Communications

Systematic Appraisal of the Records of the Government of Canada at the National Archives of Canada

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Over the past five years, the National Archives of Canada has committed substantial time and resources in implementing a revised approach to its appraisal of the records of the Government of Canada. The changes have altered both procedures and the day-to-day work of many staff. The institution is still exploring the implications of the new approach, which is having an impact on such diverse matters as the archiving of electronic records, permissions to destroy non-archival records, the monitoring of records and records systems still in institutions, and the management of an all-inclusive media approach. It affects as well the theory and content of the research carried out to set acquisition priorities and the negotiations with government institutions concerning their records. This article is intended to serve as a progress report on recent appraisal theory and practice at the National Archives, for those who might wish to assess its efficacy or avoid its errors.[1]

It is safe to say that before the mid-1980s, appraisal at the National Archives received less emphasis than other major archival functions such as custody and public service. The National Archives of Canada conducted a fairly conventional records scheduling process. It negotiated records authorities with government institutions. The institutions at their own initiative prepared schedules of the records to be kept and submitted them to the National Archives. These schedules were examined, rejected or modified by the Archives. If accepted, the records identified by the schedules passed into the records centres maintained by the Archives and some of them ultimately to the Archives itself, where they were directly appraised and final decisions made on whether to keep them.

It was an involved, time-consuming system, requiring several rounds of appraisal decisions. It created tensions with the institutions, especially when schedules were rejected. In addition, as will be discussed later, because the initiative to submit lay with the institutions, it resulted in the acquisition of a piecemeal and often

fragmentary record. Moreover, the Archives could not respond in a timely fashion to institutions' requests, since it had no way of predicting the workload in a given year.

Since 1990, the National Archives has made appraisal and disposition its highest priority for its work with government records. For the past four years, it has been planning and administering the largest systematic appraisal project in Canadian archival history, with twenty archivists and sixteen records analysts involved in an organized attempt to evaluate and schedule the records of 156 federal departments and agencies covered by the *National Archives of Canada Act*, in addition to the federal judiciary, parliament, commissions of inquiry, and other selected government institutions not covered by the *Act*. Because of the wide range of possible bodies, "government institutions" will be used in this article as the generic term.

The entire initiative is known internally as the "Government-Wide Plan." This article will discuss the vehicle the National Archives uses within the Government-Wide Plan for appraisal, the staff who carry it out, and the reasons the National Archives has chosen the present approach.

Multi-Year Disposition Plans

The National Archives calls the appraisal vehicle the "multi-year disposition plan" (actually "plans" since the aim is to negotiate one plan with each government institution that the National Archives targets). The plans are often known by their initials as "MYDPs."

The goal of these plans is to arrive at a series of agreements for the ultimate disposal of the records of each institution signed by both the institution itself and the National Archives. The Archives wishes to appraise records while they are still current and to arrange for their ultimate destruction or retention and transfer to archival storage. Those events will often take place decades down the road. The final product of each MYDP will rather be a disposition authority setting out terms and conditions specifying in sufficient detail for ready identification by institutional officials, what is to be retained (if sampling is to be carried out, the terms and conditions will specify how) and the date and conditions of its transfer to the National Archives, including technical details for the transfer of electronic records.

The Multi-Year Disposition Plans, as their name suggests, are long-term, involving a cycle of five years or longer of analysis and agreements to work through an institution. In brief, the National Archives conducts background research on each institution to determine priorities in appraising its major functional sectors. It then proposes to the institution a general plan of up to five years giving an order of sectors to be appraised by year. Usually the plan for the first year is much more detailed and includes time lines for work to be carried out by the National Archives and the institution. The plans are a matter for negotiation and compromise with the institution. The following years of the plan are fleshed out and negotiated as they come up. At the end of a five-year cycle, the whole process will begin over again in order to keep the process current. It is this up-front research that primarily distinguishes the present approach from the previous one. It is an attempt to appraise

the records only once, while they are contemporary, and to do it in concert with the creating institution according to mutually agreed upon targets and deadlines.

The MYDPs incorporate all relevant archival media, including maps, photographs, documentary art, film, and sound recordings. As one might expect, a large portion of the material that the National Archives is now identifying for retention comes in an electronic format rather than on paper.

At the core of the plans is substantial background research, followed by research in stages as the appraisal team moves through an institution. Indeed, the most innovative characteristic of the plans is that the research is not geared to looking directly at the records. Instead, it is focused on the records creator and the functions performed. The approach is structural and functional, analyzing the structure of each institution beginning with the agency as a whole and then proceeding systematically through its component parts—sectors and branches—examining their functions and interactions. Only near the end of the process are records themselves likely to be examined, and then only in small samples. The bulk of the records will be disposed of on the basis of their context—what is known of the functions and significance of the area of the institution—rather than direct examination of the actual records.

The staff used to develop and implement the MYDPs are the archivists and the records analysts of the Archives and Government Records Branch of the National Archives. The archivists with responsibility for the textual and electronic records of the federal government usually chair teams of media archivists; research and appraisal of all media—photographic, audio-visual, cartographic, and documentary art—is carried out by members of the team as the appraisal process moves through the institution. All media are included in terms and conditions as appropriate. When a medium other than textual or electronic records is of primary importance in the sector being appraised, the relevant media archivist chairs the team.

The other members of the appraisal teams are the records analysts, who gather information about the records management and informatics operations of the government institutions being appraised. They aid the institution in crafting the submissions and they facilitate the process of negotiation.

The production of Multi-Year Disposition Plans is obviously an elaborate process involving a number of players, complex agreements, elaborate research, long time frames, and intensive work. Each archivist in the Government Archives Division has been expected to devote forty per cent of her or his time to the MYDPs. It is a full time job for the records analysts.

Why has the National Archives resorted to such an elaborate strategy? One could say that it is because appraisal is the most significant archival function: appraisal determines what an archives acquires and if what it acquires is not of the first significance, no amount of control, conservation, and public service can rectify that situation.

On a more pragmatic plane, the answer is shorter and simpler: the more conventional scheduling process had not worked well. As early as 1979, a published report of what was then the Federal Records Division had stated boldly, that although institutions were required to prepare schedules of records and set retention periods against them, the schedules were often too general or too piecemeal

and were poorly applied. The National Archives was not receiving the best archival record or a sufficiently full one.[2]

In 1991, a co-author of that report, Eldon Frost, asserted that the situation had grown worse through the 1980s. Moreover, government maps, architectural plans, photographs, pictures, and film were almost always acquired by archivists through contacts with the creators rather than through records schedules. No schedules existed for electronic records. Indeed, traditional records management operations with which the National Archives normally dealt had little to do with electronic records or generally with non-textual media. Some of the most important non-textual records of the government of Canada were not under the control of records managers.

Somehow, the net needed to be cast wider.

There were other problems as well. The role of the National Archives in appraisal was in practice passive and ad hoc. Institutions made proposals as to what should be included in a records transfer schedule and the National Archives simply responded by appraising what was submitted. Proposals for schedules prepared by institutional records managers tended to concentrate on records in bulk—case files, most often—that came from the wrong end of the records pyramid to contain the material considered by archivists to be of highest archival priority. Often the proposals were motivated by an immediate need to clear space and thus reduce costs.

The proposals also frequently contained the wrong mix of records to give the context necessary for their appraisal. They would be fragments rather than descriptions of whole programmes or, if they covered a programme, they would not provide enough contextual information to permit assessment of their significance. This led to rejection or requests for the substantial modification of proposals—to the frustration of the institutions—or to poor appraisals and decisions that retained too many records—to the frustration of the National Archives.

Time has been a constant problem. There are classic tensions between records managers and archivists on the matter of disposition of records. Records managers want loose and flexible authorities to destroy records and move material quickly and efficiently. Archivists, on the other hand, must identify the few archivally valuable records among the masses of documentation. The average records manager has little patience with the time and precision this takes, especially if the archivist is carrying out her or his appraisal at a time when the material is to be disposed of. Somehow, both the record manager's need for efficient disposal and the archivist's requirement for the precise identification of archivally significant documentation needed to be met.[3]

The truly daunting extent of the records to be dealt with was also giving archivists waking nightmares. The National Archives is presently responsible for 156 departments and agencies under the *National Archives Act* as well as the federal judiciary, parliament, commissions of inquiry, and other government institutions not covered by the *Act*. The extent of the modern records of these bodies is overwhelming: for example, four million paper case files are opened annually by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in enforcing the criminal code; sixty thousand computer transactions are completed daily by the Canadian Job Strategy/Employment Services of Employment and Immigration Canada.

Volumes of records of this magnitude simply could not be dealt with under the old system. A series of piecemeal schedules submitted at random by institutions meant that from some the National Archives received nothing for years, and from others it was faced with a series of massive submissions in rapid order that swamped the system.

Finally, there had been a growing realization that the National Archives was often negotiating within institutions at too low a level in the organizational hierarchy. Conventional records management operations were often without the power or status to gain access to areas or individuals within their institutions who could provide the necessary background on records. They had neither the mandate nor the influence to organize opportunities to propagandize the services and benefits of the Archives to the records creators. Such propagandizing is essential in order to convince bureaucrats to devote the necessary resources to an appraisal and disposition plan. In addition, archivists were finding that informatics units, which had responsibility for electronic records, increasingly were set up separately from conventional records management operations, and that archivists did not have sufficient contact with them. The hope has been that the Multi-Year Disposition Plans would solve many of these problems.

The intention of the National Archives was that the MYDPs would replace a piecemeal and fragmented approach with a much more planned and systematic one. All media would consciously be included in the process. Records would be examined in a context that permitted their proper assessment.

Intensive research would lead to the identification of the most valuable records in an institution and allow the National Archives to negotiate a high priority for the sectors of an institution that it wished to examine and the records it wished to receive, rather than passively accepting what the institution wished to get rid of. Negotiations and agreements on what areas of an institution were to be assessed and when would allow greater control over the flow of work.

Top down research, which concentrates on understanding the general configurations of the institution and its functions and operations and thus on placing its records in context, could deal with a much greater volume of records more effectively than an approach that attempted to wade through the records themselves. Such research can and in fact must be carried out while the records are still current thereby avoiding the conflict with records managers that occurs when archivists assess records at the end of their life, at the very time records mangers are impatient to dispose of them. Early assessment also allows better long-term planning for the processing, conservation, and public service of records that the Archives know it will be receiving.

The long-term planning and the scope of the plans it is proposing allows the National Archives to approach institutions initially at a much higher level than records management operations. First contact is made at the deputy minister level by the National Archivist; contact and agreement on the general approach is then pursued down the levels of the hierarchy before any detailed negotiations are carried out. If obstacles or misunderstandings are met, problems can be taken back up the line.

The question of how successfully this has worked in practice will be examined later, but there is no question that the new system is a vast improvement over what the National Archives had previously known.

Setting Priorities for Institutions

As the National Archives does not have the resources to tackle some two hundred government institutions all at once, an establishment of categories and priorities was necessary. The number and order of submissions had to be carefully regulated to reflect the priorities of the National Archives and the requirements of government institutions. Accordingly, the National Archives undertook the establishment of a series of categories, one through four, in descending order of significance.

The criteria for the categorizing of institutions included the importance of the institution within the government hierarchy, and the breadth and diversity of its mandate and functions. The Department of Health, for example, would be a "category one" because of its enormous and obvious impact on Canadian society, while the Northwest Territories Water Board would be a "four" because of its much more specialized and limited powers and role.

Duplication of functions was a consideration: if addressing records of one institution first allowed records of others to be understood and disposed of, it would be approached first. For example, Agriculture Canada would be a priority before the Canadian Wheat Board, the Agricultural Products Board, or the Canadian Livestock Feed Board.

If an institution held significant multimedia records, it was moved up a category.

Work on all category one institutions was launched in the first year of the programme; category two institutions were started in second and third years; the category threes are now being begun in the fourth year and will be pursued in year five; the category fours were considered of such marginal importance that they are to be undertaken as time is available.[4]

Appraisal

Appraisal is at the core of the Multi-Year Disposition Plans. The whole intent is to identify the best and most significant records within an institution and arrange for their archival preservation, thus allowing the rest to be destroyed at the institution's convenience.

Appraisal for an MYDP is a top-down, research-based process. It concentrates upon the records creator rather than the records *per se*—initially at the highest level, that of the institution as a whole—and seeks to evaluate the institution's mandate, functions, programmes, decision-making processes, internal organization, structure, and activities.

Research for appraisal is done first outside the institution in secondary and other sources available in the National Archives, and then directly inside it. The instrument for gathering this information is called the institutional profile. Everyone on

the appraisal team, including the media archivists involved and the records analyst, contributes to it. It is a document maintained in electronic form so that it can be kept current.

Appraisal work for the institutional profile begins with an overview of the institution's historical development, its current mandate and functions, and its main organizational components. This is done using secondary sources: annual reports of the institution, official histories, research tools in the National Archives itself, and other government sources. The objective is the establishment of a general hierarchy of significance of the institution's programmes, functions, and units in relation to one another.

The aim of all this research is for the archivist to arrive at tentative archival priorities: to identify large functions or structural areas of the institution likely to have the greatest potential for producing records of the highest archival value. The objective is to isolate those areas of the institution whose records, if appraised first, would allow quicker and better decisions to be made on later subordinate, dependant, or feeder units of the institution.

At the same time that the archivist is doing this, the records analyst is assembling background information on past relations between the National Archives and the institution that will aid in the negotiation of an MYDP. The analyst will be examining the files of the National Archives to determine what is known of past issues, successes, and failures in the records and information management fields between the institution and the National Archives. In addition to reading what audits or programme evaluations revealed about records disposition or information management issues in the institution, the analyst will determine what authorities for disposition of records by the institution now exist.

The records analyst will also gather information about the structure of the records holdings. Is there, for example, a central registry system for the entire institution? What degree of control does headquarters exercise over records holdings in the regions? Are there centralized holdings of media such as photographs, film, and maps or are they scattered?

Armed with all this information, the archivist and the analyst work out a proposed Multi-Year Disposition Plan with proposed targets and project completion dates, for discussion and agreement with the institution.

Once targets have been chosen for the first year, a whole new round of research begins, more detailed and focused on the specific functional sectors or branches that will be appraised. Research now occurs inside the institution with the archivist and analyst consulting information management staff of the institution and staff of the areas targeted on the nature of their operations. Generally, the archivist and analyst will ask for all systems overviews and records descriptions available, and will seek a series of interviews with managers and others knowledgeable about operations within the targeted area. In particular, they are looking for organizational units that have records of either high or no archival value, so that the institution can be asked to provide minimum information on these areas, thus saving everyone a considerable amount of work. They are also looking for pockets of old records or special media records that could be transferred immediately and directly to the Archives.

Finally, especially in the case of electronic records, the archivist and analyst will be looking for duplication and overlap. Does the area import information from other areas of the institution or from outside? Does it significantly alter or add to that information? Does it provide information to other areas of the institution or outside? In what form? How much duplication is there between the records in field or regional offices and those at headquarters? The whole purpose of asking such questions is to avoid collecting the same information several times in several different places and to ensure that the version acquired for the Archives is of the highest quality and the most complete.

After the completion of this research within the area whose records are to be appraised, the records manager of the institution, with the aid of the National Archives analyst, prepares a submission describing the records. While this is also a substantial piece of work, it is not essentially different from what has been done in the past. The major change from past practice is the attempt by the archivist and the analyst to do initial research both inside and outside the institution that will put the records in a wider context, and to identify from that context the most significant sources.

In the last major step in this process, the archivist prepares a written, formal appraisal based on the submission and concluding with terms and conditions under which records are to be transferred, including retention periods.

At this stage, the archivist consults the records themselves to do the actual appraisal and in doing so follows a definite order. Again it is a top-down approach, beginning with records created through the formulation of policy, followed by those resulting from general operations and interpretation of policy. These are generally the most important records of an agency, revealing its operating culture, policies, and programmes. Only then is it possible to evaluate the voluminous records generated by the daily application of policy, usually found in the case files and the usually more repetitive and less valuable records located in field offices.

The archivist completes the appraisal of the records with terms and conditions for the transfer of those judged to be archival. Following discussion with institutional officials and when all are satisfied, the terms and conditions are formally signed off by the institution and submitted to the National Archivist, the sole official in Canadian law who can authorize the destruction of federal government records.[5]

Assessment of the Process

The National Archives is very much in the early days of its new appraisal and disposition process. It is concerned with assessing both its successes and its shortcomings. There is much still to be done. For some questions, however, we have at least tentative answers. Have the Multi-Year Disposition Plans been successful? Has the National Archives replaced a fragmented and piecemeal approach with a more planned and systematic one? The answer to both questions is largely yes.

It is not surprising that the greatest success has occurred where the National Archives exercises the greatest degree of control: preliminary research both inside and outside the institution has given a whole new dimension to our acquisition work. For the first time, we are developing systematic overviews of what the major

sectors of institutions are and what they do. This is particularly true of current operations, which in the past archivists had tended to come to know only as records were transferred. The National Archives thus has a greatly improved knowledge of what government institutions do, and thus of where it should focus appraisal and acquisition activity.

Concentrating on developing an understanding of the operations and functions of a sector or several branches of an institution and attempting to assess its records in the context of the institution definitely makes records and electronic systems much more comprehensible. The National Archives has not developed special criteria for the assessment of electronic records or electronic record systems. Archivists are given some basic training in the nature of electronic systems; for the most part, however, they are expected to appraise electronic records as they do others, in the context of the institution's functions. The National Archives maintains a separate electronic systems processing unit, which undertakes technical assessments of electronic systems that archivists have identified as valuable. That unit also assesses the technical feasibility and advisability of attempting to transfer individual electronic systems or portions of them to the National Archives. In addition, it advises on the technical data necessary to comprehend and run a system.

The approach has worked well. Archivists whose background was in the textual record often seemed initially daunted when they encountered as many as thirty or forty electronic systems in the sector they were evaluating. Those archivists have found the appraisal issues fairly readily resolvable, however, once functions have been studied.

Encountering electronic systems in government institutions is raising issues of retention and monitoring. The past policy of the Archives has been that ultimately all records of archival value would be transferred into its own facilities. Growing experience with electronic records within government institutions, however, has raised a number of instances where it is preferable to leave the records in the custody of the institution. These include situations where the cost of transfer of the record or other technical considerations, such as software copyright and data complexity, make it impossible to acquire the record at this time; circumstances where the institution has a continuing and long-term need for the record, which may include the provision of elaborate and extensive reference services; or the existence of statutory provisions that prevent transfer to the National Archives.

Our policy now is to leave such electronic records physically within the institutions and to negotiate agreements on a case-by-case basis to ensure preservation of the records in a useable format, permit their description in archival inventories, and grant access to researchers within the framework of our access to information and privacy legislation.[6]

This decision on electronic records is crystallizing thinking on other records in comparable circumstances. The National Archives is now negotiating agreements with several cultural institutions which will formally recognize their retention of their study collections. In the near future, the archives will be broaching the question of leaving other types of records, such as photographs and maps, in their originating institutions.

Leaving records in the institutions and negotiating long-term transfer agreements raises the issue of monitoring. The National Archives is in the early stages of producing policies and procedures by which it can monitor both records that will remain in the institutions and those identified to be of archival value, which are ultimately to be transferred to the Archives.

Partly based on what it is discovering as it becomes more immersed in government institutions, the National Archives is also in the process of revising its policy concerning those records which institutions are given blanket approval to destroy under our General Records Disposal Schedule, because they are not considered to be archival. Again, much of that revision concerns electronic records.

We have many concerns about the workings of the Multi-Year Disposition Plans themselves. For example, tackling institutions from the top down by assessing what are considered to be the most archivally significant areas first involves negotiation with the institutions, which of course have their own agendas. The Archives has often found it necessary to compromise, agreeing to deal with what the institution sees as a problem area in return for agreement that an area we see as an archival priority is also done.

Access to some segments of institutions is notoriously hard. A top down approach logically starts with the policy files of the minister's and deputy minister's offices. Many records management operations, however, do not administer the records of those offices. Although federal regulation requires that the departmental files kept at that level be available, the best the archives has been able to do in some instances has been to offer to cooperate with records management staff in obtaining fuller access. Obviously, however, the National Archives must expect to have to make compromises and experience some difficulties of that nature.

The Archives had hoped that the MYDPs would provide a firmer control over appraisal work flow, through agreements with institutions to time lines for work to be accomplished. While institutions have cheerfully signed such agreements, their observance of them has been mixed. To this point, the Archives has preferred the carrot to the stick in seeking institutional compliance. In addition, the Archives itself has had some problems with projects overlapping or gaps in the flow of work because of missed deadlines. It is a matter of degree, however: although the Archives does not have full control of the work flow, neither does it have institutions ignoring the Archives for long periods and then deluging it with work.

I have already indicated that the National Archives felt it was usually dealing with government institutions at too low a level in the hierarchy. Records managers generally do not control the full range of records of their institutions. Electronic records in particular usually are under the control of a separate informatics area. Records managers often do not have adequate influence within institutions; they are unable to help archivists gain adequate access to do their appraisal work, or to influence policy decisions. To alleviate this, negotiations for the MYDPs were begun at the deputy minister level and the signing authority for the plans in the institutions was set high—at the level of the "Management of Government Information Holdings" official, who is generally a senior manager.

These arrangements have had some advantages for the MYDP process. They have ensured that senior officials know the essentials of what is going on. They also provide a route of appeal back up to the top of an institution if the National Archives encounters extreme problems. The archives has been reluctant to appeal to high level officials, however, except in cases of major difficulty. In most cases, high level contacts have listened with polite enthusiasm and then assigned the work down to the level at which the archives has always dealt—the records manager.

The breadth of the work involved has itself helped to establish new contacts. For example, the co-operation of informatics staff has been essential in the appraisal of electronic records. The Archives also has developed new contacts inside communications branches or divisions, which tend to hold the photographic and audio-visual media. The preparation of research overviews of the areas or sectors that are to be evaluated has led to many fruitful contacts with those who are responsible for the running of systems and projects on a day-to-day basis. The broad research base of the plans ensures wider contacts within the institutions. Perhaps with time these contacts will become more automatic and formalized.

Not all the problems are created by the institutions. When it asks institutions to prepare information upon which it will base its appraisal analysis, the Archives often receives excessive amounts of data lacking focus and containing duplication. The archives obviously needs to be more specific in what it asks for and to put less emphasis on covering every contingency. By asking for too much information, the Archives is sometimes paralyzing institutions into inactivity. It needs to avoid rigid, fixed approaches to institutions, especially in the preparation of detailed written questionnaires, and to put more emphasis on face-to-face interviews and flexible discussion.

At present, the National Archives approaches the appraisal of institutional records by dividing institutions into sectors. It is then left with the problem of how to deal with institution-wide information systems that cross boundaries, such as truly centralized central registry systems, major institution-wide databases, and electronic mail systems.

At the same time, the Archives is concerned about developing generic archival appraisal criteria, for common functions and activities across institutions, for common structures (all appeal tribunals, for instance, or institutional records in ministers' offices), or by medium (cross-institutional electronic mail systems, for instance)—with a view to developing and issuing generic disposition authorities for shared functions, structures, or media.

Local Area Networks—electronic mail systems—are a particular bedevilment. The Archives believes that the best solution to the capture of this most ephemeral of records lies in system designs that incorporate record-keeping requirements. Such systems, however, are not at present in wide use. The Archives in the meantime is encouraging institutions to adopt procedures that will add corporate file numbers and titles, and any other required information, to e-mail and other electronic documents, and to store them in a shared space at the level of the work group or of the entire organization. Failing that, the Archives recognizes that

institutions may have to rely on back-up tapes generated on a regular basis in accordance with standard systems maintenance procedures. If that is the case, institutions will have to develop criteria to help identify the tapes that should be retained for extended periods of time, as well as the record-keeping rules and procedures that will ensure the retrievability of the records in the future.

The National Archives is also concerned with the sizeable volume of records held outside corporate information systems—in private offices, personal filing cabinets, and the like. While this concern applies to all records, it is particularly relevant for video, film, and photographs.

The National Archives is finding that the areas of institutions that it targets as priorities tend to be those rich in textual and electronic records. Other media concentrate in communications offices and the like, which are low priorities. As a solution, the Archives is beginning to adopt a two-pronged approach, with the archivist responsible for audio-visual media operating separately to approach those areas of primary interest to that division.

All of those working within the MYDPs have concerns about the mutability of government organization and the long time periods that often elapse before transfer of records. Records that have been appraised and on which terms and conditions have been established may move to other areas of the institution, out to the regions, or to another institution altogether. They could also be devolved to other jurisdictions. In 1993, for instance, the Government of Canada announced a reorganization of a number of major departments. Records appraised under the MYDP in Health and Welfare, to give but one example, have now migrated to the new departments of Health and of Human Resource Development, as well as to several other institutions. Another department, Indian and Northern Affairs, has long been highly centralized. In response to the needs of Canada's native peoples, it is now moving towards the decentralization of its functions into the regions of Canada and is also devolving an increasing number of functions to the native peoples themselves. Such changes often result in rapid and long-distance moves of records that previously have been appraised and identified for retention. We can only attempt to describe the records, in the terms and conditions, in sufficient detail to be able to identify them again, and take comfort in the fact that, while assignments of responsibility may change, alterations of function are much less frequent.

Every solution generates new problems. This is certainly true of the Multi-Year Disposition Plans. To a certain extent, we are going to be victims of our own success: because we are generating disposition authorities for a much greater volume of material, we are also creating future custodial problems for the Government Archives Division, which already has sixty per cent of its holdings in backlog. In part we expect that issue to be resolved through the more precise identification of records of value during the appraisal process. Whereas in the past much custodial time was spent in appraising material that had already come to us from institutions, we now hope that the extensive appraisal work we are doing inside the institutions will lead to the receipt of a better, more valuable record, requiring much less selection work at the custodial phase.

The Archives is also moving to insert standard clauses regarding file lists in terms and conditions of agreement, in order to obtain electronic copies of existing file

lists. We are also asking the institutions themselves to segregate archival from non-archival records and are offering them a copy of the programme the Archives uses for future listing of files.[7]

These plans essentially deal with long-term disposition rather than immediate acquisition; it will be decades before the Archives acquires the bulk of the material that it has appraised. That fact perhaps makes it more difficult to assess the effectiveness of the top-down, research-driven, and functional appraisal strategy that it has adopted. Has it allowed the archives to identify the best records for retention?

Any answer to that question is probably subjective. Perhaps it can never be satisfactorily answered. Certainly the archivists working on the MYDPs acknowledge that they will occasionally lose good records in what they reject. Perhaps the matter is best considered in terms of "risk management": we are faced with a flood of government documentation so vast that, even with major increases in staff, we could not hope to read even samples of the files sufficiently to appraise. Even if we could, unless material is systematically placed in context, modern bureaucracies are too complex to allow assessment of randomly received accessions. If we had continued in our previous approaches, we could hope to do no more than dabble our toes in the edge of the ocean. Appraisal that concentrates on understanding the configurations of the institution and on placing its records in context, although it may seem radical, is less risky. It will allow the Archives to reach considered judgements on much larger volumes of material.

The Archives may need to carry the top-down, research-oriented approach further. At the moment, it tends to begin its analysis inside an institution and to set appraisal priorities too much in isolation. Archivists tend to become too immersed in the institution and to develop a natural inclination to keep as much of its records as possible. The National Archives needs to put more effort at the top of the pyramid, in defining what the essential functions of government are before detailed appraisal begins, to define more clearly what is to be appraised.

I also have concerns with the "once-only" nature of the National Archives' present system of appraisal. Time does provide context. Much may be either destroyed or retained which in retrospect has a different significance than may at first appear. I believe that adequate appraisal must involve a staged process and that, despite resource limitations and the growing bulk of records, the National Archives should be working towards a process of appraisal that will entail several assessments over an extended period, with a progressive selection of records deemed to have continuing archival value.

In summary, like most ambitious and complicated planning, the MYDP has its flaws and potential failings—and plenty of opportunity for improvement. Nevertheless, I feel the MYDPs have brought the National Archives a large step forward in systematic planning of the appraisal of records.

Notes

1 I wish to thank my colleagues at the National Archives of Canada, Terry Cook, Dan Moore, and John McDonald, for their aid and advice in the preparation of this article. Earlier versions were delivered to the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, St. John's, Newfoundland, June 1993 and to the Symposium on Appraisal held by the Committee on Current Records, Records Management Systems and Archival Appraisal, International Council on Archives held in Oslo, Norway, 10-11 June 1994. The proceedings of that symposium may be published by the ICA at a later date.

The article is current to June 1994. As the article implies, developments are continuing at a rapid pace. Those with an interest in the current situation would be well advised to contact the National Archives of Canada directly.

2 Bryan Corbett and Eldon Frost, "The Acquisition of Federal Government Records: A Report on Records Management and Archival Practices," *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983-84), pp. 201-32.

3 Eldon Frost, "A Weak Link in the Chain: Records Scheduling as a Source of Archival Acquisition," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92), pp. 78-86.

4 Discussion of priorities based upon Terry Cook, "Government-Wide Plan for the Disposition of Records, 1991-96," (Government Archives Division, National Archives of Canada, October 1990, typescript).

5 Discussion of Multi-Year Disposition Plans based upon "Report and Recommendations of the Work Group on Requirements and Recommendations of Submissions, Archival Appraisal and Authorities," (Government Archives Division and Government Records Branch, National Archives of Canada, November 1990, typescript); "Report of the Multi-Year Records Disposition Plan Work Group," (Government Archives Division and Government Records Branch, National Archives of Canada, March 1991, typescript); and Terry Cook, "An Appraisal Methodology: Guidelines for Performing an Archival Appraisal," (Government Archives Division, National Archives of Canada, December 1991, typescript).

6 "Leaving Electronic Records in Institutions" (Archives and Government Records Branch, National Archives of Canada, November 1993, policy paper).

7 Some of the discussion of the effectiveness of the Multi-Year Disposition Plans is based upon "Records Disposition Division Focus Day: Report and Recommendations," (Records Disposition Division, National Archives of Canada, March 1994, typescript) as well as several National Archives documents on monitoring records in institutions, revision of the General Records Disposal Schedules, and guidelines on the management of electronic records in office support systems, all of which are presently in draft. I am grateful to John McDonald for giving me access to the draft of his paper, "The Management of Electronic Records in Office Support Systems: Setting Direction," to be presented at the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Ottawa, June 1994.