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Giving politicians information

Today there are more and more opportunities for information seekers to 'get it themselves'. It is in the interests of 'down-sizing', 'cost-cutting', and re-engineering' for example that we too in our libraries and information centres are adopting ways in which our clients can self-serve even to the point of checking out an item. So where does this leave us as information employees?

My visits in recent times to some of Australia's parliamentary libraries have demonstrated to me that there is one breed of human being who likes to receive assistance, indeed often demands it, and in copious quantities; today's politicians and their staff.

The lengthy definition of 'parliament' in my shorter *Oxford* tells me that the word is derived from the French, 'parler' and before that, the Latin 'parlamentare' — to parley; to speak. Which indeed many of our politicians do, often at great length. We in the information game like to think that our political masters and their debate are well-informed and that they wish it to remain that way. Sometimes one wonders when one listens to parliamentary debate. But it is not for the want of trying by our information colleagues who work in our parliamentary libraries.

Information services in today's parliamentary libraries, as you will read in *inCite*, range from the neat, quick, reference inquiry to detailed and well-considered reports on many topics. Professional staff include librarians, subject specialists and information technology experts. Information professionals in this area need to keep abreast of political developments in their state, in the national and perhaps — depending on the interests of their parliament — the world.

Yet we all know that no library can hold all of the world's information in order to satisfy the range of requests which many a parliamentary librarian might receive. This as well-demonstrated to me in my many visits to the Western Australian Parliamentary Library, cramped for space (although there have been some gains in recent times) and therefore unable to hold much of the information it required access to. Electronic means are well used, but they do not provide all of the answers. So it is through a well-developed network of information colleagues, mainly in Perth, that the library staff are able to access information quickly and often 'yesterday'. Just as we who are those colleagues might access information from them.

And what of the politicians? My spies tell me that the most voracious client groups are the Independents and the members of the minor parties, these clients are often overwhelming in their demand for service. The incumbent government has the resources of various government departments at its disposal and might use the parliamentary library minimally. The opposition uses it much more. Client confidentiality is paramount and must be tricky to manage.

Tricky too could be the issue of performance evaluation of a parliamentary library's service. As I commented previously, if the major client group is not the government of the day, then the parliamentary library manager and staff need to ensure that these political masters still see parliamentary information services as relevant and essential.

As an academic who teaches management practices, I am aware of the challenges that are all around us. The smorgasbord of management techniques is under constant revision; as are my lecture notes! So I am one who appreciates the impact of these new ways of doing things, which then enhance my personal experiences. I hope our parliamentary library colleagues continue to share their thoughts on their challenges, because the parallels for many of us in our own working environments are evident. ∎