

The Quebec Legislative Library: The End of an Era

by Gaston Bernier

Jacques Prémont, head of the Library of the Quebec National Assembly since October 1969 has retired. Parliamentary librarians tend to be a tenacious lot. In Great Britain the average term in office since 1818 has been over 17 years. In Ottawa there have been only five parliamentary librarians in 125 years. There is clearly something in the nature of the work that encourages length of service. Still one does not last as long as Jacques Prémont unless one possesses some vision of what the job should entail and is able to convince one's political masters to share that vision. This article outlines some achievements, including increased professionalization, administrative reorganization, the expansion of services for MNAs, and technological innovations during Jacques Prémont's quarter century in charge of the Quebec Legislative Library.

At the end of the 1960s, the Library and its influence depended largely on the multi-faceted energy and skills of the late Jean-Charles Bonenfant a widely respected law teacher, literary critic and political advisor. When he left the Library had forty positions, of which about fifteen were filled by casual or seconded employees. There was only one qualified librarian and a few semi-professionals. Twenty-three years later, the Library's staff comprises eighty-two person/years, twenty-eight of them for professionals. This growth reflects Jacques Prémont's understanding of and commitment to the modern science of records management in society and the information requirements of legislators in particular.



Jacques Prémont
(Ministère des Communications, Québec)

Gaston Bernier has been Assistant Director of the National Assembly's Library since 1986. He has worked at the Library since 1970.

Jacques Prémont also made a determined and ultimately successful effort to convince legislators that the Library should constitute a directorate within the National Assembly. A committee recommended this in 1976 but it took 15 more years of lobbying by Mr. Prémont (who often pointed to practices at other parliamentary libraries as support for his proposal) before the authorities finally conceded that he was right, and made the Library a directorate.

He was equally successful in expanding the range of the Library's products and services. When he took over in 1969, Library services were not differentiated. The organization chart showed collaborators rather than specialized services. Early in 1970 he introduced units responsible for handling documentation and for service to the clientele. A research service was established in the fall of 1971 and in June 1973 a service for reconstituting the debates was created. In 1976 a press documentation service was started from scratch. Then came a period of expansion: the Library took charge of the units responsible for indexing Hansard, the archives and management of the Assembly's administrative records.

Mr. Prémont supported many projects unreservedly and directly encouraged many others. New resources and specialization led to multiplication of products. The list of publications and parapublications distributed in one form or another in the course of his mandate includes more than 350 titles and no fewer than 375 periodical issues. The *Bulletin* of the Library which began in 1970 has been issued 60 times so far. He also sponsored and followed closely the creation of a retrospective index of private legislation. Another project was resumption of the publication of in-house reports, a practice that had been abandoned in 1936.

Under Mr. Prémont's direction, important changes were made in the documentation and information available to the Library's clients. In the late 1970s the Library joined a shared cataloguing network. Since then it has joined a large number of data banks. Currently most Library functions are automated or on the point of

being so. This evolution (some people might call it a revolution!) was approached with enthusiasm but also with prudence. Jacques Prémont's positive attitude to modernization meant that it was to all intents and purposes inevitable. But his critical intelligence helped to avoid many problems that inevitably accompany far-reaching change.

His leadership had its effect on the Library's outside influence as well. He always encouraged the Library to play an active role in national and international library associations and made a point of establishing lasting ties with his counterparts elsewhere. He urged his colleagues to co-operate with record-keeping units in other sectors. Aspects of this co-operation included the creation of a union catalogue of the volumes in administrative libraries, a similar catalogue of periodicals, and Library support for computerization of such libraries. Mr. Prémont's regular participation in the activities of the Association des bibliothécaires québécois and of ASTED (the Association pour l'avancement des sciences et des techniques de la documentation) was well known. He worked actively to set up the Association of Parliamentary Librarians in Canada and after it was founded he twice (1978 and 1992) welcomed its members to Quebec City. He regarded it as an honour to represent parliamentary libraries in the appropriate section of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. He was also involved in many of Quebec City's community and cultural organizations, but his work there lies beyond the scope of this article.

Personality counts for a great deal in all these achievements. In his dealings with the administrative and political authorities at the Assembly, Mr. Prémont was affable and open. He strove constantly for consensus among his colleagues before deciding on solutions. For almost twenty-five years he was a manager who believed in decentralization, or perhaps "deconcentration" would be a better word. He knew how to trust, how to delegate, in short how to let his employees do it their way. He will be fondly remembered by all. ♦