

Viewpoint

Keepers and Archivists: Will They Be the Same Person Again?

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In 2013 the appointment of a new Registrar General and Keeper of the Records of Scotland at the National Records of Scotland (NRS) and a new Director at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) resulted in none of the leaders of the UK's national archives coming from an archival background. I know from many conversations that this concerns many archivists who think the Keeper is almost a 'head of profession' type role and want to see archivists have a chance of getting these positions. I was postulating my nascent theory that the newly merged NRS and The National Archives (TNA) in London both have much larger staff numbers and budgets, among other things, than most archivists are ever likely to gain experience in managing. I made the mistake of spouting forth all this at an archives event in the Scottish Parliament late in 2013 and the result is this Viewpoint piece.

I am not an archivist, so here is a dispassionate attempt to take a look at the issue. Since I agreed to do this Viewpoint, some people have said to me that they don't think archivists are ambitious enough and that they do not take up opportunities for leadership training. I thought the evidence for this was mixed but worth looking into at the same time.

I hope readers won't be offended if I start in London as I think the current management emphasis started there. In 1990 the Lord Chancellor was seriously concerned about the management of the then Public Record Office (PRO) in London and commissioned a report, the *Scrutiny of the Public Record Office*.¹ It proved to be an enlightening insight into problems at the PRO and the report's recommendations still have great influence on the recruitment of the Chief Executive and Keeper at TNA. The problems at the PRO were summarised as 'a lack of clear leadership and direction in managing resources effectively' with 'management and financial planning and information systems' being deemed inadequate. Additionally, there was 'no effective strategic planning' and 'no effective management of resources'. The overall impression was: 'We conclude that major change is needed'. One of the resulting key recommendations was

¹ M. Bonsey, S. Hughes, D. Thomas and V. Traylen, *Scrutiny of the Public Record Office* (London, 1991).

that: ‘Strategic planning should be introduced, enabling priorities to be set and resources allocated accordingly’.

Following on from this recommendation, the report is conclusive about the skills priorities for future Chief Executives and Keepers of the renamed The National Archives:

Appointment of the ... Chief Executive will provide an opportunity to reconsider the role of the Keeper and the relative importance of management and leadership qualities, archival expertise and familiarity with processes of government. *Our recommendation is that due emphasis be placed on management and leadership qualities.*

The authors deemed this so important they took the opportunity to repeat the recommendation by stating:

In the selection of the Chief Executive careful consideration should be given to the balance of

- a) Management and leadership qualities
- b) Archival expertise and standing
- c) Familiarity with the overall processes of government and the ways in which government records are created and used

With due emphasis being placed on the first.

Recruitment of the Chief Executive and Keeper has been influenced by this emphasis since 1991 with the resulting downgrading of the importance of archival knowledge or experience.

The scale of the management experience required and priorities for TNA were highlighted in November 2013 following the resignation of Oliver Morley as Chief Executive and Keeper. Archivists thinking of applying for this job would have needed to look hard to find any requirements for knowledge of archives in the Candidate Brief which states:

The National Archives has delivered improved performance whilst at the same time managing a reduction in its annual budget which by 2015/16 will have reduced to £29.9 million.

Commercial innovation will continue to be a necessity in the coming years.

It will require a keen awareness of technological opportunities and an innovative approach to revenue generation, alongside an ability to work effectively within Government and with the archive sector.²

TNA has over 500 staff and usually has more than 600 when contractors are included. The Candidate Brief continues:

² Ministry of Justice, *Candidate Brief, Chief Executive and Keeper, The National Archives* (London, 2013).

Experience and Qualifications

Essential:

- Board level experience of developing the strategic direction of a comparable organisation in either the public or private sector, and experience of controlling and being accountable for a significant budget or business.
- Proven record of leadership and management of a large and diverse team.
- Experience of delivering excellent customer services, including online and a track record of achieving this against tight financial targets.
- Experience of developing and implementing innovative approaches to revenue generation.
- Understanding of knowledge and information management and awareness of the needs of the various stakeholder communities e.g. historical, academic and archival as well as potential public demand for public records.

It is hard to get the level of experience required, working in the UK archive sector. Being an archivist is not an advantage or requirement for this job. The UK's archives do not have the levels of staff or turnover likely to enable archivists to gain and then demonstrate the necessary experience. Just to hammer home the point, the managerial expertise required in the Candidate Brief is summarised as follows and could have come straight from the *Scrutiny* of 1991:

- The ability to manage effectively an organisation of The National Archives' size, including a commercial business of £10m in revenue, and successfully delivering on performance and within budget.
- Superior skills in people, financial and information management, business planning and implementation and communication.

Once again there is no reference to knowledge or experience of archives.

A similar situation has arisen in Scotland. Following the merger in 2011 of the National Archives of Scotland with the General Register Office of Scotland to form the National Records of Scotland (NRS), an organisation of comparable size and resource to TNA has been created. NRS has 430 staff and responsibility for about £22 million of programme expenditure. Its management needs are now similar to those of TNA. The following are the key criteria for the role of Registrar General and Keeper of the Records of Scotland sent out in 2013 following George MacKenzie's retirement:³

Your application should demonstrate and evidence a high level of competence and effectiveness in:

- providing critical input to strategic planning with good judgement skills;
- leadership – providing direction, delivering results, building on relationships and capability, motivating and inspiring a diverse group of staff;

³ Scottish Government, *Further Information, Senior Civil Service, Registrar General and Keeper of the Records of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2013).

- forming effective relationships with a range of stakeholders including Ministers, local government and the public that generate confidence, respect and collaborative working;
- robust financial management skills – driving quality, efficiency and value for money;
- personal presence with excellent communication skills, and the capacity to use these skills as a civil servant in a sensitive political context and in an outward public-facing context;
- personal resilience, with the determination and stamina to sustain effectiveness while upholding the values of the Scottish Government and the Civil Service; and
- working flexibly and with impact to deliver the Scottish Government's objectives.

Once again there is no mention of knowledge of archives in the key criteria. It is important to acknowledge that organisations of the size of NRS and TNA must have strong and experienced management. It is difficult to see where archivists can get the experience now necessary to run either organisation from within the archive sector.

I mentioned at the start of this article that the new Director of PRONI is not an archivist. I think, however, the reasons for this are unique and there is no reason why an archivist could not get this job again in the future.

Archivists clearly need to get leadership training and experience where they can. I have looked at the uptake of leadership training by archivists in comparison with museum and library professionals. It certainly seems that archivists attend the Clore Leadership Programme in similar numbers to those from both other professions. The National Leisure and Culture Forum has run its Leading Learning Programme since 2008. When the programme started, generous bursaries were available and archivists were well represented. Recently bursaries have declined sharply and few archivists now take part. Yet librarians and museums managers still seem able to access bursary support and attend. The Archives and Records Association has offered Leadership Training Bursaries for the last three years but these require matched funding and have been very difficult to award. In my experience, archivists find it difficult to access training budgets sufficiently large to cover leadership training. Where full bursaries are awarded such as with Clore and the early days of Leading Learning then archivists attend; as soon as bursaries dry up, archivists seem unable to attend in comparison with the museum and library sectors. This indicates to me there are issues with training budgets in archive services and organisational commitment to leadership development as well.

All three sectors, however, are completely outstripped by the success of arts organisations in accessing funding and sending staff on leadership training. Archivists, librarians and museum staff are vastly outnumbered on Clore and Leading Learning by those from the arts sector. This may reflect the larger amounts of money available even now in the arts sector and possibly more

commitment from arts organisations to leadership development. And, of course, the arts are much better at shouting and demanding.

My conclusion is that if an archivist has the ambition to be a leader he/she needs to give serious consideration as to how and where to gain the necessary experience. The criteria and emphasis for the role of Keeper at NRS and TNA will not change.