

# UK National Archives: Key government files “missing,” and documents on Europe withheld

Richard Tyler  
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Some 1,000 files “on loan” from the National Archives to various government departments have “disappeared.” Officially, they are said to have been “misplaced while on loan to a government department.”

According to the *Guardian*, the government has admitted the loss, but neither the Foreign Office nor the Home Office are able to explain why files of serious historical importance have been taken, nor if copies of the missing documents they contain had been made.

The missing files are thought to include thousands of government papers dealing with critical chapters of recent history that can prove to be a major political embarrassment, such as the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland. During the 30 years between 1968 and 1998, British troops occupied the province and were responsible for such atrocities as the 1972 Bloody Sunday massacre, which cost the lives of 14 innocent civilians in the Bogside area of Derry.

The importance of the records held by the National Archive in providing evidence of government wrongdoing was highlighted in 2014, when Irish Broadcaster RTÉ’s Investigation Unit uncovered a letter dated 1977 from then-Labour Home Secretary Merlyn Rees to Prime Minister Jim Callaghan which makes clear that ministers—including Lord Carrington, then secretary of state for defence—had tacitly agreed the use of torture. “If at any time methods of torture are used in Northern Ireland contrary to the view of the government of the day I would agree that individual policemen or soldiers should be prosecuted or disciplined; but in the particular circumstances of 1971-1972 a political decision was taken,” Rees stated.

Also said to have “gone missing” are papers relating

to the 1982 Falklands (Malvinas) war, in which the British government ordered the sinking of an Argentine ship, the *General Belgrano*, leading to the loss of 323 lives among the crew of the light cruiser. In 1985, a Whitehall whistle-blower revealed that the ship had been sailing away from the British-imposed “exclusion zone” around the South Atlantic islands at the time it was sunk.

The historical reach of the naked censorship is underscored by the disappearance of an entire file relating to the “Zinoviev Letter.” Published by the *Daily Mail* four days before the 1924 general election, the letter was supposedly sent by the then head of the Communist International to the Communist Party of Great Britain instructing it to carry out seditious activities. The letter has been long-recognized as a forgery, generally attributed to Russian monarchist elements. The intention was to whip up fear of social revolution to ensure the defeat of the minority Labour government of Ramsay—the first time the party had won office.

Maya Foa, director of human rights organisation Reprieve, said the loss of such government files was “deeply troubling and unfortunately follows a pattern we have seen before.” In 2014, ministers blamed “water damage” for destroying critical files showing the complicity of the UK in Washington’s rendition and torture programme following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and subsequent invasion of Afghanistan.

“Right now, they are forcing legal cases seeking to expose the truth about UK involvement in George Bush’s ‘war on terror’ into secret courts where the public and press are denied access,” Foa said, adding, “With a new US president openly supporting torture

and other human rights abuses, the tendency of the British government to conceal and cover up creates a serious risk that abuses carried out in our name in future will be hidden from the public until it's too late."

In 2012, thousands of files previously declared "lost" were uncovered in a secret government storage facility in Buckinghamshire. These documents provide clear evidence of the brutal colonial regimes established by Britain throughout its empire. What remains, however, is just a fraction of the trove of colonial papers, with the most sensitive documents having been culled and incinerated to cover up the worst of the atrocities and criminal actions carried out by the British government and its local henchmen in the colonies.

The National Archives house more than 11 million documents going back over 1,000 years. The archives include the Domesday Book from 1086, and centuries of government papers and other public records.

Now, government papers that could shed important light on Britain's relations with the European Union (EU) in the early 1990s are being withheld from release into the National Archive. The Cabinet Office has retained 13 out of 45 files covering sensitive issues such as the creation of the euro and the Maastricht Treaty negotiations, which led to the European Single Market.

Labour's Shadow Cabinet Office minister said there was a "pattern of obfuscation from this government, with vital information that could be key to our understanding of the current political situation being concealed." People were entitled to ask why the government was "refusing to release significant dossiers from our recent history, some of which are of critical importance in connection with the EU," he said.

Liberal Democrat leader Vince Cable said the Conservatives—who were in coalition with Cable's party as recently as three years ago—"have form on unnecessarily holding back documents related to Europe so that they avoid public scrutiny," adding, it looked suspiciously like "they are trying to hide information that could be embarrassing during the Brexit negotiations."

The comments from Labour and the Liberals come from parties who have substantial factions opposed to the dominant hard-Brexit wing of the Tories and who are supportive of remaining in the EU's Single Market

and Customs Union. The Liberal Democrats are formally committed to holding a second referendum on EU membership. This is the primary reason for their newly minted commitment to open government.

Defending the withholding of documents from the National Archives, a Cabinet Office spokesman said this was because "we have to ensure all files are properly reviewed and prepared before they are transferred, so that they do not harm national security or our relations with other countries."

A subsequent letter from the Cabinet Office claimed that the numbers of withheld documents was diminishing, but still amounted to around 10 percent in 2017. But this stands in contrast with reports that of 490 files from the Prime Minister's office due to be transferred to the National Archive, 100 have been retained, equivalent to more than 20 percent.

Other retained files that should have been released into the National Archives at the end of 2017 are thought to contain information on the 1988 Lockerbie bombing, which was blamed on a single individual, Abdelbaset Ali Mohmed al Megrahi; the 1992 Scott Inquiry, which whitewashed the clandestine sale of arms to Iraq; the basing of US cruise missiles in the UK and the 1981 marriage of Prince Charles to Lady Diana Spencer.

The hiding and even destruction of documentary records shows that, behind the face of parliamentary democracy, the ruling elite zealously guards its dirty secrets to leave itself free to carry out further crimes.



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