

Submission to 30 year rule review team by Frank M^cCall

The objective of this submission is to provide background information that may be of value and interest to the review team. It is informed by the knowledge and experience built up during my thirty year career with the Public Record Office (*now* The National Archives).

Biographical note: My full career history can be accessed from my company's website at www.iamaid.co.uk under the "Profile" tab. I first became an Inspecting Officer (aka Client Manager) in 1984 and was later appointed as the founder head of the Records and Information Management Consultancy Unit. During this time I was responsible for liaison with a wide range of public record bodies and developed and delivered training to a very large number of departmental staff and others at various institutions. I was also responsible for organising and running the annual conference of records managers in government. As a result of these and other activities I gained a unique breadth and depth of knowledge of the records management practices in organisations subject to the Public Records Acts and the application of the "Grigg System".

Submission

1. The Public Records Act, 1958, originally specified a 30 year rule for the transfer of records to the Public Record Office and a 50 year rule for their access by the public. The access rule was reduced to 30 years by the Public Records Act, 1967. This reduction did not, in theory, have any impact on the timings of the "Grigg System" as proposed by the Committee on Public Records in their report.
2. This system was intended to comprise of two elements:
 - a. the continued preparation and use of disposal schedulesⁱ for those records where the values, both administrative and historical, could be anticipated or assessed at the time of creation, and
 - b. a two stage review process for all other records.
3. My experiences from 1984 indicate that from the 1960's onwards many bodies progressively failed to maintain existing schedules and, particularly newly established ones, did not introduce schedules for new collections of records. For example in 2001 the most up-to-date schedule covering the personnel records of civil servants was that issued by the Treasury in 1963.
4. Over the same period there was also, in a significant number of departments, a gradual decline in the general standard of record keeping. File titling became less accurate and specific and filing practices became less disciplined. This resulted in many folders being used to hold records of a widely differing value; any particular folder could hold both important policy papers as well as ephemeral material as well as duplicate copies of papers also held elsewhere.

30 year rule Review

5. The combined result of these situations was to increase the proportion of material that required the use of the second element of the “Grigg System”; the two stage review process.
6. This two stage process, and its timing, has not been applied consistently.
7. The Grigg Committee recommended that files (records) be closed either on the completion of action or five years after opening whichever occurred sooner. In one department, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, all files were deemed closed seven years after opening. It was realised in the mid-1980's the department had originally intended to follow the Grigg recommendation but, prior to implantation, two individuals had both added an extra year “to be on the safe side”. After an investigation they immediately adopted the recommended five year closure rule.
8. The timing of the two stages of the process is determined by different dates. It was recommended First Review be undertaken five years after closure and Second Review 25 years after opening. That is first review might be undertaken between year six and year ten after creation or opening, depending on how long the file remained open, but second review should always be undertaken 25 years after the file was opened. This timetable, if followed, provided a period of at least 5 years before a record was due for transfer to the PRO. This period was more than adequate for both the department and the PRO to complete the processes of sensitivity review, cataloguing, labelling, packing, and where necessary repair, and physical transfer to PRO custody before a record is due for release to the public 30 years after the date of the latest record on the file or assembly.
9. The precise origins of the timetable recommended by the Grigg Committee are uncertain. The late Dr Nicholas G Cox researched the records of the committee in an attempt to establish these; he was unsuccessful. He later told me he found no evidence amongst the committee papers to explain the recommended timings. It is possible I may have stumbled upon the explanation by chance. When lecturing to a group of students at UCL I was introduced to an official or lecturer from India. In conversation he explained that the Indian Civil Service had used the review timetable recommended by the Grigg Committee since at least the late 1940's. I subsequently established that two out of the three members of the Grigg Committee had served in the Indian Civil Service. It is therefore possible the answer to the origins of the Grigg System will eventually be found amongst the papers at the IOLR collection.
10. The timing of Second Review being 25 years after the opening or creation of the record has the advantage of ensuring it is considered in the same time context as its contemporaries. If the timing of second review of a record was determined by its closure date this would, in my opinion, make the process of appraisal less reliable. Appraising records twenty five years after the events they document provides the

30 year rule Review

advantages of the perspective of time, the application of memory and some of the benefits of hindsight.

11. In principle the reduction of the transfer rule to 25 years ought not to have a significant impact on the quality of the material selected for permanent preservation at The National Archives. However the standards of record keeping in some public record bodies might have serious implications for maintaining standards. There is a risk that either records that ought to be preserved permanently will be lost and/or an increased quantity of less valuable records will be kept.
12. I am convinced if the transfer rule was reduced to 20 years these risks will be realised to the disadvantage of researchers and at the expense of the taxpayer.
13. For these risks to be avoided or minimised the National Archives must do all in its power to ensure record sections in all public record bodies are adequately resourced with sufficient experienced and trained staff to deal with the records they hold. The Review Team might also wish to consider how soon it will be practicable for all public record bodies to fully implement the change to any new transfer rule period. I have no doubt a change to a 25 year rule would be manageable by some, in the short-term, but I know there are others who are already struggling to comply with the current 30 year rule.
14. If the Review Team would like further information or want to explore the issues in more detail I would be more than willing to make myself available.

ⁱ Sometimes referred to as either Retention, Destruction or Disposition schedules