

Counterpoint

“There’s a Hole in the Bucket, Dear Liza, Dear Liza”: Archivists’ Responsibilities Reviewed

by **MARK HOPKINS**

This article will explore some of the weaknesses of record management and archival practices and procedures within the context of our professional responsibilities as government records archivists. Specific questions will be posed to help identify some highly questionable, although commonplace practices we follow in evaluating retention and disposal schedules. One hopes such an appreciation for why and how we go about ensuring the preservation of records for research purposes will clarify our responsibilities *vis-à-vis* records managers, our administrators, and our research clientele.

Although government records archives have existed in this country for decades, we have not reached the goal of a good records management system. This is because we still do not have regularly scheduled transfers of “historically significant” government records. Only very scanty archival documentation exists from the offices of the most senior departmental officials. Archival holdings are also particularly poor in the areas where individuals’ rights come into direct contact with the state, the legal system, and the various government agencies involved in the administration of justice or, perhaps at times, injustice.

Imagine, that a neutral, friendly, and learned individual from outside the archival community was asked to evaluate the informational needs of various research groups. He categorized the groups into three areas:

1. Individuals and organizations whose need for the documents of a department arises out of their profession as historians, journalists, teachers, film writers, or attorneys.
2. Individuals who, as subjects of departmental investigations or as alleged victims, claim to have suffered legal wrongs.
3. Organizations whose goals and purposes are alleged to require access to the files and records of a department in order to enable them to disseminate information for organizational, educational, and political purposes.

One might even suggest that the needs of these groups are legal rights. I believe he captured, in his three categories, most of the clientele of our various government records archives in Canada. Next, our learned friend looked further into the field of government information and found that a senior government official — namely a federal, provincial, or municipal archivist — was responsible through statutory and

regulatory instruments for what we archivists call “the life cycle of the record” — the generation, collection, maintenance, and disposal of active records. Based on the stated practices of the government archives, as detailed or described in the relevant statutes, regulations, manuals, and directives, our learned friend made some observations and then drew some conclusions. Perhaps we might do the same.

Government records archivists might ask themselves how their institution would fare under the close scrutiny of a knowledgeable, persistent review or audit of their activities and methods. Perhaps the best test is in the quantity, quality, and completeness of the product of our endeavours. Setting aside the question of access or the ability to retrieve particular records, what do we actually hold for potential research use? Can our clientele successfully carry on their professions as historians, journalists, teachers, film writers, or attorneys, or must they make do with whatever scraps we can provide?

If a government archives is mandated to acquire and preserve the historical records of government institutions, is it unreasonable of our three categories of researchers to look askance at our activities and pursue their own legal rights? As a profession, do we archivists “measure up” in terms of what we acquire for potential research use? If we were exposed to outside scrutiny, would it be found:

1. That we failed to persist in efforts to review records when a client department’s policy opposed such review?
2. That we reviewed a limited number of preselected files when faced with such opposition?
3. That we failed to discharge our responsibilities to make independent judgements concerning the record retention and destruction practices of a department?
4. That we passed judgement on documents without inspecting them?
5. That we failed to ensure that a department’s records were retained in accordance with the standards imposed by law?
6. That we approved retention and disposal schedules under broad categories rather than specific series of files?

I very much fear that few, if any of us, could respond satisfactorily to all of these six hypothetical questions. Yet, if we are to claim and maintain the trappings of professionalism which we hold so dear, we must endeavour to rectify these and other problem areas arising from our legally mandated practices and procedures. The Canadian public expects and deserves no less from us as a profession.

Thus far we have defined our clientele in three broad categories and made observations on the efficacy of our legal responsibilities, duties, or obligations in relationship to six questions that identify potential problem situations for government records archivists. Perhaps to reinforce the reality of what has thus far been a rhetorical or theoretical exercise, we might identify the players.

The “learned friend” who supervised the “knowledgeable, persistent review” was United States District Court Judge Harold Greene. The three categories of research clientele are taken virtually verbatim from his “Opinion”¹ regarding the FBI

¹ *American Friends Service Committee, et. al v William H. Webster, et. al*, “Opinion” of Judge Harold H. Greene, District of Columbia, 10 January 1980.

records, filed 10 January 1980. More than just archival researchers, the individuals wanting information were, in fact, plaintiffs. The defendants included archivists at various levels in the National Archival Records Service. Of particular importance was the inclusion of a "working level" archivist among the defendants, which belies the myth of deputy-ministerial responsibility, and assigns legal obligations to those charged with a professional responsibility under the law.

It is a cold and sobering thought to realize that our activities as archivists could ultimately be judged in a courtroom! This predicament is magnified by the knowledge that one's professional activities as an archivist may be politically displeasing to one's superiors. Where can an archivist turn should he or she be facing the dilemma of rendering a professionally unconscionable decision under pressure from superiors? Is it better to ignore the situation hoping it will go unnoticed?

The answer to these and similar questions will obviously depend on the particular facts of the situation and the personal approaches and commitments of the participants. Success in maintaining a thoroughly professional stance in difficult situations will require the support of a strong professional association, be it the Association of Canadian Archivists or one's union. It would be difficult for a working level archivist to resist the coercive power of his or her superiors who do not want to displease their political masters or departmental colleagues.

In addition to the support of a professional association or union, an archivist may have other allies. In a legal conflict between parties, for every defendant there is usually a plaintiff. By serving the needs of the clientele — pragmatic avoidance behaviour — archivists can avoid becoming defendants. It is, therefore, difficult to agree with the official response of the British government to the Report of Sir Duncan Wilson's Committee on *Modern Public Records*.² The government recommends against Wilson's proposed consultative committees of archivists and researchers, essentially for economic reasons:

SECTOR PANELS

21. The Committee wished to see opened formal channels of communication between researchers and those involved in the processes of selection. They considered that two principal benefits could accrue. Reviewers would be better acquainted with current research interests and research workers with the constraints under which records work is carried out. To achieve these ends, they recommended the institution of sector panels. These panels are a central feature of their Report and other recommendations assume their existence.

22. The Government sympathise with the concern which prompted this recommendation. In considering whether to accept it, they have had to bear in mind that the resources which can be made available for the selection processes and subsequent permanent preservation and access are limited and in particular, that no greater proportion of records can be preserved. The Government believe that the present arrangements

2 Great Britain, Lord Chancellor's Department, Report by Sir Duncan Wilson, *Modern Public Records: Selection and Access* (London, 1981).

3 Great Britain, Lord Chancellor's Department, *The Government Response to the Report of the Wilson Committee, Modern Public Records* (London, 1982), p. 4.

have not been shown to be sufficiently defective to justify the establishment of some seven new panels or committees or the provision of staff to service them. The proposals run counter to the government's general policy of reducing the size of the civil service and the number of non-departmental public bodies. The recommendation for the institution of sector panels is therefore not accepted.³

Rather, archivists should seek out the advice of specialists in the research community. The very practical solution recommended by Dr. J.V.T. (Jake) Knoppers⁴ that we utilize the data base created by the *Canadian Register of Research and Researchers in the Social Sciences* at the University of Western Ontario for identifying particular expertise in a field unfamiliar to archival generalists would be an excellent start. Such an ACA initiative would be quite worthwhile and welcome.

The operation of an archives for government records is *de facto* if not *de jure* recognition of the public research value of records or information, albeit in the future or under strictly controlled criteria. When access to archival records is defined by a statutory or regulatory instrument, the importance of the archivist's role is writ large indeed. Access rights demonstrate the thrust of the law to make government records accessible for legitimate research purposes. Our supporting role as archivists in relation to a society's right to information and research must keep us at arm's length from the interests of the creating agency and closer to the interests of our research clientele.

As Judge Greene quite succinctly stated:

...it is clear that the interest of the government in minimizing the costs and administrative burdens associated with the storage of what it regards as unneeded and unwanted documents *cannot be deemed to outweigh the interests of plaintiffs in the preservation of records which may be of substantial economic and other value to them*. The basic judgement in that regard was made by the Congress. By enacting the various records management laws, it made a decision that the *administrative and financial problems associated with archival review as a prerequisite to record disposal must take second place to the necessity for such review as a means for preserving documents* which may have certain specified values.⁵

In other words, it is in the public interest for archivists to emphasize the careful selection of archival records over financial and other administrative expediencies tending towards quick destruction of any record which has no administrative use or value to the creating agency. The existence of any archival program for government records is acceptance of the principle that citizens have a right to information, albeit and unfortunately not to information as current or extensive as we might wish.

Our role as archivists, therefore, is different from the role of our close colleagues, records managers. If bureaucrats have allegiances, the archivist's loyalty should be to research and researchers; for I suspect many of our colleagues in administration

4 Interview with J.V.T. Knoppers, Senior Vice-President, Infoman Inc., Ottawa, February 1982.

5 Green, "*Opinion*". Emphasis added.

and records management reflect the narrow economic interests of their institution and seek to protect its public image. Serving the interests of the researchers will coincide with the archivist assisting the records manager, as the timely application of effective and detailed records schedules meets the needs of all concerned. The point must be made that records are maintained in an active or semi-dormant area only for various administrative uses and for convenience — not to restrict them from the public domain. It is paternalistic, socially irresponsible, and makes no more economic sense to retain records to protect the agency's reputation or for sanctimoniously false privacy claims, than to retain routine "housekeeping" records for twenty years.

The question of the balance between the archivist's responsibility to the records manager and the researcher was also addressed by Judge Greene:

The thrust of the actions of the F.B.I., perhaps naturally so, has been to preserve what is necessary or useful for its operations. The Archives, which should have safeguarded the interests of both the F.B.I. and the public, in practice considered only the former.⁶

With access to information legislation, the role of the records manager is moving toward that of the archivist. Now that records managers must respond to non-administrative requests for information, they will also be serving an "outside" research clientele. One hopes the archival community will show some leadership in this area by advocating liberal access decisions.

Unfortunately, in situations where records management is weak, the archivist will have to fill the breach if the rights and interests of the public are to be safeguarded. However, very few government records archivists have the required training in the records management area. This problem is compounded when we are faced with coping with multi-media automated information systems.⁷ As a result of their historical training, good archivists are able to critically evaluate Canadian historiography and the use of archival sources for research purposes. However, many lack the equally important expertise to evaluate records management activities and practices.

In the future the distinctions or professional boundaries between fully competent archivists and fully competent records managers will begin to fade. Rather than dwell on whose responsibility it is to fix the hole in the bucket through which so much information is now lost, we should start to equip ourselves with the requisite training and tools to get on with the job. However, the primary assumption must remain that providing informational resources for a wide variety of clientele is the *raison d'être* of our profession.

6 Greene, "Opinion."

7 J.V.T. Knoppers, "Integrating Technologies — Integrating Disciplines?," *Proceedings of the 2nd Canadian ARMA Conference on Records Management*, Montreal, 14-17 February 1982, pp. 6-7.