Editorial

A Simple Shared Goal

In a series of seminars at Monash University's Graduate Department of Librarianship, Archives and Records in March-May 1992, we set out to explore the concept of archival documents, the records created in the context of human interaction and thus defined by their contextuality and transactionality, as foundations of democratic accountability and continuity. Our motivation related in part to a wish to explore the links between recordkeeping, accountability and the role of the archival authority in light of the accountability crises associated with the cases of government and corporate corruption of the 1980s, then being scrutinised by Royal Commissions, Inquiries and criminal investigation teams. We were also concerned with the implications of the weakening of the role of the State archival authority in Victoria. Moreover, we were intrigued by the notion that certain patterns of recordkeeping, or the lack of recordkeeping in some circumstances, might in fact be symptomatic of certain types of antisocial behaviour.

Our starting point was Terry Eastwood's call in Hobart in 1989 for archivists to spirit an understanding of the societal role of archival documents as 'arsenals of democratic accountability and continuity' into our 'very corporate and social fabric'.[1] And our method? Firstly we invited a range of speakers who had in our own or related disciplines been grappling with aspects of accountability and continuity — for as David Bearman says in his article in this issue, archivists/records managers need to make common cause with others whose interests intersect with our own.

Our speakers therefore included Dr Mark Considine, lecturer in public policy at the University of Melbourne, who explored with us the Victorian government's style of managerialism in the 1980s, which encouraged the redefinition of public accountability as essentially cost accountability, and involved with the public as individual clients of government services and consumers of government products rather than as members of society with interests which transcend those of its individual parts. Professor Peter Hanks from Monash University provided us with an insight into the relationship between recordkeeping and administrative law reforms, in particular the work

of the Administrative Appeals Tribunals. While the largely anecdotal evidence would suggest that the environment engendered by administrative law reform is conducive to good recordkeeping, this is most likely to impact on client records rather than the documentation of policy and broader decisionmaking. Thus it is linked to government accountability to its individual clients rather than to its citizenry as a whole. This concept of accountability was clearly at work in the recordkeeping reforms described by Dr John Paterson, then Director-General of Community Services Victoria. He initiated major reform of the Department's client based recordkeeping, linked to concerns with the visibility of the organisation and the transparency of its operations. There was also an emphasis on documentation as a by-product of transactions, and the relationship between documentation processes and work-flow, the quality of operations, system transactionality, and accountability.

Professor Graeme Davison from Monash University shared with us his insights into buildings as archival documents and much common ground was explored, including concerns about the treatment of historic buildings as cultural heritage objects rather than as evidence of the past societies that created and used them. Thus, like the archival documents with which archivists are more familiar, buildings acquire significance in relation to their context, and they transmit knowledge of the past to future generations through their contextuality. Colin Smith argued for the ASA to make common cause with associations representing other 'documentalists' (RMAA, ALIA?) to lobby to establish an Australian Documentation Commission to advocate at national level for proper recognition of the role of the professions concerned with documents, and the significance of recordkeeping to our society.

From David Bearman's contribution to the seminar series grew the first article published in this issue. In it he focuses on a 'simple goal' shared by archivists and records managers — providing for organisational accountability, and explores how data needs to be managed to achieve this goal for electronic records. He identifies the critical problem for archivists and records managers in the electronic environment, characterised by transformed communication patterns and new forms of documentary records, as being to develop criteria for determining what is a record and tactics to capture it. Tactics employing an appropriate mix of policy, system design, system implementation and compliance with standards will need to be based on analysis of corporate culture and the organisation's technical capabilities, and rooted in fundamental archival theoretical tenets. Risk management criteria need to be brought into play to bring about changes in organisational recordkeeping behaviour — otherwise the ability to reconstruct or defend past action will be lost.

Secondly we initiated a series of case studies focusing on the nexus between recordkeeping (the creation and management of archival documents), accountability and continuity, and informed by the insights provided by our speakers. A set of the papers reporting on these case studies, together with commentaries and additional material, is published in *Archival Documents: Providing Accountability Through Recordkeeping*.[2] In this issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* we publish three articles by Livia Iacovino, Fiona Ross and Marion Renehan which analyse aspects of the case studies undertaken.

Livia Iacovino's case study explored how accountable our national archival authority, the Australian Archives, is for its role as a watchdog in relation to the disposal of Commonwealth records, as well as how accountable the disposal practices of Commonwealth government agencies are. In this issue she writes about the context of that case study — Eastwood's vision of archival authorities pursuing the ideals of democratic accountability and continuity, Australian concepts of accountability, the notion of providing for accountability through recordkeeping, and the legislative and corporate environment of Australian Archives. The effects of deregulation, privatisation and corporatisation are also considered, together with the impact of electronic recordkeeping in a post-custodial era on the role of the archival authority.

Fiona Ross' research focussed on why records are created in what Terry Cook might call one of the 'controversial hot spots of citizen-state interaction', namely Victoria's psychiatric institutions. She looked at how these records support both service delivery and accountability in a government program which deals with people who have been, or are, members of one of the most disempowered and abused groups — people who, to quote Cook again, have 'slipped through the cracks of society':

> I experienced a feeling of nowhereness and nothingness as if I had never existed, or, if I had, I was now erased from the earth. I had somehow fallen into a crevice in time . . .[3]

If heard at all, their voice, with the rare and powerfully direct exception of a Janet Frame, is only ever heard faintly through the documentation of their interaction with the agencies responsible for the mental health function.[4] Indeed in the earlier case records, where a page in a register might record a lifetime's institutionalisation, it is the silence that speaks loudest. After reviewing the historical role of archival documents in Victoria's psychiatric institutions, Fiona explores the range of functions they now serve — as a store of knowledge, a record of patient care and treatment (planned and delivered), a record of communication between staff, service providers, patients and their families or advocates, and a legal document. She goes on to illuminate their role in supporting newly developed accountability mechanisms, such as the Community

Visitors Program and clinical audits. These mechanisms emerged in response to a major crisis in the State's institutions with widespread reporting of patient abuse, and growing community concern about the infringement of liberty and self-determination associated with traditional patterns of institutionalisation and treatment.

Marion Renehan's case study explores the role of one of society's watchdogs, the Victorian Auditor-General, with particular reference to how much the audit process depends on the 'unassailable evidence' provided by complete, accurate, reliable and usable records. Her postscript, which briefly examines the *Operation Iceberg* case involving the leaking and doctoring of confidential Victoria Police computer files, and the possible contamination of the Police's own databases, provides a telling illustration of what can happen if data is not managed in ways which meet the archival and records management functional requirements identified in Bearman's article. This case also involves files that are being created at one of Cook's sharpest points of interaction between State and citizen.

Finally, in our seminar series, we further explored our theme through one of our number monitoring newspaper reporting of accountability and recordkeeping. In this issue, Charlie Farrugia reports on the understanding of recordkeeping, and in particular of the recordkeeping angle in accountability crises, being conveyed by the print media. His article, based entirely on an analysis of the newspaper reports themselves, suggests that the concept of a record and the value of recordkeeping are poorly understood. Information is depicted as a free floating (ie contextless) 'allocative resource', to be used and exploited as are other material resources. There appears to be no notion of transactional recorded information as an 'authoritative resource', fundamental to what Giddens has termed 'the coordination of numbers of people together in society and their reproduction over time', and essential to the 'engendering of power' as well as the Janus-like 'knowledgeable management of a projected future and recall of an elapsed past'.[5] The challenge for archivists attempting to spirit an understanding of the role of archival documents in light of the media perspectives Charlie reports is daunting.

While we were exploring the recordkeeping-accountability nexus, our colleagues in other states were grappling with the consequences of crises which had brought down two state governments and endeavouring, through their inputs to subsequent inquiries, to face up to the Eastwood challenge. Glenda Acland and Philip Taylor write about the submissions made by archivists to the Electoral and Administrative Reform Commission's inquiry into archival legislation in Queensland and their impact on its findings.

The effectiveness of traditional accountability mechanisms is increasingly being called into question, and the WA Inc Royal

Commissioners are claiming that the Westminster system as it now operates in Australia is incapable of protecting the public interest against an executive government willing to abuse its power. It is therefore timely for archivists/records managers, who are responsible for the archival documentation which supports our society's accountability mechanisms, to consider the nature of the recordkeeping-accountability nexus, and to ask whether the accountability crises which currently beset our society are reflected in recordkeeping crises, and if so what we as a profession can do to assist in finding a resolution.

Sue McKemmish
Graduate Department of Librarianship,
Archives and Records, Monash University

ENDNOTES

1. Terry Eastwood, 'Reflections on the Development of Archives in Canada and Australia', in *Papers and Proceeding of the 7th Biennial Conference of the ASA Inc.*, Hobart, June 1989, p. 75-80.
2. Sue McKemmish and Frank Upward (ed.), *Archival Documents: Providing Accountability Through Recordkeeping*, in press, Graduate Department of Librarianship, Archives and Records, Monash University, Melbourne.
3. Janet Frame, *An Autobiography Volume Two: An Angel at My Table*, George Braziller, New York, 1991, p. 215.
4. Terry Cook, 'Mind Over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal', in Barbara L. Craig (ed.), *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor*, Association of Canadian Archivists, Ottawa, 1992, p. 38-70. Cook's theoretical perspectives on appraisal may lead to a reevaluation of the value of case records. In his construct they may provide the 'best documentary evidence' of some aspects of our society because they are created at the 'points of sharpest interaction of . . . structure, function, and client'. The implications of his perspective in relation to mental health case records in Victoria is reported on in *Archival Documents: Providing Accountability Through Recordkeeping*.
5. Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Cambridge, 1984, p. 258-262. The relevance of European 'structuration theory', and Giddens' version of it in particular, to recordkeeping was identified by Richard Brown, eg in 'Modelling Acquisition Strategy at the National Archives of Canada: Issues and Perspectives for Government Records', paper delivered at the Association of Canadian Archivists annual conference, Banff, 24 May 1991. It is explored further in Frank Upward's contribution to *Archival Documents op. cit.*