

The Australian Archives Administrative History Chronicle: A Unique Resource

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The Administrative History Chronicle is compiled by the Australian Archives in order to assist its production of finding aids and other reference material which assist public and official users of records in the organisation's custody. The Chronicle is a source of information about the structure, function and history of Commonwealth agencies and about changes to the machinery of government. The Chronicle also includes biographical information about individuals closely associated with the Commonwealth Government and information on records-related developments. It is based on material drawn from the national newspapers, Commonwealth Gazettes, Hansard, official Press Releases and other sources. This article is an edited version of a paper presented to the 2nd National Conference on Administrative History.

The Australian Archives is the national agency responsible for the broad management of the records produced by the Commonwealth Government. This responsibility involves the development and administration of policies, procedures and machinery relating to the control, custody, disposal, storage and accessibility of the records created by Commonwealth Departments, Statutory Authorities, Federal Courts or Tribunals and Parliament.

The Australian Archives has a vital interest in administrative history, as its management of those records is essentially carried out through the CRS System.¹ The CRS (or Commonwealth Record Series) System places each record and the body which created it in its administrative and informational context. The Archives documents all records produced by the Commonwealth Government whether they were produced fifty years ago or yesterday. At the same time it documents the agencies producing those records.

Of necessity, the Australian Archives does significantly more than simply describe or list each agency and its records. The CRS System makes the records accessible and intelligible by seeking to reconstruct the total

administrative context of every record and agency. Each group of records (usually described as a 'series') is linked to the agency or agencies which created it and to associated series (for example to the index cards for a series of correspondence files). Each series is also linked to the series which performed the same function before its creation and that which assumed its function when the series ceased. Similarly, each agency is linked to the agency from which it inherited functions, records or legislation and to the agency or agencies which replaced it. The same agency is linked to other bodies which it controlled and to those which in turn controlled it.

The structure of the CRS System provides for the integrity of all records to be respected, documenting the order or methods by which they were created and used by their agencies. The same process necessitates the preparation by the Australian Archives of accurate and comprehensive documentation which describes and analyses every component of the Commonwealth administration. The increasing rate of administrative change and the growth of the organisation's responsibilities have meant that the preparation of this documentation is an ongoing process. As mentioned previously, the Australian Archives documents agencies which ceased to exist thirty years ago and those which have been created since then. It is therefore engaged not merely in the administrative history of defunct structures, but must also engage in 'contemporary history' or 'current' administrative history, documenting bodies and records which are still active or have just begun.

During the 1960's the Australian Archives gathered information on agencies and records through contact with the agencies and through examination of the records. However, it became apparent that a more systematic source of information on Commonwealth administrative structures was required.

In early 1970, the method chosen was to chronicle the changes in administrative history as they occurred; to assemble source documents from the press, for example, and then to record the changes in a straightforward chronological listing with summaries of the major events, dates and sources in much the same way as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle recorded significant happenings.

The Administrative History Chronicle was started in 1970, although the Chief Archivist had long conceived the idea of such a thing. When it was first begun, though without permanent full-time staff, there were two distinct operations:

- a) the selection of source material from articles in the media, from the Government Gazettes or legislation
- b) the listing of major events (an inventory of events) in chronological order.

The original sources used to compile the Administrative History

Chronicle were:²

- *The Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*
- *The Canberra Times*
- *The Australian*
- *The Courier*
- *The Sunday Post*

Administrative Arrangements Orders, Directories and legislation were soon added to the sources. For the first three years press clippings were kept in separate sequences of folders for each organisation³ and within each folder the clippings were in chronological order. The actual listing of major events in chronological order was also undertaken, despite staff shortages, as this index to source material was seen as of prime importance since it could be easily copied and maintained in different locations and independently formed a significant finding aid. In 1970 the lists were compiled weekly and amalgamated at a later date with lists from sources that were not available daily, such as Ministerial Press Releases. Early guidelines for topics were:

- (a) Commonwealth administrative history
- (b) Administrative history of the Australian states
- (c) Biographical material relating to politicians and public servants
- (d) Local and administrative history of the Commonwealth territories
- (e) Matters relating to the Commonwealth Archives Office
- (f) Changes in location of Government offices
- (g) New or altered place names, e.g., suburbs of Canberra
- (h) Legislation.

A typical extract from an early listing reads:

1970 Nov.8 CA..., Australian Embassy The Hague
First Ambassador to Denmark
CP..., Dr Lloyd Douglass Thomson.

Dr L.D. Thomson, Australian Ambassador
Designate to the Netherlands
concurrently appointed first Australian
Ambassador to the Kingdom of Denmark.

Statement by the Minister, Mr W. McMahon
News Release M/104, 8 November 1970
(Relates to CA..., Australian Embassy,
The Hague)

CA..., Australian Embassy, Denmark
 CP..., Dr Lloyd Douglass Thomson).

These early selections show that the basic philosophy of the Chronicle has not changed over the last thirteen years. However, the structure and emphasis of the Chronicle has changed significantly. The listing of events, the second activity of the Chronicle, was suspended in 1974.

The structure of the first part of the Administrative History Chronicle, that is, the selection and arrangement of source material — now the only existing Chronicle — has changed quite significantly. Initially, the basic structure reflected only the top structure of the CRS system into organisations, with material on persons kept separately. From 1970 to 1973 the Chronicle was arranged in chronological order by date of event, with separate sequences for each organisation. Bibliographical and biographical material was in alphabetical order, regardless of the category, and was also filed separately. From 1970 the amount of material selected increased annually to reach a peak by 1975, stimulated partially by the increasing rate of administrative change but largely as a result of the broadening of the selection criteria. At this stage all political comment was included (as was a cross section of articles on the same subject, in order to avoid bias), editorials, election campaign material, cartoons and photographs, all the Governor-General's speeches and the Prime Minister's press conferences. There was also a similar degree of detail for organisations other than the Commonwealth Government.

By 13 March 1971, the Chronicle was also viewed as an 'intelligence' or current awareness service and by 1973 it was a well used source of information, even providing information on request to the Department of the Special Minister of State. It was also used in the early years for keeping up-to-date a copy of the Government Directory in the Context and Documentation Control Section for use by officers preparing descriptive documentation on Commonwealth agencies. More significantly, during 1973 it was a major source of information for the *Australian Government Directory* which was compiled by the Archives at that time. By mid-1973 the portion of the Chronicle devoted to the structure of the Commonwealth of Australia was subdivided into General, Legislature (Parliament), Judicature and Executive, the Executive sequence being further divided into folders for each Department of State. For each year the Chronicle is arranged in chronological order within each Departmental folder or set of folders. This arrangement reflects the structure of the Commonwealth Government and hence the framework inherent in the CRS system, making the Chronicle a complementary finding aid.

In 1977 a Vice-Regal folder was added to the structure, containing reports of the daily activities of the Governor-General from the *Canberra Times*. However, this material was rarely used and in 1983 its selection was

discontinued. Significant information relating to appointment of Governors-General and the responsibilities of the Office is now selected and indexed in the biographical section of the Chronicle — a section which consists of folders arranged alphabetically. These folders contain information on persons closely associated with the Commonwealth Government — Ministers, senior personnel in the Public Service and senior members of the Judiciary. There is currently one set of biographical folders only; the original idea of maintaining a set for each organisation was found to be unsatisfactory in view of the small amount of material collected for some organisations.

In November 1977, the section of the Administrative History Chronicle devoted to records issues, archival developments and operations was expanded to contain the following categories

Archives A	Australian Archives
Archives B	Australia — other Archives and related institutions
Archives C	Overseas Archival and related institutions
Archives D	Archives — technical aspects
Archives E	Australian Capital Territory local history

A further folder, 'Archives F', containing book reviews relating to works by or about Commonwealth persons and agencies was added in 1982/83.

Intermittently the question of initiating regional Chronicles was considered. Regional Chronicles were started in New South Wales and South Australia in 1975 and in Western Australia in 1983. Regional staff sometimes submitted material on local agencies from the local papers for inclusion in the main Chronicle and from the mid 1970's were provided with copies of material that was of particular relevance to them.

By 1978 the secondary uses of the Chronicle had been redefined. Apart from its main function of providing a highly structured and accessible source of information for the production of finding aids, it was seen primarily as a means of selectively disseminating information by making staff aware of changes in the structure of Government; in the short term it also identified new agencies or changes in agency status and could be used as a research aid in preparing documentation. The publication of an inventory of events (a digest of administrative history) was by this stage viewed as a future project.

During the late 1970's effort focussed on the Commonwealth Government section of the Chronicle and the related Selective Dissemination of Information Service. Folders on the States virtually ceased. By 1981, interest was shown in providing a more specific selection of material and in reviving the folders on the States without, however, using overly broad selection criteria. At about this time the whole *raison*

d'être of the Chronicle was under question in view of the amount of space it occupied.

During 1982 alternative sources for the information provided by the Chronicle were investigated, following recommendations of the Joint Management Review into the Australian Archives.⁴ However, after surveys of various commercial and Government agencies with sophisticated current awareness sources, the Chronicle's unique character and value became more apparent. Following these investigations it was clear that the Chronicle was an invaluable source for the information required by the Australian Archives on the changing structure of Government.

Selection policy by 1982 had become more clearly defined and had concentrated on providing one factual article from the newspapers on each event rather than a representative group and had excluded any editorials or press speculation. The administrative history element of the Chronicle itself, the actual arrangement of information, had by 1982 come much nearer to the original concept of an inventory of events. Whilst most administrative changes were represented by an article or gazettal or press release there was none of the duplication or general comment of the early collections.

The Chronicle is now viewed as a highly structured resource covering the Commonwealth as a whole (including biographical information on persons closely associated with the Commonwealth) and providing succinct current information, from both primary sources and the media which can be used either independently as a finding aid or in conjunction with other finding aids. In particular, the section of the Chronicle dealing with the administrative history of Departments of State encompasses the following areas:

- creation/abolition of Departments and associated agencies,
- appointment to Ministers,
- changes to senior personnel of the Department and associated agencies — appointments, promotions, retirements,
- changes to addresses of agencies,
- changes to record-keeping systems (ie, introduction of ADP systems),
- establishment and activities of Royal Commissions, and Official Inquiries,
- movement of agencies between Departments,
- changes to the functions of agencies.

While the Chronicle is regarded as a vital source of information on

Commonwealth agencies, there is also a growing awareness within the Australian Archives of the value of the Chronicle to other agencies, professionals and the public. The changing relationship between society and the bureaucracy (expressed in the concepts of openness, privacy and public redress) is stimulating increasing interest in the apparatus of Government, in its structure and in the way it operates. What Government is doing, and what functions the agencies are responsible for, are now of increasing relevance to a broad spectrum of people. While the Chronicle will remain a basic working tool for the Australian Archives, the organisation is seeking to explore the value it might have to others and is investigating ways of making it available to a wider audience.

Fraser recruits ministerial aid

CANBERRA, Monday. — The Prime Minister, Mr Fraser, has appointed two ministers to help him in matters affecting the arts and women's affairs.

Policies in both fields are specific responsibilities of the Prime Minister's Department.

The Minister for the Capital Territory, Mr Staley, will assist in matters of the arts and the Minister for Employment and Industrial Relations, Mr Street, in women's matters.

Mr Street will be concerned particularly with co-ordinating the women's policy units recently established in various Federal Departments. He also assists the Prime Minister in Public Service matters.

Mr Staley will handle issues relating to the Australia Council, the Australian National Gallery, the Film Commission and the Film and Television School.

The Prime Minister will continue to be involved in major policy considerations.

Source: THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

17. AUG. 1976

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Australian Archives

Special group to study report

From MICHELLE GRATTAN

CANBERRA. — The Federal Government has set up a special group within the Prime Minister's Department to handle the massive Coombs report on Government administration.

The group, headed by a first assistant secretary, Mr. Ayers, will break the reports 340 proposals down into submissions suitable for presentation to Cabinet.

The report, which has 480 pages in its main volume and another four large volumes of appendices, will be released on Sunday.

The Royal Commission on Government Administration headed by Dr. H. C. Coombs, spent two years preparing it.

It is understood to recommend an effective cut-back of the sweeping power that Treasury has within the bureaucracy.

It suggests the creation of a new "Department of Industry and The Economy".

Such a department would have under it statutory bodies like the Prices Justification Tribunal, Industries Assistance Commission, and Trade Practices Tribunal.

The department would be concerned with long term economic planning.

The report is also understood to favor an economic council which would give advice to the Government.

The commission has proposed that department heads should have greater power over the finances of their department and Treasury rather less than at present.

The report is understood to recommend that people recruited from outside the Public Service to head departments should be hired on a limited tenure basis.

Source: THE AGE 29 JUL 1976

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FOOTNOTES

1. P.J. Scott, G. Finlay and C. Smith "Archives and Administrative Change: Some methods and approaches" *Archives and Manuscripts* Vol. 7 No. 3, August 1978; Vol. 7 No. 4, April 1979; Vol. 8 No. 1, June 1980; Vol. 8 No. 2, December 1980.
2. The newspapers changed over the years. In place of the *Courier* and the *Sunday Post* the Australian Archives now uses the *Canberra Times*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Age*, the *Financial Review*, the *Australian* and the *National Times*.
3. 'Organisation' is used within the Australian Archives to mean: a whole government, church, society or company, which is broadly independent or autonomous, is responsible for recognisable functions or activities, and operates through the medium of agencies (ie, administrative bodies which produce records).
4. The Joint Management Review of the Australian Archives commenced on 10 November 1980. It was conducted by the Public Service Board and the Department of Home Affairs and Environment with the aim of reviewing the management, policies, operational arrangements and organisation of the Australian Archives and submitting proposals for both short and long term improvements.