

Received via email: 31 Jan 08

Dear Mr Strachan,

Regarding: Thirty Year Rule review, your letter of 31 December 2007

Thank you for inviting me to comment on the review. Before replying I have consulted members of the executive committee of the British International History Group, both via e-mail and during a committee meeting. The Group, of which I am Chair, is a sub-section of the British International Studies Association, has about two hundred members and exists to draw together all those interested in teaching and researching the history of international relations at University level in the United Kingdom.

As historians we welcome any move to greater openness in government and understand that improved access to papers below the current thirty years could improve our understanding of contemporary history. Of course, under existing legislation certain departments do allow access to documents at The National Archives in less than thirty years, and the Freedom of Information Act has had some impact in opening recent source materials, but a new 'rule' might bring greater clarity to the situation.

I have been surprised, however, by the lack of enthusiasm among my colleagues for a radical reduction in the thirty year time-period to, say, twenty years. There is a real fear that, while this may increase the *quantity* of material available to us, it could harm the *quality* in the long term. In particular there is a suspicion that ministers and officials, especially those who are beginning to establish a career for themselves in their thirties, may be reluctant to commit their arguments fully and frankly to paper, knowing that these could become public knowledge before the individuals involved reach retirement age.

My colleagues are far more concerned with ensuring that as full a record as possible is kept of policy-making; that a trail of papers on decision-making can be followed that includes telephone calls, face-to-face meetings and e-mails.

There is a real worry that the evidence on government for 2000 will be of far poorer quality than for the 1950s and 1960s. Furthermore, they are aware that it can take about a generation to be able to view events with detachment and proper historical perspective, so that rapid access to sources is not necessarily the first priority. (They are in good company on this I think. Zhou En-lai, when asked about the significance of the French Revolution, declared it was still too early to tell.)

In addition, it has been pointed out to me that current British practice is in line with most other Western countries and that, so far as international questions are concerned, it may prove difficult to secure agreement with allies on the release of many papers, on NATO or the European Union, for example. There is also a fear that a shorter rule would lead to more cases of files being transferred back to Whitehall from the National Archives, a process that can be frustrating for researchers and which (from anecdotal evidence at least) leads to some files being lost.

I trust that these views are valuable to you.

Yours Sincerely,

John Young

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