

NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN PARLIAMENTARY RESEARCH SERVICES AND TECHNOLOGY*

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Abstract: Parliamentary research institutions face growing demands for their services on one hand, and must keep up with an avalanche of advances in the field of information science on the other. In Great Britain, for example, it is expected that the use of modern technology will greatly increase in the new parliament, both for the research service and on the part of new Members and their staff. "The driving forces in the increase both in the qualitative expectations of Members for specialized briefing and in the volume of demand have been the pressures on Members themselves- greater exposure to the media, greater expectations from constituents, probably fueled partly by the televising of the House and resulting in larger postbags, and possibly more diffuse changes in the political and social climate associated with the emphasis on citizens rights and the expansion of information of all kinds" - says Simon Young (Head of research services for the British House of Commons Library).

At the same time, research services are confronted with the pressure for budgetary reductions and cost-effectiveness analyses, which usually means less money for specialized outside contracts. In turn, this places a heavier workload and much greater responsibility on the in-house specialists. Several services are in the process of reviewing their strategies, programs, and policies in response to these cross-cutting forces. Many parliamentary research services are in a profound transition process.

I. Background

This comparative analysis of 11 countries offers some insights into how parliamentary research services are coping with this challenge. The paper was inspired by Bill Robinson's request for more comparative information. In addition to his wonderful support and his contribution, many colleagues from all over the world contributed to the work of preparing this report. In total, 11 persons responded to the short survey that provides the basis for this report. Hereby we gratefully acknowledge contributions from:

- William H. Robinson, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, USA
- Ivi Eenmaa, Reference and Information Analysis Center, National Library of Estonia

* Paper presented at the 63th IFLA General Conference in Copenhagen 1997

- Hugh Finsten, Research Branch, Library of Parliament, Canada
- Dulce Maria Liahut, Integrated Information and Documentation System (SIID) of the Parliament, Mexico
- Erica Lieser, Research Services of the German Bundestag
- Takane Moriyama, Research and Legislative Reference Bureau, National Diet Library, Japan
- Wieslaw Staskiewicz, Research and Expertise Bureau of the Sejm of Poland
- Jindriska Syllova, Parliamentary Institute, Czech Republic
- Danute Vabalaite, Information Analysis Department, Seimas of Lithuania
- June Verrier, Research Services, Parliament of Australia
- Simon Young, Research Services of the House of Commons Library.

In our report we focus our attention on: new products and services or new emphases on old products and services; new analytical techniques; and the use of new technology like automation and telecommunications to better serve the parliament.

II. New Research Products, Services, or Analytical Techniques

A. Organizational or Process Changes

First, in terms of a general overview, we observe some interesting organizational or institutional changes. Usually they result in the combination of client services programs to provide a more streamlined, "one- stop shopping" service, as in the case of the Australian Parliament. In Australia, two former client services programs- library and research - were combined earlier this year into a single administrative structure. In December 1996 the Research Directorate of the German Bundestag opened a telephone Hotline to better serve the MPs.

The search for easy access and more integrated service to clients is also seen in other parliaments. The U.S. Congressional Research Service uses teams of analysts to produce more cross-division cooperation, resulting in work that is more interdisciplinary and integrative in nature. In the Senate Research Office in Poland, we also integrate our work by encouraging and forming teams and task forces- asking people from different divisions to cooperate in responding to more complex requests. Quick Reference Unit staff work closely with the specialists from the Subject Report and European Documentation and Analysis Units. Sometimes, we also involve committee services in work on specialized reports. This is especially important in the case of seminars and conferences.

In Canada, in order to make publications more relevant, an internal committee of professional staff, chaired by a manager, was formed to review the publication

program and make recommendations. Among the specific topics it is reviewing are: choosing topics; the role of advocacy, if any; formats; electronic publishing; resources; review process; contracting out; publicizing papers; interdisciplinary work; and coverage of bills.

Similarly in the Research and Expertise Office of the Polish Sejm all requests for scholarly consultancies are coordinated and financially supervised directly by its Director, with the help of a specialized team.

This cross division cooperation is enhanced by modern integrated information systems, which are used in many parliamentary research services. We will deal with this issues in greater detail later, but we can mention here the Integrated Information and Documentation System of the Camara de Diputados, Mexico; or the integrated information system called INNOPAC , started in 7 major research libraries of Estonia; or the new Legislative Information System (LIS) in the USA.

B. New Publications

Several parliaments have important new publications. In the spring of 1996, the Research Services of the Polish Senate added two new publications to its regular series of expert opinions and legislative history of bills expecting to be processed in the Senate. One of the new publications, *Legislative Notebook*, is a monthly review of legislative initiatives and legislative status of bills both in Poland and worldwide, filling the vacuum in this respect. The other new publication , *Reviews of the Polish and Foreign Press* is indexed by subject and consists of printouts from a new data base. The Research Bureau of the other chamber in Poland, the Sejm, distributes issue briefs to Deputies consisting of inside expert opinions on new drafts whose first readings are on the agenda. Similarly in the USA, CRS adopted a *Legislative Alert* system to link its services and products more closely to the legislative agenda of Congress. The Alert is a brief 1-2 page checklist which is faxed to each Congressional office on Sunday (so it is available every Monday morning), identifying CRS products that are addressed to topics on which congress will be voting that week. CRS reports or products cited in the checklist can be ordered in hard copy by telephone or e-mail, viewed electronically, or delivered by a fax-on-demand system for short reports. (By calling a telephone number and inputting your own fax number and the number of the desired report, the report is then automatically faxed to the Member's office).

The Polish Sejm Library, in cooperation with the Research Bureau's experts, publishes a bi-monthly bulletin *Closer to NATO*, first issued in January 1997. The SIID of the Camara de Diputados in Mexico publishes a monographic series *Aid Notebook* with four general themes: legislative process and legal materials, public

opinion, bibliographic items, and general topics. The most recent product is one on public opinion, systematizing by subject all the news appearing about legislative or political items. Also the Internal Information Group of the Seimas of Lithuania collects information and regularly presents to the MPs opinions of the general public on drafts and laws. Beginning in 1996, standing committees in Estonia receive annotated lists of new literature on law, politics, and the economy.

C. Faster, More Personalized Services for Members

The answer to the pressures put on parliamentary services by our clients and by the necessity of proving cost effectiveness is higher quality products and greater efficiency in our operations. It also means providing faster, more personalized services to Members of Parliament and Committees. For the House of Commons, requests for private briefings by researchers for individual members makes up a growing share of their service. It is also the case with the Polish Senate services. For Australian researchers, upgrading services means to focus more heavily on providing briefings to Senators and Members in increasingly friendly ways: brevity is of the essence and so is the presentation in other than prose form (tables, graphs, diagrams and occasional seminars). In 1996, both Australia and the Polish Senate conducted client services surveys. These independent surveys both suggested the need to treat the members less as a homogeneous group, and more as so many separate businesses- with different strategies to develop improved client profiles and to work more individually to ensure they are applying their resources as precisely as possible to their client's specific needs. The results of these surveys confirm similar findings of the U.S. Congressional Research Service a few years ago. The conclusion suggests a switch from a reactive set of standardized services to a proactive approach to the delivery of more highly individualized services.

There is increasing time pressure placed on responses to requests, so besides written replies, consultation over the telephone or e-mail can play an important part. Within various types of the service, specialists are able to supply increased detail and sophistication through drawing on the resources made available through technology, and also to give very rapid responses. CRS places greater emphasis on short reports (limit 6 pages, with more charts and graphs) with the intent to increase accessibility and readability by Members of the Congress. In the Canadian Research Branch, their publication program is a key element of their overall service to Parliament (with 500 titles on the current list, another 500 on the archival one, and 15-20,000 copies sent to clients each year on request!). Work for members over the past few years has tended to be oriented towards succinct responses to narrowly defined questions, rather than more extensive, in-

depth, academic style coverage of a topic. Moreover, many questions are of an urgent nature, requiring immediate information by telephone or a quick note with only a few hours preparation time.

Answering the need for more personalized services also means providing orientation programs for newly elected members. Many parliaments experience great turnover. Recent examples include Canada, Poland, Great Britain, and the USA. In the USA, CRS conducted the official new member orientation program and in the Polish Senate the Research office is working hard to prepare several publications and programs for the senators who will be elected this fall and for their staff. In the upcoming elections in Poland, we expect turnover that could reach as high as 60-70%.

It is worth mentioning that in Canada pre-election programs are organized with sessions focusing on highly relevant topics, including *How to Get Media Attention for Your Member*, *Electoral Laws and Election Financing* and *House of Commons Administrative Issues* dealing with administrative rules during the election period such as the use of parliamentary services.

D. New Directions for Analysis

There are two current programmatic themes common to research services of parliaments: one is present all over the world - the increased importance of the budget and budget analysis by the Parliament, and the second is crucial for newly democratic countries of Central and Eastern Europe - *the compatibility of proposed legislation with the EU standards*.

In order to match research work with the changing nature of legislative activity in the U.S. Congress, CRS focuses more on budget and appropriations decisions - since it was discovered that 70% of congressional workload in the U.S. is related to the budget. A special link in the CRS homepage was created to be used as a finding tool for budget and appropriation products, such as issue briefs, reports, Congressional Budget Office Reports, appropriation bills, and other useful financial information. Making its own internal resource allocation process more responsive to its environment, the CRS budget for staff and other needs is allocated according to the level of legislative activity being addressed by the particular CRS unit. In the Senate of Poland a large part of the budget for contracts with outside expert consultants is used on budgetary matters. The Sejm decided to build such expertise into its own internal structure and created two units within its Budget Analyses Division: the Financial Analyses Group and the Budget Law Group.

According to the results of our survey, the research services in the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, and both Polish chambers focus on analyzing EU legislation. There are special units created for managing requests concerning all aspects of incorporation of the associated countries into European structures, like the one currently in the initiation stage in the Sejm of Poland and not so new in the Senate. To prepare compatibility studies, that is to compare the draft law with the E.C. legislation and to give expert opinion on such matters, is also the new responsibility for the Czech Parliamentary Institute. In Estonia, an EU information center will soon be established in the National Library in close cooperation with the Parliament. For all of these countries the issue of external compatibility presents completely new tasks and problems.

E. New Research and Analysis Techniques

Modern technology is also applied to new analytical techniques. Quite recently, the Polish Sejm has been equipped with a special computer program which can handle hundreds of amendments introduced to the draft of the state budget during parliamentary consideration. The Canadian Parliament takes advantage of new techniques such as microsimulation to enable its economists to create a mathematical model of the tax system and to ask what the effect on the budget deficit will be of changing corporate taxes. Microsimulation is the adaptation of large-scale modeling which requires the use of high-end desktop PCs or even of large mainframe computers. The US Congressional Research Service reports more use of computer models and quantitative research methods. For example, CRS makes use of the following types of models for analyzing policy and its possible effects: health insurance models, a pension integration model, grant allocation model, and small desktop algorithms for estimating the effects of changes in the Unemployment Compensation system or the calculation of benefits under the Social Security pension system. These models help answer quickly the many hypothetical "what-if" questions of policymakers, and also permit estimates of possible impacts even before the changes are made- to enable Members to decide whether or not they judge such outcomes to be desirable.

III. The Use of New Technology

A. Technical Equipment and Staff Requirements

The answer to the need for intensifying and upgrading services, while at the same time looking for cost effective methods or even reducing the cost of the parliamentary research services, lies in modern technology and highly qualified, well educated, continuously trained and motivated staff. Of course two crucial technological requirements are powerful desk-top computers (in CRS they have

nearly all PCs at Pentium level technology) and the network. With powerful PCs, we can go for highly processed products, using all kinds of modern text and data processors and editors, which enables the staff to provide more sophisticated responses to client requests in terms of the use, presentation and analysis of data. We also can use complex data bases and CD-ROMs, as well as being able to create our own very specific data bases. With networking our clients get immediate access to our products, and we communicate and cooperate with our colleagues in a very easy and efficient way.

B. The Internet

Through INTERNET we share incredible amounts of information at a very low cost- and getting to it all very quickly. We economize on time, paper resources, and specialized research. The Senate of Poland Quick Reference Unit has just started using INTERNET on a daily basis using it mostly for parliamentary information and newspaper articles searching. The European Documentation and Analysis Division is already quite experienced in using INTERNET for any kind of information on international affairs: it is often the only possible source, especially in the case of recent treaties, international agreements and conference reports. We access the servers of the European Parliament, Council of Europe, NATO, press agencies, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). We have access to the collections of the Library of Congress and the US Code, and to university and research libraries in Poland and all over the world.

"On-line access to the INTERNET and the information sources it provides has resulted in one of the most significant changes in the way the staff undertakes their research and has resulted in considerable efficiencies as staff access material and download it directly on their office computers" - says Hugh Finsten in his report on the Canadian Parliament.

INTERNET has created an issue for the Australian Parliament. They decided to put up all their papers in full text on the Internet from the beginning of the 38th Commonwealth Parliament (from March 1996) to the present. As June Verrier says, while this has done wonders for their profile, it is frustrating for their clients who do not have desktop access to the INTERNET in Parliament House as all the officers in the department do.

The Lithuanians also increasingly use the INTERNET and they would like to find more full texts of laws of different countries. The Czechs use the INTERNET more frequently, especially for information about developments in foreign countries.

Many parliaments have their own WWW page, putting up important information and in some cases even delivering information to deputies in this way, as is the case with Mexico. In the Senate we plan to have Legislative Notebook in an English version in WWW, possibly next year. The Section on Library and Research Services for Parliaments has an excellent homepage on the Internet, maintained by the Coordinator of Information for the Section, Nick Bannenberg. The address for the homepage is <http://www.citec.com.au/iflaparl/index.html>. The Section has copies of all the papers for the Open Meetings posted even before the Conference.

C. Databases and CD-ROMs

Besides INTERNET, CD-ROMs and on-line commercial data bases are increasing in use. Hundreds of databases are used- 500 databases in the German Bundestag, 200 CD-ROMs in the Mexican Parliament- to name just two cases. To some of us, having access to very few commercial data bases or CDs, these numbers seem incredible.

Very important for parliaments are their own data bases. All over the world there are enormous projects going on. Takane Moriyama reports from Japan that the Research Bureau constructed a database system for the General Index to the Debates of the Diet since 1971, which the members can use through the National Diet Library Online Retrieval system. They also constructed an Optical Disc Filing System for the Minutes of the Diet and are in the process of developing a full text database. Modern technology has enabled the Bureau to work professionally and efficiently with an increasingly young staff, which is the personnel policy of the Parliament.

Parliamentary data bases vary from very sophisticated systems like the British POLIS, or those in Australia or America, to less complex, home-made data bases, like two recent data bases in the Senate of Poland: one indexing the debates by subject, the other indexing Polish and foreign press articles- using a specially adapted version of the EUROVOC thesaurus.

D. Networks and Sharing Access to Products

The importance of networking is emphasized in all the country reports. Numerous data bases are available in electronic form through parliamentary database systems from the house and electorate offices. The ideal situation will be achieved when there is immediate access to all the research products, full text of the debates, texts of bills, bill status, committee reports, schedules of congressional floor and committees activities, summaries of current floor debate and action, and possibly the text of amendments within minutes of being offered. Several such

systems are in various stages of development. Some research services have their own homepages with easy to use hypertext-links. It is worth mentioning that the CRS was asked by Congress to suggest ways to coordinate these information activities in a new, integrated *Legislative Information System (LIS)* to assure "widest possible exchange of information among legislative branch agencies with the long range goal of improving technology planning and evaluation" and to avoid duplication. Providing access is solving part of the problem, the other side is providing the clients with all the back-up and training so that they attain a "self-help" status as soon as possible- as well as to deal with cautious attitudes about technology. Some clients will always ask for hard copy- apparently caring more for convenience and maintenance of old habits than for trees. There is an inherent tension between the desire to offer free access to databases (even to the public), and the need of the Parliament to maintain confidentiality for some of the information. Often, parliaments restrict access to some material to Members of Parliament and research branch staff and selected staff in the library.

E. E-Mail

Finally, e-mail communication adds a personal touch to all of these great technological achievements. By using e-mail we can have direct and immediate contact with members, and parliamentary staff and colleagues all over the world. We can exchange information or ask a question at any time of day or night, sharing resources for the best use of our clients, "something increasingly important in a resource pressured environment" (June Verrier).

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