



**British Parliamentary Libraries:
history, international comparisons and some lessons
for tomorrow's legislature libraries**

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Abstract:

Although the British House of Commons and House of Lords are not the oldest continuously functioning parliaments in the world, their history stretches back many centuries, making them the most venerable law-making assemblies of any major country. Neither were they the first legislative bodies to possess libraries, but these institutions nevertheless have a lengthy history beginning with small collections of books and papers in the 18th century.

My paper will trace the evolution of the two libraries from their modest beginnings, through the provision of accommodation designed purposely for them, on to the characteristics of library staff and to the subsequent expansion in their numbers to over 200 by 2000.

It reviews the impact of changes in the ways in which parliamentarians work and in technology on the facilities provided by their libraries, particularly moving from simply acquiring, cataloguing and organising books and other documents for Member of Parliament and Peers to the provision of both general and individual research services, along with the growing use of electronic media.

By way of comparison I shall also discuss:

- *America's Library of Congress (which has been serving as both the parliamentary and national library since 1800)*
- *Japan's National Diet Library (a creation of the 'democratic reconstruction' of US-occupied Japan in 1948)*
- *and, to offer an example of a smaller country, Ireland's Oireachtas Library*

In summarising the history of the British parliamentary libraries, I also hope to indicate some ways in which we draw upon this historical experience to identify fruitful new future directions for libraries supporting legislatures throughout the world.

Most of this paper is devoted to the history of the main parliamentary libraries (the House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries) of the United Kingdom, but also contains some comparisons with American, Japanese and Irish parliamentary facilities. I have focused on what I believe are the salient points for our consideration in this session, so none of them attempts to explore every aspect of their histories or go into exhaustive detail.

‘Parliamentary democracy’ is an often carelessly-used expression that actually embraces two different concepts. Thus ancient Athens had a system of ‘direct democracy’ where major political issues were decided by assemblies of the entire (male) citizen population, as opposed to being settled by a much smaller number of their representatives meeting as a parliament.

English parliamentary history stretches back to the middle ages, but the legislatures of the late eighteenth century were certainly not democratic institutions. The upper chamber, the House of Lords, was composed overwhelmingly of noblemen who had inherited their seats along with their titles, occasionally reinforced by new members given peerages by the Monarch, together with some senior clerics of the Church of England, all of them holding office for life. Members of its counterpart, the House of Commons, were elected by their constituencies and had to face re-election when each Parliament was dissolved. However, only a relatively small proportion of the population held the right to vote, many of these ‘Members of Parliament’ (MPs) were effectively chosen by individual aristocrats who controlled their constituencies, while contested elections often marred by the bribery and intimidation of voters.

Although Parliament had always needed records in documentary form, this material was held as scattered collections of records of parliamentary proceedings, laws, statistical returns and reports. In 1780 it was suggested that the small collection of papers and books in the charge of the ‘Clerk’ (senior executive officer) of the House of Commons be held in a single place. A couple of decades passed before a house was leased for this purpose. While it now had a home, the largely archival collection of official and semi-official documents was in poor condition. Charles Abbot (elected Speaker in 1802), laid the basis for a properly organised Commons library when he instructed ordered his staff to collate, bind and index these parliamentary papers. In 1818 the first Commons Librarian was appointed and Speaker Abbot’s collection moved back to its own room in the Palace of Westminster. The House now developed a ‘library’ in the more generally understood sense of an organised collection of published books along with the official documents housed in accommodation specifically set aside for this purpose.

The Commons Library collection and floor space subsequently increased greatly in size and it received magnificent new quarters after the old Palace of Westminster was largely destroyed by fire in 1834. Yet, apart from the collection being catalogued and subject indexes compiled, its role and character changed little in over a century. Despite the extension of the franchise and a growing ‘democratic’ influence in British political life, the great majority of legislators remained rich men with aristocratic attitudes. Both parliamentary libraries (the Lords having set up their own in 1826) were viewed largely as appealing places to relax when not attending debates or committee meetings – not as research facilities to support law-makers in their public duties or enlarge their understanding of issues. Stock selection echoed that used in the libraries parliamentarians were accustomed to enjoy in gentlemen’s clubs and country houses. There was naturally a greater emphasis in the Commons on publications dealing with government, but large parts of the collection were devoted to history and literary classics. This was also true of the Lords library (which also held several hundred volumes on

genealogy), aside from a substantial set of legal works to serve the senior judges who sat as 'Law Lords'.

Another factor in this conservatism was the customary selection of House Librarians from either the ranks of those already serving as 'Clerks' (senior officials) or by appointing distinguished scholars from outside. There was also a tendency for the Librarians to stay in office for very long periods and, conscientious and learned though these men may have been, they were unlikely to take the lead in promoting significant change.

In 1929 the franchise for electing MPs was finally extended to all men and women aged 21 and over. George Benson, one of the new members returned in the elections of that year, was 'appalled', when he first used the Commons Library, 'to find the House ...served by a library which hardly progressed since 1850'. Despite Benson's protests to colleagues and the Speaker very little reform took place until 1945. It appears the middle and working class MPs who were being elected in gradually growing numbers over the previous 50 years quickly adopted the ethos of the House, with its traditions – even in practical matters like library services - being held in unquestioning respect.

The elections of 1945 resulted in a great influx of new members imbued with a massive discontent with the state of existing institutions and a taste for radical reform. The freshly-elected MPs broadened the social composition of the House at a stroke and their sheer number hindered assimilation into a complacent 'this is how things work in the Commons' outlook. They were far more likely to complain about the Palace of Westminster's antiquated facilities than being awed by its historical atmosphere and architectural grandeur into accepting them. From this date the Commons collections began to be modernised and extended.

A more profound departure in 1945 was the acceptance that the traditional Library roles of acquiring, cataloguing and storing books and other documents for its parliamentarians needed to be augmented by the provision of an information service. Initially modest in scale, with just two researchers and two statisticians dealing with queries from MPs seeking specific information or background material, the research facility was to grow substantially. The increase in the volume of its work (leading to a staff of 24 by 2000) was stimulated by factors such as:

- a far greater propensity for constituents to write to their MPs
- much intensified lobbying activity by interest groups and, at a larger stage, professional lobbyists
- the great expansion in the number of Parliamentary Questions tabled to ministers by Members (rising from about 5,000 in 1900 to over 30,000 in the mid 1970s)
- provision from 1971 of an allowance for MPs to hire research assistants

Besides answering specific enquires, the information unit began producing research briefings on matters of general political, economic or social interest.

Coping with steadily mounting demand for the Library's services led – eventually - to expanded staff numbers. In 1878 the Librarian was supported by merely an assistant and two messengers and even by 1954 the total complement was fewer than 30 employees. Nor did they have much technological support: until 1954 there was only one telephone (located in a

broom cupboard) to serve the whole Library. Significant growth in personnel only took place in the final quarter of the twentieth century. By 1976 there were about 75 in post, rising sharply to 173 in 1990 and reaching 200 by the Millennium. In 1991 most of the Library's staff moved out of their cramped Palace of Westminster accommodation to modern premises in nearby Whitehall.

The transition from a largely aristocratic political system to a democratic one drastically weakened the power of the Lords. Their ability to veto legislative proposals approved by the Commons was removed in 1911 and the length of time the Peers could hold these up cut to one year in 1949. Compared to the period before the First World War, Peers had considerably reduced political influence and importance. The composition of their House also began to change once Life Peers (whose right to sit in the Lords was not inherited by their heirs) were introduced in 1958. Many Peers rarely bothered to attend the House and its business was carried on by a much smaller number of 'working' Peers. The Library consequently escaped the kinds of pressure for change into an active information resource that transformed its Commons counterpart (as late as 1990 it had just two researchers).

There was some consideration of merging the two Libraries to pool their resources and achieve economies of scale, but this was rejected by the Lords in 1977. Thus the Library of the House of Lords has largely retained its traditional character. The bulk of hereditary peers lost their right to attend in the major constitutional reform of 1999 yet this had relatively little effect on the Library's work (although three additional researcher posts were created over the next three years) most of which was generated by the working Peers.

United States of America: the Library of Congress

The US parliament is generally regarded as beginning with the Second Continental Congress convened in 1775 and the following year this body issued the Declaration of Independence from Britain. Although the parliament of the United States of America drew some of its features from the Westminster model, there are striking differences. Thus the Senate, the upper house of Congress, reflects America's federal character with each state, regardless of its population, being represented by two senators. The lower chamber, the House of Representatives was, as with most democratic assemblies, elected according to the population of each congressional district. Both senators and congressmen served for fixed terms.

When the legislature moved from Philadelphia to the new Federal Capital of Washington, District of Columbia, in 1800 a single library was established for the use of its members (unlike the separate facilities maintained for the two Houses of Parliament in London). The principal influence on its early development was President Thomas Jefferson who believed that there was 'no subject to which a member of Congress might have occasion to refer'. Hence the collection embraced a far wider range of material than the core topics such as law and government that a parliamentary library might be expected to contain. When it perished in the destruction of the Capitol Building by the British in 1814, Jefferson sold his substantial personal collection to Congress to start rebuilding its library.

This task was undertaken by George Watterston, the first full-time Librarian of Congress. While the British parliamentary libraries remained exclusively for the use of legislators, Watterston allowed the public access to his collection. This 'concession' became firmly-established doctrine under Ainsworth Rand Spofford (Librarian 1864-97). He contended that,

while continuing to serve Congress, the Library's facilities should be available to all Americans. This principle enabled the Library of Congress to evolve into the national library of the United States.

Moreover, Spofford reaffirmed Jefferson's original universalist vision of it as a repository of international and not just American publications, reversing a tendency to ignore foreign works (apart from those published by the governments of other countries). This was a momentous policy decision: the national library would not restrict its acquisitions to the 'national' literature, but collect publications from across the world for the benefit of Americans.

Having also accomplished the centralisation of US copyright deposit with the Library, Spofford's term of office was crowned by the erection of a new structure in the Capitol complex dedicated to its collections. When opened in 1897 the Jefferson Building was the world's largest library.

His successors continued to extend the scope of the Library's collections and the range of the constituencies it served. Herbert Putnam, Librarian from 1897, defined its mandate as 'a duty to the country as whole' and projected its reach beyond the facilities available in Washington. The Library of Congress classification scheme was adopted by many American (and some foreign) libraries, bibliographic information standardised and distributed on printed cards for easy filing and inter-library loan schemes supported by union catalogues developed. In the 1960s it became an early adopter of computer technology by creating its MARC (Machine Readable Cataloging) protocol for communication bibliographic data in electronic form, which gained the status of an international standard by 1973.

Recognition of the fundamental significance and scale of the 'information explosion' during this period secured greatly increased government funding for the Library. However, like national libraries elsewhere, enhanced budgets and staffing levels were struggling to keep pace with the vast surge in publication, although new buildings were added in 1939 and 1980. Since then developments in technology have offered hope that the relentless physical pressure for more accommodation and access can be contained.

Japan: the National Diet Library

The Imperial Diet was set up in 1890 as part of the modernisation of Japanese society in face of the threat posed by aggressive and more technologically advanced Western powers. Creating a representative assembly was seen as an essential part of this process. Japan sent a delegation to examine various European models. However, the government was determined to retain actual political control behind the façade of parliamentary institutions. Hence Japan's parliament was largely inspired by late nineteenth century German and Austro-Hungarian constitutional practice (even its name, the Diet, came from the Teutonic term) where the legislature could be ignored in effect by a dominant executive. The Diet, made up of an elected lower house and a largely hereditary House of Peers, indeed proved ineffectual in curbing the power of the entrenched and increasingly militaristic oligarchy. Although libraries were provided for each chamber, the prevailing political culture in which their members had little influence or even interest in policy issues, meant that they failed to develop into tools contributing to democratic development.

After Japan's defeat in 1945, the American occupation administration placed great emphasis on securing genuinely parliamentary government. Hence the new constitution drawn up by it in 1947 replaced the Imperial Diet with a National Diet and substituted an appointed House of Councillors for the House of Peers. At the same time the Library of Congress had begun to undertake international service in addition to discharging its national duties. It created a reference collection for the first meeting of the United Nations in San Francisco and in 1947 sent a team led by Werner W. Clapp to help set up the new National Diet Library. The Americans were familiar with the idea of combining the parliamentary library with the national one, so it is not surprising that this example was followed in Japan. Thus the Imperial Library established in 1898 (and effectively the national library) was integrated with those of the two chambers of the Diet.

Ireland: the Oireachtas Library

When the Irish Free State was established in 1922 it had a bi-cameral Parliament. This was maintained with the promulgation of a new constitution in 1937. Compared with the other examples mentioned earlier Ireland has far less people and thus a smaller scale legislature, so a single library service serves both the Dail (lower house) and Seanad (upper house).. Being located in Leinster House, the parliament building, its attractive Palladian style reading room was convenient for members of both houses, while the National Library of Ireland was close at hand for the supply of additional material. Its staffing was modest, (consisting until the 1970s of the Librarian, a graduate assistant, three clerks and two messengers). However, the Library (rather like Ireland itself) 'punched above its weight' and the smaller scale of operation allowed for a more personally tailored service to parliamentarians. In 1976 a research service was introduced to extend the traditional range of services and this aspect has received increasing emphasis. The Oireachtas Library has been described as 'an interesting example of the provision that can be made with a small staff and limited budget'.

Possible lessons for the future

- 1) Vision is the basis for any radical change. Imagination is a necessary (although obviously not a sufficient) condition for major advances. Jefferson envisaged an American library extending over all subjects – other parliamentary libraries restricted the scope of their collections until after the Second World War.

Librarians of Congress like Spofford and Putnam continually looked beyond present circumstances towards new horizons (for example, turning the it into a national library, collecting world as well as US material or trying to help libraries throughout the USA)

- 2) The institutional background is crucial. British parliamentary libraries suffered from the 'legacy of history' mainly because those they served were content with a limited service. Likewise the Japanese Diet libraries did not start to develop properly until the shock of post-war occupation and reconstruction led to new thinking about their role.
- 3) It is very difficult to overcome institutional inertia. So it would have probably made sense for the Commons and Lords to have a single library (as in the USA and Ireland), but the tradition of having separate ones was too entrenched.

- 4) Having a powerful independent Librarian helps. In Britain each House of parliament appointed its own CEO, while in the USA the President chose the Librarian of Congress (although Senate approval of the nomination is now needed). The President sometimes chose prestigious non-librarians like poet Archibald MacLeish or scholar Daniel Boorstein, in the face of considerable opposition, who had the national status to advance their vision, rather than seeing themselves as merely servants to do the bidding of Congress.
- 5) I believe the most powerful challenge facing parliaments is to maintain their democratic legitimacy in the face of falling voter participation, mass disillusion with politicians and the competition of 'bloggers' and similar social networks to their status as the 'debating chamber of the nation'. Here I think there may be scope for parliamentary libraries to 're-connect' the public with both political life and the parliamentarians elected to serve them. Again this will call for vision, a willingness to explore new possibilities and persistent, clearly-directed leadership.
- 6) And a good deal of luck to lift the 'dead hand' of institutional inertia!

Resources for further exploration

- UK Parliament website www.parliament.uk
- "The House of Commons Library - a History" by David Menhennet, 2nd edition 2000
- "The Early History of the House of Commons Library", by Chris Pond, 2001
- 'Government and Parliamentary Libraries' by Christopher Murphy in 'The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland' edited by Alistair Black and Peter Hoare, Volume III, pages 490-493
- 'Jefferson's Legacy: a history of the Library of Congress'
<http://www.loc.gov/loc/legacy>
- 'Library of Congress' by John Y. Cole in 'Encyclopedia of Library History' edited by Wayne A. Weigand and Donald G. Davis, Junior, 1994 pages 377-381
- National Diet web site <http://www.ndl.go.jp/en/event/index.html>
- Office of the Houses of the Oireachtas - Library and Research
<http://www.oireachtas.ie/viewdoc.asp?fn=/documents/a-misc/orgchart4.htm>