

Archives of Canada

● (1300)

Finally, conservation is an essential process to the archives. With it records of every nature, on whatever support, can be preserved for long periods of time. In certain areas, public archives have developed world-scale, state-of-the-art techniques—bulk de-acidification of printed records, conservation of ancient photographs, research on possible applications of optical discs, etc.

To that traditional function of Public Archives in respect of historical archives was added in 1945 an increasing responsibility, delegated by Treasury Board and the Cabinet, for active and semi-active Government files. Between 1945 and 1966, various orders and Treasury Board decisions gave the Archives the responsibility for a number of advisory, control and service functions in order to achieve economical and efficient management of official files, and this is one of their responsibilities. By giving the Archivist the right to veto any destruction, the guarantee was secured that historical records would be protected and regularly turned over to the Archives, through the use of conservation schedules while records of a transitional value would only be kept during their period of usefulness.

In addition to its training, consulting and evaluation services, record management has developed a whole network of semi-active depositories for departmental use—it controls seven centres in Ottawa, Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton and Vancouver, which involve a total 400,000 metres of shelving loaded with written records, plus 200,000 computer tapes and 325,000 reels of microfilm. Those depositories received last year not less than 1,423,242 requests for files from various departments, which in most cases were met within 24 hours.

That second responsibility, although less conspicuous, is nevertheless vital: it looks after the classification and conservation of tomorrow's historical records, as well as the destruction of files without any permanent value, which represent over 95 per cent of the documents of all kinds produced by the Government of Canada. This function results in considerable savings for Canadian taxpayers, assessed at over \$20 million for deloped year 1985-86, through rationalization of the management of Government documents. It is now provided with a well the system making it possible to find more quickly the desired information and ensuring to the Archives that documents of permanent value are transferred at the appropriate time.

Finally, the Public Archives, like all other archival repositories throughout the world, are faced with a major problem: the identification, acquisition and preservation of archival documents recorded on a computerized base. According to still incomplete estimates, the various government departments would handle over between 2.5 million and 3 million computer tapes which contain at least ten times more data as compared with printed records. Unfortunately, because of the scope of the problem and the scarcity of resources, 2 or 3 per cent of the tapes at the most are submitted to record management and, eventually, in the case of those with a permanent value,

are being transferred to the Archives of Canada. Unless solutions are found and implemented soon a type of "memory blackout" in the picture future history of our time, the disappearance of a great many data which more and more are stored only in computerized banks.

Because of their strategic position and their relative wealth of human, budgetary and material resources, the Public Archives have played a major role in the Canadian archivist community during the last 30 years. This aspect of the role of the Public Archives should become even more significant in the future, for instance with the recent creation of the Canadian Archives Council following a federal-provincial agreement. This decentralized and flexible system will respect the autonomy of archivist institutions while giving all Canadians access to their complete archivist heritage. In addition, the Public Archives have instituted numerous international co-operative programs.

Why do we need new legislation? Mr. Speaker, people will probably ask me why I should introduce a new Archives Act at this time in view of the major achievements of the Public Archives and their central role both in Canada and abroad. The fact is that the present Archives Act was passed in 1912, at a time when typewriters, for instance, were just beginning to be in common use. No one could then have foreseen the world of computers and televised archives, nor the range of individual and collective rights which would be recognized in the following decades.

First, the Act of 1912 no longer corresponds to the present range of activities of the Canadian Public Archives, especially as regards the new types of archives support systems. Second, the Act is completely silent, which is to be expected, about the document management policies and practices developed since 1945 in response to the increase in size and complexity of the Canadian Government. Third, the Act does not take into account the public use of the collections—in fact, it does not even contain the word "access"—and could not have foreseen the very large increase in the number of users and their places of origin, as well as the decentralized needs of these users. Fourth, it does not deal with the documents of the many Government institutions created during the last 70 years. Fifth, it does not take into account concerns such as those imposed by the Access to Information and Privacy Acts. Sixth, it does not take into account the new storing and information transfer technology (records and tapes of all kinds) which, on the one hand, runs the risk of erasing historical information, but on the other, allows for a more effective and economical management of the archives. Seventh, it does not deal with the leadership role which must in fact be played by the Public Archives in terms of providing concerns professional, technical and financial support for the archivist community, nor the requirement that it cooperate with the provincial archives. Eighth, it does not provide the Public Archives into the authority to play the major role they require on the international scene.