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Gladstone’s 150 year-old budget box bows out of public life

The much-loved red ‘budget box’ first used by William Gladstone will be officially retired after the budget on 22 June.

The National Archives have agreed that George Osborne will be the last chancellor to hold up the famous red box on the steps of Number 11, Downing Street.

The budget box is a ‘public record’ and experts at The National Archives take the view that continued use of the box would result in the destruction of this iconic artefact.

As Keeper of the Public Records, Oliver Morley, Acting Chief Executive of The National Archives, has a legal duty to ensure important public records are preserved for future generations. He said: “We’ve have had a close look at the box and given the fragile state it’s in, we believe now is the time to ‘retire’ the box from public life. If it isn’t retired it may end up being destroyed completely. Having served chancellors for 150 years, it is now time for the box to claim its own place in history alongside other popular exhibits at the Cabinet War Rooms”.

The scarlet-coloured wooden box was made for William Gladstone around 1860 and has been used by chancellors ever since. James Callaghan and Gordon Brown are the only chancellors to have opted for a newer box.

Gladstone started out as a Conservative MP before becoming a Liberal Prime Minister, so it is perhaps appropriate that the last user of the box will be the chancellor of a Liberal-Conservative coalition government - George Osborne – book-ending a century and a half of British history.

The 2010 budget, the first under the new coalition government, will mark the last outing of the old box before it goes into retirement. It will be kept on display at the Cabinet War Rooms (IWM) where it has been transferred from The National Archives. A replacement
box has been commissioned by The National Archives using traditional techniques and materials and will be made available for future use.

For media enquiries please contact The National Archives press office on 0208 392 5277. Images are available on request.

Notes to editors:

The National Archives holds a variety of objects which are classed as ‘public records’ under the Public Records Act 1958. These include other items related to the Treasury such as 13th century ‘tally sticks’ – narrow shafts of wood which were used by accountants as physical proof of payments - and a pair of 16th century doors from the Exchequer itself which are housed at the museum of The National Archives.

The National Archives contains millions of documents covering more than a thousand years of British history, including the ‘Domesday Book’ and ‘Magna Carta’.

The budget box has been transferred to the Imperial War Museum where it will be kept on permanent display at the Cabinet War Rooms in Whitehall.