Efficient and effective information source

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T he essential function of parliamentary libraries is to provide their major clients — the Members who comprise the particular Legislature — with an efficient, speedy, timely, accurate and politically unbiased information service, which assists them in their varied legislative and constituency roles. This has always been a challenging and responsible task, as was well stated as far back as 1835 by Thomas Vardon, Librarian of the House of Commons, who told a Select Committee 'There is no subject connected with parliamentary business on which I am not called upon to afford instant information'.

The advent of significant electronic information gathering and dissemination tools together with the ever-increasing involvement of government in all aspects of our society has merely served to extend the need for an efficient and effective information source for Members. The 'information explosion' is no longer confined to the print media, and parliamentary libraries are increasingly required not only to access and process information covering a wide range of subject areas, but also to digest, interpret and analyse the data so that it can be more easily understood and used by their clients.

Services

The Queensland Parliamentary Library has been at the forefront of such activities for many years. In 1976 it changed from a card to a computerised cataloguing and retrieval system; in 1977 it implemented an in-house video and audio recording unit to monitor and record off-air current affairs programs; in 1979 it introduced a system to record and display on a VDU in full colour, key socio-economic statistics relating to Queensland; and 1986 saw the creation of a fully-integrated information management and records management system with networking capabilities incorporating full-text storage and retrieval, including *Hansard*. This system, marketed as Concord, has provided an efficient and effective base for all operations of the library. The library (as distinct from the Parliamentary information technology section) is entirely responsible for its management and administration. This involvement in current technology continues, with 1993 marked by the introduction of a completely electronic news cuttings service, the addition in 1996 of imaging and a Windows-based enhancement to the information management system, and transfer of the historic videotape collection to digital CD-ROM for storage and retrieval. In 1997 it is planned to permit selected Internet users to have interactive access to the library's research databases via the Queensland Parliament's home page, and also to network the library's CD-ROM resources.

Technology is important to service delivery, but quality of service remains the most important consideration for clients. The integrated Research and Reference Service established in 1978 continues to provide Members with tailored responses to individual information requests, including written research reports, and the nine professional staff are extremely busy coping with a level of demand which rarely ever decreases. The Publications and Resources Section creates and disseminates material which treats subjects of topical interests to Members generally, including analytical *Research bulletins*, as well as *Legislation bulletins* explaining Bills currently awaiting debate. The small number of professional staff responsible for these activities also produce a value-added *Quarterly bulletin of Queensland statistics*, a *Biographical guide to current members*, a triennial *Parliamentary handbook*, and an ongoing *Current awareness SDI service*.

The basic information on which these services depend is provided by a relatively small and multi-skilled Information Management Section, who acquire and fully process data for retrieval from a wide variety of sources as indicated by the title of the monthly Current Acquisitions Bulletin, *Cyberia to Brisbane*.

Features

While the range and sophistication of the services provided by a relatively modest staff establishment of thirty-two is a feature of the current Queensland Parliamentary Library, it has a significant past which is also noteworthy. It was the first publicly-funded library in Queensland (May 1860) and has retained most of the material acquired during it's first fifty years of operation, including a strong collection of nineteenth century European literature. This is known as the O'Donovan collection, in honour of the librarian responsible for its unique cataloguing and much of its content. There is limited access to items in this collection not elsewhere available in Brisbane, for bona fide researchers.

The library benefited from new premises in 1979, alleviating the over-crowding of staff and books which characterised the fifty years prior to that date. However changes in accommodation and technological advances, have not altered the need to provide services during working days which regularly exceed fourteen hours when the Parliament is in session. Such workloads and the variety of tasks placed upon staff require personnel with a unique mix of skills, and also necessitates a high level of training and staff development to promote maximum flexibility and multi-skilling. ∎

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