

The Australian Series System

by CLIVE SMITH*

Résumé

Le système des séries tel que développé par les Australian Archives durant les années 1960 (et en plein essor durant les années 1970 lorsque l'auteur se joignit à cette institution) constitue un système vaste et complexe de gestion des documents tout au long de leur cycle de vie. Les documents étaient habituellement examinés pendant leur phase active. Les descriptions préparées pour les séries devinrent le fondement de toutes les autres interventions subséquentes incluant le protocole de disposition, le transfert de responsabilité, l'enregistrement, l'inventaire topographique, la restitution, la destruction (le cas échéant), la communicabilité, le repérage, et la référence. Cet article ne présente que la vision de l'auteur de l'origine du système ainsi que des liens entre les principaux éléments du système, c'est-à-dire la série et le créateur de documents.

Abstract

The series system, as developed by the Australian Archives in the 1960s (and in full bloom in the 1970s, when the author joined the Australian Archives) is a complex and comprehensive system for managing records throughout their life cycle. Records were customarily surveyed while still in current use. The series descriptions prepared became the basis of all subsequent action, including disposal arrangements, transfer of custody, accessioning, location control, de-accessioning and destruction (where appropriate), access control, retrieval, and reference. This paper discusses only the author's views of the origin of the system and the links between the most important elements of the system: series and agencies.

The Australian series system was developed in the early 1960s by the archival authority for the government of the Commonwealth of Australia--then known as the Commonwealth Archives Office, now known as the Australian Archives. As an archivist who received my basic training entirely within the Australian Archives, the series system seemed just so much common sense that I could not then envisage any other practical method of arranging and describing archives. Why, I used to ask myself,

would anyone use any other method? Why was it in Australia that the series system evolved?

The answer to my last question probably lies in a combination of circumstances that might well be unique. First, the Commonwealth of Australia came into existence only on 1 January 1901, when the six British colonies¹ formed a federation. Second, the former colonies and the new federation had inherited British administrative and record-keeping practices. Third, the first fifty years of the Commonwealth's existence were filled with events of sufficient magnitude to change the essential nature of this federation and to create an atmosphere of administrative instability. Fourth, the federal government did not appoint its first archivist, or otherwise take any meaningful steps to manage its archives, until 1944.

When it came into existence, the Commonwealth of Australia was a new entity. Certainly, some of the functions, such as the collection of customs and excise duties, and the administration of the postal services, had been taken over from the former colonies (now States in the new federation). Some other functions, such as Defence and External Affairs, were also taken over from the colonies, inasmuch as the colonies had exercised them (these functions had tended to be regarded primarily as imperial). Yet other functions, such as those performed by the new Department of the Treasury, the new Attorney-General's Department, or the new Department of Home Affairs, were entirely new, being functions primarily concerned with the administration of the new federal government. In all these cases, however, the new Commonwealth departments established new record-keeping systems for their central offices. Although the State offices in many cases continued to maintain record series inherited from their colonial predecessors, and although some central office record-keeping systems incorporated records from colonial predecessors, I am unaware of any significant record series being taken over and continued by a central office.

The new federal government inherited British record-keeping practices, in particular the concepts of the registry (which incorporated mail room and filing functions) and pre-action filing (i.e., placing new or incoming documents on the file and then passing the file to the appropriate action officer to take the necessary action, such as drafting a reply). At the time of federation, the practice of registering and numbering each incoming piece of correspondence separately, and then adding it to the existing packet of correspondence relating to the topic or case, which was then controlled by the registration number of the latest piece, was prevalent.² By World War I, however, the practice of registering *files* as such had taken hold. Each folio added to a file was numbered sequentially, and most folios bore on them the file number. Files were usually created in numerical series (the ubiquitous "annual single number series")³ or function-classified series (usually referred to as "multiple number series"⁴ due to the practice of using numbers to reflect the classifications. Both types of system were enhanced by name, subject, or other indexes. Purely alphabetical series of files, such as the use of names for individual case files, were rare. These highly ordered systems made it relatively easy, subsequently, for archivists to identify record series, and also to track the movement of items from series to series.

Within the fifty years following its establishment, the Commonwealth of Australia was involved in two world wars, had to cope with the depression in the 1930s, and

saw the beginnings of post-war reconstruction of the economy and a significant expansion in immigration. In addition, the seat of government was transferred from Melbourne to Canberra. The effects on the administration can be demonstrated by the increase in the number of departments from seven in 1901 to twenty-three in 1950 (having peaked at twenty-seven in 1945). Ignoring the creation of the initial seven departments in 1901, during this period there were a total of fifty-one changes (that is, departments created or abolished). In addition, the government took on new functions and transferred functions between departments. For example, the function of *immigration restriction* passed in 1916 from the Department of External Affairs to the Department of Home and Territories, and then (on the abolition of that department) to the Department of Home Affairs [II]⁵ in 1928. In 1920, the function of *assisted immigration* was created and administered by the Prime Minister's Department. In 1925 it was transferred to the Department of Markets and Migration, back to the Prime Minister's Department in 1927, and then to the Department of Transport [I] in 1927. In 1932 both immigration functions were consolidated in the Department of the Interior [I], inherited by the new Department of the Interior [II] in 1939, and transferred to the Department of Immigration in 1945.

In 1944, the Australian Government appointed its first archivist. The importance of this statement probably lies in its corollary: until 1944 there had been no archivist. Consequently, there was no archival tradition, no "right way" of arranging and describing records, no investment in any archival systems. This does not mean that the new archivist, Ian Maclean, or his staff felt they were free to invent their own system. On the contrary, they spent a decade and a half in the pursuit of the ideal classificatory techniques. It did mean, however, that when they did decide on the necessity of separating the description of context from the description of records, they were not constrained from implementing a new system by the costs of converting a massive investment in an existing system.

The story of the development of the series system still has yet to be fully told, but is adequately summarized elsewhere, most notably in a five-part article entitled "Archives and Administrative Change: Some Methods and Approaches" that appeared in *Archives and Manuscripts* between 1978 and 1981⁶ and in a recent collection of essays entitled *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and the Australian Archives First Fifty Years*.⁷ My purpose now is to outline the principal elements of the system and describe how the system takes care of context. At the same time, I shall elaborate briefly on some adaptations made to the original system when it has been introduced into some other archives.

The series system separates the description of the records, or record-keeping systems, from their context, or the record-keepers, but in doing this it does not ignore or minimize either entity. The system demands close links between entities, and permits multiple links. In other words, a record series entity can be linked to multiple context entities, and vice versa. In fact, the series system treats the principle of respect for provenance as being subservient to, or part of, the principle of respect for original order. The system ignores the concept of the record group, treats the record series as the basis of description and physical arrangement (although more recent experience demonstrates that it is not necessary, and perhaps not even desirable, to insist on physical arrangement). It respects the principle of respect for provenance by clearly

recording each creating agency for each series, and producing inventories of series for each creating agency (a series could appear on more than one inventory, if it has more than one creating agency).⁸

The current definition of a series used by Australian Archives is:

a group of records that are recorded or maintained by the same agency (or agencies) and that are in the same numerical, alphabetical, chronological or other identifiable sequence or that result from the same accumulation or filing process and are of similar function, format or information content

This definition was usually very easy to apply when dealing with the records of the Commonwealth government. The central registry was almost universal in government agencies. Most records were created and maintained within the central registries. The central registries used filing systems that were tightly controlled and easily identified. When there were administrative changes and functions moved from one agency to another, the files documenting the function were transferred relatively smoothly from one central registry to another. If such a transfer took place between existing central registries, the inheriting registry usually incorporated the files into its existing system. Such transfers were usually easy to detect later on (if records of the transfer transaction had disappeared), by simply observing the filing notations on the folios within the files. Just as frequent were transfers of entire record-keeping systems between agencies.⁹

The frequency of such administrative changes and the resulting frequency of changes in record-keeping systems made it difficult for the archivists to identify record groups. Making it more difficult was the lack of regular, ongoing, specific, direct links between the individual functions of government and the record-keeping systems documenting those functions from time to time. The general practice of agencies maintaining a single central registry for the records documenting all their functions, and the frequent transfers of records between those systems, made it impossible to identify record groups by function; in addition the generally extremely short lives of agencies made it difficult to identify record groups by agency.

At the same time, the practice of agencies maintaining central registries made it practicable to create a system for documenting context that was neither extremely skeletal nor dense with detail. The working definition of agency used by the Australian Archives is:

An administrative unit that is a recognizable entity, generates records and has its own independent general record-keeping system.

Using this definition it was relatively easy to identify agencies. Frequently, the central office of a department of state would be treated as an agency, as would each of its regional offices in the state capital cities. Unless a division or branch of a department maintained its own general record-keeping system--that is, a system that was not confined to one particular function--it (the division or branch) was not treated as a distinct agency. If a division or branch of an agency did create a particular record series documenting a particular function, that series was attributed to the agency, with a notation on the description indicating the division or branch responsible.¹⁰

The series system separates the record-keeping context from the administrative context. The record-keeping context is fixed on the series. Each series is related to its predecessors and successors. One series may be a predecessor to another because it was replaced by the successor or simply because it previously documented some of the functions documented by its successor. There may or may not have been a physical transfer of record items from a predecessor to a successor series. A series can be noted as a predecessor to another even though both continue to exist contemporaneously, simply because functions once documented by one were subsequently documented by another.¹¹ Given the frequency of administrative change, there are cases where a series is noted as being both a predecessor and a successor to another series (at different points in time, of course), simply because a function moved back and forth between the agencies concerned.¹²

Series can also have other interrelationships. The most common of these is that of a controlling relationship, such as that between a series of files and the file register, or between the files and the index. Other relationships are also noted, for example where two series perform closely related functions, such as a journal and a ledger. Agencies, too, have a similar web of relationships. As with series, these relationships are not necessarily on a one-to-one basis. An agency can have several reporting relationships during its existence. It can have multiple subordinates. Agencies merge and divide. The series system also recognizes the multiplicity of relationships between series and agencies. The Australian Archives identified two main types of relationship. First and foremost, of course, was the *recording agency* relationship, between a series and the agency or agencies that created and maintained it in use over time (the provenance relationship). Very quickly, however, the notion of *controlling agency* was identified. Which agency now owns and controls a particular series is an important distinction for the purpose of access rights, disposition control, and, perhaps, chargeback. While the *recording agency* relationship remains constant (that is, an agency never loses this relationship over time, although it may cease to be an active relationship), the *controlling agency* relationship changes frequently. Further, there are more likely to be multiple *controlling* than *recording* agencies for a series simultaneously--although the latter is not unknown.

It was also recognized that other relationships between series and agencies could also exist. That of custodian, for example. Generally, the Australian Archives did not attempt to record a chain of custody, except where it was implicit in the recording relationship. There were, however, practical reasons for noting the *transferring agency* at the time records came into archival custody, especially if this was different from both recording agency and controlling agency.

The series system has now spread well beyond the Australian Archives. Let me now turn to my experience in introducing and adapting the system in two other institutions--the archives of Westpac Banking Corporation in Sydney, and the World Bank in Washington DC, where I have to admit a sort of series system was being implemented at the time I arrived. Both these institutions had something in common: the lack of strong centralized record-keeping systems. (The World Bank did, and does, maintain a number of central filing and information centres but these do not serve the entire Bank. They are also based purely on post-action filing, and are not relied upon for record-keeping by a significant proportion of the staff in the areas they do serve.)

In both these institutions, therefore, it was necessary to re-define the concept of agency. In both cases, we settled for simply documenting every organizational unit at every level, and recording its relationships within the hierarchy over time. The downside of this decision is the work load in maintaining this information and keeping it up to date. The maintenance of the authority file takes priority over the preparation of detailed descriptions of units, their functions and history. Fortunately, at the World Bank, there is more formal control over the organization's structure. We still find it necessary, however, to maintain our own authority file, rather than access the database maintained by the Organization Planning Staff, which lacks historical information.

Equally problematical has been, for the most part, the relative informality of record-keeping and the consequent problems with satisfactorily identifying record series. This is compounded (at both Westpac and the World Bank) by the primary need for series identification and description for the purpose of retention scheduling, rather than for archival description. This has meant that series have to be described in terms that make them readily identifiable to the staff in whose custody they are and who are responsible for applying the retention schedules. This is further complicated by the tendency of many staff to re-arrange the records when they take over a new job and by the lack of well-defined (and well-understood) functional statements.

One difference between the Westpac system and that at the World Bank arises from the database technology used to manage the records. At Westpac our system did not permit us to have more than one disposal class per series; that is, for the purpose of retention scheduling, an entire series was subject to the same retention and disposition instruction. The result was a tendency to treat as separate series those portions of a series (as traditionally defined) that had different retention periods or disposition instructions. The World Bank system, on the other hand, permits multiple disposal classes per series. A *disposal class* was a concept used within the Australian Archives and was defined as a group of records performing the same functions and thereby meriting the same retention and disposal instructions. A disposal class could apply across series (and be an entry on a general disposal schedule) or be specific to one series or a portion thereof.

This brings me to a couple of final points. As applied to date in the institutions I have worked in, the series system has ignored the existence of record-keeping *systems*, except as aggregations of related series. A record-keeping system could usually be identified only by some commonality of recording agency or agencies and date range--perhaps some common wording in the series titles--and through an examination of the inter-relationships.¹³ For all practical purposes, the series system could be equally well applied to record-keeping systems as a whole, descriptions of individual series (if we keep to our arrangement-based definition of the record series) forming part of the description of the whole.

One tendency I do see for the future, however, with the development of more electronic record-keeping systems (particularly electronic document systems) is that the description and control of individual documents, objects, and other types of electronic record items will supplant the description of record series. There is a wide range of electronic document systems that can, and will, function as record-keeping systems. One common element of these systems is the capability to profile (or describe) each document or version thereof. Such profiles are essential not only

for retrieval, but also for recording the business context in which the document is created or received, and used.

In such an electronic environment, the correspondence file or dossier takes on a new dimension. It no longer exists physically, but only as a collation of electronic documents that are assembled through some search criteria, and it exists only as long as the search is maintained. A single document may participate in several such virtual files if it is caught by other search criteria. In such an environment, the record series either will also become a virtual entity, evident only from a commonality of control attributes, such as recording agency, function, document type, disposition, etc., or will become synonymous with the system itself.

Notes

- * This article is based on a presentation to the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists held in Regina, Saskatchewan, 17 June 1995.
- 1 New South Wales, Tasmania, Queensland, Victoria, South Australia, and Western Australia.
- 2 This practice was known as "top-numbering" (the dossier or packet being controlled by the registration of the last piece of correspondence added to it), but the term "top-numbering" came to mean the practice of allocating new registration numbers to existing files when incorporating them into another filing system following the transfer of files between agencies consequent to an administrative change.
- 3 Each file being allocated a sequential number in a single sequence for each year, a year prefix (usually only the last two digits) being used to distinguish the files from one year to another. e.g., 25/0001, 25/0002, ... 26/0001. Subsequent parts or volumes for a file dealing with one topic or case were usually allocated their own unique numbers, rather than part numbers; while this required cross-referencing, it facilitated physical filing and retirement of older parts.
- 4 Each file being allocated a three- or four-part number, the parts designating the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of classification, with the last part being a sequential number for that file or volume within the final classification. Such classified filing schemes frequently proved too rigid in an era of almost constant administrative change. Where, for convenience, single files dealt with more than one topic or more than one aspect of a topic, supplementary cross-indexing was necessary.
- 5 I.e., the second department with that name in only twenty-eight years.
- 6 P.J. Scott and G. Finlay, "Archives and Administrative Change: Some Methods and Approaches," Part 1, *Archives and Manuscripts* 7, no. 3 (August 1978), pp. 115-127; P.J. Scott, C.D. Smith, and G. Finlay, "Archives and Administrative Change: Some Methods and Approaches," Part 2, *Archives and Manuscripts* 7, no. 4 (April 1979), pp. 151-165; P.J. Scott, C.D. Smith, and G. Finlay, "Archives and Administrative Change: Some Methods and Approaches," Part 3, *Archives and Manuscripts* 8, no. 1 (June 1980), pp. 41-54; P.J. Scott, C.D. Smith, and G. Finlay, "Archives and Administrative Change: Some Methods and Approaches," Part 4, *Archives and Manuscripts* 8, no. 2 (December 1980), pp. 51-69; P.J. Scott, "Archives and Administrative Change: Some Methods and Approaches," Part 5, *Archives and Manuscripts* 9, no. 1 (September 1981), pp. 3-18.
- 7 Sue McKemish and Michael Piggott, eds., *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives First Fifty Years* (Australia, 1994). In particular, see: Mark Wagland and Russell Kelly, "The Series System - A Revolution in Archival Control"; C. Hurley, "The Australian ('Series') System: An Exposition"; and Sigrid McCausland, "Adapting the Series System: A Study of Small Archives Applications."
- 8 The inventories included a reference to the previous or subsequent recording agency. Thus, series CRS A425 (which was created by the Department of Trade and Customs between 1935 and 1956, and then by the Department of Customs and Excise after 1956), would appear on the inventories as follows:

On the inventory for CA 10, Department of Trade and Customs:

CRS A425, Correspondence files, annual single number series, 1935-
[1956: TO CA 62, Department of Customs and Excise]

On the inventory for CA 62, Department of Customs and Excise:

[1956: FROM CA 10, Department of Trade and Customs]

CRS A425, Correspondence files, annual single number series, 1935-

- 9 The following example shows the recording agencies (as registered by Australian Archives in 1979) for CRS A1313, Correspondence files, annual single number series, 1959- :
- 1959-1963: CA 64, Department of Trade, Central Office
 - 1963-1972: CA 66, Department of Trade and Industry, Central Office
 - 1972-1977: CA 1485, Department of Overseas Trade, Central Office
 - 1977- : CA 2477, Department of Trade and Resources, Central Office
- also: 1972-1973: CA 1487, Department of Secondary Industry, Central Office
(portion relating to secondary industry)
- also: 1972-1973: CA 1491, Department of Tourism and Recreation, Central Office
(portion relating to tourism and recreation)
- The last two entries reflect the fact that for the period from 19 December 1972 to 31 December 1973, the Department of Overseas Trade (as the principal successor to the Department of Trade and Industry) operated registry systems for these departments, pending the establishment of their own registries.
- 10 In Australian Archives, before automation of the control systems, this was usually done by adding the name of the relevant division or branch, underlined, to the agency name. For example, the agency recording a series might have been shown as:
- CA 32, Department of Social Services, Establishments Branch, Office Services Section
- This "sub-agency" (and the record series it created) would then have been listed in a distinct "sub-inventory" in the Inventory of Series for the agency.
- 11 A predecessor-successor relationship might also exist because, once a certain condition is satisfied, documents relating to a particular case are transferred from one series to another, for example, once an inquiry becomes a formal complaint.
- 12 There can also be cases where an entire series ceases to exist because it is wholly incorporated into another series maintained by a successor agency--in such a case, if the predecessor agency created no other records documenting the particular function, it might be necessary to register the defunct series simply to document the relationship and indicate the current location of the records (the predecessor agency is not necessarily the provenance of the successor series, merely of some of the contents of that series).
- 13 For example, the following series (created by the Townsville Office of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs) would constitute a typical record-keeping system of the kind maintained by a government agency:
- CRS J101, Correspondence files, single number series with year prefix, 1967-1972
 - CRS J104, Registers for correspondence files, single number series with year prefix, 1967-1972
 - CRS J105, Name index cards for correspondence files, 1967-
 - CRS J106, Subject index cards for correspondence files, 1967-