house keeping" records. These include such things as Attendance Books, Salary Registers, Cash Books and so on.

There are a number of boxes of papers relating to the Empire (later Commonwealth) Parliamentary Association,

"an organisation to promote co-operation and understanding among the countries of the British Commonwealth... Full membership is available to all sitting members of parliament... In Australia there is a branch in each state parliament... The Clerk of the House in each legislature concerned usually acts as branch secretary."⁸

A quantity of documents formerly held relating to the Federal Conventions of 1891 and 1897-8, was transferred to the custody of the Australian Archives in 1976.

Arrangement and Description

A preliminary survey of the bundles of pre-1856 manuscript records revealed that they had, at an unknown date, undergone fairly drastic rearrangement. In some boxes, the records of several successive sessions had been tied in the same bundle; many bundles contained individual

documents from earlier or later sessions, in some cases a dozen years apart. A bundle for the first session of 1846 contained a number of oaths of allegiance for the years 1847, 1848, and 1849, all clearly dated as such; in another the bundle for the session of 1847 contained a report which had been tabled in 1845, and so on. These are fairly inconsequential examples, but a lengthy study of all the bundles revealed no discernible arrangement based on chronology, subject, form or function. These circumstances, as well as the indiscriminate mixing of papers from two sessions in the same year, were evidence of major disarray. There are no registers or indexes for the period from 1824 to 1855, and no other source that might serve to reveal the original arrangement of the records.

According to Jenkinson "the only correct basis for Arrangement is exposition of the Administrative objects which the Archives originally served", so any purposeful arrangement of the Parliamentary archives should serve to illustrate the way that Parliament functioned and the manner in which its records were created. If we accept that Parliament functions by session rather than calendar year (and this is how the records were bundled) then a number of, admittedly simplistic, assumptions can be made. Parliament is a legislative body which in order to have full and proper debate on the various issues before it, needs to be supplied with information in the form of documents which are tabled during the sessions. The major visible activity of Parliament is the enactment of legislation; in other words the production of Acts and the associated Bills. It is therefore reasonable to keep Acts and Bills separate from the Tabled Papers, which represent the sources of information for members. Finally, Schellenberg says that if the arrangement of the records on accession "does not contribute to an understanding of organic activity, he [i.e. the archivist] should... have no compunction about changing it, so as to make the records intelligible and serviceable".¹⁰ Using this as a basis, it was decided to treat the records of the Legislative Council, 1824-55, in the following manner:

1. For each session the documents are listed and fully described as they appear in the relevant bundles. (This is basically an inventory of items.)
2. Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Council are thoroughly searched to determine the date of tabling of each document and the date of introduction of each Bill. The original list is annotated with these dates as well as the page numbers if the particular document is printed.
3. The inventory of items is completely re-written listing the documents in the order mentioned above, i.e.:
 - (i) Public Acts: by number (order of assent) and noting the date of introduction of original Bill;
 - (ii) Private Acts: by date of assent, also noting date of introduction of the Bill;

- (iii) Bills: by date of introduction and showing the reason for dismissal;
- (iv) Tabled Papers: by date and order of tabling, the Votes and Proceedings page reference is noted if the document has been printed;
- (v) Documents not tabled: by intended date if it can be determined, arbitrarily if not;
- (vi) Correspondence: by date of letter, showing author and subject.

4. The records are then bundled in acid-free wrappers, according to this new arrangement, and stored in standard archival boxes.

A considerable amount of time was spent reading archival texts and discussing the problems with other archivists before any decisions were made. This approach seems to be justified by the state of the records on accession and the manner in which the post — 1855 Legislative Assembly records were kept. It is hoped that what has been done has served to make the records both “intelligible and serviceable”.¹¹

Indexing

At an early stage in the processing it was realised that an index would be needed. A card index of these documents, which number around 5,000 for the early period, would be so time consuming as to make it an impossible task. Fortunately the ADP branch of the Public Service Board has an indexing programme running on one of their computers (a Burroughs 7700). This is a Keyword Out of Context (KWOC) index, an index that selects the keyword from the title and arranges them all in a listing in alphabetical order, with the titles beside them. (see figure 1)

Titles are limited to 80 characters, of which 15 are reserved for date and location, so a certain amount of consistency in titles and standardisation is needed. To this end, data preparation sheets are filled out, one title per line, and from these sheets punch cards are produced. These text cards, together with a number of instruction cards are fed into a card reader and a print-out of the index is produced some four to six hours later. This index has the great advantage of offering many points of access to the information. For example, an entry that reads, “Return of number of convicts on assignment in private service” will be indexed under the terms: assignment, convicts, number, private, return, and service. The basic programme would also have indexed the entry under the words in, of, and on, except that one of the instruction cards tells the computer to ignore a whole list of prepositions, conjunctions and the like as indexing terms. A facility is also available to instruct the computer to ignore up to 200 other specific words not desired as indexing terms. Finally, if the data base becomes large enough to warrant it, it can be stored on disc in the computer and updated with punch cards. This would also enable access to the index through a remote terminal, rather than only through a print-out as at present.

CARD NUMBER

TEXT CARD

INDEX WORD

PRINCESS	DESPATCH 32..FROM E STANLEY RE BIRTH OF A PRINCESS	14/08/1844	LA031	000302
PRISONERS	RETURN OF CONDITION OF PRISONERS TRIED AT QUARTER-SESSIONS	1844	LA032	000354
"	RETURN OF FREE PERSONS AND PRISONERS TRIED FROM 1/01-31/05/1844	1844	LA032	000353
"	RETURN OF NUMBER AND DISTRIBUTION OF PRISONERS IN NSW	9/10/1843	LA026	000156
"	RETURN OF PRISONERS FROM NORFOLK-ISLAND ARRIVING IN SYDNEY	5/06/1844	LA030	000251
"	STATEMENT RE PRISONERS IN DARLINGHURST GARD	1843	LA029	000223
PRIVATE	RETURN OF NUMBER OF CONVICTS ON ASSIGNMENT IN PRIVATE SERVICE	9/10/1843	LA026	000155
PRIVILEGE	PROCEEDINGS IN COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON PRIVILEGE OF P GRANT	1845	LA035	000481
PROCEEDINGS	MESSAGE FROM GOVERNOR GIPPS RE VALIDITY OF COUNCIL PROCEEDINGS	30/05/1844	LA030	000231
"	PROCEEDINGS IN COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON ADDITIONAL APPROPRIATIONS	1845	LA035	000479
"	PROCEEDINGS IN COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON PRIVILEGE OF P GRANT	1845	LA035	000481
"	PROCEEDINGS IN COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES	1845	LA035	000478
"	PROCEEDINGS IN COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON THE CORN PETITION	1845	LA035	000480
"	PROCEEDINGS IN COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON THE ESTIMATES	1845	LA035	000477
"	PROCEEDINGS IN COMMITTEE OF WHOLE ON ESTIMATES	1844	LA032	000360
"	PROCEEDINGS OF COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON THE ESTIMATES	1843	LA029	000222
"	PROPOSED STANDING-ORDERS, WITH PROCEEDINGS IN COMMITTEE	15/08/1843	LA025	000063
PRODUCE	RETURN OF EXPORTS OF PRODUCE TO AMERICA, FROM 1838 TO 1842	27/09/1843	LA026	000147
"	RETURN OF EXPORTS OF PRODUCE TO VAN-DIEMEN'S-LAND, 1838 TO 1842	27/09/1843	LA026	000146
PROFITS	ABSTRACTS OF ASSETS, LIABILITIES, CAPITAL AND PROFITS OF BANKS	31/07/1845	LA035	000460
"	ABSTRACTS OF ASSETS, LIABILITIES, CAPITAL AND PROFITS OF BANKS	5/06/1844	LA030	000246
"	ABSTRACTS OF ASSETS, LIABILITIES, CAPITAL AND PROFITS OF BANKS	15/08/1843	LA026	000091
"	ABSTRACTS OF ASSETS, LIABILITIES, CAPITAL AND PROFITS OF BANKS	31/07/1845	LA034	000370
"	COMPARATIVE STATEMENT OF ASSETS, LIABILITIES, CAPITAL AND PROFITS	5/06/1844	LA030	000247
PROPERTY	MESSAGE FROM GOVERNOR GIPPS RE INSECURITY OF LIFE AND PROPERTY	27/11/1844	LA032	000336
PROPOSED	PROPOSED STANDING-ORDERS, WITH PROCEEDINGS IN COMMITTEE	15/08/1843	LA025	000063
PROJUGATION	SPEECH OF GOVERNOR GIPPS ON PROROGATION OF COUNCIL	8/03/1844	LA029	000227
"	SPEECH OF GOVERNOR GIPPS ON PROROGATION OF COUNCIL	13/11/1845	LA035	000472
"	SPEECH OF GOVERNOR GIPPS ON PROROGATION OF COUNCIL	28/12/1843	LA029	000219
"	SPEECH OF GOVERNOR ON PROROGATION OF COUNCIL	30/12/1844	LA032	000352
PROTECTOR	LETTER FROM LA-TROBE WITH REPORTS FROM PROTECTOR OF ABORIGINES	12/10/1843	LA026	000164
PROTECTORATE	RETURN TO ADDRESS RE ABORIGINAL PROTECTORATE AT PORT-PHILLIP	21/10/1845	LA035	000450
PROTHONOTARY	DESPATCH 12..FROM E STANLEY RE APPOINTMENT OF PROTHONOTARY	27/09/1843	LA026	000140
"	LETTER FROM SUPREME COURT JUDGES RE APPOINTMENT OF PROTHONOTARY	20/10/1843	LA027	000176
"	MARRANS OF PROTHONOTARY AND SUPREME COURT REGISTRAR	5/09/1844	LA032	000315
PUBLIC	MESSAGE FROM GOVERNOR GIPPS RE COMPENSATION TO PUBLIC OFFICERS	19/12/1843	LA029	000212

At present indexes are available for the periods 1824-42, 1843-5, 1846-8, and 1849-53. It is anticipated that a cumulated index covering the years 1824 to 1855 will be completed in March 1983.

Problems

The only problems apparent at present are perhaps those most commonly in the minds of archivists, namely conservation, accommodation, and access.

The major problem facing the Parliamentary archives is that of conservation. In November 1981 a report on the condition of the records and the conservation and restoration measures needed was presented to the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, who, in turn, presented it to the Speaker. In the course of preparing this report, a number of documents were tested with an electronic pH meter to determine their pH levels. The majority of documents tested gave readings between 4.1 and 5.0, with some registering below 4.0. As 5.5 is considered a high acidity count it is obvious that acidity is the most serious threat to the records.

The report stated that the entire collection of loose documents needed to be de-acidified to a pH level of between 9 and 10, and that all the bound volumes which had been wet in the 1975 flood needed to be fumigated, unbound, de-acidified, and rebound in new covers. The report ended by recommending the immediate appointment of a manuscript restorer for a year initially, with further extension of his term to be considered at the end of the financial year 1982/3. It also requested funds for the purchase of the essential stores needed to enable the conservation and restoration work to be carried out. It was envisaged that the manuscript restorer should be employed for at least three years, but the current situation is that only enough funds have been allocated for his employment for six months during this financial year. In the present economic climate it seems unlikely that funds will be available for the continuation of this project next financial year. Should this be so, it is doubtful if these irreplaceable early legislative archives will survive into the next century.

Accommodation does not present the same problem that conservation does, at least in the short term. The records are stored at present in the Government Records Repository at Kingswood under an informal arrangement between the Archives Office and the Legislative Assembly. The only problem associated with this arrangement is the minor delay, in the order of 48 hours, involved when having records retrieved from Kingswood. The New South Wales Government is currently constructing another building on the Parliament House site. This building has an area set aside for storage of the Legislative Assembly archives — although there is a great deal of uncertainty as to just how much space. There certainly appears to be nowhere that could be used as a reference area. The whole of the proposed area is only large enough to house the entire collection and absorb the increase for the next eight to ten years. As is so often the case,

the archivist was not consulted about the needs of the archives — in fact the contract for the compactus shelving had already been let by the time he was informed of the existence of an area for the archives.

Access is perhaps the least problematical area to be dealt with. Only seven inquiries have been received in 15 months, but this must be due to general ignorance of the existence of the archives. During 1983 it is intended to inform all universities in Australia, and other archival institutions, of the establishment of the New South Wales Parliamentary Archives and the records available for searching. At present the policy is to give access to holders of current reader's tickets for the Archives Office of New South Wales. However, this policy will change once the archives are relocated at Parliament House (July-August 1983).

The Archives of the Parliament of New South Wales is a young institution even by Australian standards — not yet two years old, yet it is, at time of writing, the only Parliamentary Archives in the country. Dating, as they do, from 1824 and being the records of the oldest legislature in Australia, they represent a unique and irreplaceable source of legislative information. Their establishment has been an interesting and yet frustrating experience — it is to be hoped that the New South Wales example will encourage other State Governments to begin preserving their own Parliamentary archives.

NOTES

1. Archives Office of New South Wales: Correspondence file 74/260
2. New South Wales Archives Act, No 464 of 1960
3. Archives Office of New South Wales: Correspondence file 74/260
4. *Ibid*
5. *Ibid*
6. New South Wales — Parliament — Parliamentary Debates
Volume 116, 3rd series, Session 1974-5, p4770
7. N. Corbett to P. Scott, 16 April 1975 — Archives Office of
New South Wales: Correspondence file 75/65
8. *The Australian Encyclopaedia*, Volume 2; Sydney 1977, p71.
9. Sir Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archives Administration*,
2 ed.rev., London 1967, p97.
10. T.R. Schellenberg: *The Management of Archives*, New York. 1965 p102.
11. *Ibid*