

Royal Historical Society  
University College London  
Gower Street  
London WC1E 6BT

19 February 2008

Dear James,

### **Review of the thirty year rule**

I am writing on behalf of the Royal Historical Society which welcomes the review and the chance to participate.

Our instinct would of course be to support a reduction in the thirty year rule in the interests of understanding the recent past, and we felt that a period of fifteen years would be desirable. However, we are conscious of the resource implications, and would wish the review to consider how the release of documents would be handled if there were to be a sudden release of a mass of material. We are not entirely convinced that even the present annual release of material is adequately resourced. We note that there has been some concern that the reduction in the period might be counter-productive in making officials reluctant to commit their opinions to paper. We would hope that on the contrary that officials, knowing that their opinions would be released during their own career, would be more likely to express their views with care and rigour, so as to contribute to better government.

The Society feels that discussion of the thirty year rule cannot be taken in isolation, and I would reiterate some points made in a letter sent a year or so ago to Natalie Ceeney. The issue might well be less one of the time-scale of access, than what is available from the recent past. I would mention four concerns:

- Privatisation or the movement of services from the public sector in other ways means that we might lose continuity of archives: for example, how easy will it be to write about communications with the privatisation of British Rail or British Telecommunications?
- We understand that the papers of special advisers are not covered considered to be public records, and might be removed so that we will lose sight of a major input into policy.
- We are not sure that there is a clear strategy on archiving material generated on the PCs of individual civil servants: is there a protocol on what is sent to be archived and what is detailed?

- More generally, we are anxious that there should be an adequately resourced system of selection of material before it is transferred to the National Archive. I am sure that this will involve the engagement of TNA in the process, by direct involvement in the practices within departments.

If these issues are not addressed, there might well be serious problems for historians dealing with the recent past, regardless of the period of closure. We wonder whether they review is able to consider these wider issues which, we would submit, are of greater significance than the thirty year rule. A general consideration needs to be given to the mechanisms by which the range of evidence on policy formation and implementation is gathered.

Yours sincerely

Martin Daunton  
President