

Viewpoint

Leadership in Archives

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In a recent viewpoint in *Scottish Archives*,¹ John Chambers put forward his opinion that an archivist is unlikely to ever be appointed as Keeper of the Records for either The National Archives (TNA) or the National Records of Scotland (NRS). The essential experience and qualifications, Chambers says, are based on leadership skills, managerial expertise and budgetary experience which an archivist is unlikely to be able to demonstrate on a sufficient scale from a career in UK archives. In regard to the position of Keeper of the TNA, Chambers writes, 'Being an archivist is not an advantage or requirement for this job.'² As an archivist with an interest in leadership in archives, I wish to question whether this statement is, or needs to be, true.

Perhaps a sensible starting point is to consider what is required of a leader. Recent literature on the subject of leadership distinguishes it from management. Bruce Dearstyne describes the difference as:

Managers are well organized, focus on the work at hand, are performance and outcome orientated by nature, and pride themselves on getting the work done ... Leaders are change agents; they envision a better future for their programs, articulate goals, inspire employees, represent needs clearly, advocate passionately, and have a flair for program building.³

My recent experience of the Clore Leadership Programme⁴ and the many inspiring leaders that I met during it demonstrated to me that there are as

¹ J. Chambers, 'Viewpoint: Keepers and Archivists – Will They Be the Same Person Again?', *Scottish Archives*, 19 (2013), 13–17.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

³ B. Dearstyne, 'Leadership and Administration of Successful Archival Programs', quoted in G. Mariz, D. E. McCrea, L. J. Hackman, T. Kurtz and R. C. Jimerson, 'Leadership Skills for Archivists', *The American Archivist*, 74 (2011), 102–22 (112–13).

⁴ An inspirational idea of Dame Vivien Duffield, the Clore Leadership Programme (<http://www.cloreleadership.org>) was set up in 2004 to help develop a generation of exceptional cultural leaders, and was the UK's first cross-disciplinary leadership programme for the cultural and creative sectors. The Programme awards fellowships to around 25 people each year from across the cultural sector. The cohort share learning activities and undertake a personalised programme of professional development designed to meet the needs and aspirations of each individual.

many different styles of leadership as there are leaders. Good leaders, however, have certain qualities in common: they have a vision and direction for their organisation; they are able to communicate that vision, and to be creative and collaborative about how it may be achieved. Most importantly, that vision has to be authentic and backed up by the words and actions of the leader espousing it. The importance of that vision is reflected throughout the Clore programme. The focus of the initial interview is not on past experience and qualifications (those have been demonstrated in the application), but the future: your vision and values; ‘the culture you want to produce and the leader you want to be’, as one of my cohort so succinctly describes it.⁵ Another colleague, providing advice to this year’s interviewees, recommends:

talk about the art! They [the interview panel] will throw in a question like ‘what makes your heart sing?’, ‘what piece of culture would you take to a desert island?’ – the programme is about leadership within the cultural sector, so show your love for and the reason for wanting to be a leader of the sector.⁶

So what is required of leaders of the archives sector: good managers or inspirational leaders? No one can argue with the fact that the Keepers of TNA and NRS need to be experienced and excellent managers – these are organisations with large budgets employing a large number of staff. But can excellent managers provide inspirational leadership for an organisation without the professional knowledge and understanding which underpins the purpose of that organisation? Why is professional knowledge and understanding of archives or information management, or even an interest in history, not also part of the job specification?

Looking outside the archives sector at a broader range of cultural institutions, it becomes apparent that appropriate professional knowledge is considered as important for leadership as management experience. Hartwig Fischer, formerly Director General of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, has recently been appointed Director of the British Museum. Fischer is an art historian who began his museum career as a curator of nineteenth-century and Modern Art at the Kunstmuseum in Basel. The British Museum has over a thousand staff and attracts six million visitors annually. Sir Richard Lambert, Chairman of the British Museum Trustees writes of Fischer: ‘He is one of the outstanding museum directors in the world. He is not only a great scholar but an experienced administrator and a gifted linguist with a global reputation for rethinking and representing great collections.’⁷ Fischer’s qualifications include his scholarship as well as his administrative skills, and essentially, his reputation for working with collections.

⁵ Sam Ruddock, Clore Fellow 2014–15.

⁶ Hannah Bird, Clore Fellow 2014–15.

⁷ http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/press_releases/2015/new_director_appointed.aspx.

In August 2015, Gabriele Finaldi became Director of the National Gallery in London. An art historian, Finaldi had most recently been working as Deputy Director for Collections and Research at the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid. Prior to that role, Finaldi was in charge of the later Italian paintings and the Spanish collection at the National Gallery. Richard Dorment wrote of Finaldi's appointment in *The Telegraph*:

What I am sure really commended him to the trustees is his dynamic impact on the Prado, which he helped transform from the moribund museum it was 10 years ago into an institution that is now the most lively and innovative in Europe.⁸

Although the Director of the National Gallery has the management of a large institution of around 600 people, Finaldi's vision, founded on his curatorial knowledge and expertise, was central to his appointment.

Within performing arts companies there are usually two directors – artistic and executive – who share the overall leadership of the company. The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), for example, is led by Gregory Doran, Artistic Director, and Catherine Mallyon, Executive Director. Gregory's experience is as a theatrical director and he therefore leads on the artistic programming and direction of the RSC. Catherine Mallyon, whose role is to manage the company of around 700 staff, was originally a trader and analyst in the City before training in arts administration, becoming General Manager at the Oxford Playhouse and then at the Southbank Centre before joining the RSC.⁹ Once again, it is Catherine's experience of management and leadership within the theatrical world which particularly fits her for her current role.

In Scotland, Dr John Scally was appointed National Librarian and Chief Executive of the National Library of Scotland (NLS), an institution with a staff of 340, in 2014. Dr Scally studied English and Modern History at Strathclyde University, was awarded a PhD in History from the University of Cambridge and a Diploma in Information and Library Studies from Aberystwyth University. He worked as a professional librarian (curator) in NLS before joining the University of Edinburgh as Director of Collections and Deputy Director of Library, Museums and Galleries. James Boyle, Chair of the NLS board wrote of Dr Scally's appointment:

John impressed the interview panel with his understanding of the challenges facing libraries today and his imaginative ideas on how NLS can best respond to these. As one of the leading library professionals in Europe he brings vision, great experience and enthusiasm to this role which will greatly benefit NLS in the months and years to come.¹⁰

⁸ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/11480102/Gabriele-Finaldi-the-perfect-man-for-the-National-job.html>.

⁹ <https://www.rsc.org.uk/about-us/whos-who/?from=mdd-au>.

¹⁰ <http://www.nls.uk/news/press/2014/06/national-library-appointment>.

Dr Scally's professional knowledge and understanding were therefore key to his appointment.

An email survey and online search for information about the current chief archivists in Europe, carried out recently for the purposes of this article, elicited twelve responses.¹¹ Eight of these leaders are professionally qualified archivists; the four who are not archivists include a lawyer, a professor of literature and an historian. No biographical information on the fourth, a civil service appointment, was available. Only for two of these countries does the legislation governing the administration of the national archives specifically require the chief archivist to be professionally qualified. The chief archivist or president of the Bundesarchiv (German national archives) is not required by legislation to be a professional archivist but, to date, a professional archivist has always been appointed. During discussions on the nomination of a new president in 2010/11, strong media representations ensured that a professional was appointed rather than a civil servant. While, therefore, there is little evidence of a statutory requirement for a chief archivist to be a professionally qualified archivist, it is nonetheless generally recognised and demonstrated through current appointments that archival knowledge and experience is extremely useful, if not vital, to perform the role effectively.

When considering leadership, a common analogy is that of the conductor of an orchestra who ensures the performance and interpretation of the music but is not required to be a professional instrumentalist. What the conductor brings to the orchestra, however, is a deep understanding of the score and of the potential of each instrument, and the ability to balance these factors to fulfil his or her vision. It is difficult to imagine the appointment of a conductor who had no musical knowledge.

It seems to me that the omission of professional archival knowledge and skills from the essential criteria for a chief archivist demonstrates a basic lack of understanding and appreciation of these skills and their value to leadership in the context of a national archive. Richard Pearce-Moses writes, 'Archivists keep records that have enduring value as reliable memories of the past, and they help people find and understand the information they need in those records'.¹² We acquire, appraise, arrange and describe records according to provenance and original order. We provide access to the records and the information contained in them. We make ethical decisions in regard to legal requirements, professional standards, and accountability to society. We advocate our collections, communicate with users, plan and deliver strategically, and use and account for funding and external resources. We innovate to ensure the successful management of archives in the 21st century, and manage a variety

¹¹ Email responses were forthcoming from the national archives of Malta, Switzerland, Greece, Spain and Germany. Online information on the current chief archivist was found for Finland, Poland, Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark, Lithuania and France.

¹² R. Pearce-Moses, 'Identity and Diversity: What Is an Archivist?', *Archival Outlook*, March/April 2006, 26.

of material from parchment to digital records, in a variety of languages and scripts. How can someone without professional knowledge and skills lead and drive change effectively for that profession?

Archivists are not unprepared to lead, but are not yet considered to be leaders. Randall C. Jimerson suggests that the perception of archives and archivists being related primarily to ‘old stuff’, history and memory is part of the problem and that this can best be addressed by advocacy. He suggests we should promote how our skills meet the needs of 21st-century users – preserving documentation critical for protecting people’s rights and ensuring that political and economic leaders are held accountable – by demonstrating how we ensure open government, embrace diversity and promote a more just and equitable society.¹³ The question is whether a chief archivist without professional archival skills and knowledge can possess the values and authentic vision required to lead an archive, regardless of his or her extensive management experience. Furthermore, if the expertise of a professional archivist is not required to lead an archive, how long will it take for the administration of archives at all levels to be deprofessionalised?

So where does this leave us? For some reason, in the UK, the professional skills of archivists do not appear to be rated as highly as those of museum and gallery curators, librarians or artistic directors, and there is no recognition of the need for leaders of our national archives to have any professional knowledge or understanding. Archives at national and local level are closely bound to government and publicly funded, and as such, the leaders are held directly accountable for management and expenditure. By contrast, museums, galleries and theatres tend to be managed independently of local and national authorities, with a board structure to ensure appropriate administration of grants and subsidies. The resulting distance from government allows independent decision-making and appointments. In recent years, the creation of charitable ‘arm’s length’ organisations to deliver the cultural and sport services on behalf of local authorities may now provide an alternative model for the administration of archives, establishing a similar distance from authority. If we understand leadership as being about values, about ‘a sense of purpose, vision and creativity about what we do – and why’,¹⁴ then we need to challenge the current perception of the skills required of leaders of archives.

First, we need to promote our knowledge and professional skills so that employers understand the unique expertise which we can utilise on their behalf. As archivists, we are absolutely aware of the value of what we do, the skills, knowledge and depth of understanding that we have, and what we do to make archives available and accessible. We have started to be advocates for our collections through initiatives such as Archives Awareness Week, but we also need to be advocates for archivists. There are many archivists doing amazing work around the globe, enabling peace and reconciliation in South Africa and

¹³ Mariz *et al.*, ‘Leadership Skills for Archivists’.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

justice in The Hague. In the UK, the Hillsborough Inquiry demonstrated the importance of the archival record of what happened that day but was any coverage given to the professionals whose skills enabled that inquiry to reach its conclusion? For our professional skills to be recognised and valued, we need to shout louder about them, only then does it become possible for those skills to be appreciated and included in the job descriptions for our chief archivists.

Secondly, we need to consider how to develop leadership skills within our profession. Many archivists, whether they work as a single professional or in a very small team of professionals, will develop leadership skills naturally – but they may not recognise that they possess those skills or that they are leading at all. There are few leadership programmes available for archivists: the Clore Leadership Programme, while a fantastic opportunity for those lucky enough to be participants, is difficult to access for archivists, particularly archivists in Scotland, with only the National Archives Institutions Fellowship (currently restricted to employees of TNA and NRS), the Creative Scotland Fellowship¹⁵ or the Clore Open Fellowships. The Scottish Council on Archives offers training in advocacy, but at the moment there is no cohesive programme to enable archivists in Scotland to develop leadership and management skills. What we really need is an archives leadership equivalent of the MBA – a widely recognised, professional qualification for mid-career archivists that not only demonstrates an archivist’s professional skills but also raises the profile of the profession itself.

Thirdly, we need to consider how to enable archivists to gain broader experience of leadership so that they can demonstrate they have the management and budgetary skills required for chief archivists and other similar leadership roles. Given the small scale of most archive departments, this is challenging. Archivists tend to be either permanent employees – unlikely to move from their posts until death or retirement forces them to leave – or itinerant workers (journeymen) who follow a succession of temporary contracts. In general there is limited flexibility and the concept of a career path, even in the larger local authorities or central government archives, is being lost. To meet this challenge we will have to think creatively – and perhaps the key to meeting it is to think outside the archive box. As archivists, we perhaps see ourselves as having more of a vocation than a career (we certainly are not driven by financial reward!), dedicated to the preservation of our collections. While that perspective gives us values and personal mission, it can also lead to us being insular and inward looking. Archives balance on the edge of a much broader cultural world: stepping out of the archive box and engaging with this new world will challenge us to explain ourselves, our collections and our expertise as well as building our confidence in the value of what we do and the skills that we have. If we can reposition and promote our profession within this world, we

¹⁵ The Creative Scotland Fellowship is ‘open to candidates who live and work in Scotland and who are committed to developing their career as a cultural leader in Scotland’, <http://www.cloreleadership.org/page.aspx?p=81>.

will also be able to work in a wider variety of organisations and institutions of different shapes and sizes, advocating archives and the professional expertise of archivists, as well as gaining more knowledge and developing new skills.

Fourthly, perhaps we need to reconsider the position of archives within the government structure. The arm's length charities created for the administration of local cultural and sporting services may provide a model that could be scaled up to a national level. A national archive could be established as an independent charity, delivering archive services for the government and offering the opportunity to develop a more diverse collections policy which better reflects contemporary society while offering an independent voice on ethical record-keeping. The National Library of Scotland operates independently of the Scottish Government: answerable to the Scottish Parliament, it is a non-departmental public body which receives direct funding from the Scottish Government as well as a registered Scottish charity. It is governed by a board, managed by the National Librarian and retains its position as Scotland's national library. The trustees are able to define and prioritise the expertise required of their leader to deliver the charitable purpose and vision, their priorities, and to innovate and drive change.

It may be that governments will continue to value management experience over professional knowledge when recruiting chief archivists. Our advocacy and promotion of the professional skills and knowledge of the professional archivist, and the potential quality of the values-based leadership which archivists can supply, may at the very least demonstrate the naivety of that position and what the government loses by it. At best, it might lead to a revision of the job description for the chief archivist, to include professional knowledge as well as managerial experience. Or it might result in a new structure for the leadership of national archives, perhaps following the theatre model in creating a new role of 'archival director' alongside the executive director? Ultimately we can either sit back and accept the status quo or we can advocate change.