

THE ROLE OF COMMITTEES OF MEMBERS IN PROVISION OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES*

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Abstract: Almost every type of library, national, university and school, public, private or special has some form of Advisory Board or supervisory committee. This paper follows up interest at recent IFLA meetings in the role of Library Committees in relation to legislative libraries. The results of some survey work on the prevalence of Library Committees are summarised and the subject is then considered in more detail in the context of a case study of the Library Committees of the Hungarian Parliament from 1867 until 1950 and the Advisory Board established in 1996.

Introduction

"The ultimate responsibility for the policy, efficiency and management of a library does not lie with the chief librarian. Whatever the type of library there can hardly be found a case in which the librarian is in complete control. Almost without exception the librarian is the servant of a higher authority; he may be very powerful, with immense freedom to carry out the day to day management of a library, yet he is always acting as a professional executive who exercises his skill and expertise as the employee of his governing body ...

It is the governing body of an institution which has the overall responsibility for its library provision, and this body is always the holder of the purse strings. Whichever body controls the financial resources given to the library has the ultimate authority over it. Therefore although librarians manage or control, they do not govern."¹

At the IFLA Conference held in Copenhagen in 1997 the question of the role of Library Committees - or equivalents - attracted considerable interest. Annalise Quistorff, Head of the Library of the Danish Parliament, distributed a paper² based on a questionnaire which the Library of the Folketing had sent out with the assistance of the ECPRD³ to parliamentary libraries in Central, Eastern, and

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¹ Stockham, K.A. *The Government and Control of Libraries*, 2nd edition 1975, Deutsch, London.

² Quistorff, Annalise. *The role of Members of Parliament in parliamentary library administration*. Paper at IFLA 1997.

³ European Centre for Research and Documentation

Western Europe and in the USA. This questionnaire sought information on the extent to which Members of Parliament (MPs) were involved in the administration of the Library or on other ways in which they followed the work of the Library. Unfortunately the questionnaire did not reach the Hungarian Parliament, where there is both an old tradition of Library Committees and great interest in the subject because of current developments. The author therefore distributed an *ad hoc* questionnaire to those present at the Workshop of the Section on Library and Research Services held in the Folketing. The *ad hoc* survey asked which parliaments had a Library Committee and some questions on the status of the committee (standing, advisory, etc).

1. Library Committees around the World

The data derived from the Quistorff paper and the *ad hoc* survey (supplemented by some information gathered later from certain international assemblies) has been analysed and is presented in the following diagrams. Responses were available from 57 parliamentary assemblies, out of some 170 assemblies with parliamentary libraries. More than half of the responses came from Europe: a different picture might emerge if data was collected without this European bias.

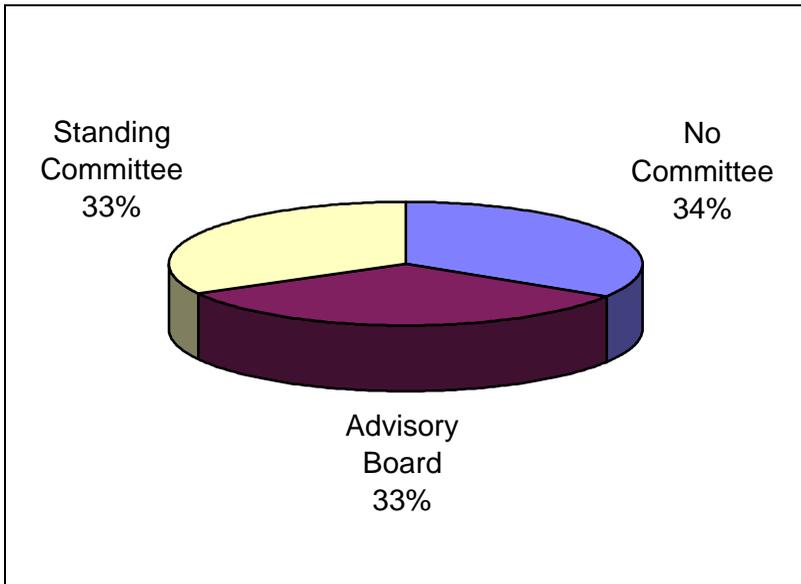


Diagram 1

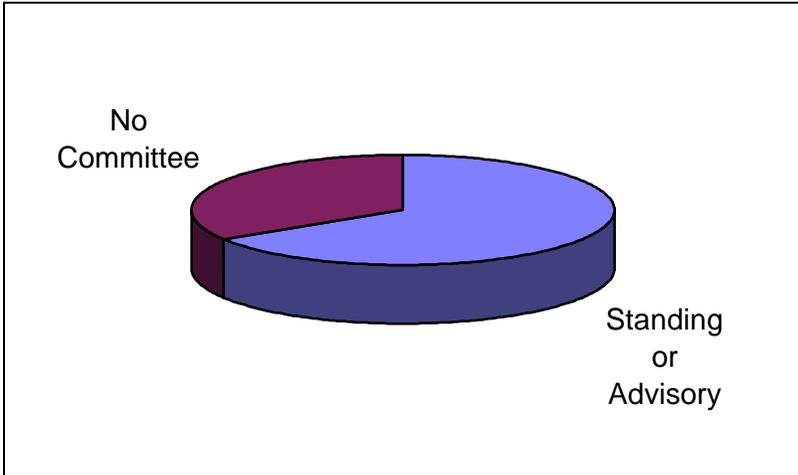


Diagram 2

What do we learn from these figures? The first two diagrams show that the Library Committees are widely used; committees or commissions are dealing with the library from its strategy to its everyday activity in 32 of the 57 responding parliaments. The third diagram, an analysis by continent of parliaments with some kind of Library Committee or consultative board, shows that more than half are European national assemblies.

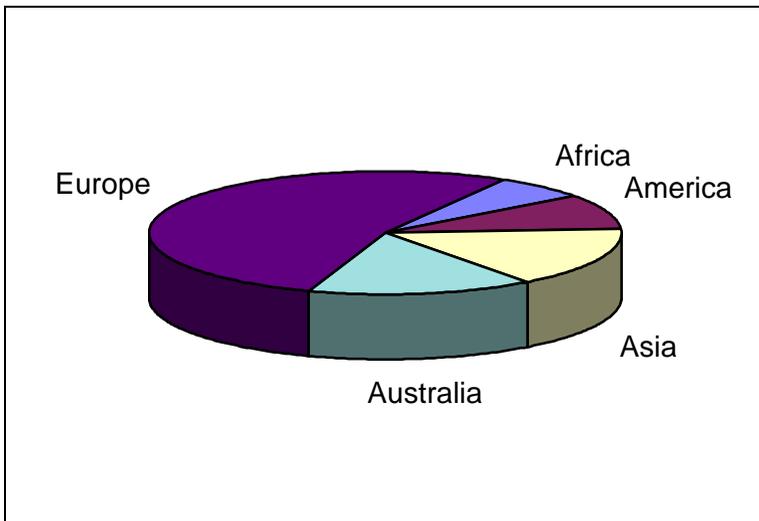


Diagram 3

Do we draw the conclusion that the Library Committee is a European speciality?

No, because the majority of parliaments who answered "yes" (18) to having a standing committee are from Australia, Asia and North America (11). Only seven European parliaments have a "standing Library Committee", and there are fifteen European national assemblies and one European international assembly with no participation by parliamentarians in library administration. In addition, we examine the proportion of the continents where there are no Library Committees or MPs are not involved to the parliamentary library's administration:

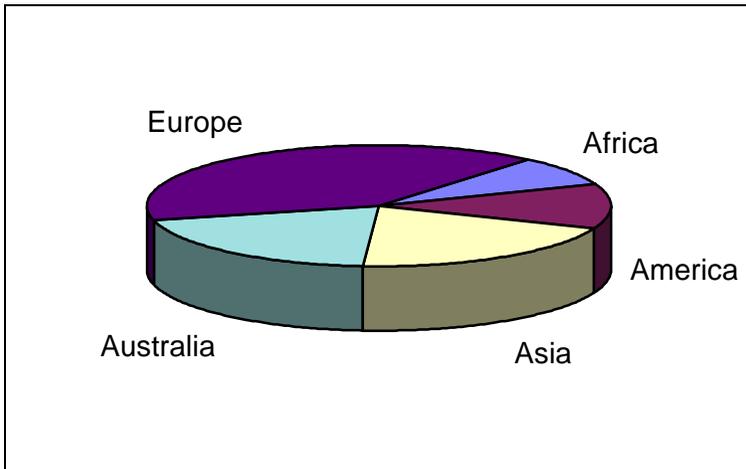


Diagram 4

So perhaps the Library Committee is not an European speciality.

Standing type Library Committees are the most commonly used in the surveyed parliamentary libraries. A "standing" Library Committee means one which generally consists of MPs, but sometimes chief officials from the administrative staff are also elected or delegated. These standing committees have regular obligations and their members may have extra allowances. They may be working in a more immediate framework than an advisory board.

What are the main functions of a Library Committee or why should have it an important role in the life of a parliamentary library? In the cases analysed these committees are:

- Policy making and oversight bodies,
- approving/providing strategic guidance and goals,

- deciding on the acquisition of documents, the lending service and rules of access to the library for public or specialists and working and opening hours.

In cases when the Library Committee is an advisory board (communicative, supervisory, consultative, initiative etc. committees), these committees also include MPs. Comparing with standing type committees the main difference can be found between their competencies. The advisory committees generally have only supervisory competence, for instance reviewing the budget, being consulted on changes in information services, or working as an information channel between the factions (party groups) and the parliamentary administration. Although these committees also have regular obligations like the standing ones, their decisions are not obligatory. The committee members are working as 'volunteers' - generally not supported by any extra allowances. There are a significant number of advisory type committees in the surveyed parliamentary libraries.

A European case might to be cited: the example of Germany where the Bundestag has three committees dealing with library matters (The Commission of the Council of Elders for Internal Affairs, a committee dealing with computerization and one dealing with the move from Bonn to Berlin), while in the Bundesrat MPs are not involved in library administration.

The first two diagrams show that about a third of the 57 responding parliamentary libraries are administered without any formal participation of MPs. Two European examples might be highlighted here because the present position is a changed one: in the Stortinget of Norway MPs have not been involved since 1992 in the library administration because the previous supervisory board was abolished and "the parliamentary librarian [was made] responsible for presenting the library's budget and new appointments. Likewise the Swiss parliament in 1988 replaced the previous supervision by a Committee of Documentation into a Commission of Administration, the task of which is supervising the library budget only"⁴

2. The Story of an Old-fashioned Library Committee or the renaissance of a traditional model

The traditional Hungarian model was based on the following three axioms:

Axiom No.1 The Library Committee supervised directly the Parliamentary Library

⁴ Quistorff loc cit

Axiom No.2 The Library Committee had its own competence

Axiom No.3 The Library Committee held its meetings on regular basis

The first Library Committee was established by the Parliament in 1867 in order to supervise its library. The committee members were originally delegated by the Speaker, but from 1875 they were freely elected when the new parliament set up. The post-1875 Library Committee was established as a standing committee. The number of permanent members varied: it worked optimally with 5-11 MPs, but since the 1930's the participation rate had grown to 33 members. After World War II until abolition in 1950, the Committee had 17 members. The Library Committee had its own president or chairman: at first he was elected from its members, later - probably as a consequence of its growing power and competence - the Speaker officially presided.

The Library Committee had the right to intervene in all matters of importance in the library's activity. This right was based on Rules of Procedure and on other parliamentary documents. The Committee's powers included the establishment of the statutes of the library, which defined the obligations and tasks of the institution, the limits to the actions and competence of the Librarian and the staff, and other regulations such as lending rules. Depending on current duties the Library Committee established subcommittees e.g. on statutes, on acquisition etc. The supervising of the acquisition policy was particularly stressed, for example from 1878 the library began to gather the documents of foreign parliaments on an exchange basis and the parliament legislated for legal deposit of published materials (first in 1922).

Examining Library Committee responsibilities of that time shows some similarity with the present practice of the German Parliament (Bundestag) or the Turkish Parliament (Türkiye Bülük Millet Meclisi) where a Library Committee is responsible for matters of policy concerning the use of the library, catalogue systems, store rooms, book lending etc. The Statutes of the Hungarian Library Committee enacted in 1909 provided that any measures concerning the out-building storage of the holding was subject to the Committee's approval because the speed of service could have been at risk. The Library Committee made cataloguing rules, decided exchange policy and practice, as well as the composition of the staff by qualifications, age etc.

How did the Library Committees work?

The Library Committees were working to a regular schedule: meetings were held monthly, then quarterly, and later once in a year at minimum. The committee controlled the status of the library, the implementation of the planned task and *ad*

hoc duties. It laid down the next year's financial framework and professional obligations on the basis of the figures and information gathered about the previous session(s), knowledge of the essential legislative requirements and the information needs of legislators. At the end of each sessions the Committee had to report to the Parliament on the activity and the main figures (holdings, expenditure, purchases, exchanges, lending, etc.) of the library - at first in each parliamentary session but later annually. These regular reports were very valuable because the committee members changed session by session, a new Speaker/President and members were elected and the staff of the library changed too. For all those involved in committee proceeding the best source for retrospective orientation was the minutes of the Library Committee, which served as the written collective memory.

The Library Committee submitted its reports to the plenary session, where the Parliament debated, passed or modified or voted against them. When the report as proposed was passed and promulgated, it was enacted and its enforcement was obligatory.

From 1920 the preparatory work of the Library Committee meetings was one of the duties of the Librarian (Chief Librarian/Director General). As the secretary of the Committee, he collected the previous reports, the future plan and the problems to be discussed. Then he agreed a date for the meeting with the Speaker, and sent an invitation letter to the committee members.

Typical Agendas

The meetings of the Library Committee had their own agenda prepared by the Librarian and distributed among the members in advance. The standing items of the agenda show the continuity of the auditing and controlling work of the committee and of the different library activities. The standing items were the following:

1. Librarian's report on the activities of the Library during the previous year
2. Librarian's proposal on the next year's budget
3. Librarian's report on the ordering and shipment of next year's periodicals and newspapers
4. Librarian's report on the lending, on the status of claims
5. Librarian's report on the status of the international exchange

Further ordinary agenda items included:

- Report to be submitted to the parliament on the role of the library
- Proposal on the framework of the library budget

- Auditing and supervising the expenditure and income
- Review of the requests of users (MPs noted in a book their demands and the titles of required but missing documents they had needed during the plenary debates)
- Decisions on the titles to be purchased
- Decisions on gifts (if the Library Committee accepted documents as gift, it sent a letter of thanks to the donor and registered the fact for the minutes)
- Decisions on allowances of the staff

Other items discussed were:

- Personal issues (staff or committee related)
- Establishment of a new reading room for outsider researchers
- Inventory control
- Establishment of new cataloguing rules

The Librarian's role was to serve as rapporteur. The proposals and reports submitted on the basis of the agenda were discussed by the committee members who accepted them or in some cases modified or voted against them. Each committee member had the right to propose an initiative. These proposals concerned mainly purchasing or cancelling documents, often linked to the particular information needs of one MP. When the Speaker agreed that the proposal was for the general good the demand was voted. Some proposals submitted by MPs were hopeless projects - all the proposals were commented upon by the Librarian before the decision was taken.

All meetings were minuted and the minutes signed by the president of the Library Committee and the secretary, and confirmed by the committee members elected at the beginning of each meetings. These confirmed committee minutes became very important sources of the library's history.

The composition of the Library Committee

The criteria for nomination as a committee member were not formally defined, nevertheless the MPs came generally from literary or scientific career. Election to the Library Committee brought a cultural recognition for an MP. This changed later, and from the middle of the 1930's partisanship and the party point of view became predominate. The composition of the Committee reflected distinctly the party balance of parliamentary power and cultural or scientific merits became secondary. A few examples of the characteristics of the qualifications or profession of Library Committee members: they included lawyers, philosophers, economists, sociologists, judges, writers, poets, journalists, archaeologists, art and

literary historians, editors, translators, ethnographers, landowners, priests, teachers and professors, geographers, sculptors and painters - with just one common attribute: they were all elected representatives.

What was the level of influence of the Hungarian Library Committees on the parliamentary library?

a) The senior management of the library was more stable than the membership of the Committee. The length of service of each Librarian was far longer than the period of each parliamentary session: two of them directed the library for 20 years, three of them for one decade. Their knowledge had an important role in the continuous development of the institution. They acted as standing rapporteurs of the Library Committee meetings, providing continuity through their duties. The MPs acknowledged their professional standing.

b) The standing rules of the meetings of the Library Committees were also important. The rules on frequency of meetings guaranteed regular committee activity, and provided for the annual survey of the implementation of the previous Committee's decisions and how the most important problems were handled.

c) The change of members happened gradually. At the beginning of a new session only a few new members were elected, the majority remained from the former committee. Usually at least a third the Library Committee members did not change which allowed transmission of experience, and professional and local knowledge, from one Library Committee to the next. The member who recorded the longest service in the acquisition subcommittee was reelected four times.

d) The relation between the Speaker and the library was continuous and the executive power of the Speaker/President of the Committee ensured that library activity continued between committee meetings.

e) Recording the actions and decisions of the Library Committee for the minutes, and archiving them was important, as was the annual report of the Committee submitted to the plenary session.

The participation rate of members varied, meetings were characterised by a rate of 50%. On some occasions almost all committee members were present, but sometimes the quorum was threatened (the required quorum was one third of the members).⁵ In all parliamentary sessions there were some committee members

⁵ The Library and Computers Sub-Committee of the House of Lords consists of 11 members and the quorum is only two!

who did not participate at any meeting of the Committee. Perhaps they were not interested, or they could have had other more important duties or they were acquainted with neither the library's nor the Library Committee's activities. On the other hand a number of MPs attended all committee meetings.

The present situation

The Library of the present Hungarian Parliament has a double function: like the Finnish parliamentary library, it is also open to the public and has a specialized holding of the literature published in the legal field and in political science. In 1991 it became again the responsibility of the Parliament and since 1997 its staff are again civil servants. The library reports directly to the Speaker.

In the Autumn of 1996 the Speaker established a Library Advisory Board consisting of MPs delegated from each of the parliamentary party groups. The independent MPs are not involved, their interests are only indirectly represented. The Speaker is the President of the Library Advisory Board and the Librarian is the secretary. The Board consists of 8 members. The professions of the Library Advisory Board are: lawyers (3), historians (2), librarian (1), teachers (2), and engineer (1).⁶ The Secretary General, the financial and the computer system managers, and the library directors participate regularly in the meetings. This board has its tradition in the earlier committees of the Hungarian Parliament. After its renaissance in 1996 it adopted a number of important resolutions. The Board has advisory and initiative competence without a supervising right. It has approved annual plans and reports, increased the acquisition budget, submitted a proposal for legislation on the legal deposit of materials published in the Parliament's jurisdiction, and founded a special library prize.

The Hungarian Parliament ended its sessional activity (1994-1998) in the middle of March 1998 because of the general parliamentary elections to be held in May. It is not yet clear how the Advisory Board will continue to fulfil its role, in principle we can expect the reestablishment of the Library Advisory Board or a new (standing?) Library Committee with a faster legal framework.

⁶ In every parliament ideally economists should also be elected as members and supervisors who take a special interest in the library from each party, from the government party and from the opposite side, would also enhance the Board.

3. Concluding Comments

Why do parliamentary libraries need a Library Committee?

Like a typical nonprofit organisation, parliamentary libraries should have their sponsors. What does 'sponsoring' an institution mean? Sponsoring is one of the most fashionable magic expressions of our globalised and market-oriented world, it means basically to assist or to support somebody for a special purpose. The sponsorship can take various forms and can embrace the activities of a Library Committee. Then both parties, the library and the committee/board have to have their own interest to make the arrangement work. The need for sponsorship could come from other requirements: to establish a new strategy for the library; to launch new initiatives in information services and to get them adopted by the parliament; or, if there is a lack of adequate funding, to deal with the resulting difficulties. Another reason for sponsorship is the need for goodwill or PR activities, and keeping the attention of users regarding library services is also a very important factor.

Everyone will realise that the competence of the Library Committee has a close connection with its composition. On that competence depends the achievement of a consensus between MP's and the parliamentary administration. A Library Committee can be a policymaking and oversight body, it can provide strategic guidance and goals for the library. At the same time it can offer practical assistance in order to ensure timely and correct information services to MP's, for instance in relation to the extension of copying rights and the particular application of copyright in a parliamentary library. The Library Committee can help to ensure the legal deposit of materials published via traditional ways or in electronic form. The Library Committee's activities can be very positive for the library, because the results and benefits will derive from the common experience of the library and of its users.

Questions remain after this analysis and case study: "How do parliamentary libraries which do not have any kind of Library Committee function?"; "To whom does the Librarian in this instance report?"; "What is the experience of parliamentary libraries whose supervisory body has been abolished?". This paper is unlikely to be the last word on legislative library committees.

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