

Summary of the Evaluation Report on the Prime Minister Papers Project 2017- 2022



Project Description

This summary presents the results of the evaluation of the Prime Minister Papers Project (2017-2022). The purpose of the project was to acquire, preserve and make accessible the private records of the Right Honourable Stephen Harper and is directly linked to Library and Archives Canada's (LAC) mandate. It constitutes the latest addition to LAC's Private Archives collection of former Prime Minister's Fonds, which is one of LAC's oldest collections. The Fonds of the Right Honourable Stephen Harper is the largest digital collection received by LAC to date. It is 50 times larger than any previous transfer of digital records handled by LAC and it is 330 times larger than preceding Prime Minister's Papers projects. The processing of the digital portion of the records required the application of 14 new specialised software tools. In addition, project staff developed and updated 21 operational policies, procedures and tools covering digital processing and description, monetary appraisal, secure asset management and audio-visual workflows.



Purpose of the Evaluation

The evaluation examined the following questions:

- What were the major issues that LAC staff and management encountered in acquiring, processing, preserving and providing access to the Prime Minister Harper's Fonds?
- What were the best practices identified by the Project Team that would be useful for future Fonds of similar nature?
- What practices could be improved further?
- What practices proved inefficient and the Project Team decided to abolish?
- To what extent the project funding mechanisms (Treasury Board Submission) is still relevant and efficient to the needs of this type of project?



Evaluation Scope and Methodology

The evaluation covered the project's five year period from 2017-2018 to 2021-2022, and used a qualitative approach including a document review, key informant interviews, and analysis of financial and project data.



Evaluation Findings

- The project team encountered complex challenges arising primarily from the digital portion of the records in the donation; however, the project adapted accordingly and was able to attain all deliverables without significant delays. In addition, challenges encountered at the governance, resourcing and project set up levels, as well as external factors outside the control of the project team affected the project operations and timeline.
- The project benefitted the most from the investment, diligence and dedication of the staff, internal partners and management (both middle and senior levels). The project became an innovation lab and the learning and experience it generated could be potentially integrated into LAC's regular operations and inform future similar projects.
- The project revealed that further improvements need to be made to the procedures, workflows and roles and responsibilities for digital records, as well as to project hiring and recordkeeping practices, the competencies of the Project Manager, and the funding mechanism itself.

- Project management and staff were able to troubleshoot and found solutions to the issues they encountered throughout the project. Inefficiencies were resolved and the experience gained would be used to inform future PMP projects containing digital records.
- The experience of LAC with the most recent PMP project calls into question the relevance of the funding model altogether. While the TB submission and the special- project approach followed for Prime Minister Papers projects are useful in providing additional resources, they present operational challenges in terms of long-term sustainability.



Conclusion

LAC has a mandate and long-standing practice to acquire, process, preserve and make accessible the private papers of Canada's prime ministers through a special project funded via a Treasury Board Submission (TB Submission). The rationale for this approach was that these type of records have complex requirements that are difficult to predict and that exceed the normal operational capacity of LAC's Private Archives Division. However, LAC's experience with the most recent Prime Minister's Papers project (PMP) revealed that this approach is not as useful for donations that contain predominantly digital material. The obsolescence of digital material requires different processing practices and procedures, which were not as established at LAC as they were for analog material. It also requires a faster turnaround time and more agility.

Furthermore, the traditional approach does not effectively address the cyclical nature of PMPs and disregards the continuous tasks that take place beyond the timeframe of the TB Submission. Also, it does not take into account the fact that LAC has to absorb the long-term costs for the housing, care, preservation, maintenance of IT infrastructure and software, and ensuring the long-term accessibility of the fonds, which has implications for LAC's base budget.

The evaluation concluded that, while the 2017-2022 PMP project laid the foundation for future digital PM fonds by improving LAC's digital processing procedures and infrastructure, it is not clear if those improvements would be sufficient in the long run. As project staff and management anticipate that future PM Fonds would be increasingly digital, LAC needs to revise its approach to the acquisition and processing of PM Fonds and explore more sustainable financing and resourcing options.



Considerations for improvement

In the spirit of continuous improvement, the Director General, Private Archives and Published Heritage should consider the following:

- enhance project planning capacity, particularly to ensure that the annual budget estimation realistically reflects the level of effort required for each project stage while taking into account the financial management rules of the Government of Canada;
- to the extent possible, explore anticipatory staffing options ahead of funding approvals to ensure availability of resources in a timely manner;
- revisit the overall PMP approach and explore all available options (starting with seeking internal efficiency) while taking into account the cyclical nature of the PM fonds, the long-term sustainability of the PM fonds post project, as well as the need for flexibility, agility and horizontality;
- explore options for combining mechanisms to ensure there is operational stability in PMP off-cycles and to increase resources during peak times;
- ensure that innovations and lessons learned from the project are shared with the relevant LAC operational areas.