

Scandinavian Archivists
Trondheim, Norway
3 September, 2009.

Opening Remarks by
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“The Gift of One Generation to Another”

Mr. Secretary, Colleagues and Friends,

It is a special privilege for me to be here this morning to help open this conference and to represent your archival colleagues around the world. When the conference organizers invited me, I quickly accepted in order to express openly and publicly the sincere thanks of the international archival community for the leadership you and your predecessors in Scandinavian archives have demonstrated over many decades. On the current Executive Board of the International Council on Archives (ICA) we have Tomas Lidman and Hans Næss as vice-presidents, and Geir Magnus Walderhaug and Kenth Sjøblom as chairs of sections. Anna Svenson is a leading member of the Working Group on Human Rights. And, of course, Olafur Asgeisson, regrettably unable to attend today, hosted a memorable CITRA in 2001 and has played a vital role in developing the program commission. By mentioning some, I inevitably overlook many but this brief list serves as eloquent testimony to the impressive contribution archivists in this region of the world are making to the work of the ICA. Thank you for this. It is deeply appreciated.

As I believe many of you realize, the ICA is changing. It is endeavouring to shift from a largely European focus to embrace the world and it is trying to broaden decision-making from national archivists to engage all archivists in a meaningful way. The main governing body of the ICA, the executive board, now includes the chairs of active sections and the presidents of all 13 regional branches. The CITRA, our annual meeting in the three years between congresses, invites the full EB and the heads of the national professional associations. To enlarge it further would impose an even larger financial burden on the host country. The various types of archives as represented through the sections and the lively regional branches representing all the archival traditions of the world have an active and clear presence in the key bodies of the ICA. But our funding structure has not kept pace and 81% of ICA's revenues each year still come from national archives. Just twenty national institutions account for 57% of ICA's income as well as a large part of the “hidden” voluntary support on which ICA depends. The current active debate in ICA concerns efforts to diversify our resource base.

All of us currently on the ICA's boards and committees will admit it is not perfect. Decision-making is slow. Communication remains difficult. Our reliance on volunteers, all of whom have full-time jobs and many of whom are coping with increased public expectations and reduced resources, makes progress slow. But it is ours. And if it did not exist we would be discussing how to invent it. Let us instead talk of how to improve it. Let us make it the effective body that the archival endeavour internationally deserves. We need your support and your engagement.

Time does not permit me to provide detail. For that, I invite you to explore the ICA web site (www.ica.org) or our publications like FLASH. But a few initiatives this past year deserve mention briefly.

- The appointment of a new Secretary General, David Leitch
- Development of a Strategic Plan and programs and initiatives linked to that plan
- Funding for the Program Commission has increased to E130,000. A second call for proposals has been issued
- Funding for the Fund for International Development of Archives is now E 100,000
- Funding for Sections and branches has been allocated
- The AtoM (Access to Memory) open source software initiative moves forward quickly with generous funding from UNESCO and the NCDR of the United Arab Emirates and other partners. Release 1.1 is expected in March, 2010. Some 30 institutions are testing the software as it evolves, including the Archives de France and the Scottish National Archives. Thus far, we have a success on our hands.
- We have invested time and budget for a new interactive web site. It should be live in the next few months.

It is becoming increasingly clear that international co-operation and mutual support amongst archives is essential. Everywhere, it seems that archives are under budget pressure. Public expectation for online access increases demand while official record formats shift from paper to increasingly complex and expensive new technologies. The issues are the same in North America as in other parts of the world. We need to learn from each other; find common shared-cost solutions, like AtoM; use distance learning to help our staff; and together raise awareness of archival issues.

One of my predecessors as Archivist of Canada, Arthur Doughty, published a statement in 1924 which has stood the test of time:

Of all national assets, archives are the most precious. They are the gift of one generation to another and the extent of our care of them marks the extent of our civilization.

As all of you realize, they are not the gift of one generation of archivists to another. We are the stewards, maintaining, protecting and enabling access to the record on behalf of our societies. Our professional training in appraisal and selection is vital when we are being inundated by e-information. Our practices designed over centuries to maintain context, integrity and authenticity of records as evidence assumes new importance in electronic environments where the ability to change text or images threatens the believability of all records. Archives also remain a precious asset in documenting borders and boundaries, sovereignty and constitutions, identity, and the rights of individuals and corporations within society. Legal proceedings rely on a careful examination of the record. Truth and reconciliation processes in a number of countries have emphasized the fundamental importance of a record. Official records remain the absolute basis of accountability in democratic societies. And, auditors audit the record, seldom the action. Records are the foundation of evidence based governance and enable efficient and effective delivery of government services. Our arguments and our voices, locally and internationally, must be raised and must be heard. We cannot be so proud that we do not enlist the active support of our natural allies: the lawyers, the auditors and human rights commissions. They rely on effective records and often have administrative independence that archivists lack. That is the role of a good steward.

Digitization of original archival records, as many institutions are discovering, opens new audiences for archives. As we put online detailed census, military, civic and other population records, our citizens are

discovering for the first time the extent, depth and personal interest of the records in our keeping. Online, fragile archival records in all media and formats move from being the least accessible heritage resource to being the most accessible. And history shifts from the general to the particular as people search for their families, their communities and explore their own history. And we have only begun the process of digitizing the source material. Those who benefit from this are potential allies and genealogists can be extremely effective as a political lobby group. It is an exciting time to be an archivist. I have attended many meetings as an archivist. The published proceedings are informative but they lack the liveliness of the coffee breaks and of the discussion. For many of us the most powerful impression remains of CITRA 2003 in Cape Town, South Africa. Archbishop Tutu gave the keynote address and in simple, eloquent terms described archives as a bulwark against atrocities and against forgetting those that have occurred. We came away with renewed professional commitment and rededication to pursue these issues in our own jurisdictions and our own ways. The ICA has now established a Working Group on Human Rights to lead us in exploring these issues. Their conference in June in Copenhagen on Memory, Archives and Human Rights and several other projects are advancing this discussion.

On behalf of your colleagues internationally let me wish you an enjoyable and informative conference. The archival discipline remains an active force amongst the information disciplines, with a relevance that is renewed and reinvigorated by the demands of the e-world. As stewards of society's documentary heritage we need to ensure that the archival record is carefully preserved, that it is developed systematically to reflect the full diversity and complexity of society and that it is suitably accessible to the public. In this way it is truly the gift of one generation to another.