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Founding Memorandum: The Continuity Office

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The two-page memorandum that established the institution, including the funding condition its author attached and the board's reluctant acceptance of it.

PREAMBLE

This memorandum is reproduced in full. It is the founding instrument of the institution and has not been amended, though it has been reinterpreted three times -- in 1991, 2009 and 2016 -- each occasion recorded separately in this Archive.

The original is held at MERIDIAN in the condition in which it was received, including the annotation in the margin of the second page, which is in the author's hand and is not part of the instrument.

THE MEMORANDUM

> There is a category of question that no one is presently able to ask.
>
> Not because the questions are forbidden, and not because they are beyond us, but because answering them takes longer than any institution now existing is willing to wait. A university cannot pursue a result that will arrive after the grant. A company cannot pursue one that will arrive after the quarter. A government cannot pursue one that will arrive after the government.
>
> I propose an office whose only distinguishing feature is patience.
>
> It should be small. It should be funded from principal and never from contract, so that no external party can end a line of inquiry by declining to renew it. It should publish when publishing is useful and hold when it is not, and it should write down which it chose and why, so that its successors can judge it.

> It should keep records as though the people reading them have not been born.

THE FUNDING CONDITION

The author made the endowment conditional on a clause the board initially declined and accepted eleven weeks later, in the form now carried in the Continuity Charter:

> No undertaking of this office shall be begun unless it can also be stopped. Any instrument, system or arrangement it introduces into the world must remain capable of being withdrawn by the people who introduced it, for as long as it persists.

This clause is the origin of what the institution now calls the Reversibility Principle, and it is the reason a substantial fraction of our engineering effort goes into shutdown paths, rollback and custody rather than into capability. It has cost us at least four programmes that were technically sound and could not be un-deployed. Those closures are recorded.

THE MARGINAL ANNOTATION

On the second page, beside the funding condition, the author wrote:

> They will think this is about safety. It is about humility.

The annotation is not part of the instrument and carries no force. It is reproduced here because the Disclosure Board judged, in 2009, that the institution had spent thirty-five years explaining the clause badly and that its author had explained it in eight words.

CUSTODY

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