
The Library's Research Service: Added Value for Parliamentarians

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Canada has one of the libraries in the Commonwealth that provides the most complete range of research and analysis services to legislators. At a recent presentation to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) in Singapore, the Canadian Parliamentary Librarian outlined how Canada provides research support to parliamentarians. Over the years many countries have been impressed by the services available to Canadian parliamentarians and have inquired about considerations to keep in mind when establishing similar services. This paper summarizes the thoughts that were shared with international colleagues interested in establishing their own research service.

Early in Canadian parliamentary history, a need was identified for parliamentarians to have access to tailored information and knowledge to help them fulfil their roles as legislators, decision-makers and representatives of the people. In 1876, less than ten years following Confederation, the Library of Parliament of Canada opened its doors on Parliament Hill. At the time, books were the primary repository of "knowledge," and decision-makers had few other sources of information on which they could rely as they steered the young country. Today, one of the unique features of the Library is that its collection focuses on specific areas that are relevant to parliamentarians: law, economics, political theory, international relations, history, and resource management, among others.

Since that time, the Library has evolved to include hundreds of journals and periodicals, as well as electronic material and data; it has also developed a research and analysis capacity in various areas of public policy. In 2015, the Library will celebrate 50 years of providing research and analysis services to parliamentarians. From modest beginnings, with only five researchers in the 1960s, the research service has matured into a professional unit relying on the expertise of over 80 research analysts and a dozen research librarians, supplemented by a separate centre of excellence on economic and financial matters created in 2008 and headed by the Parliamentary

Budget Officer. The growth in demand for research and analysis over the years is directly linked to the relevance of this support to Parliament: 413 parliamentarians, 50 parliamentary committees and 12 parliamentary associations.

Informed Decision-Making: What Google Cannot Offer

Parliamentarians have different backgrounds and interests, and they cannot be experts in all matters of public policy. Given that parliamentarians have extremely busy schedules, they have limited time to devote to researching the underpinnings of the public policy issues confronting them. While some may become immersed in the intricacies of a thorny public policy, the majority will be seeking timely and accessible information from a source to which they can turn when they are unaware of the crux of the issue at hand or the purpose of the latest bill. They are not aiming to become experts, but they want to be informed on the issue so that they can make a positive impact.

While internet search engines such as Google or online repositories of information like Wikipedia make it easy to find information quickly, the real challenge lies in its interpretation. Parliamentary libraries and research services do not simply help parliamentarians find relevant and authoritative information; they also make sense of the information by analyzing its various dimensions and relating it

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to the work of Senators and Members of Parliament. Researchers monitor public policy issues on an ongoing basis and are skilled at linking their development to the policy or program agenda of the government as it is considered by Parliament. The public service performs a similar function for Cabinet members who are associated with the Ministry; however, of 413 Canadian parliamentarians, less than 10% are part of the Ministry. The majority do not have direct access to the public service for advice on public policy.

Parliamentarians rely on a range of other sources for advice. Their political staff develops expertise over time, and political parties share key analysis aligned with their platforms. The media and lobbyists often come forward with arguments in favour of particular outcomes on public policy; however, many parliamentarians value the opportunity to access analysis that is politically neutral and fact-based, reflecting a range of perspectives that they may wish to consider as they exercise their parliamentary duties and/or seek re-election.

Ingredients for Success

Conversations with international parliamentarians point to three common needs: finding information quickly; understanding tabled legislation; and accessing critical information and analysis on annual spending budgets. As parliamentary administrations consider developing a research service, they should ensure that their staff includes research librarians, who can find relevant, authoritative information quickly; lawyers, who can explain proposed legislation, how it relates to existing law, and the changes being proposed; and economists, who can assess the economic and financial context in which Parliament adopts policies and programs. As parliamentary research services develop their base and benefit from expanded budgetary resources to better serve their clients, they would be well advised to hire employees with other professional backgrounds as well. Public policy issues have many different angles, and the addition of social science experts, scientists and others strengthens the expertise available to parliamentarians.

Over the long term, credibility for sound analysis will be measured by availability, irrespective of the political context prevailing, and equality of service to all parliamentarians. It is therefore critical to avoid commenting on policy options, focus on facts and leave political parties to provide policy advice. A corollary to this approach is the practice of acquiring and providing statistical information whenever available and appropriate. Many countries have statistical agencies, but these are often limited to the

presentation of statistics, without analysis of trends. A parliamentary research service would be well advised to invest resources in acquiring data sets that it can tap into to present information and analysis tailored to the needs of the parliamentarians it serves. Hiring a data librarian and/or statistician could be a good use of resources. Experience in the United States and Chile, for example, shows that devoting resources to the implementation of a data visualization capacity, such as Geospatial Information Systems (GIS), enhances the ability to communicate complex issues. The majority of parliamentarians have neither the time nor the inclination to read long and technical documents, and the use of maps and graphs to convey analysis of complex public policy issues is often greatly appreciated.

Analysis Equals Added Value

Parliamentarians (or more often their staff) choose to interact with the Library only if it brings them value beyond the more easily and publicly accessible sources. A parliamentary research service must be able to tailor its analytical support to the parliamentary nature of its clients' business, in a way that alternative sources of information cannot easily replicate. The Library of Parliament faces this challenge with three clusters of analytical activities.

- *Every election brings a new cohort of parliamentarians, who may not be familiar with the issues they will be called upon to address in their role as elected representatives.* Shortly after an election, the Library's research staff provides overviews of key issues that will soon require the attention of Parliament. They analyze issues emerging from current public policy debates and draw links to the upcoming review or development of new regulations, legislation or formal agreements with other jurisdictions, which will require parliamentarians to address the issues directly.
- *In support of the legislative role of parliamentarians, the Library's research service offers a suite of services to enhance a parliamentarian's fluency with the content of legislation being considered by Parliament.* Researchers develop summaries of bills tabled by the government, explaining the intent of the proposed legislation and its interaction with existing laws. Library employees track the progress of legislation in Parliament and make themselves available to provide personalized, confidential briefings for parliamentarians who may be struggling with the complexities of issues being addressed by a proposed bill. Given the political neutrality of Library employees, parliamentarians can feel free to ask questions without fear of judgement of their lack of awareness of the topic; likewise, they need not manage any lobbying efforts from their interlocutors. For parliamentarians who

wish to submit a private member's bill, Library employees are available to assist in crystallizing the intent of the proposed bill and to work with the parliamentarian to prepare drafting instructions for the legal drafters, who will eventually turn the idea into a bill.

- Holding government to account is a key role for parliamentarians. Throughout the life of a Parliament, parliamentarians are called upon to analyze budgets and government estimates as well as the economic health of the country. Library researchers have expertise in monitoring the alignment of what has been voted on in Parliament, the policies and programs implemented by the government and the impact these have on citizens (as assessed by various analysts such as agents of Parliament, think tanks, academics, and others.) Parliamentarians often comment on the difficulty they face in making sense of it all within what is generally a short timeframe. The Library's employees, therefore, focus on decoding this information and presenting it in a format and language that align with activities conducted in Parliament. To do so, they must pull together and analyze data, studies, testimony, and so on. They then adapt their written and verbal briefings to specific contexts, such as reviews of and voting on government estimates, analysis of budget measures by parliamentary committees, and studies of the Auditor General's reports, to name just a few. *Library analysts scan all perspectives and present a factual picture of the elements to be considered by parliamentarians; they strive to "connect the dots."*

Capturing Corporate Memory

Parliamentarians and their staff are a relatively transient population. The average length of service in the Canadian Parliament varies between six and eight years. During this period, parliamentarians may be called upon to play different roles, reflecting changes in committee assignments, assignments as

party critic on a specific issue, or even movement in or out of Cabinet. In addition, their staff members are often young, ambitious, and energetic employees who take advantage of opportunities to further their careers with relatively frequent changes of assignments. As parliamentarians and/or their staff tackle new portfolios, they frequently turn to librarians and researchers for a quick analysis of what occurred in their file in the past.

In light of the need to respond quickly to such requests for information and analysis, the Library must rely on a solid Information Management (IM) system. Librarians are IM specialists, trained to capture information in such a way that it can be retrieved from large databases with relative ease. To be successful, a research service should be aligned with an IM infrastructure that is designed and operated by skilled employees who can leverage the possibilities of modern information technology and a keen interest in client-centered service.

Ultimately, parliamentarians seek the information or knowledge that will give them an edge over their political opponents. Faced with an ocean of information, parliamentary research services can assist them in navigating the various currents with relevant, concise, and timely analysis. As Canada's Parliamentary Librarian, I am proud of the support we provide to the Parliament of Canada, but, at the same time, I am keenly aware that we need to continue assessing how best to meet our clients' expectations and add value to our services. Throughout the years, the Library of Parliament has accompanied parliamentarians as they carry out their important democratic duties. Our goal is to continue supporting them on this journey, remaining flexible and responsive in the years to come.