
Information Services in a Small Legislature

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We live in an information age and this fact has placed an onus on governments everywhere to ensure that elected members are provided with the personnel and resources to assist them in dealing quickly and knowledgeably with issues as they arise.

All jurisdictions realize that with the speed and complexity of events these days, it is unrealistic to expect an individual elected member on his or her own to be able to gain an understanding, form an opinion and respond knowledgeably and quickly to issues without assistance.

Cabinet ministers have research and communications resources at their disposal within their respective departments to respond to issues affecting their individual portfolios. But a need has emerged for other capabilities of a more general nature to serve all elected members – cabinet ministers, government backbenchers and opposition members alike.

The research capability must be able to provide the member with speedy access to information on a wide variety of issues. It must be able to analyze the information, refine and tailor it to the member's requirements. The communications capability must be able to take the information, combine it with the member's thoughts and points of view, as well as those of the party and create a product that communicates the desired message in the proper way.

Research and communication services for members of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly are provided through our legislative library and through the caucus offices of the three recognized parties. The budgets of both the legislative library and the caucus offices are administered by the Speaker's Office.

Like other legislative libraries, Nova Scotia makes available to members a wide range of books, periodicals and other publications, and staff at the library will help members search out and compile information on request. However, the research capability of the library is confined to searching and compiling information for members. We do not at present have a "research arm" of the library to refine and analyze information for members.

With the increasing workload being handled by committees of the legislature, the need for a research capability to assist these committees in their work is becoming increasingly apparent. This is an issue I hope we in Nova Scotia can address in the very near future, and when that time comes, it is most likely that this research capability will be centered in the legislative library.

Some of the services presently offered by our library include: current awareness services including listings of new books by subject; a table of contents service which invites members to select articles from selected journals they may wish to receive; an MLA update which tracks legislation of interest to members and includes book reviews and listing of new books, and status of bills, which keeps track of the movement of legislation through all legislatures in Canada including our own.

As well, the library indexes and maintains complete and up to date clipping files based on provincial daily and weekly newspapers and certain other publications. Statistical and financial information is provided by the library as well through a number of publications, reports and on-line databases. And of course, our library is the repository for a unique collection of historical information.

Within the caucus offices, budgets for research and communications are set by the Speaker's Office according to a formula based on the number of members in each caucus.

To use the government caucus office as an example, research and communications functions overlap with a director of caucus services, a research assistant and a communications assistant all involved in research and communications functions.

Day to day research functions include collection, analyses, refining and cataloguing of information from sources such as the legislative library, government departments, government news releases, and selected periodicals. The recent introduction of new computers will permit information databases to be brought on-line and create time saving improvements through the establishment of new indexing and retrieval systems.



Much of the work handled by research/communications staff involves responding to specific requests from members. In many cases, this will involve tracking down and analyzing information from sources other than those regularly accessed. However, it is also an important function of these people to identify and suggest worthwhile topics and issues for members to address.

On the communications side, caucus office staff provide writing, editing and advisory services combined with a limited layout and design and audio video production capability. Specific research/communications by the caucus staff presently include: speechwriting, preparation of news releases, articles, position papers, reports, newsletters, resolutions and other material for use in legislature debates, video and audio scripts, correspondence, maintenance of up to date clipping files, production and coordination of a weekly cable television programme and radio and television free time broadcasts; maintenance of an up to date record of government accomplishments, both provincially and by constituency; production of a monthly newsletter featuring government activities in capsule form; production of regular reports and analysis of opposition activity, and keeping abreast of issues and developments in the news.

Once again, the new computers have provided staff not only with time and labour saving alternatives, but with the opportunity to broaden the scope of in-house capability through the introduction of options such as desktop publishing.

In the coming year government members, through the caucus office, are considering producing regular constituency newsletters, as Members of Parliament do now. These will be produced entirely in-house.

The establishment of active caucus committees to provide an avenue for involving backbenchers in policy development is a concept that has been underutilized in Nova Scotia in the past. However, using the research and communications capabilities of the caucus office, the government caucus last year established a caucus committee on youth. This

committee held public meetings around the province and produced a report with meaningful recommendations that have been accepted by cabinet and are in the early stages of implementation.

I have no doubt that this successful experiment will be the forerunner of many similar efforts in the future, and we will have to look closely at our ability to provide for such efforts within the research budgets of caucus offices.

Until recently the government caucus office provided services for backbenchers exclusively. It is becoming increasingly apparent, however, that many of the services available are also needed by ministers. Departmental research and communications personnel are often loathe to perform tasks of a partisan nature, and this is perfectly understandable. Yet, unless ministers have skilled research and communications people on their personal staff, or within their constituency organization, there is really no place for them to turn but the caucus office, and they are doing so in increasing numbers.

The government caucus office, then, is being viewed more and more as an office serving the entire government caucus, and not just the backbenchers.

As a result of the recent provincial election the size of the Official Opposition Caucus has gone from six to twenty-one. It is expected that a substantial increase in the number of research staff available to serve this expanded group will occur soon.

The subject of providing research and communications capability for members in their constituencies is one that has been brought to my attention from time to time during my years as Speaker. My personal feeling on this matter is that with today's communications and information technology, a province the size of Nova Scotia might be better served by having each member equipped with a computer and fax machine linking them with the resources of the caucus office than through the hiring of constituency-based research personnel.

We are finding more and more that the issues members are called upon to address in their constituencies and in legislature are not strictly local issues. As often as not, they are local manifestations of issues that are provincial, national or global in nature. Speeding access to relevant information and the resources to assist the member in gaining a perspective and formulating a response are absolute necessities if members are to fulfil their responsibilities properly. ■