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The parliamentary library and research service as an engine for democratic education and development: supporting a spectrum of democracy-enabling initiatives

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Abstract

The political dilemma and the professional responsibility of parliamentary librarians as agents of democracy in modern societies are explored. Phased implementation of democracy-enabling initiatives by parliamentary libraries is counseled according to a democracy action plan. A socially responsible definition of such initiatives suited to the Latin American as well as to the East European and Western political environments is attempted, and seventeen types of democracy-enabling initiatives of parliamentary libraries and research services are discerned and described. The urgency of the present crisis requires innovative means and new approaches by parliamentary librarians in democracy education and development.

"Democracy," said Bernard Shaw, "substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few." As such, it "is a device that insures we shall be governed no better than we deserve."

Political Realities

These two pithy witticisms by the most political of all British playwrights hide truths that sum up the dilemma of all those engaged in the work of democratic education and development. Rule of the people, by the people and for the people in our 21st-century mass societies is a messy business, full of collective and individual mistakes and misperceptions based upon ignorance, media distortion, pride and prejudice. Voters really are often incompetent to judge the best course on complex issues on which they lack adequate information, let alone the best party to govern on a platform of positions prone to shift with the winds of expediency. And yet, history has proven all the alternative forms of government, including government by wise experts like ourselves, to be worse than democracy, since all forms of power eventually corrupt. Even the best leaders and experts are blinded, soon or late. They will steer the state to disaster unless informed public opinion and free elections give the people, who in their collective wisdom do deserve better, the power at least to throw the bums out of office, if not to correct the course of public policy through subtler political pressure.

We librarians and the few other professions who commit to the work of democratic education and development (like journalists, public-interest researchers, teachers and – dare I say it? – some politicians) must therefore strive to enlighten the public impartially as best we can, in fear and trembling, on public issues and on the political process, aware all the time that we are doomed to a measure of frustration, failure and blame. For all we who are knowledge workers in the political sphere are in some degree accountable when a bad elected government errs egregiously, and indeed gives its ill-informed citizens no better than they deserve for electing it. At the same time, we share the glory when the democratic political system works as it should: when good laws are made by informed representatives in consultation with an informed public, when injustices are corrected by an informed public outcry, when bad policies are reversed, proud leaders discover humility, rights are defended, civic responsibilities are assumed, and the poor and the downtrodden of the earth are lifted up through the triumph of informed public opinion.

Professional Responsibility

I want to make it perfectly clear, as a representative of the IFLA core program on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression, that turning our backs on the work of democratic education and development is not really an option any longer for professional librarians of the 21st century. The task is integral to who we are. For it is as professional custodians and mediators of history, culture, civic identity and human values that we each have a civic responsibility to inculcate, build and defend the universal institutions of human freedom, equality and democracy in a way best suited to our own country, through the programs and activities of our libraries.

It follows from this inherent professional responsibility for democratic education and development in and through libraries that professional librarians, and especially those dealing with government information – even in the sensitive climate of the parliamentary library and research service – have beyond their primary job description a broader civic duty. In the measure that their circumstances and the constraints of client confidentiality permit, government information specialists and parliamentary librarians must always keep in mind a democratic responsibility not just to governments or parliaments but to citizens, not just to those in power but to those in opposition, not just to further the ends of the state but to expose its failings.

I gave a somewhat impassioned keynote address on this last point to the 2nd IFLA Government Information and Official Publications Section Eastern Europe Seminar and 2nd International Conference on Government Information and Democracy, which met jointly as part of the Crimea Conference in June 2003. It was called "Libraries and the Public Interest" and you can read it on the Crimea 2003 website. Here I want only to quote one conclusion from the abstract: "Libraries serve the public interest by limiting the forces of both power and disorder in the name of civilization." As librarians serving parliaments and democratic values, we must stand back from all excess in politics, whether by terrorists or by governments, and teach our clients and the public to be deeply suspicious of the claims of demagogues.

In this philosophical context, how do democracy-enabling initiatives fit into the program of work of the parliamentary library and research service? What kind of activities should be considered and undertaken, and how do we approach their implementation? These will be the subjects of the rest of this paper.

Structuring the Initiatives

The formal structural placement of significant democracy-enabling initiatives within the parliamentary setting is a point which has not yet been the subject of any detailed comparative study. It will of course vary according to the administrative structure of the parliament or legislature. The more visible activities for the promotion of democracy will likely not be unified under the direction of the parliamentary library or research service but scattered among different administrative units. Where there are two parliamentary chambers (Senate or House of Lords or Council of the Federation, and House of Commons or House of Representatives or Chamber of Deputies or State Duma), each chamber may have its own library and research service, though not necessarily of equal weight. In such a case public outreach programs such as initiatives to promote democracy will I suspect tend to be associated with a common parliamentary administration or with the administration of the chamber which is viewed as "closer to the people", rather than with either library. If there is a single parliamentary library and research service it may acquire control of parliamentary public information programs (as in Canada) or remain separate from them. And where there is no central control of democracy-building initiatives a parliamentary or legislative library can always stake a claim to the territory by establishing its own, as a natural outgrowth of existing library services.

Finally, the special case must be mentioned where the parliamentary and national libraries are one, as in Ukraine or the United States of America. Here the organizational logic may tend to leave questions of democracy-building to the departments of the legislature or to foreign aid agencies, except where an immediate and traditional library connection can be shown.

In any case, the more interesting question is not where the democracy-enabling initiatives are formally placed within the parliamentary structure, but how the library or libraries of the parliament integrate them into the program of library and research service activity. The key steps here are: awareness, involvement, collaboration.

At the level of awareness, the library must recognize democracy-building as part of its mandate and seek a natural 'fit' between certain of its services and existing and potential parliamentary public outreach services that could be considered as building democracy. This may require imaginative brainstorming or "thinking outside the box" to view existing services and public needs from a new perspective. For example, in 1997 the Parliamentary Libraries conference in Stockholm heard that Iceland had merged its parliamentary library with its parliamentary information technology services, with a view to making most current parliamentary and government documentation available online. Whatever we may think of the wisdom of this organizational decision, it certainly required an early awareness of the democracy-enabling potential of the parliamentary Internet service.

Involvement requires a commitment of library or research resources to following and reflecting a democracy-enabling activity within the parliamentary library. Sometimes such involvement has arisen naturally as part of the *raison d'être* of the library; for example, the collection of printed copies of debates or committee proceedings may lead to their indexing by the parliamentary library, which may then (as in Russia) turn into a library publication distributed throughout the country for public use. A reference tool listing ministerial assignments in past governments may evolve into an online database of history and government available on the web to public libraries, schools and the general population. But the more remote an activity is from traditional library functions, the more explicit will be the need to justify involvement in it under the library's democracy-building mandate. The library hiring actors and writing scripts to make history come alive during parliamentary public tours is perhaps less intuitively obvious as promoting democratic consciousness, though just as valid as preparing a print index or a website.

Collaboration in the production and delivery of democratic knowledge resources for public instruction, whether with other parliamentary departments or with outside agencies, marks the deepest level of commitment by the parliamentary library or research service to building democracy, in the sense that a defined budget, fixed liaison structures and a dedicated staffing complement are required. Often such joint activities are an outgrowth of service to parliamentarians: for example, it might be an easy step from offering seminars on topics of public interest for parliamentarians and their staff, to holding a public lecture series; or from hosting student research interns who prepare

parliamentary briefing books, to a formal collaboration with university political science departments for the exchange of research staff. Often collaboration works better than doing it yourself; thus, contributing expertise to the preparation of educational or public television broadcasts on parliamentary democracy makes more sense in most cases than creating the library's own television production studio to do the same job. But essential to the concept of such public-public or public-private partnerships (PPP's) is that the library itself acquires a benefit in the creation of a democratic learning resource or program connected with its name, which it can further market.

Awareness, involvement, collaboration are three successive levels of participation in democracy-building activities, but how does the parliamentary library make such activities a part of its mission? No number of democracy-enabling PPP's can substitute for a management vision of the parliamentary library and research service as an engine of democracy, helping to cure voter apathy, raise knowledge of public policy issues, and contribute to citizen political involvement at the local as well as the national level.

Every parliamentary library or research service needs to have a democracy action plan, a kind of knowledge map in which it inventories all democracy-enabling activities within its parliament's jurisdiction and indicates the level of the library's commitment to each. Such a plan not only serves to indicate where resources are within the parliament for democracy promotion, but what gaps the library can usefully aspire to fill. It should be emphasized that this plan need not be a complex construct suited only to the largest parliamentary libraries. It can occupy a single page of paper and be useful in the one-room library of a small island legislature. What is important is the concept – that we should plan to build democracy by specific types of activities of the parliamentary library, just as we plan to build collections or to train staff.

Types of Activities

At this point you may well be wondering when I shall ever get down to cases and give you a ready-made cookbook of democracy-enabling activities you can try in your home parliamentary library – you know, *Kirkwood on Democracy-Building for Small and Medium-Sized Legislatures,* or perhaps in French *Le guide bleu de la promotion démocratique bibliosavante.* Unfortunately it is not that simple. Circumstances alter cases, and one parliamentary library's democracy-fortifying cocktail may turn out to be another parliamentary library's misuse of funds. What I can do, however, is to attempt a definition and a typology of democracy-enabling projects, in which you may perhaps see yourselves or get some fresh ideas.

First, what do I mean by a "democracy-enabling activity" or "democracy-building activity" in the context of a parliamentary library and research service? It is an activity of the library and research service, or of the parliament mediated by the library and research service, which contributes to citizens' or parliamentarians' knowledge, understanding and practice of the democratic process, of political participation, of civic rights or obligations, or of the rule of law. But it is not just any such activity in the abstract that meets my

criterion to be an exercise in democracy building. Rather, it must be undertaken with the explicit purpose of shaping a society that is based upon reason and compromise rather than force or necessity, and is governed of, by and for the people and for their common good.

This is a rather precise but quite broad working definition. For example, the mention of shaping a society based upon reason or compromise rather than force or necessity might allow us to include in the scope of our democracy-enabling activities a whole host of practical, populist programs for the relief of poverty, healing of disease, education of the illiterate or building of civil economic infrastructure that not only free the people from want, ignorance or crime but also promote their democratic self-government and their independent self-reliance at the local community level. Healing the ills of the disadvantaged is both a precondition and a natural accompaniment to practical democratic instruction, and a parliamentary public information service, for example, which collaborated with populist deputies by bringing not only political but economic and medical counsel to the impoverished barrios of a Latin American capital would certainly be working to build democracy.

This may strike some of you as a radical vision for the activities of a parliamentary library, more in tune with the agendas of Peron or Lula or Hugo Chavez than with the deliberations of the Andean Parliament or of the bicentenary legislatures of the lands once liberated by San Martin. But it is a possible vision, within the breadth of my definition, and serves to illustrate how unconventional we could in fact dare to be as parliamentary librarians in the promotion of democracy according to our country's needs.

But let us return to our more usual pursuits and to less exotic ways of using our library and research services to promote democracy. I will list some categories of democracy-enabling activities that are more or less common around the world, and comment on each.

(1) *Public dissemination of parliamentary documentation.* This would include not only the printing and the making available to public libraries or for public sale of copies of laws, debates and committee proceedings, but their public provision on the Internet.

(2) *Publication of indexes or other parliamentary reference tools.* In-house tools may be developed by the library and research service for the use of parliamentary workers, but are they made available to public libraries or on the Internet? For example, lists showing the current status of legislative bills and the stage of debate they have reached; databases of parliamentarians both historical and contemporary, searchable by many different criteria such as political affiliation, ethnic origin, age on first election, previous occupation, voting record.

(3) *Research papers available to the public.* The information and research services of the legislature may produce compilations, briefings and analyses of public issues for their primary clients, the parliamentarians, but how often are these made known to the public except by the accident of a journalistic leak? To better

inform public opinion should the library pursue an aggressive depository and marketing program for its research papers, or even undertake to make the whole body or a selected part of its substantive work on public policy questions and on legislation generally available on the Internet?

(4) *Public information service.* This answers questions which ordinary citizens may submit directly about the parliament, its members, laws, and all manner of other government information, whether by mail, telephone, fax, e-mail, or in person.

(5) *Support for parliamentarians' answers to their constituents.* Many parliamentary libraries and research services provide only pre-existing documentation for this purpose. What about opinions, analysis, letter-drafting?

(6) *Public-access website on the parliament and its activities.* This could include not only information on the legislature and the workings of parliamentary democracy, but access to individual deputies' offices and websites, political party links, and links to text and video archives and to live streaming video of the legislative chambers and of parliamentary committees.

(7) *Print and CD-ROM publications about the parliament and its activities.* These could be distributed to visitors or through the public information service in response to requests. Special-purpose kits could be made up to deal with particular topics or needs, such as inquiries from teachers or schools or on recurring legislative concerns.

(8) *Parliamentary press service.* Provision of special assistance to journalists reporting on the parliament or on public issues, through such services as press clippings or historical news databases, press briefings, news summaries.

(9) *Parliamentary broadcasting service.* In addition to recording and broadcasting parliamentary business sessions and public affairs programs on radio or television, the library can also collaborate with public or private broadcast networks to produce programming about the history and achievements of democracy, about voting and elections, and about a whole gamut of controversial public issues. Fictional entertainment programs on the workings of government can also benefit from a dose of political accuracy from library consultants.

(10) *Support for democracy in schools.* By this I mean much more than the provision of printed brochures or parliamentary information on demand. Participation in the editing of school textbooks that promote democracy, citizen involvement and knowledge of the parliamentary system of government is one possibility. Preparation of educational broadcasts for school radio and television channels is another. Provision of materials, advice and logistical support for school parliaments is an intriguing possibility – not just for a mock United Nations or a political club that mirrors the national parliament, but for an actual, local student parliament that runs the affairs of the school, with government and opposition in

an elected student house, teachers as the Senate and the school principal or headmaster as the head of state, all governed by a school constitution.

(11) *Training of teachers.* The Teachers' Institute on Parliamentary Democracy is a week-long program sponsored yearly by the Canadian federal parliament which brings teachers from across the country to Ottawa for in-depth exposure to the workings of the parliamentary system of government and the preparation of lesson-plans based on real-life experience. This model has proved very successful in promoting the knowledgeable teaching of democracy in schools.

(12) *Training of librarians and researchers.* Internships, training sessions or job exchanges can be offered to public or academic library professionals in the parliamentary library, as well as to academic researchers in public policy fields, to promote better understanding of parliamentary documentation and parliamentary democracy.

(13) *Training of deputies and their assistants.* The newly elected, first-time Member of Parliament or the neophyte parliamentary staff member is an innocent lamb entering a forest of wolves. She needs training in a multitude of tools, resources and ways of doing things so as to provide effective democratic representation for and service to her constituents. The parliamentary library and research service enables this practical democracy to happen by leading the newcomer through orientation sessions and continuous learning seminars, not just on library matters but on how parliament works, where to get assistance with immigration cases, what sources of funding are available to constituents, as well as a host of public policy issues.

(14) *Visitor facilities.* The parliamentary library may manage a program of tours and interpretation of parliament for visiting members of the public. This can be supplemented by public shows, talks and exhibits illustrating the history of the parliament and of democratic government. Another step down the same road is to bring parliament to the visitor through traveling exhibitions of films and artifacts in museums or at public events.

(15) *Languages.* Often overlooked is the frequency with which visitors to the parliament or citizens who might seek help from the parliamentary information service belong to linguistic or ethnic groups which do not speak the majority or official languages of the country. In addition, some legislative assemblies, the multinational European Parliament being the outstanding example, must operate in many languages with a polyglot staff of interpreters. The library's provision of interpretation and translation services, of primers on the country's democratic system and of parliamentary information in many languages may all be important tools in enabling multicultural democracy.

(16) *Consensus building.* The parliamentary library and research service often works with parliamentary committees, political parties, and interest groups. It brings together opposing points of view and helps to draft reports and position papers that bridge differences and advance the public policy agenda. In so doing it fosters the society based upon reason and compromise which is a hallmark of mature democracy. It is an easy step for the parliamentary library to become involved in brokering citizen consensus on political issues. We will have an example of such a consensus-building process in our paper from Chile later this afternoon.

(17) *Electronic democracy.* Through its mastery of the parliamentary Internet and of information tools in many media, the parliamentary library and research service is a natural, impartial choice to run consultations with the electorate electronically on public policy initiatives. Advocates of direct democracy would like to see this extended to actual electronic voting or referenda on specific issues. At the very least, international librarian observers of the American presidential election of 2000 cannot but wonder if might have been more efficient and less divisive if run electronically by the Library of Congress. Small, remote nations take note: in the future your parliamentary library may become the electronic political hub of your country and may be swallowed up by, or end up running, the national elections.

I want especially to thank Janet Seaton of the Scottish Parliament for her many useful comments on an earlier version of this typology of democracy-enabling initiatives, which I presented to the Standing Committee on Library and Research Services to Parliaments in the form of a draft questionnaire, three years ago at IFLA in Boston. Due to lack of funds and time, the research questionnaire was never distributed, but I want to assure all parliamentary librarians and researchers in the audience that they have not been forgotten. Our minions will pass among you during the later part of this afternoon's session and you will all receive a lengthy take-home examination on your own democracy-building activities, which you are asked to complete and return by post to me no later than 1 October. Not only will I try to create a useful summary of the results for the section website, but those who give the best answers will receive a computer-generated scroll by e-mail, indicating their graduation from Democracy-Building 100!

What Should We Do?

When I led a workshop in the Crimea last year on democracy-building by parliamentary libraries, a librarian from the Ukrainian Rada thought that there would be a need for such activities only until the East European countries developed more advanced political systems, like those in the West. In reality the West is speaking nowadays of a crisis of democracy: voter participation is plunging, especially among the young, and there is a perceived democratic deficit in which representative political institutions have lost their legitimacy with a cynical and non-participant citizenry. To do nothing as librarians to promote democracy when we are so close to its daily workings in our parliaments and to its daily decline in public esteem would be a most peculiar form of political blindness.

Education and development in the ways of democracy are indeed always and everywhere needed, if only because of the attrition over time of the politically involved. But today we have the more pressing threats of terrorism and war, which undermine the liberties of the citizen and the democratic foundations of the state. In particular, those of us who are from old democracies should never delude ourselves that because our country has a vibrant political culture, a free society with a free mass media, our democratic polity is secure and needs no reinforcing. Greece was the mother of democracy and had a freed political rebirth in the 19th century, but had to endure a military junta from 1967 to 1974. Argentina likewise has had her share of juntas. Chile was the most stable democracy in Latin America until the military murdered Allende; it has taken her many years and much international pressure to limp back to a democratic government. Democracy is fragile in the hands of soldiers, and never guaranteed.

Most of us are doing something, but many of us are not doing all, or enough, of the things we could do through our parliamentary libraries and research services to help reinforce democracy. Budgets are limited and there are other priorities. Sometimes our democratic action inventory will show that the initiative may already have been taken somewhere else in the parliamentary administration, and all we can do is move to a higher level of involvement or collaboration. Sometimes technology, or the training to use it, is lacking. Sometimes the political climate is not right for an initiative. At the level of international parliamentary assemblies, libraries and research services may be constitutionally limited in the types of activities they can undertake for the citizens of member countries.

But despite these constraints each parliamentary library should identify new things it can do for democracy, perhaps with a modest increase or redeployment of resources, and should set out to sell them to politicians and the public as part of the library's mandate.

Parliamentary librarians are a cautious lot. It comes naturally when you are dependent upon annual appropriations. So the tendency will be to do publicly visible things for democracy only if they seem to be a logical outgrowth of something we are already doing in the library collection or for our parliamentary clients.

But look for opportunities to do something different too. Try to introduce at least one new, exciting, dynamic initiative every couple of years, where the parliamentary library helps create something for the thirsty democratic public of your country that it did not even know it needed. Wouldn't it be grand if it had been the parliamentary library which developed the public reading rooms for legal information in Russia, or the popular one-minute television spots in Canada that portray democratic developments worthy of national pride?

Janet Seaton asked me three years ago what parliamentary libraries and research services can do to enable democratic involvement by those who are marginal in our elite societies: the persons with physical or mental impairments, the socially excluded, the immigrant, the sickly, the prisoner, the slum dweller. I don't know the answer, but I hope you will find it. Maybe those multi-purpose, parliamentary public information clinics in the barrios are not such a bad idea.