AUSTRALIA AS AN INFORMATION SOCIETY: GRASPING NEW PARADIGMS; AN ASSESSMENT

Sue McKemmish

Having made, with Frank Upward, one of the few archival submissions to the 1990-1 Parliamentary Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies' inquiry into Australia as an information society, Sue McKemmish critically assesses its report. She summarises its conceptual framework and approach to the idea of a National Information Policy and finds them wanting, and compares the submissions covering archives and recordkeeping with the Committee's treatment of related issues. She ends by highlighting the continued impact of the integrity of records on accountability and advocates using the opportunity presented by the release of the report, despite its shortcomings, to influence official policy on records and information matters.

In a provocative article on the information economy, American records management guru Ira Penn suggests that a lot of what is termed Information Resources Management is after all just another suit of the Emperor's New Clothes.[1] The cynics among us may argue that the recently published findings of the House of Representatives Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies' inquiry into Australia as an Information Society[2] represent another such case, although we need to keep in mind that what the Committee might have done is hold up a mirror to our own inadequacies.

The first Report of the Committee addresses terms of reference which include the need for a *National Information Policy* and which elements should be included, equity in information access and

transfer, questions of personal privacy and national sovereignty, and 'information' as a factor in employment, production and export.

The main body of the Report comprises sections on Australia as an Information Society, the Parameters of the Inquiry, a Policy Framework for Information Issues, and a National Information Policy. They are supported by a Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations, a Glossary of Terms, and appendices which include information on the conduct of the inquiry and lists of submissions and witnesses.

The Committee acknowledges that it had difficulties in defining the parameters of the *information society* and in establishing a working definition of information. It has opted for a broad approach which characterises an information society as one in which:

> communications and computer technology have brought about a concentration of the workforce in the collection, processing and manipulation of data and the organisation and transformation of this into information and/or knowledge (p. xiii).

Just how broad an approach this is becomes evident when it is revealed that the information workforce includes teachers, researchers, journalists, artists, writers, entertainers, bureaucrats, accountants, lawyers, bankers, psychiatrists, real estate agents, architects, librarians, museum curators, printers, travel agents, welfare workers and Australia Post courier drivers. The usefulness of such an approach must be questioned in the absence of further analysis of the constituent parts of this workforce and the nature of the contribution they make.

The concept of *information* itself is given an equally broad definition. Early in the Report the Committee refers to the data-information-knowledge-intelligence hierarchy, in which *data* is defined as 'observations or facts which when collected, evaluated and organised become information or knowledge'; *information* — identified as a free good, a resource and a commodity — as data 'processed, organised or classified into categories to serve a useful purpose'; *knowledge* as being wider than information, 'incorporating the subjective concept of knowing; awareness, experience or consciousness . . . (being an) accumulated stock of information'; and *intelligence* as the 'capacity for understanding; (an) aptitude in grasping, interpreting and expressing truths and meaning' (Glossary p. vii-viii). Some general references are made to the importance of understanding the processes which, like the squares in M. C. Escher's *Metamorphosis III* reproduced on the report cover, transform each concept into the next. The transformation of *information* into *knowledge* is said to be dependent on information technology, information communications and systems, and the capacity of individuals to select, store, preserve, disseminate and use information. However, the hierarchical construct is not developed further. The term

information tends to be used throughout the rest of the Report to cover *data* and *knowledge* as well. More and better use of information technology and telecommunications is depicted as the key to Australia's clever country status.

This is an approach which tends to make no distinction between the qualities, values and interrelationships of different types of information. An airline timetable, a legal or medical opinion, an architect's plan, a film or play, a research and development report, a financial statement, an information database, a computerised accounting system, a literary work, a tourist brochure (and so on) are subjected to a process of *homogenisation*. Most critically from the perspective of archivists and records managers, there is no consideration of the different sources of information or any analysis of the unique characteristics and management needs of different information sources.

The Committee sees a *National Information Policy* as being primarily about access to and use of information for a variety of purposes including:

• the development of information products, services and export markets;
• the achievement of social justice goals;
• research and development to support education, social and cultural development, and scientific and technological progress;
• the provision of a basis for better decision-making; and
• support for participative democracy.

It also includes risk management strategies, e.g. in relation to privacy protection, the threat posed to equitable access and the community's right to know by the commercialisation of information, and safeguards against unethical practices.

The section of the Report on a National Information Policy therefore sets out 'principles, propositions, recommendations and conclusions . . . upon which governments should act' (p. xiv), which range across all of these areas and are organised under a multiplicity of headings, said to identify the main elements of the policy:

> the right to know; industry; scientific and technological information; intellectual property law; transborder data flows; sovereignty; defence; telecommunications/media; media ownership and control; libraries; archives; public accounting information; social justice; privacy; education; information research; information statistics; promotion of efficient/ effective information use; promoting critical evaluation of information; consumer information and copyright.

The stated aim of developing this set of principles, propositions etc. is 'to put information issues firmly on the national agenda . . . to

overcome the fragmentation and the lack of coordination and comprehension that characterise the current approach' (p. xiv), and elsewhere in the Report the Committee is critical of the sectional approach of many of the submissions. Unfortunately the Committee itself failed to develop an integrated set of principles and recommendations, and this section of the Report tends to read like a rag-bag selection from the wish-lists of the various groups who made representations to the Inquiry, thus perpetuating the problem of fragmentation and providing a poor basis for future coordination of action. Having elsewhere in the Report provided such a broad conceptual framework for the Policy, and not having analysed and described adequately its component parts, their interrelationships and how they fit into the whole, this result is hardly surprising.

An example should suffice to illustrate the point. Under a number of different headings or elements in a *National Information Policy*, the Committee recommends legislative action to extend privacy protection, to ensure the integrity and useability of the archival document and promote ethical recordkeeping, to ensure the adequacy and consistency of public accounting information, and to provide a code of ethics for professions and industries dealing in information as both a free good and a commodity, but there is no recognition of either the overlap or significant interrelationships involved here.

There are also concerns about how the various recommendations might be translated into action, aside from the associated resourcing issues which, thought not the inquiry's concern, is likely to be a major sticking point in terms of implementation. The Committee proposes the establishment of a national advisory body on information policy with representation from State governments, business and industry, research organisations and information providers. Its mission would be 'to keep broad information issues under review and provide expert advice to governments and organisations as required on information matters' (p. 40-1). It would be serviced by an Interdepartmental Committee. Much of the proposed regulatory and other government action would be a matter for the states rather than the Commonwealth. It is not clear whether the national advisory body would have a role in promoting or monitoring such action. Much would also depend on the cooperation of the non-government sector. In this regard there is no evidence in the Report that the Committee considered how to secure such cooperation. In some areas it may have been preferable to consider the promotion of voluntary codes rather than legislative action — the European experience in the privacy protection area for example would suggest this is a viable option. In our own area, the Committee's proposal that a national body be established to make recommendations on the preservation and use of archival resources (see also below) does not specify how such a body would fit into the

larger scene, e.g. whether it would be linked to the proposed peak national advisory body or to whom it would make its recommendations.

Archives and Records Submissions and the Committee's Response

Of the 121 submissions made to the Inquiry, only four relating to archives and records can be identified — the Australian Society of Archivists, McKemmish/Upward, Australian War Memorial and Records Management Association of Australia.[3] It would appear that, with the exception of the AWM, none of our major government archival authorities or private archival institutions have participated, either individually or through the Australian Council of Archives.

As the initial paper on the Committee's terms of reference, circulated when the Inquiry was launched in September 1990, made no mention of archives or records, or the role of recordkeeping in a modern democratic society or the significance of our archival institutions as repositories of society's accumulated knowledge and experience, one of the main aims of the representations made to the Inquiry by archivists and records managers came to be one of convincing the Committee that archives, records and their management should be included as components in a *National Information Policy*. The case was largely argued on the grounds of the unique nature and characteristics of archives and records and their special relationship to other information components — as primary sources which are crucial to accountability within society and its organisations, and provide for the validation or verification of published material, whether this be an information database, an historical treatise, an article reporting the results of a scientific experiment, a politician's press release, a government agency's report to Parliament or a company's report to its shareholders.

Thus the ASA submission argued for the significance of archives to be recognised in their own right, not just as an 'appendage to libraries', because of their uniqueness and originality, their creation 'in a largely unselfconscious way', and the fact that the future availability of our archival heritage is dependent on current recordkeeping policies, practices and systems; and the RMAA submission pointed to proper recordkeeping as being fundamental to effective decision-making processes and to business efficiency; while the McKemmish/Upward submission argued more broadly that recognition of the role of both current and historical archival documents (defined as recorded information arising out of transactions which provides evidence of those transactions, and encapsulates the experience of the parties involved) and their management in ways which maintain their integrity and useability for current and historical purposes are

'preconditions for an information-rich society' and underpin 'the public accountability of government and non-government organisations, FOI and Privacy legislation, protection of people's rights and entitlements, and the quality of the archival heritage'.[4]

The archives and records submissions went on to argue for:

- a redressing of the current imbalance in the Committee's approach which placed too much emphasis on information technology systems and information delivery and not enough on managing the sources of information and issues of records creation, maintenance, appraisal and selection (AWM);

- the establishment of recordkeeping principles and standards to promote ethical recordkeeping practices, as well as guidelines on the role and legislative base of Australia's archival authorities, in particular in relation to the regulation of recordkeeping and records disposal (McKemmish/Upward);

- the development of information technology standards (RMAA);

- the extension of legislative provisions relating to records disposal, the selection of records for permanent retention, FOI and privacy protection, and equitable access to archives (ASA, McKemmish/Upward);

- a requirement that all legislative jurisdictions seek the equivalent of an environmental impact statement in relation to prospective legislation that impacts on recordkeeping or related existing legislation (AWM);

- the promotion and funding of research, especially in relation to the impact of information technology on the archival document and heritage (McKemmish/Upward);

- more government support for the physical preservation and conservation of Australia's archival heritage (ASA);

- promotion of a greater awareness of the role of current and historical archival documents in modern society, shared responsibility for their management, and coordinated action on the preservation and use of our archival heritage (McKemmish/Upward); and

- a commitment by governments to a 'national council on archives' coordinating body to frame a national archival policy, provide a source of funding, formulate standards and provide a link to peak National Information Policy bodies (ASA).

How did the Committee react? The Committee's direct response to these representations is contained in paragraphs 4.11 and 4.57-4.60 of the section of the Report which sets out the elements of a *National Information Policy* (p. 38, p. 46-47). Paragraph 4.11 acknowledges that coming to an understanding of the current status of information management in Australia is an essential part of the development of a

National Information Policy, goes on to identify weaknesses in our paper-based archives systems, and states:

> As a first step we need to understand which information needs to be stored for future reference; what contextual information is necessary for its comprehension; and which information, once used, is valueless and therefore not worth saving.

Paragraphs 4.57-4.58 accept the proposition that 'effective creation and management of archival documents is a pre-condition of an information rich society', underpinning public accountability access and privacy legislation, protection of personal rights and the quality of the archival heritage, and acknowledge the threat to the archival document posed by electronic recordkeeping and communication. Thus the significance of archives, records and their proper management appears to have been recognised by the Committee, resulting in their inclusion as elements of the Policy. The Committee also picked up on a number of the action areas identified in the McKemmish/Upward submission, and supported by related parts of the ASA submission, and made the following recommendations (para. 4.59-4.60):

> The Government should establish a Committee including representation from the Australian Council of Archives and the Australian Council of Libraries and Information Services (ACLIS) to make specific recommendations on the preservation and use of archival resources including:
> • acquisition and collection policies;
> • preservation and conservation of records both in and out of custody;
> • promotion and value of the use of Australia's archival heritage;
> • the impact of electronic recordkeeping on the archival heritage; and
> • raising the level or [sic] awareness of the role of archives as a factor in social cohesion.
>
> The Parliament should legislate for the provision of recordkeeping principles or guidelines to ensure an integrity and useability of the archival document for current and historical purposes and to promote ethical recordkeeping.

There is some evidence in the way in which the Committee dealt with these action areas to suggest that concerns about current records of transactions and their management have yet again been subject to Hugh Taylor's 'historical shunt', which 'relegates the social aspects of the evidential role of records to the past . . . when the main role is a current one for present purposes'.[5] The translation by the Committee of the call for recordkeeping principles and standards to be developed for incorporation in the *National Information Policy* into a recommendation for legislative action is a rather startling proposition. Presumably this approach would need to include appropriate regulatory machinery — perhaps the recordkeeping equivalent of a Commissioner for Human Rights, Ombudsman, Auditor-General or Privacy Commissioner![6]

To the extent that these recommendations are given serious consideration by the Commonwealth Government and Parliament, opportunities for advocacy and better articulation of archives and records issues may be provided.

The Report's specific recommendations in relation to other elements of the *National Information Policy*, based on submissions from groups concerned with the community's right to know, information technology and systems, transborder data flow, public accounting information, and privacy protection, are also of interest to archivists and records managers. For example, the Committee recommended:

- Commonwealth-State collaboration in establishing standards and guidelines for Information Technology, and information collection and dissemination; and encouragement of the use of standard formats;

- in relation to information as both a free good and a commodity, legislation to define and codify individual and organisational rights to access where this is in the public interest (not defined) to non-government information sources, give privacy protection guarantees, provide rules of reciprocity to govern relationships between the public and private systems and networks, and a code of ethics for professionals and industries concerned in this field; and

- legislation to provide a framework to ensure the adequacy and consistency of public accounting information about the financial activities of public and private enterprises.

Where To From Here

Thus far I have avoided the question of whether or not the development of a *National Information Policy* is a desirable goal in itself, and I do not propose here to pursue that issue in any depth. The Committee itself noted that in its earlier manifestations the attempt to develop a policy was largely ignored by key players in the field. This time around, however, it attracted the attention of some of the heavyweights, including the federal Departments of Defence, Transport and Communications, and Industry, Technology and Commerce, and Telecom. The Committee also noted that the less powerful agencies and groups were far more supportive of the concept, whereas the more powerful urged caution especially where they saw the policy as impacting on areas where they had staked out territorial claims, or where they saw their interests being threatened.

Given that archivists and records managers are most unlikely to be able to exercise any influence over whether or not we should have a *National Information Policy* at all, the issue for us becomes one of whether we should participate, despite any reservations we might have

about what is happening and the likelihood of any progress being achieved.

Richard Cox characterises the American archival scene moving into the 1990s as threatened by declining resources, referring to Hugh Jones' earlier depiction of archival programs as caught in a poverty cycle, unfriendly national and state government actions, and the impact on recordkeeping of information technology. He goes on to argue the need for archivists to be activists, persistently seeking to affect relevant national, state and local legislation and information policies.[7] With particular reference to information policies, he points out that because of their potential for affecting the legislative bases for archival and related programs, resource allocation, the environment in which archival programs operate, and information technology standards, archivists cannot afford not to get involved.

The parallels with the Australian scene are obvious. A number of state archival and records programs are currently under direct attack from government or opposition policies. To take Victoria as an example, the situation of the Public Record Office is particularly grim. The Victorian Government has moved a long way from the early Cain philosophy of open government, which provided a more supportive environment for archival and records programs:

> I start with the proposition that open government in the true sense is a central need in a democracy. People must have information to enable them to make choices about who will govern them and what policies the individuals or political parties that they choose to govern shall implement. It is a corollary of that proposition that if people are more able to scrutinise what is going on with a government that is open, then it is more likely to be both competent and efficient.[8]

For evidence of the shift, we need look no further than the Victorian Government's submission to the Inquiry.[9] It focused on the one hand on provision of information re government services and individual rights and entitlements in order to promote social justice. On the other hand, it stressed the need to minimise the costs of information provision and to balance equity and access issues with protection of government assets and the revenue base through a 'judicious blend' of free access and 'data retailing'. The development of Victoria's information technology and communications industries, and the better use of information in production, distribution and financial exchange industries were also mentioned. This approach to information provision reflects the current managerial preference for dealing with the public as individual clients of government services and consumers of government products rather than as a collective entity with interests which transcend those of its individual members. Thus the submission barely touched on issues of public accountability (of government or non-government organisations), FOI, privacy

protection, government regulation of business and financial organisation through information reporting or record audits, recordkeeping in governmental agencies or the role of the government's own archival authority — a failure that is particularly striking at a time when the Victorian public's attention is focused on what went wrong financially in the late 1980s and why no one seemed to know in time to try to do something about it. It is also ironic that while the submission emphasises improved information service delivery and information access through the use of information technology, but ignores issues of the completeness, reliability and accuracy of that information, a recent Law Institute report has found that public databases in the legal area in Victoria, e.g. Land Titles, Corporate Affairs, lack integrity.[10] Indeed some carry disclaimers protecting government agencies from third party loss. This report does address the issue of the integrity of the record, recommending information risk management strategies to be implemented by government agencies. This calls to mind David Bearman's suggestion during his Melbourne visit that records managers would do better in the electronic recordkeeping environment of the 1990s to present themselves as being in the risk management business rather than pushing the old cost-effectiveness and efficiency barrow.

Can we then afford not to participate in any process which offers the opportunity for advocacy? There is no doubt that though we may be critical of aspects of this particular Report, the Inquiry is raising at national level information issues of vital concern to archivists and records managers. As foreshadowed, it may also be the case that criticisms that can be made of the Report are in fact equally self-criticisms. The Committee admittedly has so far not been able to adequately map the territory for us, to identify fully its constituent parts and their interrelationships, to come to terms with the special nature, value and management needs of different types of information and their sources, and to provide analytical tools that enable us to understand and better manage the processes that transform data into information, information into knowledge and knowledge into intelligence, while ensuring adequate risk management. Yet this may merely reflect the 'State of the Art' and the fact that professionals working in the information community have yet to adequately define their own patch in these terms.

Finally I would put forward a number of reasons for our continued participation in such forums whenever the opportunity arises. First, they do have the potential to influence our environment. Second, further opportunities may open up as a result of our participation. Third, participation in such a process is of value in itself for it forces us to define more clearly our part of the territory, to explore what we uniquely bring to it, and our links with the whole. This in turn will

better equip us for future advocacy, to take on the role assigned to us by Terry Eastwood in Hobart of:

> spirit(ing) an understanding of the idea of archives as arsenals of democratic accountability and continuity into society and into its very corporate and social fabric.[11]

ENDNOTES

1. Ira A. Penn, 'The Information Economy: Less Than Meets the Eye', *Records Management Quarterly*, January 1991, p. 3.
2. Australia, Parliament, *Australia as an Information Society: Grasping New Paradigms, Report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies, May 1991* (B. O. Jones, Chair), 82 pp. ISBN 0 644 1437 1. $9.95. (Available from Commonwealth Government Bookshops.)
3. The Australian Society of Archivists' Submission was published in the ASA's *Bulletin*, no. 95, Feb. 1991; the McKemmish/Upward submission in *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 19, no. 1, May 1991; the RMAA submission in *Informaa Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 2, May 1991. The AWM submission, unpublished, was prepared by Paul Macpherson and Anne-Marie Schwirtlich (copy supplied by Anne-Marie Schwirtlich).
4. McKemmish/Upward, op. cit. p. 21-2.
5. Frank Upward, 'Records Management and Recordkeeping: The Archival Document', *Informaa Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 2, May 1991, referring also to Hugh Taylor's notion of the historical shunt, set out in 'Information Ecology and the Archives of the 1980s', *Archivaria*, no. 18, Summer, 1984.
6. Acknowledgments for respectively conceiving and encouraging this particular flight of fantasy must go to Frank Upward and Michael Piggott.
7. Richard J. Cox, *American Archival Analysis: The Recent Development of the Archival Profession in the United States*, Scarecrow Press Inc., Metuchen, N.J. and London, 1990: chapter 14 'Archives and Information Policy in the US: Looking Toward the 1990s', p. 304-727.
8. John Cain, 'Open government and the canker of secrecy', in Jim Varghese (ed.), *Papers of the Freedom of Information Seminar — the Legislative and Administrative Dilemma*. RMAA, Melbourne, 1981, p. 16. Cain was Shadow Attorney-General at the time.
9. *Victorian Government Submission*, March 1991 (unpublished copy supplied by the Acting Keeper of Public Records).
10. *Access to Justice: Community Access to Public Databases: A Highway for Reform*, an unpublished paper prepared for the Council of the Law Institute of Victoria by Murray McCutcheon, October 1990.
11. T. M. Eastwood, 'Reflections on the Development of Archives in Canada and Australia', *Papers and Proceedings of the 7th Biennial Conference of the Australian Society of Archivists, Inc.*, Hobart, 1989.