

The Fine Art of Destruction Revisited

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RÉSUMÉ Cet article est essentiellement le texte d'un discours prononcé par l'Archiviste national du Canada, M. Ian E. Wilson, au début de l'an 2000, lors du Séminaire Riley qui portait sur la destruction des documents et des amendements projetés à la Loi sur l'accès. Comme l'explique Richard Brown en présentation, l'article s'inspire d'un texte publié par l'ex-archiviste fédéral W. Kaye Lamb et intitulé "The Fine Art of Destruction." M. Wilson met l'accent sur la gestion de l'information comme une ressource corporative et un actif pour le gouvernement ; il signale que les Archives nationales du Canada peuvent à la fois contribuer au développement de normes pour l'industrie de l'information, lesquelles peuvent s'appliquer à l'ensemble du gouvernement, tout en poursuivant leurs propres intérêts quant à la préservation des documents ayant une valeur archivistique et historique.

ABSTRACT This article is essentially the text of a speech given by National Archivist of Canada Ian E. Wilson in May 2000 to the Riley Seminar on the Destruction of Records and Proposed Access Act Amendments. As Richard Brown explains in the foreword, the article draws its inspiration from an article by former Dominion Archivist W. Kaye Lamb, entitled "The Fine Art of Destruction." Wilson focuses on the management of information as a corporate resource and asset of the government and indicates that the National Archives of Canada can contribute to the development of information industry standards with government-wide application while pursuing its own interests to preserve records with archival and historic importance.

Foreword

The title of this presentation, as well as some of its remarks and observations, draws inspiration from an article by former Dominion Archivist W. Kaye Lamb, "The Fine Art of Destruction," published in 1962 (see note 5). Many of the issues raised by Dr. Lamb about the management of public records continue to have great resonance today, despite all the recent technological advances in the development of electronic record-keeping infrastructure. The age-old conundrum of deciding the value and preservation of public records – which records to keep, which records to throw away – continues to challenge

and perplex information management professionals and archivists, just as it did forty years ago.

What follows below, with some modifications to facilitate publication, is the text of a speech delivered on 1 May 2000 by Ian E. Wilson, National Archivist of Canada, at a convention in Ottawa, Ontario, which explored the implications of a critical amendment to and further proposed reforms of the federal Access to Information Act, the legislation which currently provides for and enables public consultation of the records created and managed by institutions of the Government of Canada. Advertised as the Destruction of Records and Proposed Access Act Amendments: A One-Day Seminar and Training Session, the convention attracted over 250 participants from all walks of public and private life, including professionals in information management (IM) and information technology (IT), federal access to information and privacy officers, federal security officers, lawyers, auditors, parliamentarians, journalists, public rights advocates, and academics. The keynote addresses were given by National Archivist Ian Wilson, John Reid, Information Commissioner of Canada, and John Bryden, Member of Parliament responsible for the private member's bill then on the agenda of the House of Commons recommending changes to the federal access legislation. (Bryden's bill subsequently died on the House floor.) There were also several panel discussions devoted to the ramifications of the amendment of the Access to Information Act recently passed by Parliament. For the first time in the history of Canadian national access legislation, there is now a section of access law which stipulates significant penalties for the intentional destruction or unauthorized alteration of public records.

The text of the speech stands substantially as it was presented at the convention. Although the text does not necessarily suit the form and format of the journal, the full impact of Ian Wilson's remarks would be diminished if major revisions were made in the interests of academic presentation. After all, and this is enormously important, this text represents what the National Archivist actually said to a large group of people with specific interests in the management and preservation of the government record. It is not about record-keeping concepts and appraisal theory, rather, it is about "hard" contemporary issues visited in light of public policy: government business enterprise and its accountability; the authenticity and reliability of public records as evidence of programme and service delivery; the right of Canadians to understand their privileges and obligations; and, last but certainly not least, the preservation of government's historical memory. It is about managing information as a significant corporate asset and resource of the federal government, and how the National Archives of Canada can contribute to the development of information industry standards while pursuing its broader heritage and memory interests within the government records management and disposition framework. In his presentation, the National Archi-

vist makes his opinion and his agenda for future action very direct and clear.

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As we meet today to discuss the rationale supporting the disposal of government records and potential reforms to the *Access to Information Act*, it is important to recognize that the issue of records destruction is not exactly new. In fact, records have long been the object of intentional destruction. Throughout history, for example, the deliberate destruction of records has been the constant companion of war, revolution, politics, and social aggression. Consider the decision made by the first Qin Emperor of China, who unified the country and began construction of the Great Wall in 213 B.C. To reinforce his position as the head of a “new world order,” the Emperor ordered all previous historical writings destroyed upon his accession to power. Henceforth, he declared, “history” would begin with him.¹ Or think about the events of the French Revolution following the storming of the Bastille in 1789, which witnessed a purge of all feudal documents by the revolutionary government, including its archivists, because they subjected “the feeble to the strong.” The revolution left a trail of razed châteaux in the countryside, most of them burnt down by the rural peasantry who wanted to destroy the manorial rolls and registers which detailed their seigneurial service obligations and taxes.²

During the twentieth century, we have witnessed many incidents of premeditated records destruction on a massive scale. Most recently, as noted in a number of news stories, the alleged ethnic cleansing of Kosovo Albanians by Bosnian Serbs included the systematic destruction of public documents. One Reuters news clip ran as follows: “As the 20th Century draws to a close, the scene is chilling – thousands of Kosovo Albanians are being massacred, driven from their country, their villages destroyed, their homes looted, their lives uprooted. Even archives housing their birth and marriage records are being burned by Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic’s Serb forces – an act designed to deny that the Albanians ever existed.”³

It is not difficult to understand why records have historically been targeted for deliberate and wanton destruction. To put it simply, they possess enormous *power*. Records tell us who we are as people. They tell our stories, and they inform our culture and our history; they define political sovereignty, and our rights, privileges, and obligations in society; they provide evidence of government policies, decisions, programmes, and services which have an impact upon our lives as citizens; they sustain and facilitate access to judicial process at law. In essence, records constitute the very foundation of civilization.

There was a curious incident which occurred in East Germany about ten years ago as the Iron Curtain fell which perfectly conveys the status and meaning which records can have within a community. In January 1990, a mob stormed the Berlin headquarters of Stasi, the East German secret police. The protestors broke up the furniture, scattered the agency's surveillance files on the floor, and proceeded to stomp on them in what the *New York Times* rather temperately called "a show of popular frustration." Significantly, the mob did not actually destroy the files; instead, realizing their potential importance as evidence, the protesters merely vented their pent-up anger against the old regime by subjecting the records to a form of symbolic erasure. In fact, just one month earlier, the leaders of the East German democratic movement had acted to prevent the destruction of secret police files in the interests of identifying informers and documenting government abuse.⁴

Perhaps the power of the record is most thoughtfully illuminated by George Orwell in his novel *1984*. In the negative utopia of his imaginary state of Oceania, "the constant rewriting of history, the annihilation of old, outdated facts, and their replacement by new ones of changing orthodoxy, are all essential government monopolies."⁵ As the archivist in charge of preserving our nation's historical memory, I find the archival twist in Orwell's tale of an information society gone horribly wrong both enormously disturbing and chillingly insightful. Oceania's national archival programme, which condones deliberate tampering with and "fixing history" in the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth under an official records destruction policy called "reality control" or "doublethink," is justified by the corporate slogan, "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past."

Of course, the vast majority of records destruction activities are not conceived for nefarious purposes. On the contrary, and I want to emphasize this point, the intentional destruction of records is a necessary and legitimate business activity, provided it is conducted rationally and in compliance with law. The notion that government should regularly dispose of its records in the interest of efficient public administration has a long and venerable history, tracing its modern roots back at least as far as the record-keeping regulations devised by the College of Notaries in Italy during the later Middle Ages, and the chancery of King Henry VII of England at the end of the fifteenth century. For hundreds of years, governments have been routinely disposing of records no longer having further administrative use, typically following processes and procedures developed in the public interest by record-keepers and archivists. Historians may now bemoan the resulting gaps in the historical record, notably in reference to the survival of public documents prior to the nineteenth century, but it must be remembered that many of these so-called memory holes are actually the product of intentional records destruction decisions made by records administrators for perfectly good and sound reasons, however unfortunate these decisions may be for historical research later on. Fur-

thermore, many records have been destroyed inadvertently by natural disasters. In Canada, the fires on the parliamentary precincts (in the West Block in 1897 and in the Centre Block in 1916) both destroyed thousands of government files. This is one of the main reasons we now have first-class storage and laboratory facilities like the Gatineau Preservation Centre, where stringent conservation controls and fire protection measures assure the survival of government's archival records.

Certainly since the turn of the twentieth century, with the professionalization of records management in many countries, the orderly retention and disposal of records has been considered a cornerstone of effective and efficient government administration. Notably, the development of more sophisticated methods to manage public records over the last century, including their preservation in archives, has not been a matter of mere bureaucratic exercise. As the Government of the United States discovered in the 1930s, when the files which had accumulated over many years of federal administration reached the state of a virtually impenetrable mass of information, the absence of business routines to organize and dispose of records can inhibit government's capacity to make policy, render decisions, and deliver programmes and services. Quite literally, as this early example of the American experience indicates, government can either be overwhelmed by its own information or, alternatively, placed in difficulty by ineffective access to documentation or even the absence of records altogether. It is, incidentally, the Americans to whom we must largely credit the development of modern records management techniques emerging from their efforts to fix record-keeping problems before and after the Second World War.

Here in Canada, too, we have long recognized a fundamental requirement for government to have efficient and effective records administration. Over the course of the twentieth century, beginning with the *Report of the Royal Commission Inquiring into the State of the Records of the Public Departments of the Dominion of Canada* in 1914, the federal government has developed processes and procedures to provide for the orderly destruction of records based on rational business principles. Records "scheduling," that is, the taking of official inventories in order to manage the life cycle of records – including the timing of their destruction by departments or their preservation by what was then the Public Archives – was first introduced in 1924 with the general records disposal schedule for the administrative records of the "public departments." The application of scheduling was subsequently extended to the operational records of government during the years 1936 to 1945 through a series of Treasury Board Minutes. Between 1945 and 1965, the destruction or archival preservation of records was authorized by the Public Records Committee. It is highly enlightening and revealing to note just how seriously the business of records destruction was considered at this time. In addition to the Dominion Archivist, the membership of the Public Records Committee was composed of

some of government's most senior bureaucrats, including the Secretary of the Treasury Board and the Comptroller of the Treasury, the Deputy Minister of Public Works, and the Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs. This committee spent many hours in regular deliberation, pouring over the records inventory lists in order to make appropriate keep or destroy decisions.

In 1966, the Public Records Order, emerging from the recommendations of the Glassco Royal Commission on Government Organization delivered five years earlier, introduced the basic foundation of our current records disposal system by ending the tenure of the Public Records Committee and delegating the responsibility of records scheduling to government departments in consultation with the Dominion Archivist. Since that time, beginning with the chapters devoted to record-keeping in Treasury Board's Administrative Policy Manual (e.g., Chapter 460), the federal government has consistently followed an official records management process which incorporates intentional records destruction by institutions for reasons of business efficiency. This process was most recently confirmed with the passage of the *Access to Information* and *Privacy Acts* in 1983, the *National Archives of Canada Act* in 1987, and, last but not least, the implementation of the *Management of Government Information Holdings Policy* by Treasury Board in 1989, the combined effect of which represents a legislative, regulatory, and policy framework which condones records destruction by government subject to certain terms, conditions, and limitations.

Today there are dozens of records management manuals available on the market which provide guidance to government and business on the development of rational records destruction methods. In many of these textbooks, one observes a number of common themes in reference to current records destruction and preservation activities in the Government of Canada, three of which I would like to highlight: the destruction of certain records is essential to effective and efficient business administration; information is a valuable asset which needs to be managed with the same precision of business routine and rigour of accountability as is normally provided for financial, human, or materiel resources; and the management of information is an exercise in business needs analysis. Within the broad context of these themes, I particularly want to address two critical questions of obvious interest to us gathered here today, and to Canadians generally. Which records should government keep? Which records should government throw away?

It would be foolhardy to suppose that these are easy questions to answer. I have already suggested that records can have enormous social, political, economic, and cultural benefit, in some instances a value beyond estimation. When I think of the records preserved by the National Archives, for example, we are rating government's information assets on a potentially dizzying scale of measure. Exactly what value would one place on the hydrographic or topographic surveys which establish Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic, or our

treaties and agreements with Aboriginal peoples, or the documentation of the negotiations pertinent to a bilateral trade agreement of the status of the North American Free Trade Agreement? How does one even begin to calculate value in this context?

Perhaps the conundrum of making decisions on the preservation or destruction of government records was best expressed by one of my predecessors, the late Dr. W. Kaye Lamb. An historian, archivist, and record-keeper of great international stature, Dr. Lamb likened the destruction of records to a “fine art,” a careful, well-considered, and well-planned activity conducted “intelligently, reasonably, and with common sense.” As he noted in an essay written forty years ago:

The sheer bulk of modern records makes destruction inescapable. The extent and cost of storage space in which to retain them all would be prohibitive. The difficulty is to decide wisely and well what shall be destroyed and what shall be retained. At the extremes are groups of documents about which no question need arise. It is obvious that great numbers of papers become superfluous after a time – sometimes after a very short time – and that there would be no justification for keeping them, even if it were feasible to do so. It is equally obvious that other papers belong to categories that must be retained permanently. But between these two extremes one finds a great mass of material, the interest and long-range value of which is a matter of opinion, and it is here that the most difficult decisions with regard to the destruction of records must be made.⁶

Dr. Lamb’s observations continue to have great resonance today, more so as we begin to fully realize the implications of managing information in the electronic age. In the transition from a mass of paper in the early 1960s to the current digital superabundance of electronic records and data, the issue of records destruction is growing ever more complicated. We are now being inundated with computer-generated records to the extent that it is becoming difficult to establish and maintain control over their identification, retrieval, accessibility, authenticity, and integrity. The scale of the problem borders on boggling the mind. For example, government now measures its electronic data holdings of information in thousands of terrabytes. To put this into more familiar terms of measure, one terrabyte of electronic data equals 175,000 metres of records or approximately 750 million pages of text. This does not even include the paper records of government, the mass of which is growing at an ever increasing rate despite the optimistic predictions of communications technology mavens heralding the advent of the paperless office. In the case of government’s paper records, we are now talking about millions of files, and billions of documents. I recently visited several of the federal records centres managed by the National Archives on behalf of government, where many departments store their dormant files. On one occasion, standing on a mezzanine floor twenty

feet in the air and peering down over the main concourse, I saw hundreds of rows of neatly arranged numbered boxes stretching off into the distance as far as the eye could see. I could only think of the closing scenes of the film *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, with the camera panning back to reveal a vast warehouse storing thousands upon thousands of identical wooden containers.

It is not merely the volume of records which is complicating the issue of their preservation or destruction, however, for there are other significant pressures being brought to bear which require attention. First, there are the rising expectations of citizens to gain access to government information. As government creates and accumulates ever more information about its policies, programmes, and services, it is a reasonable and legitimate expectation – in the interest of open and transparent decision making in a modern democracy such as ours – that the public should be able to review the records which have impact upon their lives as Canadians or residents. The facilitation of records review by the public is, after all, one of the primary purposes of the *Access to Information Act*. In this regard, we should not underestimate the recent influence of the Internet, which potentially affords greater access to government and corporate information than we could have possibly imagined even just ten years ago. As the new culture of the Internet rapidly expands in Canada, people expect, require, and are demanding access to government records for a variety of reasons in unprecedented numbers. In effect, the Internet has created a new and highly ravenous generation of knowledge and information consumers (as well as a techno-industrial complex to support and supply it) in which information is treated as venture capital, and communication infrastructures are traded as corporate futures in the stock markets. By turning information into a market commodity, the Internet is coincidentally raising the level of public expectation regarding information access to heights previously unknown in the history of modern communication. With such emphasis being placed on information and upon the platforms which provide access to information, it is becoming increasingly difficult to explain the necessity of destroying records or justifying impediments to information access. Given this new information culture and growing public demand for access to information resources, it is critical that government has a comprehensive audit trail of decision making which fully addresses these concerns, especially in relation to information disposal.

Perhaps the most important factor complicating the issue of records destruction is the ongoing adaptation by government of computer technology as the communications conduit to conduct the nation's public business. Many of us are already conducting our own personal business by computer using the electronic commerce environment. This is certainly the wave of the future, and it is potentially tidal in effect. We are all likely to alter our personal business habits and to change the way we communicate with institutions, both government and private business, over the course of the next several years. As gov-

ernment moves progressively towards full electronic record-keeping integration and electronic service delivery, however, there are a number of problems we need to address, questions that we never had to answer prior to the age of high technology. For example, we didn't have to define what a record was, largely because we always had access to a physical object: a paper file in a box, or a register, or a photograph, or a film. We didn't have to think about preserving records, largely because we had standards and conservation treatments to save physical recording media. Nor did we have to consider the necessity of creating records because documentation of most transactions and decisions eventually found their way into notes on a paper file. Today, with so much government business conducted by telephone through the medium of voice-mail, we have to think about voice-mail communication as a significant government record which requires management and preservation.

Electronic communication has added a whole range of new intellectual concerns, some of them fairly complicated, to the traditional, physical business of record-keeping. Because we are no longer dealing exclusively with a physical medium or object, but often with signals and traces and bits and bytes, with virtual records which live temporarily on a monitor screen according to the specifications of the records creator, we now have to consider the elements and components involved in the creation and preservation of records which provide records with authenticity, reliability, and integrity. We have to rethink how we identify, manage, and provide access to records. Will we be able to reproduce documents as they were originally conceived and drafted? Will we be able to know exactly what occurred? Does an emulation or a representation of what transpired constitute evidence? Will we understand all of the nuances involved in making decisions and in programme and service delivery? Will we even be able to find the records we need to determine what happened? Answers to some of these questions are slowly beginning to emerge, as information managers and archivists around the world, working in close consultation with the legal and audit communities, begin to wrestle with the issues.

I want to come back to the main challenge posed by Dr. Lamb's "fine art of destruction," which expresses the need for government to undertake a progressive reduction of records by determining their short-, medium-, and long-term values. Regardless of all the hardware and software implications involved in managing computer-generated records, or the intricacies of such complicated intellectual matters as the creation of industry standards to determine the admissibility of electronic records in court proceedings, there is a very important and fundamental bottom line to the modern administration of public records. One must have a rational business process and criteria in place which allows government institutions, and more important, public servants, to "distinguish unerringly," as Dr. Lamb advised, "between ephemeral material and significant papers of permanent interest and value."⁷ In other words, there must be a business process susceptible to scrutiny and audit which explains

how government makes decisions about the status of records and why it assigns value to certain records and not to others, and why certain records are retained and others are destroyed; there must be a rational records evaluation process which lends context, continuity, and support to the destruction or preservation of public records. It is time that we begin to think about establishing information industry standards for the retention and disposal of records in particular business domains and at particular levels of decision making, and further – considering the transitory nature of some information – to consider establishing criteria and standards to determine which records need to be created to document an action or a decision by government and linked to a clear indication as to how long these records will be kept.

At this point before we begin to look at ways to refine the processes and procedures of records destruction by government, it would be useful to briefly review the current legislative and policy framework. It is relatively straightforward, and I am not in the habit of quoting legislation and policy; nevertheless, in the context of our discussions today, some elements are worth repeating.

First, under the *National Archives of Canada Act* (NACA), section 5(1), “no record under the control of a government institution and no ministerial record, whether or not it is surplus property,” can be “destroyed or disposed of without the consent of the National Archivist.” In essence, any destruction of records regardless of medium, including their alienation from the control of the Government of Canada without the permission of the National Archivist, normally conveyed to institutions in the form of a Records Disposition Authority, is illegal. Now, I want to put some additional context around this section of statute, so as to avoid any misunderstanding of its purpose or meaning. The authority provided by the National Archivist in reference to records destruction is basically an enabling mechanism, that is, it permits government institutions to implement their internal records disposal mechanisms. In other words, when I authorize government institutions to carry out their records disposal plans (after I have decided which records must be transferred to the National Archives), I am not ordering the destruction of the remaining records. Rather, I am indicating that the National Archives of Canada has no interest in preserving these records because they do not meet our selection criteria conceived within the context of national archival or historic importance. In fact, the whole purpose of section five of the NACA is to allow the National Archives to preserve national memory by providing an opportunity for us to intervene directly in the government’s records destruction process. This reverses the traditional course of records destruction events during the scheduling years of the Public Records Committee and before, when the archives more or less picked the records leftovers once the deputy heads had decided what they needed to keep for continuity of business and reference purposes and what they thought should be destroyed. As such, this clause is of enormous benefit to the preservation of national history for Canadians.

Second, and this refers directly to the accountability of government institutions for records destruction, when I provide a Records Disposition Authority to an institution under section five, the Authority does not relieve the institution of any obligations, responsibilities, or liabilities associated with the delivery of programmes and services to Canadians supported and documented by the creation and retention of records. Ultimately, the decision to destroy or otherwise dispose of records which do not have archival or historic value rests with the deputy head of a government institution, more specifically as directed by Treasury Board under the *Management of Government Information Holdings Policy*, with the senior official nominated by the deputy head to manage the institution's records. The scheduling of records and the timing of their destruction is an institutional responsibility, subject to any archival terms and conditions I impose.

Another clause in the archival legislation of interest to our discussion is section six, which enables the National Archivist to require government institutions to transfer records to the care and control of the National Archives under the terms and conditions of agreements. With the Records Disposition Authority provided under section five, the agreements provide the framework to articulate the results of the intellectual and business processes engaged by the National Archives to identify and preserve records of archival or historic value. Our approach requires a very detailed explanation and documentation of the procedures undertaken by the National Archives to establish the archival value of government records, not only to ensure that the rationale for every archival decision is clear and recorded, but also to ensure that the reasons supporting the decisions form part of the future archival record of government itself. At the moment, and this may come as a bit of a surprise to some people, our appraisal strategy is aimed at a target in which the National Archives preserves about one per cent of the records created by government.

Lest anyone think that one per cent of the government record sounds awfully small, may I remind you that for paper records, the extent of the National Archives' holdings is now about 100,000 metres. The size of this group of paper records is staggering and very difficult to comprehend in any meaningful way. In addition, we also have government photographs which number in the millions, multi-thousands of hours of audio and visual recordings, and hundreds of pieces of documentary art, not to mention about two-and-a-half terrabytes of electronic data, and we are only just on the cusp of the electronic archive.

Of course, it is not the magnitude of the archival records which is so impressive but the quality, value, and significance of the records. That one per cent includes cabinet conclusions; operational records of our royal commissions dating from 1873; immigration records of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries including the passenger lists of the ships which brought many of our ancestors to this country; records of the men and women who have defended

us since the late eighteenth century and the documentation of Canada's participation in the global conflicts of the twentieth century; our treaties with Aboriginal peoples; the plans, drawings, and specifications for the construction of our railways from 1836; the geological surveys of our land mass; the accident reports of shipwrecks, train accidents, and air crashes; the documentation of our diplomatic missions and international treaties. We have records with the capacity to touch directly and inform the lives of ordinary Canadians, as demonstrated in the recent story on Stephen Truscott broadcast on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's television programme *The Fifth Estate*. Our goal is not merely to facilitate historical research but to serve and protect all citizens by documenting government business and preserving government information to enable people – many of whom would not normally think they would ever need to use the archives – to prove citizenship, establish entitlements to pension, settle land claims, or to document other rights, privileges, and obligations. The National Archives is, and I say this with the greatest pride, a remarkable institution.

But I am not here today to advertise the National Archives (much as I like to take every opportunity to do so). Rather, I am here to say that it is not just the National Archives which assesses the value of government records; it is not only the National Archives which needs to think about long-term preservation. Consider the equation. If the National Archives is preserving the archival records of government at a rate of one per cent there is another ninety-nine per cent which needs to be addressed. Any solution conceived by government to address this mass of information in the context of records destruction extends well beyond the implementation of a routinized business process to manage and dispose of it.

In fact, government has already identified the critical issue in Treasury Board's *Management of Government Information Policy*:

Effective information management depends on a corporate assessment of the information required by the institution to support its programmes and activities. Defining information needs should be an integral part of corporate strategic planning. It permits an institution to appraise continuously the adequacy, quality and ongoing need for particular information holdings and to determine the information technology required to meet programme objectives.⁸

Distilling this information management guideline, we essentially have two elements, and they are critical to government's business of records destruction. First, there is the notion that all government institutions must continuously assess and appraise the value of their records, in effect recognizing that all public servants are information resource managers and records appraisers. For example, simply by pushing the delete button at a personal computer station to erase a record or, alternatively, by pushing the save button to

store a record in a record-keeping system, public servants regularly make decisions about the value of government information as a business and public asset. Everyday, public servants routinely make appraisal decisions and practise the “fine art of destruction.” To make sure this practice is conducted “unerringly,” we need to bring the decision making about the value and retention of records into the individual workplace; we need to embed the decisions in the desktop.

The second element concerns the context in which decision making about the value of government records occurs. On the one hand, there is the archival domain in which records are examined in reference to archival and historical criteria in order to determine their archival or historic value. On the other, there is the domain of government business administration, in which the value of records is assessed in reference to the following: operational business needs associated with delivering programmes, providing services, or completing transactions; legal requirements, meaning compliance with laws or regulations which require the retention of records for prescribed periods of time; and legal considerations, or the keeping of records to afford protection during litigation, investigation, or audit.

It is important to understand the distinctions between the archival mission and the record-keeping responsibilities and accountabilities of government institutions, that is, the differences between the archival record and why it is preserved in the National Archives, and the business record and why it is retained or managed by a government institution. Even if on many occasions the decisions about the value of records finally prove to be synonymous, the objectives being served are significantly different. In a government institution, the context of records retention and disposal decision making is established by business needs analysis referenced to the responsibility and accountability of the institution in undertaking business functions and activities as defined by legislation and mandate. This is a world away from historical research.

We are here today to discuss government records destruction, why there are public concerns about how it is being conducted, and how the administrative business of this essential procedure can be improved. In my view, many of our current records destruction problems have emerged directly from the gradual erosion of the profile given to decision making about the value of government’s business records.

For some time, notably over the last twenty years or so, we have been either avoiding or ignoring the tough decisions involved in the undertaking of records destruction as “fine art” by seeking processes, procedures, and technological solutions to what is largely an intellectual problem. Once the sole prerogative of a committee of deputy heads, the business of government records destruction has been reduced to a routine of records scheduling administered by records managers often without appropriate support. By rationalizing the business of records administration and placing it in the hands of information

professionals, we have inadvertently distanced the decision making about the value and utility of records from those most competent to exercise judgement and determine records preservation and destruction requirements in the context of the public business enterprise, that is, government's operational programme managers.

This is not to say that records managers, or archivists for that matter, lack competence. Far from it. Rather, it is to say that records managers and archivists bring special and different tool sets of knowledge, skills, abilities, and experience to the records destruction table, each of these tool sets fashioned and honed within the confines of particular domains of competence designed to achieve particular goals and objectives. Records managers want to bring a rationale of order to the identification, organization, accessibility, and disposal of government records in the interest of promoting business efficiency. Archivists want to preserve the historical memory of government by selecting for the use of future generations of Canadians the records which most comprehensively illustrate how the government formulated policy, made decisions, delivered programmes and services, and interacted with the civil constituency. None of us, however – neither records managers nor archivists – are nuclear physicists, or lawyers, or health care professionals, or geologists, or diplomats. We cannot legitimately say which records government needs to maintain to establish a foundation of business continuity to support the affairs of state, nor are we really in a position to determine how long government needs to keep records and when they may be destroyed. We have no business telling a scientist when to throw out the laboratory notebooks, or telling an aviation safety inspector when aircraft engine maintenance records are no longer required, or telling a doctor when to get rid of the documents about the approval of a pharmaceutical drug. We do know, however, how to create and manage processes which translate these critical decisions into rational business practice. Earlier on, I alluded to a tenet of modern records management, that information must be treated with the same scrupulous care normally accorded human, financial, and materiel resources. I could not agree more. However, we also have to recognize that information is a substantially different resource from the others, with unique qualities and values whose preservation and destruction requires stringent regulation and control. Records managers and archivists intuitively understand the value of information, and they know how to provide for its care and custody.

I also do not wish to leave the impression that the records destruction process, namely records scheduling, is unimportant. On the contrary, it is absolutely critical. Public servants working in the respective business domains and institutions of government must know – and Canadians certainly want to know – what types of records are being created and how long they will be retained. But records scheduling must be conducted in a meaningful way, taking into full consideration the value of records in relation to the significance of the

business functions, programmes, and services they support. As I suggested earlier, information management, including its important subcomponent, records scheduling, is essentially an exercise of business needs analysis. If we want to have a records destruction process susceptible to public scrutiny and audit – one with an in-built capacity to justify decisions about the status and destruction of records – we need to focus our collective attention more on business needs analysis than on administrative process. In this endeavour, we need to directly enlist the aid of government's business and programme managers.

In conclusion, we have a major opportunity at hand to restore the profile of information management in government. I see this opportunity unfolding in a number of ways, beginning not only with the recreation of partnerships among the major stakeholders directly involved in government records preservation and destruction activities but also with expert groups outside the government arena who can lend significant knowledge and expertise, notably the legal and audit communities. One direction currently being discussed (and it speaks to what we seem currently to lack in government) is the creation of information industry standards related to particular business domains. Whether these standards apply to the retention and disposal of government records for business purposes, which ultimately determine public access and review capacities, or whether they apply to technology and the preservation of records or the possibility of entering records as admissible evidence, there are very real possibilities that exist. The creation of information retention and disposal standards for particular government business domains – both at the generic level of human resources, finance, property management, etc., but also in more specific business domains like science and technology, security and intelligence, health care, etc.– represents one of the first logical steps towards the resolution of government's records destruction issues.

I began my remarks this morning with some references to mobs of people storming government buildings to destroy records. Such events were commonplace in the early modern period. In one normally calm Italian city (Ferrara) during the Renaissance, there were no less than twenty records riots in the space of forty years. Here, records destruction by mob riot was so endemic to the culture that the authorities eventually had to sanction the practice by creating official records-burning ceremonies to maintain civil order.⁹ Ironically, at the turn of the twenty-first century (we see this with the mob invading Stasi headquarters in East Berlin a decade ago), people seem to be more interested in preserving government records than destroying them. They understand the *power* of the record, especially in the democratic context of government accountability. They are insisting not only upon the preservation of records, but also upon gaining access to them. In this light, I have to believe that the first Qin Emperor of China, were he ruling today, might well reconsider his decision to erase his country's national memory.

Notes

- * I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Richard Brown (Appraisal and Special Projects, Government Records Branch, National Archives of Canada) for his fine work in the research and preparation of this paper.
- 1 Marc Drogin, *Biblioclasm: The Mythical Origins, Magic Powers, and Perishability of the Written Word* (London, 1989), pp. 82–83, cited and related in James M. O’Toole, “The Symbolic Significance of Archives,” *American Archivist* 56, no. 2 (Spring 1993), p. 254.
 - 2 Ernst Posner, “Some Aspects of Archival Development Since the French Revolution,” *American Archivist* 3, no. 3 (July 1940), pp. 161–62; and George Rudé, *Revolutionary Europe, 1783–1815* (London, 1964), p. 99.
 - 3 Arthur Spiegelman, “Experts Debate Whether Serb Offensive is Genocide,” *Los Angeles Times* (1 April 1999).
 - 4 This story from the *New York Times* is related in and paraphrased here from James M. O’Toole, “The Symbolic Significance of Archives,” p. 254.
 - 5 *Ibid.*
 - 6 W. Kaye Lamb, “The Fine Art of Destruction,” in Albert E.J. Hollaender, ed., *Essays in Memory of Sir Hilary Jenkinson* (Chichester, 1962), pp. 50–51.
 - 7 *Ibid.*, p. 51.
 - 8 Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Management of Government Information Holdings Policy*, Appendix E, s.3.
 - 9 Richard Brown, “Death of a Renaissance Record-Keeper: The Murder of Tommaso da Tortona in Ferrara, 1385,” *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997), pp. 1–44, esp. pp. 13–22.