

LSE

THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

LSE Research Online

[Paul Rock](#)

'The dreadful flood of documents': the 1958 Public Record Act and its aftermath. Part 1: the genesis of the act

**Article (Published version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Rock, Paul (2016) '*The dreadful flood of documents*': the 1958 Public Record Act and its aftermath. Part 1: the genesis of the act. [Archives: The Journal of the British Records Association](#), 51 (132/3). pp. 48-69. ISSN 0003-9535

© 2016 [British Records Association](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/73705/>

Available in LSE Research Online: April 2017

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

‘THE DREADFUL FLOOD OF DOCUMENTS’:
THE 1958 PUBLIC RECORD ACT AND ITS AFTERMATH

PART 1: THE GENESIS OF THE ACT

BY PAUL ROCK*

This bipartite paper flows out of the writing of a history of criminal justice and it attempts to resolve why so many state records of scholarly importance were destroyed in the latter half of the twentieth century. Since its foundation in 1838, the Public Record Office or PRO, later The National Archives, the chief repository of state papers, has confronted the problem of how to accommodate a remorselessly growing mass of documents. Shaped by periodic crises and bouts of anxious stocktaking, it has sought continually to develop effective ways of culling or ‘weeding’ the unwanted record. At the end of the Second World War, especially, the accumulation of papers had become so substantial that a new and radical organisation and methods analysis was to be applied by the Treasury to what was defined as a failed and antiquarian PRO. A committee under the chairmanship of Sir James Grigg elected to give primacy to reducing the volume of records. It turned its back on what it took to be the PRO’s discredited staff, techniques and ideology, although, ironically, it did warmly endorse the presumption of Sir Hilary Jenkinson, the PRO’s deputy keeper, that historians and archivists were quite incapable of identifying which records might become of future historical interest. Criteria of historical significance were as a result to be introduced slowly and belatedly, and only after Sir Hilary had departed. The outcome was to be a structural revolution that was driven principally by an imperative to save money and labour, conserve space and do away with as many records as possible, and much that was of scholarly interest has been lost in consequence.

Keywords: *record management, official history of criminal justice*

Introduction

. . . what seems easy to discard now is often not regarded that way later on. If we keep collections to a “reasonable” size by getting rid of things not worth saving now, we will inevitably make what later generations will see as terrible mistakes. Some of what we discard now will be just what they prize, need or want.¹

In April 2009, David Downes, Tim Newburn and I were the last scholars to be appointed official historians by the then prime minister, Gordon Brown, and our theme was to be the history of criminal justice between 1959 and 1997. The prospectus drafted by the Cabinet Office opened by stating that ‘The Official History would examine the significant changes in the Criminal Justice System over the last 40 years . . . It would chart the position before, during and after our [*sic*] changes to the system’, and, it continued, ‘An appropriate starting point would probably be the Beeching

*PAUL ROCK is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics. He is grateful to Elizabeth Shepherd, Hans Rasmussen and the anonymous reviewers of *Archives* for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

¹ H. Becker, ‘Where do you stop?’ in *What about Mozart? What about Murder?* (Chicago, 2014), p. 151.

Report, the abolition of the Assizes and the introduction of the single Crown Court in 1971'. I submitted the first two volumes on the liberalising legislation of the 1960s and the founding of the crown court and the Crown Prosecution Service to the Cabinet Office in May 2016. Others will follow.

Our principal sources were interviews; published articles, reports and books; private papers; and documents in The National Archives, local archives and university collections. Given their criticality, one of our first tasks was to ascertain what files had been retained and what had been thrown away, especially by The National Archives, the prime repository of files touching on criminal justice policy-making. We soon established that much had indeed been thrown away, and we sought to explore how it came about that record-keeping in the major archive in England and Wales in the latter half of the twentieth century had been organised as much by a desire to destroy papers as to preserve them. The quest came to offer an interesting small exercise in the sociology of knowledge, examining how the past can be made perceptible or imperceptible, and representing perhaps the first such extended analysis of a pivotal series of events.²

The Dilemmas of Record Management

Until the passage of the 1838 Public Record Office Act,³ public documents – defined as legal records – were dispersed throughout some 60 metropolitan repositories staffed by what were called ‘a multitude of imperfectly responsible keepers’;⁴ ‘administered by a bewildering variety of agencies . . . [that was marked by] a lack of a central administrative authority’;⁵ housed in ‘very improper situations and unsuitable buildings’;⁶ without proper management of their care and preservation;⁷ and subject to no ‘superintendence or direction’.⁸ The result, a Member of Parliament claimed, was that ‘the national records of this country [were in a] disgraceful and dangerous state’.⁹

There was to be a rescue, and it was a rescue that was mounted as part of the greater programme of reforms that rippled across the state in general, and the administration of criminal justice in particular, in the 1830s. H.G. Nicholas, the Nuffield reader in the comparative study of institutions at the University of Oxford, stated that:

It was no accident that the Public Records Act was preceded, six years earlier, by the Great Reform Bill. The substitution of responsibility for neglect, of centralization for dispersion, of classification for chaos, of salaried experts for pensioners and perquisite-collectors, of free access for heavy fees – this was all part of that urge for reform which justly entitles the 1830's and 1840's to be regarded as the harbingers of ordered democracy in Britain.¹⁰

² There is, to be sure, a very broad history of record management by Elizabeth Shepherd, *Archives and archivists in 20th century England* (Farnham, 2009), but it contains none of the detail offered in this article.

³ 1 & 2 Vic. c. 4. See W. MacDonald; ‘Keeping safely the public records: The PRO Act of 1838’ in *Archivaria*, xxviii, Summer 1989, pp. 151-154.

⁴ *Report from the select committee on record commission*, HC 429, July 1836, p. xxxix.

⁵ P. Levine; ‘History in the archives: The Public Record Office and its staff, 1838–1886’ in *EHR*, ci (398), Jan. 1986, p. 20.

⁶ *Report from the select committee on record commission*, 565, (House of Commons, 15 Aug. 1836), p. vii.

⁷ See ‘The custody of the public records’ in *The Times*, 18 Oct. 1872.

⁸ *Report from the select committee on record commission*, p. vii.

⁹ M. Milnes (Richard Monckton Milnes, first Baron Houghton (1809–85), speaking in the Commons, 20 Feb. 1849, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1849/feb/20/public-record-office> (accessed 14 Nov. 2016).

¹⁰ H.G. Nicholas, ‘Public records: The historian, the national interest and official policy’, in *International Journal*, xx (1), 1964/5, p. 34.

What a later deputy keeper of the records, the effective manager of the Public Record Office, called the ‘two greatest desiderata – centralized control and centralized housing’,¹¹ were achieved by entrusting a ‘pragmatic Benthamite’, Lord Langdale,¹² the master of the rolls, the second most senior judge in England and Wales, responsible (as his title suggested) for the records or ‘rolls’ of the chancery court, to ‘keep safely the public records’ – defined somewhat elastically – in one place, a single institution and a new building, in a professionally staffed¹³ Public Record Office (PRO), that was opened formally in Chancery Lane in 1856.¹⁴ In 1854, that embryonic Office’s collection was amalgamated with that of the State Paper Office,¹⁵ but the consigning of documents and the regulations for their safekeeping or destruction by government departments remained somewhat haphazard until the Public Record Office Acts of 1877¹⁶ and 1898,¹⁷ and there still remained no formal duty on departments to transfer their papers to the new Office or make them accessible to the public¹⁸ (the Home Office, for example, did not routinely forward its papers until 1880).

Particularly important was Section 1 of the 1877 Act, under which the master of the rolls was empowered to order the destruction of what were called ‘documents of not sufficient public value to justify their preservation in the Public Record Office’, providing not only that the destruction schedules did not include documents ‘which can reasonably be considered of legal, genealogical or antiquarian use or interest, or which give any information not to be found elsewhere’, but also that the schedules themselves had been agreed jointly by the head of the department and the master of the rolls and laid before Parliament for four weeks.

The records may have become better tended and organised¹⁹ but the space that was allotted to house them was insufficient from the first. ‘In effect’, reported Aidan Lawes, an assistant keeper, in the PRO’s own autobiography, ‘the Office was acting as an agency for other departments’,²⁰ and the departments of an increasingly active state were generating more and more paper. In 1853 alone, it was estimated that some 7,000,000 documents had piled up in government offices,²¹ and much of that paper

¹¹ The deputy keeper of records; ‘Preservation and housing of public records’ in *The Times*, 24 May 1951.

¹² Lord Langdale, 1783–1851, was master of the rolls between 1836 and 1851. A friend of Jeremy Bentham, and a liberal, he has been described as the ‘father of record reform’. His biographer, G.F.R. Barker, continued, ‘His perseverance led the government to consent to provide an adequate repository for the national records’ (ODNB). It was he who agitated for the transfer to one, purpose-built and professionally-staffed, new depository, ‘the strong box of the Empire’, the records that were then scattered in and around London: see J. Cantwell, *The Public Record Office: 1838–1958*, (1991). Elsewhere, Cantwell argues that Lord Langdale was more than a little reluctant to take charge of the reforms stemming from the 1838 Act (‘The 1838 Public Record Office Act and its aftermath: A new perspective’ in *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vii (5), pp. 278, 280).

¹³ Levine, ‘History in the archives’ pp. 20–41.

¹⁴ The building was constructed on a site that had been in the possession of the master of the rolls and used to store the rolls since 1377. (See an undated booklet published by King’s College – *Chancery Lane Library & Information Services Centre* – which had acquired the building from the Rolls Estate in 1998).

¹⁵ The State Paper Office was founded in 1578 to house the papers of the two Secretaries of State – the communications of diplomats; treaties; and correspondence between ministers, the Privy Council and with the sovereign. See Susan Palmer; ‘Sir John Soane and the Design of the New State Paper Office, 1829–1834’ in *Archivaria*, lx, 2005, pp. 39–70, <http://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12514/13642> / (accessed 15 Nov. 2016).

¹⁶ ‘An Act ‘to amend the Public Record Office Act’, 1838.

¹⁷ A minor piece of legislation, whose long title was ‘An Act to amend the Public Record Office Act’ 1877.

¹⁸ Parts of this section are based on The National Archives; ‘History of the Public Records Acts’, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/information-management/legislation/public-records-act/history-of-pra/> (accessed 15 Nov. 2016).

¹⁹ By 1872, *The Times* (‘The custody of the Public Records’, 18 Oct. 1872) could report that, whereas in the past ‘The records were imperfectly arranged; they possessed but the most meagre of indexes; they were dispersed in various establishments; and to discover what one was in search of ended more often than not in disappointment. Respect for the past and the new phase upon which modern history has entered have now happily changed neglect into care and dispersion into consolidation’.

²⁰ A. Lawes, *Chancery Lane 1377–1977: ‘The Strong Box of the Empire’*, (Kew, 1996), p. 22.

²¹ ‘State papers and record offices’ in *The Times*, 14 May 1859.

would inevitably be intended for the archives. ‘Hardly a day passes’, *The Times* stated in 1872, ‘but that important documents either from the Treasury, the Foreign Office, the Colonial Office, the Home Office, the Board of Trade, the Admiralty, the War Office, or other departments of state are lodged for preservation and arrangement within the iron cages of the Fetter-lane Repository’.²² The Public Record Office had had as a result to be extended between 1863 and 1873, and again, by the addition of two wings, between 1892 and 1896.

Matters came to a head in the 1940s, partly because documents had been allowed to pile up uncontrollably before²³ and during the Second World War.²⁴ Although tons of records were being destroyed each year, there remained what Sir Hilary Jenkinson,²⁵ the then deputy keeper of the records, and, in practical effect, the working head of the Public Record Office, called in 1949 a continuing and ‘enormous increase in accruals of modern Archives’.²⁶ To be sure, a succession of improvised remedies had been attempted over the years to manage the backlog— one being the establishment in 1943 by the master of the rolls of a committee which recommended a three-stage life cycle for records – ‘current, semi-current and selection for permanent preservation’, and the recourse, under what Sir Hilary called the ‘Limbo’ plan, floated in March 1944 but implemented later, first to storing tens of thousands of feet of semi-current departmental papers awaiting disposal in ‘deep shelters’ at London Underground stations at Goodge Street, Belsize Park, Clapham Common, Clapham North and Camden Town, and then to the requisition of a former ordnance factory at Yeading,²⁷ and the conversion of buildings into a ‘branch’ repository at Ashridge, with an extra 10 miles of shelving, and a ‘limb’ repository in Hayes in the early 1950s.²⁸ There was to be the assignment in 1949 of John Collingridge, who had joined the Public Record Office as an assistant keeper in 1926, to the new post of liaison officer charged with ‘establishing and maintaining closer relations with depositing Departments and studying the special problems incidental to their Records’.²⁹ But it was never enough. Government had not fully planned for the sheer extent of the problem that was thought to have arisen by mid-century.

²² ‘The Public Records’ in *The Times*, 27 Dec. 1872.

²³ Roger Ellis, lecturer in archive administration at University College, London, and formerly principal assistant keeper, reported that a number of departments ‘unable to keep up, accumulated a bulk of dormant Records so daunting that less and less effort was made to deal with them’ (‘The “limbo” plan for departmental records’ in *OandM Bulletin*, vii (1), Feb. 1952, p. 13).

²⁴ Under the heading ‘Elimination of records of ephemeral value accumulating in modern departments’, Sir Hilary Jenkinson reported that ‘Work in this Section as a result of War-time accumulations continues to be heavy’. *109th report of the deputy keeper of the records* (1949 for 1947), p. 5. See also H. Jenkinson, ‘British Archives and the War’ in *The American Archivist*, vii (1), Jan. 1944) pp. 1–17.

²⁵ Sir Hilary Jenkinson, 1882–1961, took a degree in classics at Cambridge and then entered the PRO in 1906, becoming deputy keeper from 1938 until his retirement in 1954. His entry in the *ODNB* says that ‘In the course of his lifetime Jenkinson played a leading part in establishing in England principles which should govern the care of records, in rousing public interest in their preservation, and in providing for the professional training of their custodians, who should be, as he preferred to call them, archivists rather than amateurs with antiquarian tastes. His gift for personal relationships undoubtedly went far to promote the cause he had at heart, although his pursuit of perfection betrayed him into a doctrinaire advocacy of ideas and practices which created difficulties and brought frustration’.

²⁶ *111th report of the deputy keeper of the records* (1950 for 1949), p. 3.

²⁷ See for example, the *109th report of the deputy keeper of the records*, p. 5.

²⁸ It was not until the end of 1969 that permission had finally to be given to start constructing an entirely new and much larger repository for the PRO at Kew, the present site of what is now the National Archives or TNA. The new building was opened in 1977 with 75 miles of shelving (‘Public Record Office starts to move house on Monday’ in *The Times*, 12 May 1977). By 2014, it had come to house some 11 million items on 190 kilometres – or 118 miles – of shelving (and, it was then estimated, an extra 2 km or just under 1¼ miles of space were still required every year).

²⁹ *111th report of the deputy keeper of the records*, p. 3. His posting was thought to be something of an unwelcome deformation of the core duties of the PRO: the deputy keeper of the records reported that, although it ‘was almost unavoidable . . . [it] seems likely at no distant date to alter considerably the balance of work in the Department . . .’

In 1957, Lord Evershed, the master of the rolls, described to the House of Lords the way in which the law and practice of record management supposedly functioned. It rested on a system that had been devised a century before for legal records in a simpler world, a more rudimentary government and much, much less paper:

whatever was in the mind of my predecessor, Lord Langdale, in 1845, when he made with the then Home Secretary, Lord John Russell, the somewhat casual and typically English arrangement upon which the management of departmental records has since depended, that arrangement did not provide – and, indeed, as I understand it, was quite incapable of providing – any real solution in modern circumstances to the problem of selection. Indeed, I think it may even be said that the arrangement negated the possibility of such a solution. On the one hand, it provided, according to Lord Langdale's letters, that the Public Record Office should be but the agent of the Government Departments in preserving the records and receiving them from the Departments. On the other hand, in the light especially of slightly later legislation, it absolutely prevented the Departments from acting as their own destroyers or selectors of documents.³⁰

'If intended to be a temporary convenience' he had earlier explained, the arrangement so negotiated 'has, in fact, lasted ever since. . . . no single document coming into existence in any Department of State can be destroyed save after a procedure requiring the personal co-operation of the master of the rolls; and in theory (it is said) the master of the rolls could secure the removal of any papers from the desk of any Minister to the Public Record Office'.³¹ That was the formal position, but informally, and under growing strain, a proliferation of *ad hoc*, home-grown and often unsanctioned practices appear to have mushroomed across the Whitehall departments.

Many disposal procedures were actually quite unorganised. John Collingridge recounted how in a number of departments 'weeding' could be little more than 'an occasional operation, executed by staff temporarily diverted from the normal work of the department'.³² It worked only where documents were capable of being listed; the 'schedules so compiled and approved were in fact generally brief and the terms necessarily wide and often vague';³³ 'No possibility exist[ed] of examination of the individual documents',³⁴ and, to cap it all, departments were given 'a continuing authority to get rid of worthless papers throughout the whole range of their records'.³⁵ Moreover, until a comparatively late date, those who received the documents, the assistant keepers at the Public Record Office, were not formally trained in archival practice.³⁶ They regarded themselves, said Hans Rasmussen, the coordinator of special collections technical at Louisiana State University and an historian of the archivists' profession of the period, primarily as civil servants rather than as archivists.³⁷

³⁰ HL Deb 16 Dec. 1957, ccvi, cols 1147–81.

³¹ TNA, LCO 4/282, memorandum, 8 Nov. 1954.

³² J. Collingridge; 'Record management in England since the Grigg Report' in *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, ii (6) (Oct. 1962), p. 242.

³³ P. Jones, 'The Grigg Report' in *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, I (1), Apr. 1955, p. 7.

³⁴ The Master of the Rolls speaking in HL Deb 16 Dec. 1957, ccvi, cols 1147–81.

³⁵ J. Collingridge; 'Implementing the Grigg Report' in *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, i (7), Apr. 1958, p. 179.

³⁶ See M. Roper; 'The Public Record Office and the Profession' in *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, x (4), Oct. 1989, p. 162. Michael Roper was the keeper of public records between 1988 and 1992.

³⁷ See H. Rasmussen, 'Endangered records and the beginning of professionalism among archivists in England, 1918–1945' in *Library & Information History*, xxvii (2), June 2011, 90–91.

It was only when a committee under the chairmanship of Sir James Grigg, a former secretary of state for war,³⁸ a man described by Edward Playfair, the Treasury official who nominated him, as ‘bubbling over with mental energy and at the top of his form’,³⁹ was appointed in 1952 to review the existing arrangements that systematic reform may be said to have begun on any scale.⁴⁰ The committee was the government’s answer to what John Collingridge called ‘the very alarming state of affairs revealed by the information produced by Departments in response to a questionnaire sent out by an organisation and methods team of the Treasury in 1951’.⁴¹ The Treasury was the department of state officially responsible for the PRO. It provided its premises for the work of the committee, and, through its minister, the chancellor of the exchequer, was accountable for its doings to Parliament. It was also the regulatory department within Whitehall where organisation and methods analysis was being developed with some gusto;⁴² and it had come to conclude that at a time of harsh financial cuts that were falling especially heavily on the PRO,⁴³ ‘a radical change might be required in present practice in order to ensure only documents worthy of permanent retention were passed to the Public Record Office, and to ensure that the problem of providing permanent storage space did not grow out of hand’.⁴⁴ The organisation and methods team had been prompted to investigate existing procedures not only by the

³⁸ Sir James Grigg (1890–1964) was successively a civil servant, serving as principal private secretary to a number of chancellors of the exchequer between 1921 and 1930; the chairman of the Board of Inland Revenue in 1930; the permanent under-secretary of state for war, 1939–1942; and the Member of Parliament for East Cardiff between 1942 and 1945 (*ODNB*).

³⁹ TNA, T 222/538, Edward Playfair to Sir Edward Bridges, 1 Feb. 1952.

⁴⁰ Committee on departmental records; *Report*, Cmd. 9163, 1954. G. Martin, the keeper of public records between 1982 and 1988, remarked in 1988 that the committee’s recommendations ‘have served the Office and its users ever since’. G. Martin (1988), ‘The Public Records in 1988’ in *The records of the nation: The Public Record Office 1838–1988*, ed. G. Martin and P. Spufford, (Woodbridge, 1988), p. 22.

⁴¹ Collingridge; ‘Implementing the Grigg Report’, p. 179. The report revealed that the 53 departments consulted housed some 1,100,000 linear feet of records not still in current use but not yet old enough to be reviewed for destruction; and 300,000 linear feet of records awaiting possible destruction, of which it was estimated that 50,000 would be passed to the PRO for preservation. The Treasury inquiry into the PRO was only one of a number conducted at the time. Others included the Tate Gallery, the Wallace Collection, the National Maritime Museum and the British Museum.

⁴² The methodology had first been advocated in 1915 by the Royal commission on the civil service, the MacDonnell commission, Cd 7832, and it grew in and around Whitehall, but it appears only to have come properly into its own in the latter half of the 1940s. See C. Krishnamoorthy, ‘Organisation and methods in the British government’ in *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, xiv (2), Apr.–June 1953, pp. 113–122 and I. Pitman, ‘Organisation and methods: An important select committee report’ in *Public Administration*, xxvi (1), Mar. 1948, pp. 1–9. One source, *The Civil Service Yearbook*, was not published in the war years between 1941 and 1945, but it appears that an organisation and methods division was established at some point in that time. In 1940 there was no reference to a Treasury organisation and methods division, but by 1946, the division was 69 strong. By 1951, the year of the inspection of the PRO, it was 119 strong. The Treasury organisation and methods division issued its first *OandM Bulletin for the diffusion of news ideas and opinions among organisation and methods officers in the civil service* in August 1945 with a circulation of some 480 as part of a pioneering attempt to feel ‘their way through uncharted seas’ (H. Wilson Smith, Foreword, *OandM Bulletin*, I (1), Aug. 1945, p. 1. H. Wilson Smith was Treasury under-secretary). It also appears to have initiated a Treasury O and M course at much the same time: see ‘The Treasury course – a commentary’, *OandM Bulletin*, iv (1), Feb. 1949, p. 21.

⁴³ A draft letter to the master of the rolls from Sir Edward Bridges of 1 Feb. 1952 recited that ‘as it happens, the cut hits the Public Record Office arithmetically almost harder than anyone else’, TNA, T 222/538. The PRO Museum, founded in 1886, was to be closed that year at a saving of four posts and some £1,300 *per annum* (HC Deb 13 May 1952 cd, cols 103–4W). Aneurin Bevan’s comment was that ‘It may be that we have to make economies in this or that direction, but the trouble is – as I have said on a number of occasions – that in the hierarchy of the Government machine the Treasury is now practically supreme. That may suit some people, but it has a most appalling consequence on public administration . . .’ (HC Deb 14 July 1952, cdi, cols 1808–90).

⁴⁴ TNA, T 222/538, Indecipherable, note to Mr Simpson, the director of organisation and methods at the Treasury, 29 Nov. 1951.

very similar ‘alarm expressed by the [1949] Hoover Commission⁴⁵ on the unwieldy size of public records⁴⁶ in the United States;⁴⁷ but also by an observation made in the 1950 Webb Memorial Lecture, ‘The History of our Times’, that had been delivered by Professor Sir William Hancock, an official historian and the director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies at the University of London.⁴⁸ Sir William had reported that 12,000,000 files of war records in the Board of Trade alone were awaiting the record managers’ attention. They were expected to require 16 miles of shelving; existing procedures simply would not be able to cope;⁴⁹ and the fearsome logistical and economic implications of what lay ahead alarmed Whitehall.⁵⁰ ‘Think’, Sir William warned, ‘of what is coming to the Public Record Office!’⁵¹

Sir Hilary Jenkinson *did* think, and he rejected most of the assumptions, procedures and findings which the team had mobilised to confront the problem. He may have agitated for change – indeed, Cantwell called him a ‘thorn in the Treasury’s flesh’⁵² – but he did not accept the Treasury’s diagnosis. Difficulties resided not in the PRO, he said, but elsewhere, in the record-management procedures practised by government departments across Whitehall. The remedy for such an unrestrained increase in records lay at the registry stage, ‘the point at which Documents began to accumulate’, because ‘vast quantities of papers are made and distributed unnecessarily’; ‘working, routine and formal papers are filed and put away equally without thought’; and systems of filing seemed to be devised ‘specially to make any separation of sheep and goats laborious and difficult’. ‘All these troubles could’, he concluded, ‘be mitigated if not eliminated by intelligent organisation in registry’.⁵³ In short, the Treasury’s response was ill-judged and unwelcome. It did not know what it was talking about. The fault did not lie with the PRO, and its archivists should not be treated as rude mechanicals whose actions could be subjected to the unpolished methods of time and motion study:

⁴⁵ Hoover commission on the organization of the executive branch of the government, *Report*, (New York, 1949). The commission reported on pp. 78 and 80 that ‘the maintenance of records costs the Federal Government enormous sums annually. The records now in existence would fill approximately six buildings each the size of the Pentagon. In 1948, some 18 million square feet of space were filled with records. Our task force estimates that, on the basis of rental value alone, the space costs for this volume of records is at least 20 million dollars annually’. And the number of records was increasing alarmingly, from 5m cubic feet in 1933, to 10m in 1938 and over 15m in 1944. Its recommendation was that there should be a new record management bureau in the Office of General Services; a new federal record management law to provide for the more effective preservation, management, and disposal of government records; and an ‘adequate record management program in each department and agency’ (p. 80).

⁴⁶ TNA, T 222/538, Indecipherable, note to Mr Simpson, 29 Nov. 1951.

⁴⁷ The Treasury organisation and methods division had taken an avid interest in what was called ‘this very general and rather devastating examination of the executive machine as a whole’ (Anon, ‘Reorganisation of U.S. government departments: Report of the Hoover Commission’ in *OandM Bulletin*, iv (2), Apr. 1949, p. 19). It was to publish three different synopses of aspects of the commission’s work, although it did not touch on record management – itself a very small part of the report.

⁴⁸ Sir William Hancock (1898–1988), occupied the Chichele chair of economic history at the University of Oxford between 1944 and 1949. In 1957, he returned to his native Australia to teach at Canberra.

⁴⁹ ‘Time’, he said, ‘does his weeding through the agency of officials working by rules . . .’ Insufficiently valuable documents were to be destroyed, but ‘Unfortunately, the criteria of value are variable and subjective’. And the task had grown to such proportions that ‘I doubt whether the old procedures of the Public Record Office can cope with it. . . . Some of the most precious grain of war-historical record never got into the registered files and may therefore never come to the Public Record Office: conversely, in the registered files of the war period there are tares by the million; but good wheat is mingled with the tares. How can they be separated?’ *The History of our times*, (1951), pp. 8–9.

⁵⁰ TNA, T 222/538, Note to Edward Playfair, 28 Dec. 1951.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 8.

⁵² Cantwell, ‘The 1838 Public Record Office Act’, p. 286.

⁵³ TNA, T 222/538, Hilary Jenkinson, ‘Public Records being some notes on OM 68/3/01’, 11 Dec. 1951.

The Officials of the Treasury who have specifically studied the subject should be able to advise other Departments in regard to the technique of Secretarial, Accounting and Establishment work is admitted: but in institutions such as the Public Record Office . . . (in strong contrast to the larger Ministries and Public Departments) work of this kind forms a small proportion of what had to be done. The large part of the time is devoted to tasks of a highly technical character the execution of which . . . necessitates special training; the methods employed have been chosen or worked out over a long period of years; and policy in such apparently simple matters as the locking of doors or opening of windows, the transport of parcels or the location of Staff, is based on considerations different from those which govern such proceedings elsewhere, and is not always readily intelligible except to persons having experience of the work of the institution concerned. I was therefore doubtful how far Officials having no such experience or training would be in a position to advise us in regard to the major part of our duties . . . I felt bound to take the position that . . . none of the proposals made with a view to Staff reductions were [*sic*] feasible . . . Secondly, the proposals, so far as they took the form of suggested changes in method or equipment were . . . all impracticable . . .⁵⁴

But reorganisation could not be stalled. There was a bullish tone to many of the arguments propounded by the Treasury organisation and methods division at the time, and opposition could be dismissed as merely reactionary, unreasonable and obstructive. 'It has been said,' a contemporary article in the Department's *OandM* [organisation and methods] *Bulletin* remarked, 'that scientific progress is the embodiment of development and change, and the resistance to changes proposed or introduced poses to the O and M officer a problem no less great than the challenges of effectiveness and efficiency'.⁵⁵ Those who blocked reform must, it was surmised, have done so because of their reluctance for personal reasons to accept a disturbance to the *status quo*; the difficulty of being hoisted out of 'the grooves into which they have become well moulded'; their lack of information about what was proposed; or their selfishness, old age or lack of confidence. Any non-cooperation had to be overcome in the name of what was 'logical and desirable'.⁵⁶

The 69-year old Sir Hilary, moulded in the grooves of the PRO for some 45 years, wedded to an older way of working, had little prospect of securing sympathy or support. Like poor William Huskisson, he stood in the way of a new and very different set of grooves, the ringing grooves of change. It was a foretaste of the quarrel between Whigs and Tories, modernisers and conservatives, that would resound across the face of public administration in general, and the criminal justice system in particular, throughout the latter half of the century, and the outcome was almost always the same. The progress of rational reform could not be brooked. Sir Edward Bridges, the permanent secretary at the Treasury, was certainly not to be brooked. His reply to Sir Hilary was unyielding: 'It seems to me that we should now consider whether there should be an enquiry into the fundamentals of the Public Record system and, if so, what form it should take'.⁵⁷

Besides, there was a new and powerful political impetus driving change. Sir Edward recorded that the idea of setting up an enquiry had received strong endorsement

⁵⁴ 114th report of the deputy keeper of the records (1954 for 1952), pp. 4-5.

⁵⁵ J. Thomson, 'Resistance to change' in *OandM Bulletin*, vi (4), Aug. 1951, p. 44.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48. Other commentaries were less strident. See, for instance, B. Schaffer, 'The British Treasury: Changes over the last generation' in *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, ix (3-4), (Sept. 1950), pp. 329-347. Schaffer, a former member of the Treasury O and M division, on p. 341 described it as 'very much in the position of a humble adviser . . .'

⁵⁷ TNA, T 222/538, 20 Dec. 1951.

from Sir Winston Churchill, the prime minister, who had been told by David Eccles, the minister of works, that his department would have to spend £300,000 in 1952 (equivalent to some £8,226,000 at 2015 prices) on filing cabinets in Whitehall offices:⁵⁸

This led the Prime Minister to suggest that we ought to devote more attention to destroying old papers so as to avoid the demand for a lot of new filing equipment. I was happy to be able to tell the Prime Minister that we had in mind the appointment of a Committee to consider this business of records. It is clear that the Prime Minister would like this dealt with as a matter of urgency and at a rather high level.⁵⁹

And it was in that very particular context that the next steps were taken⁶⁰ and defended,⁶¹ being propelled by what the chancellor of the exchequer, R.A. Butler, described as ‘a side wind before the Cabinet’.⁶² Ministers were, he said, ‘discussing troubles of accommodation and the accumulation of papers was mentioned as being one of the difficulties. The Cabinet invited me to arrange for the appointment of a Committee . . .’⁶³

Preliminary discussions about the scope of the Grigg committee’s work focused solely on the economic and logistical difficulties posed by the huge number of documents threatening to engulf government departments and the PRO. The Treasury’s director of organisation and methods was told in December 1951:

more than a quarter million linear feet of shelving could be cleared if weeding were brought up to date . . . One of the main points to be considered in the enquiry now proposed is how Departments should tackle this job of weeding. When ought the job to be done? . . . Who should do the weeding? What outside assistance is desirable? (P.R.O. or other experts). What can be done at an early stage in the life of important papers to ensure they will survive?⁶⁴

At an informal preparatory meeting held two months later, and ominously titled ‘The Alarming Accumulation of Modern Departmental Records’, Sir Hilary assented to the idea that there was a crisis but then recited his earlier argument that there were:

⁵⁸ His ministry was responsible for the installation and maintenance of services in the various buildings occupied by the PRO.

⁵⁹ TNA, T 222/538, Sir Edward Bridges to Mr Simpson, 21 Dec. 1951.

⁶⁰ The Cabinet minutes of 5 Feb. 1952 read ‘The Cabinet – (1) Approved in principle the proposals put forward by the Minister of Works . . . (2) Invited the Minister of Works to send to his colleagues lists of premises which he thought their Departments might surrender by a given date; and invited all Ministers in charge of Departments to support the efforts which the Minister of Works was making to curb the demands of Departments for office space, and to comply with the approved standards of office accommodation. (3) Invited the Minister of Works to report in a month’s time the progress made in securing economy in the use of office space by Government Departments. (4) Invited the Chancellor of the Exchequer to arrange for the appointment of a Committee to make an urgent review of the arrangements for preserving valuable official records and for destroying those which were of no permanent value or interest.’

⁶¹ R.A. Butler, the chancellor of the exchequer, informed the prime minister on 18 Apr. 1952 that ‘You have mentioned to me more than once the amount of building and shelf space taken up by departmental records of which many could easily be destroyed. The last time the question came up was at Cabinet on the 5th February when I was invited to arrange for the appointment of a committee to make an urgent review of the arrangements for preserving valuable official records and for destroying those which were of no permanent value or interest . . .’, TNA, T 222/538.

⁶² There are no other references to the incident, Sir James Grigg or the Committee on Public Records in Butler’s many biographies and autobiography.

⁶³ TNA, T 222/538, Draft letter from the chancellor of the exchequer to the master of the rolls, 8 Feb. 1952.

⁶⁴ TNA, T 222/538, G.B. Crichton, senior organisation officer, to Mr Simpson, the director of organisation and methods at the Treasury, 4 Dec. 1951.

two problems for investigation both very large but both in their elements simple. The first was the present vast accumulation of Records, largely unweeded, in numerous expensive *ad hoc* Repositories – the problems of lessening their bulk and decreasing the expense of their housing. The second was that of finding means to prevent a continuance or recurrence of the trouble'.⁶⁵

The resulting note of the meeting stated that 'It was . . . strongly maintained that the Terms of Reference [of the committee] should be to restrict the Inquiry to the formulation of the practical means for dealing as a matter of urgency with [those] two known and practical problems'.⁶⁶ That was how the task was to be presented first to the new chairman, Sir James Grigg,⁶⁷ and then to his future colleagues:⁶⁸ the increase in the volume of departmental papers, prompted by the growth of government business and aided by the typewriter and duplicating machine, was accelerating so fast that it was on the verge of becoming unmanageable.⁶⁹ It was a pressing crisis that demanded a pressing solution, and the committee's formal terms of reference would be to 'review the arrangements for the preservation of the records of Government departments . . . in the light of the rate at which they are accumulating and of the purposes which they are intended to serve'.⁷⁰ The master of the rolls, Lord Evershed, would later recall in a memorandum to the lord chancellor:

There are in the Public Record Office about 40 miles of Records covering the whole period of English history. The quantity of documents now in Government Departments awaiting sorting and transfer and representing about 50 years only of administration is said to amount to about 1½ times the whole content of the Public Record Office. . . . The problem of Departmental Records having assumed such proportions that it was in danger of reaching administrative breakdown, the "Grigg Committee" . . . was appointed by the present Chancellor of the Exchequer and myself.⁷¹

An editorial in *The Times* commented that 'No country in the world compares with England for the copiousness and continuity of its public records. No age in history compares with the present for the abundance with which Governments

⁶⁵ TNA, T 222/538, The alarming accumulation of modern departmental records: Notes of an informal discussion at the Public Record Office, 17 Jan. 1952.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ In a draft letter inviting him to chair the committee, it was suggested that Sir Edward Bridges should put it that 'One of our growing problem is the accumulation of departmental records. Each year more paper is put on files of Government departments. Much of it has to be preserved in any case and even where destruction is permissible it is apt not to keep up with creation. The result is not only a problem of housing but also of availability. . . .' TNA, T 222/538, Draft of 7 Apr. 1952.

⁶⁸ Edward Playfair of the Treasury wrote to one prospective member, Professor Robertson of Cambridge, who proved unable to serve, 'We have been getting more and more appalled by the problem of departmental records; they pile up and up – you have watched them accumulating with your own eyes. . . .', TNA, T 222/538, 3 May 1952. Another, undated draft letter in the same file, despatched to those who had accepted the invitation, reiterated the same point: 'I am sure I need not stress to you how fearsome a problem we are faced with these days in sorting and storing the papers produced in the course of conducting the business of the many Government departments. . . . The problem is most urgent'. The letter that was eventually sent on 28 May 1952 opened less dramatically: 'There is growing uneasiness about the problem presented by the accumulation of the records of Government departments. . . .'

⁶⁹ And that sense of a crisis of capacity has pervaded reports about the state of other national archives. For example, see Report of the director of national archives [of Ireland] for 2012, <http://www.nationalarchives.ie/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Report-of-the-Director-of-the-National-Archives-2012.pdf>, 2.19 (accessed 15 Nov. 2016).

⁷⁰ *The Times*, 28 June 1952.

⁷¹ TNA, PRO 1/1445, memorandum, Public Record Office and the Grigg Report, n.d.

daily manufacture and accumulate documentary evidence of their activity'.⁷² What does *not* seem to have been envisaged as a viable solution at the time was any compensatory increase in the PRO's permanent storage capacity. The Treasury had always been grudging when asked to approve such expenditure,⁷³ and that was not the direction which thinking was encouraged to take. In 1954, after the committee had done its work, D.B. Wardle, assistant keeper, first class, responsible for repository and photography matters at the PRO, wrote to David Evans, the new deputy keeper, that 'the statement of the [Grigg] Report to the effect that it is the inescapable duty of the Government of a civilised state to make adequate arrangements for the preservation of its Records might I feel have been followed (at the appropriate point) by mention of the fact that there has been no building of permanent accommodation specifically designed for the purpose of housing the Public Records during this century, and that for fifty years and more a series of temporary expedients has been adopted to deal with the overflow from Chancery Lane'.⁷⁴ But his was virtually a lone protest.

Perhaps there never could be quite enough space for everything that might and should have been retained, but the much-trumpeted crisis of overflow did frame the genesis and work of the new committee and it was held to follow, in the words of *The Times* editorial, that 'The problem of preservation, if it means preservation for use, becomes in practice the problem of how, what, and when to destroy'. It was to be that formulation of the problem which provided the *Leitmotiv* of much of what followed, and it allowed record management all too easily to become record scrapping. Hans Rasmussen described 'the spirit of this movement as one of rather pragmatic managerialism in which destruction became an ironic sign of progress in a period grappling with an explosion of records'.⁷⁵

The Grigg committee received submissions from government departments⁷⁶ and inspected 'representative registries',⁷⁷ examining their procedures for 'reviewing papers for destruction or preservation',⁷⁸ and it is not remarkable that it came to conclude that there was a manifest and urgent need to reduce the volume of records that could and should be saved. 'Few of these', it declared, 'will need to be preserved, but their very number greatly complicates the process of deciding which should be preserved, and which destroyed'.⁷⁹ The committee's deliberations were described by Kenneth Clucas, its secretary, as having been governed throughout by a 'general feeling . . . that the PRO

⁷² 'Weeding the rolls' in *The Times*, 9 July 1954.

⁷³ See Lawes, *Chancery Lane*, pp. 37, 59.

⁷⁴ TNA, PRO 1/1445, undated note.

⁷⁵ Email 25 Nov. 2014.

⁷⁶ Including a memorandum from Margaret Gowing, then at the Cabinet Office. She also submitted a note under her own name, at the Sir James' invitation, with the title of 'A war historian's experience of a departmental registry'. Amongst other matters, she reported that 'Many important papers were never registered. . . . Very frequently there is no record of meetings of officials when important policies were decided. . . . We had numerous examples of important files that had been lost. . . .' TNA, T 222/989.

⁷⁷ TNA, T 222/989, K. Clucas, secretary of the committee to Sir Thomas Lloyd, under secretary of state, Colonial Office, 25 Aug. 1952.

⁷⁸ TNA, T 222/989, K. Clucas to G. May, private secretary to Sir Harold Emmerson, permanent secretary of the Ministry of Works, 27 Nov. 1952.

⁷⁹ Committee on departmental records, *Report*, pp. 5-6.

needed a shake up',⁸⁰ and it worked under a powerful, impatient chairman who could be temperamental,⁸¹ blunt,⁸² irascible,⁸³ 'peppery and given to strong language'.⁸⁴ It was a forceful and independently-minded body, 'nothing if not bold',⁸⁵ and its reasoning appeared – on the surface at least – to have been largely impervious to the accepted procedures and thinking of Government archivists.⁸⁶

There was in particular to be a very deliberate rupture not only with past practice in Whitehall and the PRO but also with its champion, the deputy keeper of the records. Although he was quite adamant that he should be a member of the new committee,⁸⁷ precautions were taken to exclude Sir Hilary, 'the doyen of the archival profession in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth',⁸⁸ a man described as a 'giant',⁸⁹ the writer of the 'first book of its kind based on English experience'⁹⁰ of archive administration, from any of its proceedings.

Sir Hilary was a man publicly honoured, a leader in his field nationally and internationally,⁹¹ and a scholar who had written prolifically about such diverse matters as court handwriting in early and later medieval England; parish records; Jewish history and archives; the study of English common law records; the records of the English african companies; the plea rolls of the exchequer; the financial records of the reign of King John; seals in the PRO, and much else. He was, and remains, an influential figure, 'the most eminent archivist of his generation in the English-speaking world',⁹² who stressed the hazards and uncertainties of weeding the archives, of attempting to

⁸⁰ TNA, PRO 30/98/18, Notes etc. of conversations with Jeffery Ede . . . [and] Sir Kenneth Clucas 1985–1989.

⁸¹ John Cantwell refers to the work of the committee being for a while jeopardised by an unspecified crisis. He recorded that 'At one point [Sir James] was threatening resignation – Sir K could not recall the exact incident – but after a lapse of some weeks in Cttee business, Sir K (evidently a model of tact) persuaded him to take up the task once more'. He then added: 'Actually, it had to do with the feeling of the historians that either the Treasury or the PRO should have some power of enforcement, which Sir J. G. considered unconstitutional'. *Ibid.*

⁸² His entry in the *ODNB* reports how Herbert Morrison recalled that 'Grigg had a considerable flair for frank speech, aggravated by a hot temper. I recall a day at No. 10 when we were all waiting to enter the Cabinet Room. I was chatting to Sir James and we began mildly to disagree. In a matter of a moment or two he was denouncing me and being extremely rude. I mildly enquired who was having a row with whom. Sir John Anderson, another civil servant turned minister, who was present on this occasion, said "It's all right, Herbert. You need not be upset. It's just James's way of talking. He can't help it".' H. Morrison, *Herbert Morrison: An Autobiography* (1960), p. 207.

⁸³ He was said to have called Margaret Gowing 'a long-nosed bitch', for instance, TNA, PRO 30/98/18, Visit to Sir Kenneth Clucas, 18 Feb. 1988.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ F. Hull, 'Jenkinson and the 'acquisitive' record office' in *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vi (1), Apr. 1978, p. 2.

⁸⁶ Although the report does state that the embassies of a number of countries were consulted.

⁸⁷ Edward Playfair said that 'he insists on being a member of the committee himself. He sees no conceivable reason against it. . . there must be on the committee an expert in the conservation of archives'. T222/538, Edward Playfair to Mr Johnston, 22 Jan. 1952.

⁸⁸ W. Neil Franklin, review of *Essays in memory of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, ed. A. Hollaender, in *The American Archivist*, xxvi (4), Oct. 1963, p. 504.

⁸⁹ *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, i (1), Apr. 1955), p. 10.

⁹⁰ J. Davies, 'Memoir of Sir Hilary Jenkinson', in *Studies Presented to Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, ed. J. Davies (1957), p. xxii.

⁹¹ He had been a member of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, vice-president of the British Records Association, president of the Society of Archivists, president of the Jewish Historical Society of England, a member of the UNESCO committee of expert archivists, and much else. He was awarded the CBE in 1943 and a knighthood in 1949.

⁹² O. Holmes, 'Sir Hilary Jenkinson, 1882–1961' in *The American Archivist*, xxiv (3), July 1961, p. 345.

anticipate the demands which future historians might place on them,⁹³ or of allowing archivists to prune records themselves (they might, he said, be guilty of prejudices that would distort the impartiality of selection)⁹⁴. Records were simply what administrators had chosen to keep for their own employment, and what counted was their official origin and continuous use. All items of 'ephemeral value' should have been deleted before they ever reached what he called the 'Record' stage,⁹⁵ but once identified as records they had to be treated as inviolate.⁹⁶ His was an emphatically self-denying ordinance which prevented the archivist from playing the activist role in record management which the Treasury sought (Terry Cook aptly called it a 'curatorial, neutered, and self-deprecating professional mind-set'⁹⁷). In that critical year of 1951, under threat from the Treasury and its new mode of management, he repeated that:

The Public Records are not an artificial Collection, the size and scope of which can be precisely limited or predicted, but a Natural Accumulation which grows, and must continue to grow, with the continuance and growth of Public Administration: to solve satisfactorily the problem of their Housing is not therefore a question merely of calculating their bulk at a given moment and obtaining an amount of building and shelves sufficient to accommodate it, but of securing a space adequate for expansion over a very long term of years . . .⁹⁸

His critics were not to be quelled. It was, said Hans Rasmussen, their consensual judgement that the PRO under Sir Hilary's management was inept and 'famously antiquarian'.⁹⁹ Sir Hilary was known to be ill-disposed to the kind of radical restructuring which the Treasury might propose,¹⁰⁰ and his own principles of record management were generally dismissed as *passé*, but it was not solely for those reasons he was shunned. It was an *ad hominem* matter. Officials disliked the man and his *amour*

⁹³ He said (1937) that documents become archives when 'having ceased to be in current use, they are definitely set aside for preservation, tacitly adjudged worthy of being kept. The difficulty is that it is impossible to predict with any certainty what future historians will consider worthy of being kept. We are left', he continued, 'with a growing conviction that destruction of any . . . Archives we have received from the past is a course that a conscientious Archivist must find it difficult to comment. . . . It has emerged with tolerable clearness . . . that the Archivist is not and should not be primarily concerned with the modern interests which his Archives at any given time may serve. He is concerned to keep their qualities intact for the use, perhaps, in the future, of students working upon subjects which neither he nor any one else has contemplated. . . . we find the conclusion unavoidable that destruction is an operation which can only be practised with undoubted safety in one case – that of word-for-word duplicates: all other proposed criteria are fallacious; and in any case there is great difficulty in finding suitable persons to carry them out'. Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (1937), pp. 8, 145–6, 147. Two years later he returned to that theme. He was, he said, unable to condone 'the destruction of Records or . . . [suggest] that any qualities of scholarship or experience will make it possible to "choose" with certainty out of a mass of records those which future historians will find most useful'. H. Jenkinson 'The Choice of Records for Preservation' in *The Library Association Record*, Nov. 1939, p. 1.

⁹⁴ Jenkinson, *Manual of Archive Administration*, Part 3. And see F. Hull, 'The archivist should not be an historian' in *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vi (5), Apr. 1980, p. 253.

⁹⁵ Although quite how that was to be done seems never to have been spelled out thoroughly.

⁹⁶ He admitted on p. 151 of *A Manual of Archive Administration* that the modern administrator might, faced with 'impossible accumulations', have to destroy records but that once they become archived there are 'great objections to any destruction'.

⁹⁷ T. Cook, 'The archive(s) is a foreign country: Historians, archivists, and the changing archival landscape' in *The American Archivist*, lxxiv (2), Fall/Winter 2011, p. 608.

⁹⁸ *113th report of the deputy keeper of the records* (1952 for 1951), p. 3. In some measure, his rival, the American archivist, Theodore Schellenberg, would not disagree. 'Archival institutions', he argued, 'do not collect materials'. And he went on to say that 'This point has been made very clear by Sir Hilary Jenkinson . . .' T. Schellenberg, *Modern archives principles and techniques* (1956), p. 19.

⁹⁹ H. Rasmussen; 'Record management and the decline of the English archival establishment, 1949–1956' in *Libraries & the Cultural Record*, xlv (4), 2010, p. 447.

¹⁰⁰ Eastwood talked about how 'his obstinacy about principle kept him from being named to the Grigg Committee . . .'. T. Eastwood, 'Jenkinson's Writings on Some Enduring Archival Themes' in *The American Archivist*, lxxvii (1), Spring–Summer, 2004, p. 35.

propre. He was considered to be too self-confident, too much of a grandee, too lordly,¹⁰¹ too much the 'absolutist . . . who defended his archival principles with the passion of a preacher defending moral principles'.¹⁰² Sir Edward Bridges, in charge of setting up the committee, said of one preparatory meeting in early January 1952 that he was, 'obviously going to be extremely difficult to deal with. He was touchy and acid to a degree. He was resentful of the O. & M. investigation. He says that he is the world authority on the subject and that everything will be simple if only his methods are adopted at once'.¹⁰³ Sir Edward's conclusion, voiced 18 days later, was that he

felt it would be most unfortunate if Sir Hilary Jenkinson were to be made a member of the Committee. . . . His talent seems to me to be quite extraordinarily narrow and his vanity great. As soon as he steps outside his own particular speciality, which is the conservation of archives, in the narrowest sense of the word, he is apt to make the most careless and obvious mistakes from unwillingness to question his own beliefs. . . . He would try to run [the committee] himself and would infuriate all the members . . .¹⁰⁴

His colleague, Edward Playfair, third secretary at the Treasury, the man with responsibility for the division that dealt with the arts and science, concurred. Sir Hilary, he said, was an 'old mountain of prejudice', 'a real cough-drop. . . . he talks incessantly and is perfectly convinced that he knows all the answers'. The committee would have 'the most awful time'¹⁰⁵ if Sir Hilary were allowed to join it. And if the chief archivist had to be excluded so, by extension, it was concluded, it would be impossible not to banish his lesser colleagues in the PRO. Sir Edward added that he was 'quite determined to try to get an enquiry . . . which should be composed entirely of external persons – no serving civil servants of any kind'.¹⁰⁶

Sir Edward was to have his way. In February 1952, he wrote to William Armstrong, the principal private secretary to the chancellor of the exchequer,

We face a row with the Master of the Rolls about the earth-shaking question of whether Sir Hilary Jenkinson should or should not be a member of the proposed enquiry into the accumulation of Departmental records. Does the Chancellor know the Master of the Rolls well? I would like to know whether [we] could play the card of asking the Chancellor to see the master of the rolls, as I am afraid that I shall find it difficult to persuade him of the point'.¹⁰⁷

Such a meeting did indeed take place precisely one month later, and, for diplomatic reasons, the question of the membership of the committee was quietly smuggled in as but one of a number of points mooted for discussion. An anticipatory draft letter of 8 February which had been prepared for the chancellor put the problem delicately:

¹⁰¹ See R. Ellis, 'Recollections of Sir Hilary Jenkinson' in *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, iv (4), Oct. 1971), p. 262.

¹⁰² Holmes, 'Sir Hilary Jenkinson', p. 346.

¹⁰³ TNA, T 222/538, Note of 4 Jan. 1952.

¹⁰⁴ TNA, T 222/538, 22 Jan. 1952.

¹⁰⁵ TNA, T 222/538, Note to Sir Edward Bridges, 1 Feb. 1952.

¹⁰⁶ Sir James would be told in the letter of invitation of 8 Apr. 1952 from Sir Edward Bridges that 'The Committee would have no serving civil servants on it and we should hope to keep it small and select'. Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge (hereafter CAC), PJGG10(2).

¹⁰⁷ TNA, T 222/538, Sir Edward Bridges to Mr Armstrong, 4 Feb. 1952.

I feel, for reasons which I can explain in greater detail when we meet, that the usefulness of the committee will be greatly increased if no serving civil servant is a member of it. I know that this gives you great difficulty because of the Deputy Keeper's unique experience, which you feel should be directly at the service of the committee throughout its deliberations. Perhaps we could have a word about this.¹⁰⁸

There had then followed the conversation about 'whether Jenkinson should be on the committee. On this the master of the rolls was very helpful. He suggested at one time that Evans, the Principal Assistant Keeper should be a member of the committee but agreed in the end that the simplest line was to take the view that no official should be on the committee at all'.¹⁰⁹

It was not only the master of the rolls who was very helpful. The chancellor of the exchequer had also secured the prime minister's blessing for the deputy keeper's blackballing in April 1952, having told him that 'this is a question on which fresh minds are needed and we shall do much better if we do not have on the committee representatives either of the creators or the hoarders of files'.¹¹⁰ It was an irresistible show of force.

It thus looks as if much of the personal influence which domestic government archivists – the hoarders of files – might have been able to wield had been driven off-stage. The officials of the PRO *were* allowed to observe the occasional meeting; submit 'a considerable body of preliminary information';¹¹¹ and, chiefly through John Collingridge, keep in touch with the committee's secretary, Kenneth Clucas.¹¹² They could comment on drafts. But they had no direct hand in writing the report, and Sir Hilary was not even shown an advance copy of the final version or told when it would be published.¹¹³ The secretary, for his part, had preferred to keep his distance from a man who was himself said not 'to like anyone to come too near'.¹¹⁴ He later reported that:

he did not have a great deal to do with [Sir Hilary] personally . . . [he] thought that the stories he had heard from Treasury colleagues probably biased him against him and he was not struck by any exceptional qualities. . . . he had written most of the Report himself and had his tongue in his cheek when alluding to certain of Sir H J's assertions, as in his definition of 'records'.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁸ TNA, T 222/538.

¹⁰⁹ TNA, T 222/538, Note for Record.

¹¹⁰ TNA, T 222/53, Letter of 18 Apr. 1952.

¹¹¹ See the *114th Report of the deputy keeper of the records*, p. 7.

¹¹² Kenneth Clucas, 1921–2010, was a principal at H.M. Treasury 1952–54. He became permanent secretary at the Department of Trade, 1979–82, and was knighted in 1976. He drafted all but a single paragraph of the report.

¹¹³ What Sir Hilary said in diplomatic fashion at the time was "By the kindness of the Chairman, Sir James Grigg, I and my Colleagues principally concerned have been kept informed of the progress of this Committee and enabled at some stages to offer our observations; but as its Report has not yet been presented (though I understand it may be expected shortly) I am not in a position to make any comment. See the *115th Report of the deputy keeper of the records* (1954 for 1953), p. 2.

¹¹⁴ See Ellis, 'Recollections', p. 266.

¹¹⁵ TNA, PRO 30/98/18, Visit to Sir Kenneth Clucas, 18 Feb. 1988. The actual passage to which he referred read: "'Records" the Deputy Keeper has stated to be synonymous with "archives", a term which he has defined as meaning "Documents drawn up for the purpose of, or used during, the conduct of affairs of any kind, of which they themselves formed a part, and subsequently preserved by the persons responsible for the transactions in question, or their successors, in their own custody for their own reference". For our own purposes it will be convenient to modify this definition slightly . . .' Committee on departmental records; *Report*, para. 1.

So it was that officials of the PRO tended to be held at arm's length. They returned only afterwards, when Sir Hilary had left his post in April 1954, to a re-born institution under a new deputy keeper where they prepared guidance for a new breed of departmental record officers. In what *The Times* headlined a 'plan for relief of Record Office',¹¹⁶ the report (in Sir James Grigg's words) 'roasted' Sir Hilary and his 'antiquated, unworkable scheduling system'¹¹⁷ that was based on retaining the structure of the PRO intact and a notion of the archive as a repository, a natural growth which was 'as much an organism as a tree or animal',¹¹⁸ that should be fiercely protected for as yet undetermined future use.¹¹⁹ It proposed in its stead the introduction of a revolutionary, rationalised, comprehensive, formally-structured and busily interventionist model of retention and destruction.

Sir Hilary's published *riposte* was a partial, grudging acceptance of the report – the growth in the mass of modern records *had* got out of hand¹²⁰ and it did need reining in – but he also issued a warning that that a shift to managerialism would only imperil the professional standards of the archivist. 'There will be a tendency', he protested, 'to employ for the administration of Modern Archives, if that is made a separate affair, persons of a lower educational grade, or, at least, persons not qualified by special training to act as Archivists'.¹²¹ But most disagreed. They believed that the committee had had no choice in the matter.

Kenneth Clucas told Sir James that he 'had successfully dusted the kingdom's archives'.¹²² The keeper of the records and master of the rolls remarked to Sir James that his recommendations were 'absolutely right. At any rate, I have heard of no sensible alternative to what you have proposed'.¹²³ Margaret Gowing, Sir William Hancock's collaborator as official historian, a woman who could be most critical of the state of the records, one of the committee's members, said that 'there is now at least a good chance, where none existed before, of preventing chaos in the legacy of government records that the twentieth century will bequeath to its luckless descendants'.¹²⁴

There was little mourning for the prospective loss of historical records. That had never been the focal concern. Even in the profession's own mouthpiece, the *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, an eager commentator pronounced that 'The report rightly assumes that a large proportion of the documents created in a department should be destroyed as of no value to anybody. Those that are kept must be worthy of the

¹¹⁶ 'State papers by the mile' in *The Times*, 9 July 1954.

¹¹⁷ Rasmussen; 'Record management', p. 457.

¹¹⁸ 'The English archivist – a new profession', speech at University College London to launch the new school of archives, 1947. In that same lecture he defined archives as 'the documents accumulated by a natural process in the Conduct of Affairs, of any kind, public or private, at any date; and preserved thereafter for Reference, in their own custody, by the persons responsible for the affairs in question or their successors'. Hans Rasmussen remarked that this was not 'a notion unique to Jenkinson, but rather as a statement on the inherent characteristic of archives being organically created from the regular course of business of the creating body. Schellenberg used it approvingly to distinguish archives, which receive records, from libraries that collect them' (email, 25 Nov. 2014).

¹¹⁹ See N. Ceoney, 'The role of a 21st-century National Archive – The relevance of the Jenkinsonian tradition, and a redefinition for the information society' in *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, xxix (1), 2008, 57–71.

¹²⁰ He said of the Grigg Report that some of its proposals were common sense and that he had enunciated them himself in the past. And he then added that 'I incline myself to think . . . that, failing substantial diminution in the accrual of written matter . . . [an] ultimate intrusion of selection based on the interests of research [after 25 years] is inevitable. But note that none of the pruning process is made the task of the Archivist. The business of the Keepers of Archives is still . . . to keep them'. (Emphasis in the original). Sir Hilary Jenkinson, 'Roots' in *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, ii (4), Oct. 1960), pp. 136–7.

¹²¹ Sir Hilary Jenkinson, 'The future of archives in England' in *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, i (3), Apr. 1956, p. 60.

¹²² CAC, PJGG10(2), Letter to Sir James Grigg, 8 Nov. 1957.

¹²³ CAC, PJGG10(2), Letter to Sir James Grigg, 27 Feb. 1957.

¹²⁴ CAC, PJGG10(2), Letter to Sir James Grigg, 18 July 1954.

endless trouble and expense that their retention will entail – valuable accommodation, equipment, cleaning, preservation and repairs through the centuries. Selection must be drastic . . .¹²⁵ And that adjective – ‘drastic’ – began to creep into the vocabulary of record management at the time,¹²⁶ part, as it were, of a new language of crisis management and purging. Culling was to be all. A note for the record, lodged in a Treasury file about impending legislation, announced that ‘the new principles of reviewing’ required ‘destroying everything that is not wanted instead of destroying only what is specified on a Schedule’. But it then added the seemingly nervous caution ‘Best not include in the Bill, but cover in Rules, to be made by the Lord Chancellor under the Act’.¹²⁷

Individual government departments would now assume responsibility for administering that drastic new selection process under the general supervision of a new public records department;¹²⁸ the management of the new department (against the wishes of the master of the rolls¹²⁹ and senior officials of the Public Record Office¹³⁰) would be transferred to a minister of the Crown; and inspectors would be appointed to ensure that the new arrangements were being conducted properly (there were to be four such inspectors at first and they were in position by September 1956).

Government ministries were in their turn to appoint a suitable internal official, a departmental records officer,¹³¹ to take charge of their papers, and in a manner not unlike the three-stage life cycle for records, review them five years after they had ‘passed out of active use’ (para. 80) and then destroy those which were no longer needed¹³² (and the first such officers were nominated in May 1956 – there were to be officers in post in 64 departments by the end of the next year). Any records not thus discarded were to be reviewed again after 25 years, and those considered no longer to be of historical or administrative importance were to be destroyed (para. 87). Records that did succeed in passing that second muster were to be kept only if they were deemed still to be of administrative use, and the remainder were to be sent for safekeeping to the Public Record Office (although the criteria for identifying historical importance were not clearly identified at the time). That was not to be the end of the matter. Attrition could continue. The archivists of the Public Record Office

¹²⁵ P. Jones, ‘The Grigg Report’, p. 7.

¹²⁶ For example, TNA, T 216/37, note on ‘Action on the Grigg Report’, 19 Dec. 1955.

¹²⁷ TNA, T 216/37, undated.

¹²⁸ Charles Johnson, sometime assistant keeper, Public Record Office, asserted after the publication of the Grigg report and before the passing of legislation that ‘The business of co-operating closely with the registries of other Departments in the economical disposal of modern papers by means of a Records Administration Officer with staff of inspecting officers will require an extension of the administrative and executive work of the Office . . . There will thus be a smaller proportion of officers engaged in that part of the work which demands a knowledge of languages, law, or history’, quoted by C. Johnson, ‘The Public Record Office’, in *Studies Presented to Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, p. 194. Michael Roper described the process of selection having become a ‘joint responsibility of the department and the Public Record Office’ (M. Roper, ‘Modern departmental records and the Record Office’ in *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, iv (5), Apr. 1972, p. 401.

¹²⁹ Lord Evershed wrote to George Coldstream on 24 June 1955 that, should the role be transferred, no one could ‘think otherwise than that the office of the Master of the Rolls (as such and by that title) would cease to exist – on the ground that its *raison d’être* had gone’, TNA, T216/347, Grigg Committee, General Policy Papers.

¹³⁰ D. Evans, the principal assistant keeper of records, reported to Sir George Coldstream that ‘The Office regrets especially that the Committee . . . found it necessary to “recommend that the headship of the Public Record Office” should be transferred from the Master of the Rolls to a Minister of the Crown . . .’ TNA, PRO 1/1445, Memorandum on some of the main proposals contained in the report of the committee on public records’, n.d.

¹³¹ The prime duty of the officer was described as being ‘to ensure that his function is as widely known within his department as possible and, in particular, that he is regarded as the authoritative, natural source of advice on any matters connected with records’. *Manual of Records Administration* (1983), 2.1.3.

¹³² The first reference in the files to the proposed new system was an anonymous note, dated 25 Oct. 1952, which made no allusion to the origin of the scheme other than to ‘the various ideas on this subject that have been ventilated in discussion and elsewhere’, TNA, T 222/989.

were obliged to keep their own stock of documents under 'continuous review' and, in consultation with the relevant departments, dispose of those which were thought no longer to justify retention. (Under the Public Record Act, this would require the consent of the lord chancellor and the procedure is very rarely adopted.)

The proposals received a guarded endorsement from the PRO in September 1954.¹³³ A memorandum to Sir Alexander Johnston, a third secretary at the Treasury who was in charge of controlling departmental expenditure, from David Evans, Sir Hilary's successor as the new deputy keeper of the records and later, very briefly, the first occupant of the new post of keeper of the records, said, a little optimistically perhaps, that he took it that the report 'boils down to recommending strongly that our present organisation under Collingridge [the PRO's liaison officer] be augmented in status, numbers and authority to deal with the immediate problems and to introduce in due course the new procedure.' But he and his colleagues were also disturbed about the prospect of administrative upheaval, and he added, in one of the very rare references to the matter, that:

Historians . . . will examine carefully the proposals that the responsibility for deciding what records are to be retained at the First Review should rest with the Departments themselves . . . They may wish to be assured that the very large quantity of papers (50 to 90 per cent is the estimate) that will be destroyed within a few years of compilation do not contain classes of document that may be of considerable interest to posterity though not to present administration. They may be disturbed by the fact that the introduction of these new and drastic proposals will coincide with the transfer of responsibility from the century-old charge of the Master of the Rolls to a more remote Departmental Minister.¹³⁴

His observation was ignored. An undated 'Paper for Home Affairs Committee Paper', prepared for the lord chancellor by the financial secretary to the Treasury, acknowledged in the new, commonplace terminology that the proposal for a system of first and second review:

is a drastic one. It may well involve destroying some records that future historians would like to see. But there were three historians and a University librarian¹³⁵ on the Committee, and other historians (who were consulted informally) were satisfied. There has been, as far as I am aware, no serious criticism of the Report after publication. In brief, the Committee's view is that a substantial amount of destruction is inevitable in any case; and that the amount of significant material that might be lost in this way is likely to be less than under any other system which it would be practicable to adopt. . . . I ask my colleagues to agree that the general principle of Reviews after about 5 years and about 25 years respectively, and of destruction on the criteria recommended, should be accepted. . . .¹³⁶

¹³³ Although the keeper of the records did write to Sir James Grigg on 18 Feb. 1954 expressing his unhappiness about the implied criticisms in the report: it was 'less than fair at a number of points in that it set out the difficulties inherent in any system of Elimination, and criticised weaknesses and deficiencies in existing arrangements . . . without any indication that Officers of the Record Office were aware of the difficulties and sought anxiously to minimise the weaknesses and deficiencies.' TNA, PRO 1/1445.

¹³⁴ TNA, PRO 1/1530, letter to Sir Alexander Johnston, 3 Sept. 1954.

¹³⁵ Margaret Gowing (then a member of the historical section of the Cabinet Office, nominated by her colleague, Professor Hancock); Professor J.G. Edwards, director of the Institute of Historical Research in the University of London; and Sir John Habakkuk, Chichele professor of economic history at Oxford. The Librarian was Harry Creswick, the librarian of Cambridge University.

¹³⁶ And that was to be the nub of the case in an undated Memorandum to Cabinet submitted by the chancellor of the exchequer in the spring of 1954, TNA, T 218/82.

And, as an ironic, crowning argument, Sir Hilary himself could be summoned in support of the contention that it was quite impossible to gauge the potential historical importance of records. A review of his *magnum opus*, the *Manual of Archive Administration*, conducted by Kenneth Clucas for Sir James Grigg, applauded his stance that archivists and historians were not at all well placed to determine the future interest of present documents – the only credible judge was the administrator.¹³⁷ The secretary wrote to Sir James on the 23 September 1952 that he had spoken to J.R. Simpson, the director of organisation and methods at the Treasury, about the idea that there should be a:

joint inspecting staff of O and M plus P.R.O., with a Committee of historians in the background, to deal with questions of historical importance . . . The more I consider Jenkinson's arguments in his book the more interesting I find it. It is, indeed, remarkable that anyone should be able, at one and the same time, to hold these views and yet find nothing wrong with the present system whereby destruction schedules are approved by archivists in collaboration with, in difficult cases, with historians. I like, both in principle and in practice, his thesis that neither the archivist nor the historian should play any part in the selection of documents for retention . . . I think he is right in wanting to have a system where it is the administrator who decides what to keep. To make the historian the final arbiter is not at all satisfactory. It is impossible for any man to forecast what the historian of anything but the immediate future will require . . . Let the archives of the future be records of the conduct of work in Government Departments as it is actually carried out, and let the administrators decide what is to be kept.¹³⁸

The director's reply to the secretary had been enthusiastic:

To my intense surprise I found very little in your summary of Sir Hilary's Manual with which to quarrel . . . I think there is a distinct possibility that we could go quite a long way with Sir Hilary and I particularly like his argument that it is impossible to look at public records from the point of view of what will interest historians of the future . . .¹³⁹

Sir Hilary's own comment was a little opaque but he did not seem to dissent from the way in which he had been represented by the Secretary: 'What I said was . . . a scrutiny from the point of view solely of historic interest "might possibly intrude" but that this was "to be employed only with due precaution" and that in most cases it would probably be best to omit it'.¹⁴⁰

'The Archivist', it had been agreed, 'is not and ought not to be an Historian'.¹⁴¹ It was not to be the projected interests of posterity or future historians that drove the committee. It was not to be historians who would be awarded a formal role in record management. The Grigg report went to Cabinet on 3 March 1955 where the sole problem discussed was 'the expediency of opening Cabinet records to public inspection after 50 years'.¹⁴² That was a sticking point, a matter of key interest to ministers whose deliberations would no longer be confidential, and it was agreed, in

¹³⁷ See the commentary of E. Honer and S. Graham, 'Should users have a role in determining the future archive? The approach adopted by the Public Record Office, the UK National Archives to the selection of records for permanent preservation' in *Liber Quarterly*, xi, 2001, p. 384.

¹³⁸ TNA, T 222/540, Letter 23 Sept. 1952, Sir Hilary Jenkinson's 'Manual of Archive Administration'.

¹³⁹ TNA, T 222/540, Letter of 25 Sept. 1952, Sir Hilary Jenkinson's 'Manual of Archive Administration'.

¹⁴⁰ TNA, T 222/540, Letter to K. Clucas, 13 Oct. 1952, Sir Hilary Jenkinson's 'Manual of Archive Administration'.

¹⁴¹ Sir Hilary Jenkinson, quoted in P. Harvey, 'Archives in Britain: Anarchy or policy?' in *American Archivist*, vi (1), Winter 1983, p. 22.

¹⁴² C.C. (55) 20th Conclusions.

the prime minister's words, that it should be 'subject to further study and thought'. The question of access was duly referred three weeks later to a meeting of senior officials which endorsed the recommendation that records should be open to public inspection only after fifty years, subject to the *caveat* 'that Government Departments should retain discretion to withhold particular classes of documents of their own choice from such inspection'.¹⁴³ The report then returned to Cabinet on 7 June 1955, where it was presented by its secretary, Sir Norman Brook, as 'a rational and comprehensive scheme for reducing to order the chaotic arrangements for pruning Departmental records and ensuring that those of importance are accessible to historians of the future in the public record office'.¹⁴⁴ It was there concluded that the chancellor of the exchequer should give effect to as many of the report's proposals as possible, whilst giving yet more time to a consideration of the problem of the 50-year rule.¹⁴⁵ The government promptly announced its acceptance of the main proposals,¹⁴⁶ although the timing of the right of public inspection was a predicament that was to detain officials for several months more.

John Collingridge was appointed as the very first records administration officer in December 1955 (it had been the grading of his new, and, some thought, anomalous position that had also delayed progress);¹⁴⁷ and a number of the committee's other recommendations had already been implemented by the time a Bill was presented, after protracted internal discussion about details of structure, remuneration and staffing,¹⁴⁸ to an ill-attended Parliament in December 1957.¹⁴⁹ But there were some few matters that did demand legislation,¹⁵⁰ and it was to the threat of a looming torrent of paper which the lord chancellor, Viscount Kilmuir, the man who was about to take charge of the problem, again referred in opening the debate:

I am told that the Public Record Office has, in Chancery Lane and in the repository at Ashridge, about 46½ miles of shelves full of records; and there are,

¹⁴³ TNA, CAB 130/109, Notes of a meeting held in Sir Norman Brook's room, Cabinet Office.

¹⁴⁴ TNA, PREM 11/911Memorandum to the prime minister, 21 Feb. 1955.

¹⁴⁵ C.M. (55) 12th Conclusions

¹⁴⁶ HC Deb 5 July 1955, dxliii, cols 957-60.

¹⁴⁷ There was some uncertainty about whether he could and should be appointed to the new post. One of the problems was what the master of the rolls called the untidiness of the creation of 'one anomalous Officer' in the PRO, CAC, PJGG10(2), letter to Sir James Grigg, 11 Nov. 1955. Discussion about the dilemma was also reported in the Treasury file, Public Record Office: Action arising out of committee on departmental records Report (Grigg) (TNA, 218/82).

¹⁴⁸ For example, an internal Treasury note of 29 June 1955 reported that '(1) nothing has been definitely clinched. (2) discussion has centred largely on particular points of disagreement, notably – the grading of Inspecting Officers; the general attempt to diminish the A.K. [Assistant Keeper] empire (by devolving minor duties to Executives – in particular the loss of 2 AK (Directing) posts . . . I think we shall have to start pretty well de novo. . . .' A later note of 1 Nov. 1955 reported that 'The P.R.O. memorandum is noticeably more polite than those we were wont to receive from Sir H.J. [Hilary Jenkinson, the Keeper of the Records] and, up to a point, more accommodating. Quite a number of recommendations have been accepted in whole or in part. But, as we feared, all those having adverse staffing implications have been rejected'. What particularly exercised some of those constructing the new PRO was whether insiders should be appointed to senior positions, and especially to the new post of keeper of the records. There was an evident interest in breaking what was held to be a conservative archival tradition. The appointment of Sir Hilary's successor, Sir David Evans, was opposed within the Treasury, and he occupied the position of keeper only between 1959 and 1960. The next keeper, Stephen Wilson, serving between 1960 and 1966, had worked in the PRO between 1928–9, but was effectively something of an outsider, having been a civil servant in various departments of state until 1950, and then an employee of the Iron and Steel Corporation of Great Britain and the Iron and Steel Holding and Realisation Agency. His successor, Harold Cottam Johnson, was again an insider, having joined the PRO as an assistant keeper in 1927.

¹⁴⁹ See Cantwell, *The Public Record Office*, p. 1.

¹⁵⁰ An undated draft letter, written in or about March 1954, to heads of departments on the Grigg Report's recommendations about the future administration and staffing of the PRO said that 'These proposals, if accepted, will require legislation; but not at once. The idea is to have a transitional period of about five years and to introduce the legislation at the earliest convenient moment during that period', TNA, T 218/82.

so it is estimated, a further 120 miles which are still retained by Government Departments, but which may ultimately be transferred to the Public Record Office for permanent preservation. This will present a considerable accommodation problem in the future. I learnt with surprise that the quantity of paper destroyed by Government Departments last year amounted to no less than 3,600 tons.¹⁵¹

It was a threat that was alluded to once more in March 1958 when the solicitor-general, Sir Harry Hylton-Foster, the Shiva of the records, moved the second reading of the Bill in the House of Commons. His talk was all about the necessity, indeed the joy, of destruction:

I shudder to think of what it must have looked like to those working in the [Public Record] Office – a dreadful flood of documents descending upon those scholarly and not underburdened civil servants who give such admirable public service. . . . It is plain, I submit, that there was dire need for the Bill . . . The new system is already under way, and the House will be interested to know how it is working. Of course, if it is to work well, it is essential that Departments must go through their records and destroy what is not worth keeping. In accordance with the recommendation of the Grigg Committee, in paragraph 131 of its Report, a Records Administration Officer has been appointed in the Public Record Office. There is some evidence that he and his inspecting officers are already playing a useful part. I take an almost sadistic satisfaction in thinking of these figures. It was estimated that the amount, or dead weight – if that be the happy description – of documents destroyed by the Departments in 1956 was 3,600 tons. Since the beneficial influence of the new system, the year 1957 produced an estimated quantity destroyed of 5,398 tons in the year – about 60 miles of shelving, for those who like to be statistically minded . . .¹⁵²

The one section of the Bill that excited parliamentary attention,¹⁵³ just as it had earlier excited ministers and officials, was the proposal that records should be open to public inspection only after fifty years. That was considered by some Members of Parliament – the men and women who were supposed to scrutinise ministerial and official actions – to be too long, and it was put right ten years later.¹⁵⁴ But the proposal that a substantial amount of destruction was both inevitable and desirable, and the criteria and methods that would have to be devised to achieve it, were neither defended nor explained¹⁵⁵ (the principal archives officer of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, E.E. Burke,¹⁵⁶ commented that ‘The machinery for these arrangements is not stated, nor does the act indicate

¹⁵¹ HL Deb 16 Dec. 1957, ccvi, cols 1147–81.

¹⁵² HC Deb 26 Mar. 1958, dlxxxv, cols 499–540.

¹⁵³ See, for example, the home secretary’s answer to a parliamentary question put in July 1955: HC Deb 5 July 1955, dxliii, cols.957–60.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* That 50-year rule was later amended to 30 years under the Public Records Act 1967, c. 44: ‘An Act to reduce the period of fifty years specified in section 5(1) of the Public Records Act 1958 as that for which certain public records must have been in existence for them to be available for public inspection’.

¹⁵⁵ Even in 2000, the report of a public consultation by the Public Record Office stated that ‘To date, the PRO’s guidance to record reviewers has been of a rather general character and it has not attempted to articulate explicitly the values which underpin appraisal policy.’ *Acquisition and Disposition Policies*, Version 2.1 (Feb. 2000), 3.6. That neglect may be discerned elsewhere. For example, a fairly comprehensive review of Canadian archival policies omitted to deal with the problem of how many papers could and should be retained (J. English, ‘The role of the National Archives of Canada and the National Library of Canada (1998) <http://capalibrarians.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/englishreport1999.pdf> (accessed 15 Nov. 2016)

¹⁵⁶ He was, for example, responsible for the collection of a large quantity of personal papers and papers from business and other organisations, unusual at the time in a national archive. See T. Baxter and E. Burke, *Guide to the historical manuscripts in the National Archives of Rhodesia*, (Salisbury, Rhodesia, 1970).

what principles are to be applied to selection').¹⁵⁷ There was in their place the simple overriding presumption that, in the phrase of Lord Evershed, 'there was a tremendous proliferation of paper in the modern State',¹⁵⁸ that almost all of it had to be jettisoned to avert a calamity, and the Bill's focus should be on the proper safekeeping of the relatively few records of administrative interest that would be allowed to remain. What followed was drastically to mould the policies of the PRO and affect the possibilities of almost everything that we, as historians of the late twentieth century were able to do.

¹⁵⁷ E. Burke; 'Some archival legislation of the British Commonwealth' in *The American Archivist*, xxii (3), July 1959, pp. 281-2.

¹⁵⁸ 'Public Record law changes' in *The Times*, 23 Mar. 1956.