

MANAGING THE RECORD RATHER THAN THE RELIC

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In an address prepared originally for a public seminar on archives legislation organised by the Queensland Electoral and Administrative Review Commission¹ in December 1991, the author presents both a discussion of the records issues facing governments today and a vision of the long-term benefits achievable if they are properly managed. The author's analysis interweaves notions of records as evidence, as our true clients and as a continuum, with those universally favoured by governments including resource efficiency, user pays and cost recovery.*

It has often been said that one of the disadvantages or advantages (depending upon your point of view) of being an archivist is that no-one knows what your job involves or what you really do. This has been particularly so, I have noticed in recent years, in Queensland. I suspect that EARC have now put paid to such anonymity, in the public sector at least, with this investigation into archives legislation and related activities. Rarely has the archival role and mission been given such a public forum for debate in this country, nor a government archival authority examined under such a public microscope. So it seems that we might be enabled to take somewhat of a quantum leap in Queensland, archivally speaking, and this presents a perhaps unique opportunity for archivists to explore, explain, expand and espouse an explicit archival mission at a time of significant administrative and technological change.

However, such things are rarely as clear-cut as they might first appear as EARC seems to have discovered in its review resulting in the Issues Paper. The archival profession in Australia may be small — some 200 of the 630 members are registered in the 'professional category' by the Australian Society of Archivists — yet there is often a wide divergence of opinion on the importance of the various elements

*Philip Taylor's assessment of the public seminar appears under 'Conferences' in the Reviews Section elsewhere in this issue.

in the archival mission and on the details and priority of various aspects in an archival program. While the Issues Paper, submissions and seminar can examine a wide range of issues and highlight those of most significance, what is of paramount importance at the end of the process is a *vision* — a vision to take the archival authority forward in its place in government. A vision of archival excellence yes, but one tempered by the pragmatism necessary for the vision to become reality within the parameters of government expectation and contribution.

I see my role today as helping to derive this vision by providing my view of what it should be, by provoking discussion and debate and, in accordance with my terms of reference from the Commission, to contribute some pragmatism in the area of allocation of resources to the archival mission.

The government function of the strategic management of public records is best served by an authority responsible for the continuum of records. In the written submission to the Commission which I co-authored with colleague Philip Taylor, a refocusing of the mission of the Queensland State Archives to provide for the establishment of the State's archival authority as a public records authority was recommended. We conceived the new body, the Public Record Authority of Queensland or PRAQ, as a pro-active participant in the machinery of government, focusing on standard setting, resource management and archival audit strategies in addition to the current facility activities of preservation, storage, and access and research provision.² A change is needed here and the equilibrium adjusted to manage the *records* rather than the *relics*. The integrity of records is just as important as the soundness of finances in an accountable democratic government.³ As the Rt. Hon. Sir Paul Hasluck observed in his opening address to an Australian Society of Archivists biennial conference a decade ago, 'The archives of an institution are not created for the sake of the historian or to provide a supply of bright specimens for the curious but are made principally to serve the purpose of the institution itself.'⁴

Archival institutions in the 1990s should not be acquisition driven or custody oriented nor managed primarily as information outlets. These facets provide the focus for a library rather than a public archival authority. The pivot of archival science is evidence not information. Archivists do not deal with isolated and free-floating bits of information, but with their documentary expression,⁵ with what has recently been referred to in Australia as the archival document.⁶ Archivists are in the *understanding* business not the *information* business.⁷ The information or heritage aspects are the end product of the process and to get that right, concentrated effort needs to be devoted to the front-end procedures and operations. A change in the traditionally perceived archival mindset is needed here to manage the

records and their continuum, not the relics as the end stage in the record life cycle. If the continuum management is right the rest can follow with confidence in the end. It is a matter of developing intellectual control strategies rather than physical control procedures. To follow this through, the concept of a largely non-custodial role for archivists is envisaged for the future in the professional literature in a number of English-speaking countries in recent years.⁸

Such a view sees records management not as a separate life cycle stage in recordkeeping but provides for records creation, records management and records appraisal as elements of archival practice over the continuum of records. The life cycle of records concept is largely outdated by current thought on continuum management. Nevertheless the tensions which exist in drawing a satisfactory balance to archival activity are not lessened by the continuum approach, rather, initially at least, they are exacerbated by it. The primary focus of a heritage role is supplanted by a focus on an audit role. It is my view that this audit role provides a natural progression for archival theory which is based traditionally on the evidential nature and value of a record.⁹ Even so, our archival operations still, at this point of time, involve a significant custodial role, so a balance must be achieved between these responsibilities, and a mission appropriate to this balance clearly enunciated.

It is a well accepted adage that 'Archivists alone in society are charged with taking the long view',¹⁰ and with preserving the collective memory. Equally a government must take the long view in relation to the resources of its archival authority and not attempt to marshal it into a cost recovery *modus operandi*. Just as pragmatism is called for on the part of the archival authority in the setting of its mission, in the operation of its program and in the allocation of its resources, so a pragmatism is required by government in its approach to budget allocation to facilitate the archival mission which allocation should be a discrete appropriation. Such pragmatism on the part of government would allow the public benefit of the relics as a cost against the State, while accepting the administrative benefit of sound continuum management which in turn provides reliable documentation as the fundamental element of accountability for individuals, government and society.

While archivists have a duty of care to the records in their custody, there also exists a duty of care to ensure that adequate records exist and are properly maintained and managed. An archival institution also has a duty of care to the organisation of which it is part, a duty of care which while fearless in its ethical pronouncements, and resistant to bureaucratic interference in ethical matters, nevertheless adopts a flexibility in response to changing administrative patterns and requirements. Archival institutions by their very nature, 'are designed

for stability and predictability, (are) places where routine and repetition are organised through standard operating procedures'.¹¹ An increase in volume of records or a broadening of responsibilities will inevitably lead to the conclusion that resources are inadequate and must be increased to cope with such changes. Under such circumstances a pragmatic approach to the archival ideals is required to provide an administrative orientation to the archival mission.

I have long held the view that, in this country at least, resources will never be adequate for the successful operation of the traditional archival mission. We should simply accept that fact and get on with the job required. In 1987 the then Governor of Western Australia, His Excellency, Professor Gordon Reid, lamented, 'Sadly, archives do not mean votes, and that has been one of the tragedies of modern public administration'.¹² And since then the economic rationalists have gained greater control over the public purse strings.

However, Queensland has now put the spotlight on accountable government. One of the measures of accountable government is public access to, and opportunities for review of, the decisions of government. Modern management is essentially ahistorical and we live in what has been termed the 'a world dominated by the politics of forgetfulness'¹³ in administration. While the paperwork of government is increasing, there is no longer any doubt, as the US Committee on the Records of Government reported in 1985, 'Top officials . . . rarely, if ever, think about records. Relying upon oral briefings or written memoranda from staff for information, policymakers are isolated from the recordkeeping process by the inherent nature of bureaucratic organization'.¹⁴ Yet, for accountable government, good recordkeeping and good management of the continuum of records are essential. Initiatives such as Freedom of Information legislation, the Criminal Justice Commission and the review of administrative decisions require a sound record base from which to operate, and the records need to be managed with integrity and with cost-benefit efficiency. To achieve this government does well to utilise the intellectual control methodologies of the archival profession. The focus for both — accountable government and the archives — is on the record, on the document and its context.

The basis of every successful archival operation should be the *record*. Indeed a leading Canadian archivist has recently suggested not only that an Archives which doesn't maintain the focus on the record is in trouble, but also that, in the trendy marketing imagery of business, our real clients are the records while the user is our product¹⁵ and that view is one worth thinking about.

To return, however, to resources, it is abundantly clear that the duty of care to the record must be adequately resourced if this essential measurement of accountable government, the record, is to subsist. An

increase in intellectual control strategies must of necessity at this point of time require some addition of human resources not only in the archival authority, but also in the record creating bodies, the government agencies. However, there is also the need to look for some non-human resource solutions. There are obvious cost-benefit efficiencies of an integrated public records management program mainly in the areas of facility, equipment and systems savings. These are real and are short-term cost paybacks. But the real cost-benefit is in the long term, so not only archivists but also government must take the long view, a rather difficult concept for both politicians and the economic rationalists. A long view is needed not for the historical/heritage reasons, important though they may be, but because over time the result will be greater public efficiency and a better service to our client, the records; better response times for those seeking both evidence and information; better safeguards for the archives and for their preservation not merely as artifacts or relics but as the full, accurate and reliable memory of transactions and activities; all of which will result in a better memory for society and its heritage. For an initial outlay there will be a nett gain overall over a measured period of time and in the long term I believe more can be achieved with less as the intellectual strategies take effect. Developed strategies for the management of the continuum of records will go a long way to managing the information overload currently facing bureaucracies and help to lower the information anxiety¹⁶ currently felt by organisations, archivists and users alike.

It is difficult, even for a pragmatist, to find any convincing arguments that archives can be exploited economically, except at the most simplistic levels or in the marginal areas. The public clientele of archives has changed significantly over the last decade. The days when the bulk of the researchers were academic historians are gone, to be replaced by a wide cross-section of users with wide demands primarily for *information* rather than *evidence*. Consequently the opportunity now exists to introduce a charged reference service which could be provided for certain categories of enquirers and enquiries on a contract or cost recovery basis. The user base will undergo yet another change with the fallout from Freedom of Information and related mechanisms. Should such user access then be on a cost recovery basis or should the cost be borne as a public benefit? In our current user pays society, how far can such public benefits be extended? There is no easy formula for this and government will have to find the level acceptable to them just as with the cost associated with Freedom of Information legislation.

Primarily then government has to decide what service it wishes its archival authority to provide; essentially where its key service point lies. Resources can then be directed to that key service point and measured decisions taken about servicing other related service points.

The strength of an integrated public records management program is that it identifies the primary service to the record and focuses resources to managing the records continuum. This services both a 'now' administration and accountable government as well as the long term health of archival resources. It will require, in addition to resources, methodological changes — and change is often a difficult phenomenon for people to handle, so in addition to courage, a significant educative role is called for in adjusting the equilibrium.

So my vision is one that requires courage and constant effort. Persistence must be the mate of pragmatism in a public records program. Persistence and a willingness to rethink strategies and methods and to change where necessary, a flexibility in approach and a measured reassessment of priorities. The opportunity currently exists for a visionary and innovative approach to the management of the archival resources of Queensland. With the spotlight clearly on the record rather than the relic, the equilibrium can be adjusted to provide efficient, effective and innovative public record management with an intellectual control not custody axis, safeguarding and making accessible archival resources for good government, public accountability and future research needs.

ENDNOTES

1. The Electoral and Administrative Review Commission, established by an Act of the Queensland Parliament in 1989, was one of two commissions resulting from the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Possible Illegal Activities and Associated Police Conduct, better known as the Fitzgerald Commission. EARC's reasons for focusing on archives legislation is explained in chapter one of its publication *Issues Paper No. 16; Archives Legislation* (EARC, Brisbane, September 1991). See also *Archives Legislation; Public Submissions* (EARC, Brisbane, December 1991).
2. G. I. Acland and P. Taylor, *Submission to the Electoral and Administrative Review Commission on Issues Paper No 16 Archives Legislation*, 27 November 1991, p. 3.
3. *Ibid*, p. 9.
4. P. Hasluck, 'Opening Address', *Promoting the Better Use of Archives: Papers from the 1981 Conference of the Australian Society of Archivists*, Melbourne, 1981, p. 2.
5. B. L. Craig, 'What are the Clients? Who are the Products? The Future of Archival Public Services in Perspective', *Archivaria*, no 31, Winter 1990–1991, p. 140.
6. S. McKemish and F. Upward, 'The archival document: A submission to the Inquiry into Australia as an Information Age', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol 19, no 1, May 1991, pp. 17–30.
7. T. Cook, 'Rites of Passage: The Archivist and the Information Society', *Archivaria*, no 31, Winter 1990–91, p. 176.
8. David Bearman in the USA, Jay Atherton, Gerald Ham, Terry Cook in Canada, Glenda Acland, Sue McKemish and Frank Upward in Australia.
9. G. I. Acland, 'Archivist — Keeper, Undertaker or Auditor?', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol 19, no 1, May 1991, pp. 9–15.
10. J. F. Cook, 'A Time to take stock', *American Archivist*, vol 46, no 1, Winter 1983, p. 11.

11. J. G. Bradsher, 'Archival Effectiveness' in J. G. Bradsher, editor, *Managing Archives and Archival Institutions*, Mansell Publishing Limited, Great Britain, 1988, p. 254.
12. G. Reid, 'Opening Address', *The National and International Environment. Proceedings of the 6th Biennial Conference of the Australian Society of Archivists*, Perth, 1987, p. 4.
13. B. L. Craig, *op. cit.*, p. 140.
14. Committee on the Records of Government, *Report*, Washington, DC. March 1985, p. 37.
15. B. L. Craig, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
16. R. S. Wurman, *Information Anxiety*, Doubleday, New York, 1989, as cited by T. Cook, 'Rites of Passage: The Archivist and the Information Age', *Archivaria*, no 31, Winter 1990-91, p. 176.