

Parliamentary Libraries

By H.F. Coxon*

AUSTRALIA has a federal system of government comprising six States and two internal territories. The six State legislatures of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania all have properly established libraries staffed by professional librarians. In the self-governing Northern Territory the Legislative Assembly while maintaining a library collection has yet to appoint a professional librarian. The Federal Parliament located at Canberra within the Australian Capital Territory is served by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library. Overall, however, parliamentary libraries, despite their relative numeric strength, are not a major element in the national library scene, either in terms of their staffing or their collections. Their importance stems from their few if influential clients.

Historical background

Parliamentary libraries have a long history; many were the first publicly-funded libraries in their State. Most were established in the mid-nineteenth century and regrettably remained there until well into the twentieth century. The New South Wales Parliamentary Library dates from 1840, the Victorian Parliamentary Library from 1851, the Parliamentary Library of South Australia from 1854 and the Queensland Parliamentary Library from 1860. It would be fair to say that until recent times parliamentary libraries have taken little initiative in professional matters. The sovereign nature of Parliament led to jealously guarded separate development

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so that parliamentary libraries did not see that they had some degree of interest in common with their colleagues in other States or other colleagues in the profession. It would probably not be unreasonable to go so far as to say that during their early history parliamentary libraries played a largely recreational role within the ambit of the gentleman's club to which colonial legislatures often seemed akin.

Perhaps the first significant change came with the new century and the creation of the Commonwealth Parliament. Certainly, over time, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library developed as a major Australian library resource. Indeed, until the 1960s the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library in some ways came to adopt a position analogous to the Library of Congress in the United States and performed many of the functions of a national library.

Development of research services

Australian parliamentary libraries remain disparate and difficult to categorise as a group. The differences in size, for instance, are considerable ranging from the nearly 200 staff of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library to the four staff of the Tasmanian Parliamentary Library. Nevertheless, it can probably be said that in recent times parliamentary libraries have experienced a greater degree of change in their role than most other kinds of library. This change has resided in a number of features, the principal of which has been the development of research services. Symptomatic of the generally greater emphasis on user services in libraries, which has extended to most types of library since the end of World War II, the services which parliamentary libraries have developed for their clientele have gone beyond anything achieved in other libraries.

Parliamentary libraries have sought to recruit staff to provide members with detailed written and oral briefings on any subjects they might request. Consequently, these staff have come from outside the profession of librarianship; from a wide range of other disciplines. Not surprisingly because of its greater resources it is in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library that these developments have progressed furthest. The Legislative Research Service was established in 1966 and based on the

already existing Congressional Research Service in Washington, D.C. There were originally six members of the service. Today there are around forty. The members of the service are divided into seven groups: Defence; Economics and Commerce; Science, Technology and the Environment; and Statistics. These officers are able to offer specialist advice to members, their function being to analyse information, to present fact and to present argument and to do these last effectively by being able to write well. They must be able to draw relevant information together, to point to conclusions, to draw alternatives or to put a case, pro or con. The principal function of the library as simply a manager of documents is clearly eclipsed by the development of these personal, high-level services. Indeed, research services themselves contribute to library documentation: in the form of bills digests summarising the purpose of legislation, papers on current topics and commissioned reports.

The success of the Legislative Research Service in Canberra has been significant. The impact of its example has been felt by all parliamentary libraries in Australia. In 1976 two research officers were appointed to the South Australian Parliamentary Library and in 1983 two officers were similarly appointed to the Victorian Parliamentary Library. The demand apparent with the appointment of research staff has invariably led to pressure for more positions. In South Australia, where extra funding has not been provided, some of the increase in demand has been accommodated by integrating almost all professional staff into a single more flexible research service with responsibility for a wider range of functions. Such an arrangement has been operating in the Queensland Parliamentary Library since 1975 where there are now in total nine research officers. All three of these State parliamentary libraries with research officers produce research reports for general circulation.

Media monitoring

A second principal area where parliamentary libraries have been innovatory is in the area of media monitoring. The symbiotic relationship between politics and the press is obvious. And parliamentary libraries have for some period provided newspaper clippings services which allow for the quick retrieval of stories which have appeared in the press. Similar comprehensive services have perhaps only been maintained in the past by newspaper libraries but the services are typical of the kind of refinements in information delivery which have been demanded by Members of Parliament.

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It is a phenomenon regularly remarked on that the electronic media have developed an importance in relation to politics that few anticipated a generation ago. Parliamentary libraries have accordingly been quick to adjust to the need to provide members with access to the electronic media as well as the traditional print media. The Queensland Parliamentary Library stands perhaps as a model in the level of service it offers in this area. Not only are programmes recorded and edited for members' use and reference and generous viewing facilities provided both within the library and at other points around Parliament House, but the Queensland Parliamentary Library has additionally assumed overall responsibility for the automatic monitoring of proceedings when Parliament is sitting.

The New South Wales Parliamentary Library has, like Queensland, taken the opportunity offered by new premises to establish another successful media monitoring service in which radio and television programmes, recorded not only by the library but also by the Premier's Department may be relayed to a number of offices in the new Parliament House. A viewing room has been established in addition to space provided for recording, editing and storage.

Among other parliamentary libraries the scale of operations may differ but the commitment remains similar. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Library for instance has a major unit, its Current Information Service, which prepares transcripts of television and radio programmes: while the smallest parliamentary library, the Tasmanian, has a single video cassette recorder and records programmes on request.

Other services

The two trends outlined are not of course the extent of the service provided by parliamentary libraries. They simply illustrate the kind of responses which have been made to the unique demands currently placed on a parliamentary library by its clientele. It is perhaps this uniqueness which presently sets parliamentary libraries apart in the library world. Parliamentary librarians find it difficult to convey to colleagues the weight of the pressure from parliamentarians for immediate, accurate and full information from the widest possible range of sources. Nor is it easy to convey the nature of Parliament as an organisation since it is concerned with discussion and debate rather than orderly decision-making. At the immediate level, for instance, this can mean that the Librarian on a sitting day has to provide open-ended service so long as the Parliament sits. Pressures also vary considerably between sessional and out-of-session times which themselves can be varied at short notice. At a broader level, the Parliament lacks

any corporate objectives and proper administrative framework, so many of the structures and procedures familiar to other organisations tend to be lacking. The vacuum can too often be filled by personal whim or the grinding of political axes.

Networking and resource sharing

Yet while they have not become well integrated into the overall library scene (no parliamentary library for instance is a full participant in the Australian Bibliographic Network), parliamentary libraries among themselves have been no less concerned than other libraries in recent times with networking and shared resources. This trend has been another major feature of the development of parliamentary libraries in the last few years.

For over a century parliamentary libraries remained isolated, possibly never meeting their colleagues in other States. This situation obtained while curiously the major part of the collections of each library were built up under a series of reciprocal arrangements on a Parliament-to-Parliament basis for the exchange of the principal series of official publications. It was an irony that these arrangements began to break down through the pressure of outside forces, notably implementation of the 'user pays' principle, at the same time as ties between the librarians were formalised by the establishment of an Association of Parliamentary Librarians of Australasia (APLA), New Zealand being also a member.

Conferences and meetings

Biennial conferences among parliamentary librarians were inaugurated in 1972 thus establishing the way for regular consultation and the exchange of views. After a decade, at the Adelaide Conference in 1982, it was thought desirable to formalise and strengthen the relationships that had developed and in 1984 APLA came into being. In consequence, the librarians who constitute the Association now have an organisation that can express their common viewpoint and represent them in dealings with outside bodies, be they government departments or other groups of librarians. And the Parliamentary Librarians now meet on an annual basis to discuss the issues that affect them.

Principal among these issues has been the establishment of a computer-based information network which was originally proposed at the 1980, Conference of Parliamentary Librarians held in Canberra. A thesaurus was the first stage of the project to come to fruition—a list of subject headings for use specifically by parliamentary libraries and as a common index tool

for a networked system. However, the President of the Senate in 1984 refused to endorse a system to include only parliamentary libraries, preferring a Parliament-to-Parliament arrangement. This made the proposal considerably more difficult to achieve and further progress has been limited.

More success has attended a less grandiose concept—the improvement of communication between parliamentary libraries by the installation of a network of facsimile machines in all the libraries. The machines allow for the fast exchange of information between libraries and extend the information resources immediately available to members of individual parliaments to include those of other parliaments.

Development assistance activities

Another co-operative venture that reflects the political environment in which parliamentary libraries operate is the helping hand programme for parliamentary libraries of the South-West Pacific region developed as part of Australian aid to developing nations. This matter had been discussed at the political level at a Regional Conference of Presiding Officers and Clerks held in Nauru in June 1983 and at the regional Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Conference held in Hobart in November 1983. The President of the Senate at the Conference of Parliamentary Librarians in Brisbane in 1984 raised the question of the role that parliamentary libraries could specifically play and got approval for a scheme which would comprise training courses run by staff of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library and periods of attachment for staff of Pacific legislatures in the libraries of Australian parliaments. During 1984–85 eight officers attended a two-week basic skills training course in Canberra with attachments thereafter to the Commonwealth and New Zealand parliamentary libraries and the Queensland, Tasmanian, Victoria and Western Australian parliamentary libraries.

Summing up ...

It will be evident to what degree parliament libraries are susceptible to the direct influence of their political masters. To this extent parliamentary libraries can find their initiatives unsustainable and easily lose control of their own affairs. The unique service which is provided by parliamentary libraries with its emphasis on personal attention has given these libraries a common bond but also made them different from other libraries, a difference expressed by lack of involvement in national library affairs. Accordingly, the place of parliamentary libraries in a national information system remains problematic.