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# Rethinking the Role of Parliamentary Libraries

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by Gaston Bernier

*Parliamentary and legislative libraries usually have a very pragmatic approach to the documentary needs of elected representatives and their staffs. The collections built up over the past 200 years devoted considerable room to literary and scientific classics, alongside publications of governments and assemblies themselves, as well as national, regional and local newspapers. In many cases, legislative libraries, which appeared before so-called national libraries and often before public libraries, acquired and conserved documents in all possible disciplines and all fields of interest. However, thinking about the documentary needs of national or local elected representatives has been very limited, judging from the few publications on the subject in the past 50 years. This article suggests we need to rethink the role of libraries to serve the needs of legislators.*

The documentary needs of elected representatives are based on the duties that fall to them: legislation, monitoring of government action, liaison between citizens and government, facilitation of society as a whole. The necessary and desired documentation will differ with the member, type of activity he or she favours and the member's area of intervention (economy, culture, social issues, public education and so on). In all cases, it will be taken for granted that the library or documentation centre will have and conserve as much data as possible, current and up to date, on the national situation: publications of the government, government departments and agencies, national and local newspapers, monographs on the country and its regions and so on. This kind of collection will be of use to all members, regardless of their chosen fields. Beyond that, the legislative specialist should have suitable collections, the comptroller as well, and so on. It would be interesting to see whether these assumptions can be verified and

whether assemblies can use them to derive guidelines for the immediate future and the longer term. In the same line of thinking, an attempt could be made to determine whether the information needs of parliamentarians are different depending whether one views Parliament as a whole, committees, political groups and parties and, lastly, parliamentarians taken individually.

In recent years, a significant convergence has been observed between research services, independent and library services, and parliamentary committees. Previously, the services provided at the request of committees represented a small portion of the total number of hours worked. The support of research department officers appears to be highly appreciated by parliamentarians and committee management teams. In this area, collaboration does not go so far as to include documentary information specialists in the strict sense of that term. Should that possibility be considered, or can research department officers continue acting in this capacity?

In attempting to determine the documentary requirements of the parliamentary environment, other approaches can be used, with the emphasis on the types of information that are desired or useful. The typologies

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presented in a North American context could help determine a division between the contribution of libraries and those of other bodies, because it must be observed that libraries must rely on multiple sources of information and that politicians do not hesitate to use the full range of sources. Consequently, the distinctions between information (from raw data to their interpretation) and knowledge, and between technical information and so-called political information could help in determining documentary tasks and setting their limits or borders.

The quality and scope of services and the division of tasks between related services (research departments, parliamentary committee secretariats, procedural advisors) have been the subject of much discussion and observation. As regards substance, information forwarded to elected representatives is usually expected to come from various sources and to be complete and thorough, exhaustive and qualified, sure and reliable, rigorous, specific and objective. With respect to form, it should also be clear, condensed, summarized, concise and brief. This list of characteristics shows that, above all, internal information services have an obligation of means to their clients and correspondents. It remains to be seen whether the conditions listed above will change over the years or whether new ones will be added.

### **Organizing the Documentary Function**

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Organization of the documentary services of a parliamentary assembly presupposes parliamentary funding, a hierarchical and physical location and an internal structure.

Like all services made available to elected representatives, parliamentary libraries must have sufficient funding. However, funding is not the whole story: in a context where there is an obligation of means, very large amounts of funding could be budgeted or requested, reliance on neighbourhood centres could be disregarded as being one of the random aspects of collaboration and communication, and an encyclopaedic collection could be put together in a spirit of independence. The current technological context, communication facilities and the diversification of documentary formats must be taken into account. If that can be done, a parliamentary library should manage to focus on a certain number of essential tasks and disregard others it has previously taken on (conservation of national publications, coordination of public libraries and so on). The extent of funding that should be granted to it will depend to a large degree on the way in which responsibilities are shared within the surrounding environment and the tasks assigned to it. Funding levels observed in a number of libraries could constitute a standard that can be used or proposed. Fu-

ture allocations to the documentary function will not be as high as they have been in the past. Documentary information, which is becoming increasingly multipurpose in nature, is no longer a monopoly of libraries, and, in many situations, can be short-circuited or disregarded. The important thing is that elected representatives have access to the information they need and that the library gets the necessary resources that will enable it to meet the requests made of it.

Apart from necessary or desirable funding, another issue, or subject of discussion, is the situation of documentary services in the administrative hierarchy. In the administrative secretariats of assemblies, services that are deemed to be of strategic importance are often placed in the immediate neighbourhood or under the authority of the secretary general. In some no doubt temporary situations, they have even reported to the speakers themselves. New functions, or those that may potentially have significant impact, are usually consolidated at the top of the hierarchy. However, the increasing structuring of the administrative branches of parliamentary assemblies reduces the number of exceptions. These days, parliamentary library services have become traditional functions, their impact is well known, and the monopoly or virtual monopoly that they may have held is a thing of the past. Consequently, it is normal for a documentation centre or library to be treated like the other administrative services of assemblies.

A library considered as any department of an assembly may be part of a directorate or branch that has a certain degree of homogeneity or unity, similar concerns and thus frequent exchanges or relations. It would be entirely logical, at least at first glance, for a library to fall within the hierarchical neighbourhood of archives, research departments, committees and even, to name only a few examples, public information services or even parliamentary documents distribution services. However, since horizontal organization charts appear to be well suited to the administration of political organizations, consolidations would be more secondary, on an equal footing with lines of authority. It has been observed that the political environment influences administrative operation: orders and commands are less important than negotiations and consensus. In other words, then, well justified administrative organization charts and consolidations would not have any decisive effect on the operation or performance of the services concerned. However, the subject is undoubtedly worthy of some attention and research.

In the same line of thinking, various administrative arrangements have been adopted. William Robinson has identified at least four: integrated services, articulated

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services, independent services and dispersed services.<sup>1</sup> In some parliaments, documentary services are independent of each other, while in others the library is used as a consolidating entity. Elsewhere, the research service was established first and is responsible for the library. The first arrangement is in effect at France's National Assembly, the second in British-style parliaments, and the third in Washington and Tokyo. Without viewing any one of these arrangements as an administrative gamble, one could examine the basis or philosophy, if there is one, of the three approaches and determine which one might be suited to the new reality and to the future.

The internal administrative structure of a parliamentary library or documentation centre is a different matter. Here, one gets the impression that dullness, pragmatism and mimicry prevail. Every traditional library has its entry and acquisitions service, its cataloguing and filing or processing service, its reader service and its reference service. Peripheral services are sometimes associated with them (research, citizen information, archives, etc.). There is every reason to believe that the internal organization of tomorrow will differ only slightly from current practices, despite technical improvements in communications and information, although certain adjustments would be desirable.

In addition to the internal organization of libraries and their position in the organization charts of administrative secretariats, their physical location and even surface area should also be considered. As libraries appeared very early on, they usually inherited premises near the parliamentary chambers and the offices of elected representatives. At the time, secretariats and services were small organizations. Communications were not what they are now, to say the least. Consequently, it was considered normal and even logical for documentation and documentation specialists to be at the heart or centre of parliamentary institutions. But will similar choices be made in the future? Computer storage, retrieval and communication technologies could obviate the need for readers, that is to say parliamentarians, their immediate associates and public servants, to go to a library, and the physical location of a parliamentary library could lose its strategic importance. In some areas, experts and students are already better served by using their computers than by going physically to the library, which does not mean that the involvement of information officers would be superfluous. The miniaturization and digitization of documents makes the search for space less of an issue for parliamentary libraries, whose conservation mission concerns only a portion of their collections.

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## Staff

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The documentation world is constantly improving; it continues to rely on increasingly powerful technologies and, at the same time, there is a need for resource sharing and specialization. In addition, widespread electronic access to certain collections and data bases means that readers can retrieve and consult documents without going through a library. In that case, one may well wonder whether the number of library employees will increase, remain stable or decline, both in absolute terms and compared to other parliamentary services. Some traditional library sectors are undergoing significant changes: cataloguing, previously conducted independently, has now become a shared undertaking; binding is losing importance with the increase in the number of microfilms, microfiches and CD-ROMs; and consultation of electronic rather than printed publications should reduce the importance of shelving. What is more important will be the added efficiency of referencers as a result of computerized search methods. Given all these and other changes, choices must be made: maintain the level of services and reduce staff or improve services and retain current positions, or assign the library new responsibilities and functions.

In addition to influencing the number of library employees, and their number as a percentage of parliamentary public service employees, current developments in communication and information technologies will also mean changes in training and requirements for new recruits and training and development programs for current staff. The fundamental nature of documentary work remains constant over time, and it would be easy to illustrate the continuum that characterizes its evolution. However, the increase in data flows and in the number of technologies and means currently available to librarians and information officers are both new and out of all proportion to what societies knew 50 years ago. It may therefore be taken for granted that the documentation specialists recruited from now on will be knowledgeable about modern computer devices and mechanisms and that they will be able to use them effectively and to teach politicians and their assistants how to use them. One may also hope that the information officers on staff will have diversified training and fields of interest, given the universality of the concerns of parliamentarians (and governments), and that they will be able to shield them from the documentary deluge. Globalization should also lead authorities to determine certain language requirements: it may be supposed that a team of referencers could include individuals with a passive or functional knowledge of the most important foreign languages for a given political entity. They should also ad-

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dress certain concerns, such as that of acting as filters and providing parliamentary readers with only the essential substance of information, because too much documentation is almost as bad as none at all. Lastly, the employees of tomorrow will have to instantly take into consideration changes to the responsibilities and centres of interest of individual parliamentarians.

## Technology

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All areas of parliamentary documentation are affected, improved or reinforced by the new computer resources available. There is no comparison between today's instantaneous communications and the relative slowness previously observed. Just think of the time it took in nineteenth century America to obtain a volume published in Europe or to get mail or newspapers. Think of how hard it was to reproduce a document: it had to be copied by hand or by copyists. Think of the isolation of libraries at the time and their rudimentary, manual retrieval systems. And there was only one format at the time, the printed document. Without providing an exhaustive list, one can say that the changes have been numerous: CD-ROMs, microfilm and microfiche, in addition to books and periodicals, electronic links to domestic and international libraries, new means of reproduction (photocopying and digitization), fast transmission channels and powerful and often universal retrieval tools.

Parliamentary libraries should be able to follow the general development trend of national documentary communities in the area of communication and information technology. While they are not technological laboratories, they should be able to integrate rapidly technologies that have been adopted in other countries and, ultimately, those recommended by specialized international organizations so that collaboration and cooperation among them are easy and natural.

New technologies are, if not a unique opportunity for parliamentary libraries, at least incomparable instruments in a number of respects. Researchers and information officers, parliamentarians and citizens currently have direct access to North American and Western information. However, local and national information for a vast majority of countries and parliaments, is unretrievable, or at least difficult to retrieve, because indexes are lacking, as, in some instances, are complete collections of newspapers and major series of government or parliamentary publications. Here is a field that should be occupied locally. Electronic formats, such as CD-ROMs, and especially digital libraries, and the possibility of remote consulting of the collections of a third political entity or of accessing them instantly through

document transmission systems (Ariel software in particular<sup>2</sup>), will release foreign libraries from the need to keep those collections on their shelves or in their data bases.<sup>3</sup> In this way, in the vast majority of cases, every library will be able to remove certain collections for bibliographical processing and classification purposes, and focus on local documentation. The contribution of computer technologies will make it easier to provide parliamentarians with support and service by making it easier to manage parliamentarians' profiles and centres of interest and to provide them with the right documentation at the right time, and to do so rapidly.

Unfortunately, much remains to be clarified before the situation regarding electronic documentation can be stabilized and rationalized. For the moment, in the area of conservation, librarians do not know where to turn or who is responsible for electronically conserving the documentation of their own government, even less so that of foreign countries. In short, libraries continue to duplicate and triplicate. Since it is not known whether an interesting document made available on a Web site will be there for long, and since we are not sure whether someone is responsible for conserving it for the long term, we make a paper copy, bind it, catalogue it and make it physically available to clients. This means that uncertainty and vague practices are perpetuating obsolete models. There has to be a rationalization effort, which need not necessarily come from parliamentary libraries. However, they should at least raise the issue and make the appropriate authorities aware of it.

## Conclusion

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Parliamentary libraries possess incomparable collections of their own. They conserve historical treasures and consider it a duty to collect political documents; they strive to prepare indexes and directories designed to facilitate retrieval from immense bodies of information. Perhaps it is time for them to take on official responsibility within the network of libraries of the various countries, to become, as one former Australian parliamentary librarian suggests, a kind of national library of the political life of a given territory.<sup>4</sup>

The changes outlined above, which will affect parliamentary libraries in future, will occur without altering the underlying reality or major parameters. However, libraries could become more a part of their documentary environment, participate in the sharing of national documentary resources and, in that capacity, stop conserving rarely consulted documents that can already be accessed remotely.

One thing is certain, and that is that the libraries and documentation centres of assemblies and parliaments

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will have to be designed, above all, for elected representatives and their assistants. They must define themselves as providing a service for legislators and parliamentarians of all kinds. They must, one could say, operate on the basis of the activities of the collective organizations of parliament, but also of parliamentarians individually.

### Notes

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1. Jean-François Le Men, *L'information du Parlement français*, "Notes et études documentaires", 4758 (Paris: La Documentation française, 1984), 140 pp.
2. A library that has an "Ariel station" and up-to-date computer equipment can digitize or scan documents and send pictures via the Internet to other Ariel stations, where they can be printed. Recipients can receive documents via e-mail.
3. As Ms. Simone Signori, member of the National Assembly at the time, said: "... libraries can now rely on each other for peripheral, secondary or foreign collections, and will increasingly be able to do so in the coming years." *Bulletin de la Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée nationale*, Vol. 29, Nos. 3-4, October 2000, pp. 7-8.
4. R.L. Cope, "If special libraries are disappearing, why are parliamentary libraries surviving? Contradictory currents and changing perceptions," *The Australian Library Journal*, November 2000, pp. 307-326.