

*A case study*

# *The Record Group: A Concept in Evolution*

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The record group or archive group is the primary unit of organization in many archival institutions devoted to public records. The group is normally deemed to consist of the total historical record holdings created by an independent administrative unit. Hilary Jenkinson, Deputy Keeper, Public Record Office, 1948-53, defined it as comprising all records "resulting from the work of an Administration which was an organic whole, complete in itself, capable of dealing independently, without added or external authority, with every side of any business which could normally be presented to it."<sup>2</sup> The National Archives of the United States of America, when faced suddenly with the problem of organizing a large, complex and rapidly increasing mass of records, adopted a more flexible definition: "a record group is a major archival unit established somewhat arbitrarily with due regard to the principle of provenance and to the desirability of making the unit of convenient size and character for the work of arrangement and description and for the publication of invento-

<sup>1</sup> This article is an elaboration of a paper presented during a panel discussion of "Perspectives on the Record Group Concept" at the conference of the Society of American Archivists in Philadelphia, 3 October 1975. These comments on the record group concept, its past and present, the possible alternatives, and its evolutionary development are based almost entirely on personal observations of its application in the Public Records Division of the Public Archives of Canada. The Archives has occasionally, and perhaps with some justification, been accused of considering itself the *summa* of archival experience and wisdom in Canada, and of regarding its methodology as furnishing the model for any situation. Nevertheless, the institution does provide an excellent opportunity for a critical examination of the record group system in action, and for a statement concerning the system's principal merits and disadvantages. At the present time, there are 118 record groups at the Archives containing about 20,000 metres of material. These groups have been created for a variety of reasons, ranging from logical arrangement to organizational convenience and flexibility.

<sup>2</sup> Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archival Administration*, second edition, (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co. Ltd., 1966) p. 101.

ries.”<sup>3</sup> The Public Archives of Canada includes a definition of record group in the Dominion Archivist’s foreword to each inventory published by the Public Records Division:

The term ‘record group’ (RG) is used here exclusively to refer to federal government records in the Public Archives of Canada. It can be most easily defined as any body of records of the federal government of Canada or its predecessors that are organizationally or functionally related by administrative continuity. In practical terms this usually means that a separate record group is created for each department, branch, or agency that maintained at any point during its existence a separate and self-contained registry system.<sup>4</sup>

The last sentence of this definition indicates that the creation of a record group sometimes may be based on the continuity of a records system rather than upon the continuity of organization.

A review of Public Records Division (PRD) holdings reveals that at least half of the groups do contain the historical records of government organizations which have had administrative continuity and whose functions may have increased through natural expansion or amoeba-like fission, but which had never been transferred from another organization. Little need be said about such record groups. The system functions admirably from a practical viewpoint, and does not strain against traditional archival principles. If all groups were like these, the record group concept need not be a subject for analysis. However, many government organizations in Canada, as elsewhere, have for both administrative and political reasons been augmented or diminished by the transfer of functions from, or to, other record creating agencies. Others have been created by the combination of two or more predecessor bodies. This process of administrative change is the factor which casts doubt upon the validity of the record group concept. The Public Records Division has attempted to cope with this almost organic process while retaining record groups, at least nominally.

No simple and brief outline of the Public Archives’ policy regarding the effect of administrative change on record groups can be advanced, for the very policy has been inconsistent. A variety of approaches has been employed, either by process of adaptation or by experimentation. A case in point: where a major record-creating organization has moved through a number of different government departments since its inception, but throughout has maintained its own records systems and retained the majority of its original functions, one device has been the designation of its records as a separate group. A typical example of this approach is provided

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3 National Archives [U.S.A.], Archivists’ Memorandum No. A-142, February, 1941.

4 See, for example, preface by W. I. Smith, to RG 18, *General Inventory Series, Records of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police*, No. 2, compiled by Joanne Poulin, General Editor, Peter Gillis (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1975) p. v.

by the Immigration Branch, an extremely important organization from an historical perspective. This Branch has formed part of five departments since its creation in 1896, but as RG 76, the records form a distinct entity. So long as its existence, structure and RG identification are adequately noted in the inventories of its various parent and foster-parent departments, the breach of provenance and *respect des fonds* is more than offset by the ease of identification and access.

Normally, the records of an organization which has maintained its own registry system but has formed part of a single department since its creation will not be treated as an independent record group. When a series of records has passed from one department to another, the problem of which group should receive these records can sometimes be resolved simply by asking whether the recipient department incorporated these records into its own record system (i.e., did the classification system change?) or was new material placed on the file? Should the answer be no, the files are normally assigned to the record group of the creating department and a note is placed in the inventories of both record groups concerning the department from which the records were accessioned.

A more serious problem is posed by the genuine multiple provenance records in which a series of files, or even an individual file, may incorporate material from two or more organizations which have held the file(s) in turn. To which record group files of this nature should be assigned may require an arbitrary decision by the archivists directly concerned. Several factors must be taken into consideration. For example, if the last department to hold these records incorporated them into its own records operation and assigned new file numbers from its own records classification system, there is a powerful argument for placing them within that departmental record group. However, the problem may be more complicated if the last department maintained the old file organization, but utilized the records to such an extent that by the time of deposition in the Archives, the last agency had in fact created the bulk of the material in the files. Of course, the final department may have converted the files to its own system, but have placed a negligible quantity of material on these files prior to archival accessioning. The selection of an archives group is often made on a perfectly *ad hoc* basis, according to the archivists' judgement as to which record group is the most logically appropriate. The very real risk is of either robbing the records of a proper and meaningful administrative content or destroying the original arrangement of the series. It is difficult to see how it is possible to avoid one or both of these situations, at least to some degree. This presents one of the flaws in the record group concept, even when applied in a non-arbitrary manner. The fault can be relieved somewhat by cross-referencing items in the inventories for the record group of both the predecessor and successor departments. On occasion, the Public Records Division has created one group where a strict application of

the record concept would require two or more. This occurs most frequently in cases where several independent organizations had merged to form a new entity combining the functions of all. For example, the records of the Board of Transport Commissioners, the Maritime Transport Commission and the Air Transport Board now co-exist in RG 46 along with the records of the Canadian Transport Commission which combined and replaced these bodies.

Despite criticism to the effect that the record group concept is more likely to break down when the groups involve a large volume of records or numerous and complex series of records, experience at the Public Archives suggests otherwise. First of all, a large volume of records does not necessarily entail complexity. One of the largest record groups in the Public Records Division is RG 24, the Records of the Department of National Defence. Its inventory is one of the shortest and simplest, and is perfectly adequate. In contrast, RG 30, the records of Canadian National Railways, has few rivals for complexity in any of the world's archives. This corporation's ancestors include more than 600 agencies, most of which led an independent existence at one time or another. The forebears include the first Canadian railway, whose records date from 1832, yet not all these companies amalgamated to make Canadian National. An example of the convoluted corporate ancestry of Canadian National is the Belleville and North Hastings Railway which was absorbed by the Grand Junction Railway which amalgamated with others forming the Midland Railway which was later bought by the Grand Trunk Railway which was finally taken over to become one of the major components of Canadian National. RG 30 contains the records of the majority of these companies as well as many series from Canadian National itself. The final inventory must be a *tour de force* involving the description and organization of all records tied to the evolving corporate structure. Any attempt to reduce this record group to either a number of smaller groups, which would seem to be required by a strict application of the record group concept, or to an even greater number of series on the Australian pattern would not make much sense. Nothing would be gained in simplicity, convenience or ease of reference, for that portion of the larger inventory covering the entire historical evolution of the corporate structure would still have to be provided in some form or other.

Another group in the Public Records Division desecrates even further the shrine of the record group concept. RG 33, Royal Commissions, contains the records of more than 100 separate Royal Commissions. While the records frequently amount to a large volume for each Commission and are often of exceptional historical value (the recent commissions on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, and on the Status of Women are prime examples), they have absolutely no administrative relationship with each other save for their common title of "Royal Commission." Yet, they all

form sub-groups of RG 33. Obviously this is at best a serious distortion of the traditional concept with nothing whatsoever to recommend it except that it functions extremely well.

A slightly more detailed breakdown of the actual treatment of record groups may be useful. The guides to records in a group are normally prepared at two levels: the inventory and the finding aid. The inventory usually includes an historical and structural outline of the government organization which created the records in the group, and also the history and nature of the record organization. The bulk of the inventory consists of a brief description of each record series. These are arranged and numbered in a hierarchical format, and furnish other information such as outside box-volume numbers, extent, outside dates, the existence and form of any available finding aids, and access conditions. The second level guide, the finding aid, is normally geared to the series level. It may have been created concurrently with the records and transferred to the Archives, or have been prepared by an archivist. Finding aids take many forms, such as lists, index cards, bound registers and computer printouts. Occasionally, a finding aid may exist for an entire record group, particularly for small units.

By now it is quite obvious that as priests of the sacred flame of the record group concept, the Public Records Division archivists are charlatans and frauds. Consequently, certain questions must be explored. Was the PAC justified in adopting the record group system? Was there any other system that would have served as well? Is it still an acceptable system or would a change be advisable? Finally, is there an evolutionary process at work and, if so, what is being developed?

*Should it have been adopted?* The answer must be yes. In 1962, more than 15% of the records of the Government of Canada had been scheduled for disposal, and the historical public records in the PAC occupied the attention and effort of but two archivists. Within little more than a decade, approximately 90% of government records have been scheduled, archival public record holdings have increased nearly one hundred-fold, and first a section and then a division was created to service the material. As the records poured in, both as a result of the application of record schedules to current record systems and the clearing of basements, attics and other storage areas in government buildings, archival control ran from excellent in the cases of some older established or long-extinct government organizations to none at all. Given the dimension of the problem with the greater part of these enormous accessions, it was understandably difficult to envisage a suitable alternative to the allocation of a record group designation to materials that were, putatively at least, from one government department and then striving to organize the records, to identify the series, to make the information available to researchers, and to

have the archival arrangement reflect the administrative history of the department. The decision to accept inconsistencies inherent in making *ad hoc* decisions relating to the allocation of certain record series to specific record groups resulted in the creation, in a relatively short time, of a fairly efficient system of dealing with historical public records created by the Government of Canada. If the experience of the Public Archives of Canada is typical, particularly in consideration of the possible results of other systems, the record group concept, flexibly applied, is probably the form of organization which warrants the most serious consideration by an archives entering completely the records arena for the first time.

*Is the concept still valid?* There is no doubt about the necessity of identifying the records created or used by a government department throughout its existence, or of identifying the functions and organization of the records. To fail in the latter will obscure the evidential value of the records concerning the structure and operations of the department concerned, as well as slight the principles of provenance and *respect des fonds*. In the case of the records of administratively stable organizations, the record group system is probably the most effective approach. As suggested above, the most incisive criticisms of the record group concept relate to its relative inflexibility concerning multiple provenance records and the difficulty presented by the system in reflecting and accommodating administrative change. During the last fifteen years at the Public Archives of Canada, soul-searching analysis of arbitrary decisions concerning the creation and content of record groups, and whether the groups faithfully reflected traditional archival principles, was a luxury seldom indulged. Decisions were made after an objective study of the situation and the main effort was devoted to getting the records into reasonable order, to identifying their place in the record group, and to making the contents easily available to researchers through the preparation of inventories and finding aids. To date, these objectives have justified the approach.

The record group concept as it is applied in the Public Records Division does occasionally run counter to the principles of provenance and *respect des fonds*. Perhaps this is not important since the system operates fairly well and any substantial problem encountered by either the historian or the archivist does not seem to derive from the record group concept. This observation may be valid so long as it can be stated that other priorities such as basic identification, organization and location of records prevail. Nevertheless, alternatives and modifications to the record group concept as practiced at the Public Archives do exist.

There appear to be four feasible courses of action: to retain the system as it now exists relatively unaltered; to effect certain changes aimed at eliminating the major weaknesses; to adopt another system entirely; or, to allow a definite, though unintentional, evolutionary process to continue with the possible end-product being a superior system.

The argument for retaining the present system is simply that it is established and, despite weaknesses, functions well. The degree of flexibility exercised by archivists, particularly as to what should constitute a record group, and the ease with which administrative change has been accommodated to date, indicate that it can be an effective system for the immediate future. Some of the weaknesses can be corrected while retaining the record group concept. The preparation of a brief but thorough administrative history of the organization of the Government of Canada and the functioning of its units, past and present, comprehensively indexed and cross-indexed, with adequate reference to the relevant record groups, would be of enormous benefit. While the researcher might know which agency's records could contain the information sought, the responsible archivist *should* know. The preparation of the administrative history will provide an archivist who knows where certain information normally will be found, but what is more important perhaps, the history will provide an invaluable reference and access tool for researchers and other archivists. Another device which must be more fully exploited is the provision of definite references to associated series in other record groups. Such cross-indexing directs the inventory reader to related records.

A recently recommended alternative to the record group concept is the "series system" adopted by the Australian National Archives, whereby the series is the primary level of arrangement. The administrative context is provided by incorporating in the guide to the series, a reference to previous, subsequent and related series, and by a higher level of guides to those record series produced completely or in part by each government agency. The advantages and disadvantages of the series system have been explored in the pages of various archival journals.<sup>5</sup> Some very powerful arguments indeed have been advanced for the adoption of the series system. In particular, it has been pointed out that since a large number of record series are of a multi-provenance nature (the Australian example is 27%), the arbitrary allocation of such series to a record group denies traditional archival principles. While the series system may be an acceptable means of organizing archives, does it really solve the problem of multi-provenance series? Do such series really become anything else whether maintained independently or ensconced in a record group?

Instead of evaluating the contributions to this debate, it may be more instructive to ponder whether reliance on either the traditional record group or the newer series system is necessary. At the Public Archives there has been no major change in the method of creating record groups and allotting

5 See, for example: P. J. Scott, "The record group concept: a case for abandonment," *The American Archivist*, XXIX (1966) pp. 493-504; Meyer H. Fishbein, letter in *The American Archivist*, XXX (1967) pp. 239-240; Gerald L. Fischer, "Letting the archival dust settle: some remarks on the record group concept," *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, [United Kingdom] vol. 4, no. 8 (1973) pp. 640-641; P. J. Scott, "Facing the reality of Administrative change— some further remarks on the record group concept," *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1974) pp. 94-100.

series of records to groups since the system was adopted. As mentioned previously, there has been a tremendous increase in the volume of historical public records placed in the Archives. This increase can be attributed almost entirely to the greater prominence that records management has achieved at all levels of the federal government. The recommendations embodied in the 1962 report of the Glassco Commission<sup>6</sup> and the provisions of the 1966 Public Records Order<sup>7</sup> have played a large part, as have the efforts of the Records Management Branch of the Public Archives of Canada, in advising, assisting, and developing suitable training for departmental records managers. The most obvious result from the point of view of the Archives is the growing volume of historical records being transferred on an increasingly regular basis. Furthermore, a larger proportion of these records is the product of integrated registries, and most records are arranged in some form of file block classification system. Most government departments now use this system, and when a new organization either chooses a system or has one installed by the Records Management Branch, a block classification system is usually employed. This results in greater uniformity of records organization.

A growing percentage of records accessioned by the Archives comprise additional records from long-established series already in the institution. For example, the Ministry of Transport (MOT) has used the same block classification system since the original Department of Transport was created 40 years ago. There seems to be no intention of abandoning this system and, indeed, there is no such need for it functions admirably. All records in the system are scheduled for disposal with reasonable retention periods and with provisions for archival retention or archival examination for all potentially historical records written into the schedule. The schedules are applied, not simply once annually as in most departments, but throughout the year, resulting in an intermittent stream of records arriving at the Archives. These are accessioned by using an "open-ended" accession, that is, by controlling the records through the means of a list and by not completing the accession form with details such as total volume until the end of the year. The finding aid for this main MOT registry series consists of a card index and, as each file arrives, a card is completed and inserted in the appropriate place in the index. For case files within the series, such as aircraft registration files, some form of alphabetical cross-index is maintained simultaneously on cards. There have been several smaller series maintained at one time or another by the MOT which now form part of its record group (RG 12), but by far the largest part of the records, particularly in recent years, derives from the main registry series. The most recent document on these records may be from five to thirty years old and public access may be open or restricted. This description is

6 *Report of The Royal Commission On Government Organization*, [Glassco Report] vol. 1. Management of the Public Service. Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1962.

7 Order in Council, PC 1966-1749, The Public Records Order, 9 September 1966.



brief and, as an example, not entirely typical, but does serve to illustrate a reasonably representative department's relations with the Public Records Division.

The record group concept, applied in a very flexible manner, has accommodated this increasing intake of records quite well. However, other changes have taken place which should be included in any review of archival theory and practice. These changes may place the record group versus series controversy in a new perspective. It is becoming obvious that in the public records field at least, the terms "arrange" and "organize" have lost much of their original meaning. An accession of records from a series is identified, of course; boxed and placed on shelves, certainly; but, unless it arrives in no discernible sequence (a rare occurrence), it is not "arranged". The records listing must be integrated with an existing finding aid, whether mechanically or manually, and the extent, outside dates, and additional box numbers noted (or changed) in the appropriate places in the record group inventory. There is, however, no attempt made to integrate physically the files with other records in the same series but previously accessioned. Indeed, as soon as the finding aid for the new accession is integrated with the main series finding aid, the accession completely disappears as a unit and is never so thought of again. The accession control forms are retained, but they are rarely examined. Thus, so far as the Archives is concerned, no attempt is made to keep records from a series in any original order on the shelves.

Another development is the continuous numbering of boxes and volumes within a record group. Under this system, the only retrieval information required to obtain a record is the record group and the box or volume number within the group. No mention is made of the series or sub-series, although these are fully described in the inventory. As a simple example, if ten metres of records arrive and are found to belong to "Series A" of RG 12, they are boxed and listed and may be allotted box numbers 1001 to 1050 in RG 12. The next RG 12 material to be accessioned might be from "Series B" which would be placed in boxes 1051 to 1075, while the next accession from "Series A" would be placed at the end of the line as boxes 1076 to 1095. This system works well even for the most complicated record groups with scores or even hundreds of series. Indeed, the more complicated the group, the more benefits continuous numbering is likely to bring. Researchers, archivists, and retrieval personnel alike are relieved when one of the older groups is converted to continuous numbering. Far fewer errors are made in requesting and retrieving material, while shelving control and space allocation are much simplified.

Given the increasing production of records by a modern government, the more regular transfer of historical public records to the Archives, and the inevitable limitations of staff, space, and time, any attempt to organize these records physically according to their last classification system will

usually be a waste of time and money far better spent on improving finding aids, inventories and retrieval systems. There are exceptions, of course. When unorganized records with no obvious system are accessioned, they must be examined, identified and arranged. Occasionally, when a small accession from a definite series arrives with the records out of sequence, or two small accessions from the same series are being processed simultaneously, arrangement or integration may be desirable, but it will be simply a matter of convenience whether it is done or not. All this should not be interpreted as meaning that the archivist should no longer examine records. It will be a sorry day for the profession if, even when an accession has arrived in perfect order, is part of a well known series, and is accompanied by an adequate list, the archivist fails to make a file-by-file examination and either do the boxing and listing himself or maintain thorough supervision over the process. With accessions of records from a series arriving annually, if not more frequently, the process of fiddling with files and boxes and of juggling shelving required to keep a series physically integrated is a very short road to archival insanity. In short, it cannot be done. Emphasis must be placed on adequate and integrated finding aids so that any record in the series is quickly identifiable and retrievable. Archivists must consider a principle something to the effect that *if existing finding aids and sufficient space, time and staff permit the recreation of any given order of the material, it is assumed that these records are so arranged, regardless of their shelf disposition.*

Despite the inescapable facts of modern archival life, some archivists may disparage this practical approach of "a paper arrangement" as running counter to archival principles by not reflecting the actual records arrangement of the creating organization. Yet, in modern records operations, even where only one system/series exists, there is normally only "a paper organization", continually changing to control the fluid status of a large volume of records at varying stages of the creation/active/dormant/disposed "life cycle". It is certainly not an unrealistic postulation that for a multi-volume file, two volumes may be in the active departmental registry, two dormant (presumably stored in the Public Archives Records Centre), and two transferred to the Archives for historical retention. What is this, but "a paper organization"? A variation might be that with a block filing system, one file may have been at the Archives for ten years while the file that comes immediately after in classification sequence has not yet been created. These examples do not illustrate complicating factors such as field office records within the primary classification system, sub-registries using the same system, and files from the system that have been destroyed upon the expiry of their retention periods because the Archives has concluded that they have no historical value. Thus, an attempt by the archivist to duplicate in his institution a presumed departmental physical arrangement of the records is not only a difficult exercise in practical terms but also it can be faulted in

theory as an attempt to impose upon a group of records a physical organization which it has never known. Furthermore, it is an ultimately futile attempt to freeze in space and time a changing body of material. The best an archives can do is to recreate, so far as possible, with its own "paper organization" the "paper organization" used by the department concerned and, by the use of more comprehensive finding aids and guides, create an even more efficient retrieval system with a superior indication of the role the records played in the administrative and operational structure and history of the department than existed during the active phase of the records.

The point is that most of the "arrangement" within any given record group or series must take place "on paper" at inventory and finding aid levels. Sheer pressure of events is forcing archivists to accept this reality. If tentative acceptance of this situation leads to the recognition that a paper organization, combined with continuous numbering within a record group and rapid integration of new accessions, produces a superior control, identification and retrieval system, why not exploit this increased flexibility to eliminate the disadvantages of the record group system and to adhere more closely to the traditional virtues of provenance and *respect des fonds*?

One of the mental blocks archivists must overcome is thinking that the various symbols used to indicate record groups and series have an intrinsic value beyond identifying the sections of the finding aids and inventories provided by the archives in which a description of the records and their place within the government structure can be found. It is the description of the record that is important. For example, should there be any difference in citation of references from a two-volume file, one volume of which is in an archival repository while the second remains in active use by the creating organization (assuming, of course, that the researcher has been granted access)? Obviously, the only difference in citation should relate to its physical location in the archives, for any record group or series codes simply refer to a description that must be supplied with the active volume as well. The vital information for both the active and archival volume of the file in any citation is the description of the actual record as to the creating department, series, file title, file number, and so on. This is the key part of the citation. The common use of a record group and/or series number combined with a box or volume number as a locator device to enable retrieval of the record wanted is not relevant to the main point of describing the document.

Following from this, the desirable evolution of the record group concept with the Public Archives of Canada might well take these four steps:

- 1 *The formal abandonment of block allocation of space to record groups.*

When the Archives moved into a new building in 1967, space was

allotted to each existing record group on the basis of current and predicted accession volume. The inevitable errors in estimating future requirements, exacerbated by the needs to abandon some storage area for office space and to resort to satellite storage, have made it necessary to use a locator chart in determining where portions of a record group may be found. Thus, there is already a *de facto* abandonment of the block space practice and when, sometime in the future, the new Archives building is ready for occupation, it is unlikely that the mistake made in 1967 will be repeated.

- 2 *The adoption of continuous numbering for Public Records as a whole, and not just within record groups.* Continuous numbering has worked with large and multi-series record groups that are equivalent in volume and complexity to the entire holdings of many smaller archival institutions. There is no reason why it should not be successful for all the records held by the Records Division. Each box/volume would have a unique archival number which would be the only retrieval information required. Record group, series numbers and codes would exist in the various inventories and finding aids, but would have no locator or storage significance. The mechanics of the continuous numbering and the conversion process require consideration. Obviously, the numbers should relate roughly to storage areas and it might be convenient to keep blocks of related records in the same building or part of a building. Whatever minor faults might develop, it would be far more efficient than the present alternatives of including a record group and/or series number in the location code, and then either attempting to keep each group in one area or controlling retrieval by an elaborate chart showing where every portion of each group is physically located.
- 3 These developments would leave a situation where each series and record group is composed of a number of boxes or volumes, each with a unique number. This is not so different than now obtains in most record groups, for each box/volume has a unique RG number regardless of series. However, this step would effectively *bring control down to the smallest indivisible physical entity*, the bound volume or, most commonly, the file. For the sake of protection and retrieval convenience, files are stored in the standard twenty-centimetre PAC box which then becomes the smallest unit. Both the series and the record group would lose their location function and possess solely a descriptive function in the series finding aid concerning the nature and arrangement of the records. The inventory would describe the place of the various series in the records of the creating organization, and the administrative and records keeping history.
- 4 Once this stage is reached, a major breakthrough could be instituted. If the volume/box numbers are the sole retrieval information necessary

and the series descriptions within record group inventories exist only to describe and not to locate, it would appear that *the allocation of series to record groups is, once again, a purely descriptive activity*. In this case, is there any reason why a multi-provenance series should not appear in the inventories for each of the record groups in which it might possibly be placed? For example, a simplified inventory entry might read something to the effect:

Central registry files relating to \_\_\_\_\_ of the \_\_\_\_\_ Branch of Department A, 1910-1920; \_\_\_\_\_ Branch of Department B, 1920-1930; \_\_\_\_\_ Division of Department C, 1930-1940; held as reference files by Department D, 1940-1950. They were originally filed according to the Department A classification system which was retained by Department B. On their transfer to Department C, in 1930, they were converted to that department's classification system. Department D did not alter this system or add material to the files. See finding aid 1234 (index cards) for these records. PRD boxes 15,120 to 15,600 [retrieval code].

This series description would appear in the same form in the inventories for the record groups for Departments A, B, C and D. The numerical designation for the finding aid would be the same in each of the four entries for the series. The series description would, however, appear in the appropriate locations in these inventories in order to reflect the administrative structure of the department and its records. The series would, therefore, have a different hierarchical code within each record group as this is only allotted as part of organizing the inventory and not as a location device. This should cause no trouble in citation as, in a reference from a 1925 document in this hypothetical series, the Department B record group and series codes would be cited. Indeed, thought might be given to abolishing RG numerical designations altogether and using abbreviations or full titles. However, for convenience, numbers are easier than names; it is simpler to talk about "RG 64" than about "the records of the Wartime Prices and Trade Board and of the Commodity Prices Stabilization Corporation."

This is as far as it is desirable to project the evolutionary process for the foreseeable future. However, if it does reach this point, the benefits will be many. No longer will critics of the record group concept be able to say that multi-provenance series are being allotted arbitrarily to one record group. The inventory for each record group will show in full detail the complete relationship of all record series, past and present, which could possibly have been included. Indeed, the criticism that the record groups are created arbitrarily, sometimes only for archival convenience, can be countered by the capability of the mobile series description (particularly when stored in a word-processing machine) being used to create new inventories of government organizations more or less at will. Thus, for example, an organization which has formed part of several departments but maintained its own registry unchanged, and whose records currently form a record

group, could have its records inventoried, both on their own, as at present, and as part of the records of the controlling departments. The possibilities and combinations are nearly endless. Even for institutions that do not possess word-processing equipment, it would be simple to prepare manually varied inventories as desired. This, of course, is an additional advantage. Yet, many of the record group inventories will remain absolutely unchanged, with the exception of new box/volume numbers, while others will require only minor alterations. If the Australian figures are applicable to Canada, approximately three-quarters of record series are single provenance, and can be comfortably placed in one record group and left there without any painful soul-searching.

For the Public Archives of Canada, which has applied the record group concept to its records in purely practical rather than in theoretical terms, the concept is working quite well. The increase in historical public records transferred to the Archives on a regular basis has resulted in a nearly total abandonment of "shelf arrangement" of records and an increasing use of continuous numbering within record groups. The fact that these developments have greatly improved rather than worsened the lot of the archivist, combined with the sheer physical imperatives of archival life in today's record-creating government environment, has made it clear that the role of record groups or series as location or retrieval devices is rapidly disappearing. The resulting emphasis on intellectual rather than physical arrangement is far from simply making virtue out of necessity. While it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the traditional ideals by traditional methods, the exploitation of the flexibility of mobile series, of continuous numbering, and of more comprehensive and sophisticated finding aids will ensure an adherence to provenance and *respect des fonds*, while simplifying identification, retrieval and use of records. The record group concept will survive, perhaps not under that label, and certainly not as an immutable structure; it will, however, embrace the entire archival holding from the historical records generated by a governmental unit—exactly the purpose for which the concept was originally formulated.

## Résumé

L'article décrit, dans un premier temps, l'utilisation du concept de fonds d'archives officielles tel que mis en pratique par les archivistes de la Division des archives fédérales des Archives publiques du Canada. Parce que le concept ne peut être appliqué de façon uniforme, surtout dans le cas des archives d'une unité administrative ayant appartenu à plus d'un ministère au cours de son histoire, des accroc doivent être faits occasionnellement aux principes de provenance et de respect des fonds. Considérant que la description des archives d'une unité donnée est plus importante que leur classification, l'auteur, dans un deuxième temps, explique comment le concept de fonds d'archives officielles pourrait évoluer en disparaissant en tant que principe d'organisation tout en étant maintenu comme outil de description.