

---

# The Research Service of the Quebec National Assembly

---

by Gaston Bernier

Parliamentary libraries usually perform three functions: general documentation, institutional memory and, more recently, a function as an association of ideas.<sup>1</sup> The general documentation function was the first to appear. It can be found in the earliest lists and in the first catalogues published in the nineteenth century. The libraries took over the memory function when the publications and documents produced as a result of legislative and other parliamentary activity became substantial and, at the same time, something that desperately needed to be arranged and processed. The association of ideas function, which includes the work generally done by the so-called research services, entered the scene in the 1960s. Of course, the three functions of parliamentary libraries presuppose the existence of classification, cataloguing, indexing and, more generally, processing in the library.

The Library of the National Assembly was founded in 1802. It grew slowly and its role and functions were particularly repetitive and stable during its first 150 years. An information service, the forerunner of the existing readers services, was created in 1936; a bindery was established some thirty years later. However, the greatest innovations occurred during the 1970s. The Research Service was set up in 1971<sup>2</sup> and it was followed a few months later by a press clipping service, a service to recreate the debates of the Assembly (a retrospective Hansard) and, between 1979 and 1984, the assignment to the Library of the team responsible for indexing the *Journal des débats*, the archives of the Assembly and administrative documents.<sup>3</sup>

The Research Service of the National Assembly was modelled on the service created in the Library of Parlia-

ment in Ottawa.<sup>4</sup> It was part of the process of modernizing Quebec's parliamentary institutions during the Quiet Revolution. The Upper Chamber was abolished in 1968 and the number of electoral districts increased from 95 in 1962 to 110 in 1973. Consideration was given to creating specialized parliamentary committees and a full printed record was created in 1963. It should perhaps also be noted that over a period of eleven years, from 1960 to 1971, the Assembly had three new majority governments following four elections and thus there was substantial turnover in the membership of the Assembly. It was in this context that an opposition member, Yves Michaud, suggested that researchers be appointed to work in the Library or, at the very least, in the Assembly, a need to which the Librarian of the time, Jean-Charles Bonenfant, had also anticipated.

The establishment of the Research Service seems to have been an ambiguous and risky undertaking. The choice of where the unit would fit into the organization was difficult. From the outset, the focus was on the documentary and bibliographic needs of the Assembly's members. Consideration was also given to producing a "political yearbook in Quebec" along the lines of the *Canadian Annual Review* or *l'Année politique, économique, sociale et diplomatique en France*. Selective indexing of a daily newspaper in the provincial capital was also provided. Analyses and studies, however, were produced only on an exceptional basis. In addition, parliamentary groups were being formed at about the same time and they all created their own "research" group along parallel lines.<sup>5</sup> They received their first appropriations<sup>6</sup> during fiscal 1970-71 and, five years later, the amounts in question had increased fivefold.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, when the leaders at that time found that a large number of requests were made to the "research" units of the parties, they bluntly asked in April 1975 whether the service should not become part of the Reference Service. It would appear that this solution had already been contemplated since an organization chart dated January 1971 contained a "spe-

---

Gaston Bernier is Director of the Legislative Library of the Quebec National Assembly.

---

cialized reference" division near the "general reference" division, both forming part of a unit called "Services au public". Despite the difficulty in defining its mandate in the early years, the growth in the work of the committees and the increased activity in international parliamentary relations were the reason for regular and on-going activity by the team. In short, while the fate of the Service hung by only a thread in its early years, it seems to have made its mark later and defined its role and functions more effectively.

The Library's Research Service had to compete from the outset with a new service which had a clear and unambiguous mandate to recreate the debates of the legislature. The Assembly had adopted the project to create a retrospective record of its debates in 1973, when the so-called research services was doing on-site work. For a few years the recreation of the debates demanded and consumed some of the resources that were initially allocated to research activities. In 1976-77, only three officers worked in "research" whereas eight professionals and technicians were reconstituting the debates of the nineteenth century.

The existence of two services at the same level, recruiting the same kind of specialists and sharing resources that were always rather limited delayed the development of the "research" section. Inevitably, the managers of the Library and the Assembly had to share the resources between the two services. However, they also had to take into account the restructuring of other administrative services, especially the Legislative Committees Secretariat, the Interparliamentary Relations Directorate and the Parliamentary Procedure Research Directorate. In the early 1980s, the work of the committees and their secretariat was reorganized, young professionals were recruited and, for a few years, it was thought that they could perform the "research" function as well as the secretarial duties in the area for which their committee was responsible. A similar reflex was noted later when the interparliamentary relations sector was expanded. At the present time the pendulum appears to be swinging back and the Secretariat and the Directorates now submit many requests, which are varied and often important, to officials in the Library. Moreover, the presence of a Bureau of Advisers in Parliamentary Law has further defined the area in which service is provided and the Service, which was deeply involved in the past in parliamentary reform projects and activities, has been increasingly removed from the area of research or intervention.

The relative weight of the Service within the Library and the Assembly has varied over its first quarter-century of existence. In terms of absolute numbers of staff there were five professionals in 1971-72; twenty-five years later there were seven. In the meantime, a mini-

um threshold of three was reached in 1976-77 and a peak of 9.6 in 1991-92. If we compare the staff of the Service with that of the Library as a whole, we find for the years in question that the figures were 9%, 3%, 5.6%, 10%, 12.6%, 11.1% in 1996-97 and almost 14% in 1999-2000. This means that if we ignore the exceptional data for 1976-77 and 1991-92, the Service has accounted for more or less 9% of the person-years allocated to the Library.<sup>8</sup>

Since the employees of the Service are first and foremost at the disposal of the members of the National Assembly, it is possible to estimate the number of members who can call upon an employee of the Service. From a general point of view, the ideal situation was achieved in 1991-92, when every 12 or 13 members could count on one research officer in the Library. The worst-case scenario occurred in 1976-77, when, in principle, 36 or 37 members had to share the services of a single employee. At other times, the ratio has swung between the two extremes: one employee for 17 or 18 members of the Assembly in 1996-97; one to approximately 14 in 1999-2000, one to 15 or 16 ten years earlier and one to 21 or 22 when the Service was established.

Since the recruitment or loss of immediate collaborators of the elected representatives has an impact on legislative activity,<sup>9</sup> changes in the group responsible for studies and "research" can be compared with changes in total numbers of administrative employees and secretariat staff in the broad sense.

Having determined the size of the Service, we should now assess its services at least quantitatively and then take a look at who benefits from these services, again from a historical point of view.

The data on the Service's output show two quite distinct periods separated by two years of rapid growth: an implementation period extending from 1971 to 1981, a year during which production almost quadrupled and, since that time, a plateau of stability. Statistically, the number of projects completed from the year in which the Service was created to 1981 increased in saw-toothed fashion to reach 85 in that year. During the eleven-year period, the annual average was 44. The production of the Service if not its productivity recorded two major increases in succession in 1982 and 1983<sup>10</sup> so that output for 1982 was four times as great as that for 1981. Later, from 1984 to 1997, the annual number of projects ranged from 305 (1992-93) to 440 (1986-87), a peak often being followed by a trough and *vice versa*.

It may be asked what explains such an increase in productivity. First, we must consider a cumulative effort made to record requests and prepare statistics. However, this factor cannot hide the success and influence of the team, regardless of the supposedly less busy periods surrounding general elections or the lengthy sessional

---

breaks.<sup>11</sup> It can be assumed that the accumulation of experience,<sup>12</sup> the increase in work tools and the acquisition of modern information technology and communications have helped increase the service provided while staff numbers remained steady.

Inevitably, we progress from the number of tasks done and changes in this figure over the years to identifying the recipients. The Research Service is available exclusively to the members of the Assembly and senior officials and collective organizations such as committees and interparliamentary missions. On the basis of the assessment made each year for 25 years, the Service devotes most of its budget to the elected representatives (76% in 1996-97; 88% in the following year) and senior management of the Assembly (10% and 4% for the same years). These cumulative figures were lower in the past: 84% in 1991-92 and 72 in 1990-91. The figures for the first few years are less clear and the distinctions currently made were not used at the time. However, it is known where the requests came from. In 1976, one-half of them were sent to the Service by Assembly members; the figure for 1978 was 30 out of 38. Before 1982 the Service's contribution to the work of committees of the National Assembly was minimal. The silence of the annual reports on this subject justifies this conclusion. Throughout this period, however, the officers were convinced, as were the Library managers,<sup>13</sup> that this was a possible field for intervention. One source of requests has dried up over the years, specifically following the reorganization and refocusing of the Bureau of Advisors in Parliamentary Law.

There is one group of achievements of the Research Service that was especially important after 1980 and in a particular manner in the first two years of this decade: the preparation of many reference or consultation works concerning parliamentarianism on the St. Lawrence. Year after year it can be estimated that the employees spent between 5% and 10% of their work time on this task. A biographical dictionary was prepared of all the members of the National Assembly and the Legislative Council between 1792 and 1992, a parliamentary guide (four editions to date), a record of election results, completion of an inventory of government archives relating to the parliament buildings, and a second recording the location of the archival depositions of politicians, publication of a glossary of parliamentary expressions, ephemera and a selective bibliography of legislative institutions, to name only some of them. The *Bulletin*, of the Legislative Library has been published since 1970 and the Research Service was the main contributor.

This is a whole body of work designed to increase the Assembly's reputation and national representation, although, above all, it makes the work of people consulting

the materials easier and of all those parliamentary officials who are likely to receive questions from the public or even an elected representative, journalists in the Press Gallery or government officials.

## Conclusion

---

For now, it is possible to make a few observations on the Quebec experience. The Service appeared as part of a rejuvenation and modernization of the representative institutions and at a time of economic growth. Its existence and position in the bureaucracy have been subject to questioning both by the managers of the Library and by the creation or reorganization of similar services. The task of identifying the type of service to be provided took up much of its first ten years. In recent years requests from legislative committees and parliamentary missions have required greater effort. In short, the Service seems to have made its mark, earned its place and convinced the administrative and political authorities of its usefulness.

It is tempting to make projections but past prognostications were so wide of the mark that we may reasonably have doubts about current forecasts. The parliamentary environment which consists of many decentralized decision-making centres, makes any attempt at forecasting dubious. One could predict that the Service will have a given number of officers in 2003 or in 2008 or that requests will increase by 10% per year and that in future reports will contain 75 pages on average rather than 100 (or vice versa). However, it seems more appropriate to preserve present services and ensure that they can be flexible and sensitive to the surrounding communities, without ignoring their skills and their information and communications resources.

## Notes

---

1. Jean-François Le Men mentions only the last two of these (*L'information du Parlement français*; Paris: la Documentation française, 1984, p. 94).
2. Gaston Deschênes, "La Division de la recherche et l'histoire parlementaire", *Bulletin de la Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée nationale du Québec*, Vol. 10, Nos. 3-4 (December 1980), p. 1.
3. Gaston Bernier, "La Bibliothèque (de l'Assemblée nationale du Québec), d'hier à demain", *Parlements et francophonie*, Nos. 101-104 (2nd semester 1996 and 1st semester 1997), p. 74.
4. The first appropriations to be allocated for this purpose were provided in fiscal 1964-65 (Philip Laundry and High Finsten, *Twenty-five years serving Parliament: the Research Branch 1965-1990*, Ottawa: Library of Parliament, 1990, p. 2).
5. The research services of the Library are, according to Jean - Pierre Charbonneau, "strategically oriented to the different needs of the official opposition, independent members of

- 
- the Assembly or the party of government" (*Journal des débats*, April 30, 1996, p. 530). An officer who is currently employed in a partisan research service and is very familiar with the Library, has summarized its strength as consisting of four factors: proximity to the parliamentarians, easy contacts, confidentiality and flexibility of the schedules. In Ottawa, the leaders of the opposition began by rejecting the idea of attaching the research service to the Library: "... the primary reason was their desire to have personnel who enjoyed the fullest possible confidence of the party people and this ... the personnel of the Library of Parliament had never been able to achieve, primarily because of their having to serve members of all parties equally:" (E.R. Black, "Opposition Research : Some Theories and Practice ", *Canadian Public Administration*", Spring, 1972, p. 28).
6. A sum of \$50,000 was approved on July 2, 1970 under the budget item "Office and other expenses". The amount was to be identified during the following year (*Journal des débats*, July 2, 1970, pp. 655-656). One of the opposition political groupings apparently spent \$9,200 for this purpose between September 1970 and March 1971 (*Ibid.*, May 14, 1971, p. 1593).
  7. Maurice Champagne, "Budgets de recherche des partis politiques, 1970-1984", *Bulletin de la Bibliothèque ...*, Vol. 15 Nos. 3/4 (December 1985), pp. 5-7.
  8. In Ottawa, in comparison, the Research Service accounted for 31.6% of the Library's staff in 1996-97 and 30.7% one year later (*Annual Report of the Librarian of Parliament, 1996-97*, p. 25; *Ibid.*, 1997-98, Appendix A).
  9. See N. Miller, "Legislative staff services: toxin, specific or placebo", *Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 2, June 1967, pp. 384 ff.
  10. 206 and 340 projects in 1982 and in 1983 respectively.
  11. In fact, it can be observed from one year to another that requests submitted to the Service "are spread more or less evenly through the year" and even that "the average number of projects completed during the months when the Assembly is not sitting is slightly higher than the figure for the months when it is in session" (*Rapport annuel pour l'année terminée le 31 mars 1998*, p. 5).
  12. Three officers who had among them almost fifty years of experience retired between September 1996 and March 1997.
  13. "We hope to be able to work in the near future in closer co-operation with the legislative committees. New provisions would allow for active participation in this area" (Jacques Prémont in *Bulletin de la Bibliothèque*, Vol. 8, No. 1, January-February 1977, p. 11).
  14. William H. Robinson examined the problem in a paper entitled *Research and Analytical services for National Legislatures: A Preliminary Analysis*. See <http://www.citec.com.au/iflaparl>.
-