



Preserving the Archival and Historical Memory of Government

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National Archives of Canada
Government Records Branch

Preserving the Archival and Historical Memory of Government

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The Role of the National Archives

Every year in support of its policies, programs and services, the Government of Canada creates and manages records in a variety of recording media, increasingly in electronic form. Ranging from correspondence, policy statements, agreements, research reports, operational files, contracts, deeds, leases, surveys and service transactions to statistical data, photographs, architectural drawings, plans, maps and audio-visual and sound recordings, these records are critical:

- to the efficient administration of government as it conducts business and the affairs of state on behalf of Canadians;
- to the capacity of citizens to hold government accountable for its decisions and actions in our democratic society;

and to

- the preservation of knowledge about our national history and collective memory for the benefit and use of future generations.

The National Archives of Canada (NA) serves as the permanent repository of the archival and historical records of government and facilitates the management of information by government institutions. Under the *National Archives of Canada Act* (1987), permission to dispose of records, either by their transfer to the National Archives, by their destruction, or by their alienation from the control of the Government of Canada, is conveyed to government institutions by the National Archivist. In addition, the Archivist may require government institutions to transfer records deemed to have archival or historical importance to the National Archives for long-term preservation.

In essence, the Archivist has the authority to identify records of archival or historical value and specify the terms and conditions of their archival preservation *prior* to any records disposal activity undertaken by government institutions. The Archivist has been granted this power by Parliament to ensure that Canadians -- both now and in the future -- have the capacity to know, study and understand the history of the national public administration over time through access to its recorded memory.

Selecting Archival and Historical Records of National Significance

To fulfill its mission to preserve government's historical memory, the National Archives must make decisions about the archival or historical value of the information created and maintained by government institutions. The records are voluminous and multi-media, relating to every conceivable

element of civil and social life in Canada, and the mass of information continues to grow as government makes increasing use of technology. It is not possible for the National Archives to preserve every government record, nor would any such endeavour serve the best interests of Canadians. Like any large organization, the Government of Canada produces an enormous number of records which become superfluous after a time -- sometimes after a very short time -- to the extent that there can be no legitimate administrative reason for keeping them, even if it were feasible to do so. Alternatively, there are many essential records of government activity which provide critical information that must be retained permanently or for long periods of time.

To respond to the challenge of preserving government's historical memory, the National Archives has adopted an appraisal strategy to identify and protect a comprehensive archival *record* of the administration of the national state, the machinery of the federal government, and the interaction between government and its citizens. Broadly speaking, the archival acquisition or protection of government records by the National Archives is related to their *national significance* as determined through an exhaustive appraisal process in support of the following general objectives:

- to preserve selected records which document the deliberations, decisions and actions of government in relation to its assigned business functions, programs and activities, as well as records which establish the sovereignty, organization and administration of government.
- to preserve selected records which provide government and the public with accurate, authentic and integral information about the policies, decisions and programs of government institutions over time for the purposes of review, scrutiny and understanding;
- to preserve selected records which document the impact of government decision-making upon citizens and groups in Canada and the interaction between the Canadian public and the federal state;
- to preserve selected records that are considered essential to protect the collective and individual rights and privileges of Canadians and their social, cultural and physical environment;
- to preserve selected records which contain information unique to government that will substantially enrich understanding about Canada's history, society, culture and people;
- to preserve selected records that the Government of Canada is required to maintain for a substantial period of time by law, or by virtue of their ongoing, long-term business value to government.

During the appraisal process, the NA undertakes a rigorous analysis of the functions and activities of federal departments and agencies, seeking to understand their policy, program and service delivery environments and their importance to government and Canadian society at large, and to identify the substance and context of the documentation being created and managed by institutions in support

of public business enterprise. Using the knowledge gained through this business systems analysis, the NA acquires selected records from offices and responsibility centres in departments and agencies which best illustrate the operations of government and the broad framework of national governance as expressed in the criteria outlined above. Decisions about the archival status of government records, and permission to dispose of records without archival or historical value, are conveyed to government institutions in the form of *Records Disposition Authorities*.

The National Archives is responsible for preserving the Government of Canada's archival and historical memory, and consequently, it bears an obligation to explain to Canadians – and to others who may wish to use its archival holdings – how and why decisions are made regarding the archival preservation of government records.

The National Archives maintains comprehensive documentation of the government records appraisal process, including the rationale supporting preservation decisions for all *Records Disposition Authorities*. Through its records description systems and associated holdings management processes, the NA also maintains the attributes of archival government records as evidence; ensures that these records remain in continuous official custody; and keeps with the official archival holdings any other documented analysis leading to the selection or disposal of related records to provide the full context for any records disposition decision-making. All of this information is available to the public upon request.

In addition, a detailed, step-by-step explanation of the government records appraisal strategy and methodology followed by the NA is available on the corporate web-site (www.archives.ca) at the *Services to Government* web-page under the heading, *Government Records Disposition Program*. This web-page also includes a number of program tools, including published versions of records disposition authorities which have government-wide application (*Multi-Institutional Disposition Authorities*).

Managing Government's Business Records

The National Archives preserves only those government records which meet its appraisal criteria of national significance. The strategy facilitating this selection process is designed to provide Canadians with complete historical documentation of government's decision-making and business activities. It is not intended to assure the preservation of all government records. In fact, only a small volume of the government's records, compared to the total information produced by government, is finally identified for archival preservation. The vast majority of records created and maintained by government are disposed of by institutions through the application of *Records Disposition Authorities* as part of their records management programs. Many records which do not have archival or historical value must be preserved and managed by government institutions for long periods of time to support ongoing legal and operational requirements.

Treasury Board's *Policy on the Management of Government Information Holdings* (1989) establishes the record-keeping responsibilities and accountabilities of government institutions. This policy requires government institutions to assess their information requirements as part of their strategic planning and business needs analysis. In the normal course of business, the ongoing requirement to retain records is generally established by government institutions according to:

- operational needs associated with making policy, taking decisions, delivering programs, providing services or completing business 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.

The NA is a centre of record-keeping expertise. In compliance with its mandate to facilitate the management of government records, the National Archives helps government institutions by providing advice and orientation in the development of information industry standards and protocols, guidelines, and best practices.