



*“ . . . in the Agora ”*

In the last issue, the Editor introduced this new section with references to the origins and significance of its name. For the ancient Greeks the “agora” was a gathering-place where people exchanged information and ideas; it was also a market-place. This section is therefore an opportunity to push your own barrow, and to overcome your agoraphobia . . .

For this issue, I would like to take up the theme of the market-place. The notions of a market and of operating within the market-place are foreign to many archivists and archival institutions. Yet, these and similar notions are increasingly important for us.

For archival businesses, such as consultants, as with any business, the definition and survey of the market, and the promotion of business within the market, are normal and essential tasks. No-one would argue with the consulting archivist’s need to develop and exercise marketing and other business skills in order for the business to survive and grow.

In the public sector, there is growing pressure from governments on their instrumentalities to operate more like businesses. The adoption of business management techniques, the “user pays” principle and cross-charging by government bodies are some of the results of this pressure. Public sector archival institutions are affected as much as any other parts of the public sector. Here, these developments have most obviously been reflected in pressure to raise more revenue, by charging public and

corporate clients for archival services and products, by undertaking small marketing ventures to exploit parts of the collection, and by seeking corporate sponsorship for exhibitions and similar activities. In addition, public sector archives are adopting the whole range of business management techniques that we are seeing throughout the public sector.

Leaving aside the question of how desirable it is for a large part of the archival community to travel along this path, it is worth asking whether there are any natural limits to these developments and to their successful application in the archival area. The following are some of the possible limits or barriers which come to mind.

In the private sector, profit is the main motivation for a business to improve its performance, just as profitability is its main measure of success. For individuals employed by businesses, a range of profit-related incentives can be used to encourage individual and corporate performance, including bonuses, commissions and profit-sharing schemes. For archivists and managers in public sector archives, where is the incentive to introduce commercial practices, apart from a fear of discipline by superiors or governments and, possibly, a view that these changes are for the public good? It is difficult for governments to expect enthusiasm and imagination for adopting business practices, if they provide nothing in return.

A related limitation will be familiar to all archival operations, but becomes acute for public sector archives operating in this new environment. In the private sector, seeking and developing market-share and new markets are healthy activities leading to the success and growth of the business. Archival institutions tend to ask themselves, perhaps subconsciously, where the sense lies in encouraging further demand for their services when they scarcely have the resources to meet current demand. They are not allowed the flexibility to respond to market opportunities (a government and the public would scream if its archives closed its reference service in order to expand a profitable bulk records storage service) nor the power to increase resources to meet demand (governments still impose staff ceilings).

Further, many public sector bodies, including archives, which provide common services to the rest of that government's apparatus face the real prospect of having to compete with private sector providers of similar services for the former's current business. At the same time, there is little prospect of governments allowing their archives or other common service bodies to compete in the private sector for business. Governments artificially limit the size of the market in which their public sector bodies can operate, and still expect them to sink or swim despite this commercial disadvantage.

A further limitation lies in the fact that the accountability requirements which public sector bodies must now meet in order to satisfy the

expectations of governments, legislatures and the public show no sign of diminishing. Public sector archives tend to be in the accountability spotlight because records are at the heart of accountability. Whatever its justification in terms of public policy, a high level of accountability is costly and brings few returns in a business sense.

Finally, most public sector archival institutions carry out a range of functions, only some of which are suitable for management along commercial lines. Most commonly, the storage and related services provided to other public sector bodies are seen as suitable. For public policy reasons or by their very nature, services to the public and activities like conservation and finding aids work are seen as having little scope for providing a significant financial return. This brings the danger of governments being tempted to split off or privatise profitable functions, leaving the organisation to struggle on with few sources of revenue but major public expectations.

For public sector archives, there are undoubted opportunities and benefits to be found in a more commercial environment. Clearly also, this can only go so far.

David Roberts.