
Library and Research Services for Parliaments Section
Research Day. IFLA Pre-Conference Meeting
Valparaiso Chile 17-19 August, 2004



Meeting the needs of the parliamentary members in Japan

Yoshio Watarase (Deputy Director General, Research and Legislative Reference Bureau, National Diet Library, Japan)

Abstract: According to the recent changes of characteristics of Diet members, we have adopted two strategies. One is developing the electronic Information Service System. The other is conducting anticipatory research. And as the most important anticipatory one, we conduct a series of interdisciplinary research. It needs long-term study and in-depth analysis of the interconnected national issues. By this kind of research, we try to maintain the ability of our staff and meet the urgent needs of the Diet.

In Japan, we have a bicameral system. In the House of Representatives there are 480 members, and in the House of Councilors there are 247 members. So, we have about 730 parliamentary members whom we will call 'Diet members' or simply 'members' from now on. All the staff of the Research and Legislative Reference Bureau (hereafter referred to as 'the Research Bureau'), have the task of answering the requests from those members.

Regarding their characteristics, we can find some new trends. First, members, having been under pressure to do policy-making through the decade of Political Reform since the mid-1990s, are now not only younger and more specialized, but also have more computer literacy. Second, they have become more and more demanding in setting a time limit for the response to their requests. More than 70 % of the answers are expected within 48 hours. Recently we often receive a question at 5 in the evening, which has to be answered by 10 the next morning. Therefore, we regularly have to do overtime especially when the Diet is in session. Indeed, to conduct our business both quickly and accurately has been getting difficult. Third, requests from members have come to cover broader or more interconnected subjects. For instance, the Japanese people face such problems as economic hardship, constitutional amendment, pension reform and tax reform. These problems need a lot of time and cooperation among related divisions in our Research Bureau.

In order to address the above challenges, we have two strategies. Firstly, we have developed the Total System for Research and Information Service since 1996. The system was made available in 1997, helping to speed up our daily support activities and provide Diet members with access to our research findings. The system is composed of two sub-systems. One is the Tracking Request System, which records members' requests, distribution and assignment of the requests to members of our staff, actual responses by them, and approval of their performance by the seniors. Thanks to this function, we are able to monitor the status of requests, analyze and anticipate the members' needs, and utilize or update the results of past responses instantly. The other is the Information Sharing System, which stores digitized versions of our publications and a variety of research reports. We can provide them to the Diet via an intranet Web site called 'Gateway to Research'. Last year we renewed this Total System to increase its capacity and responsiveness. Since April this year we have enabled members to read our products via the Internet from their constituencies. (I owe this paragraph to Ms. Sakata's report at the 2002 APLAP Conference held in Turkey.)

Secondly, we are stressing anticipatory research. Our Bureau formulates a “ basic research work plan” just before April 1 when the new fiscal year begins. This plan is basically composed on our own initiative, and remains in effect for one or two years. Anticipatory research is carried out in accordance with this plan. On the other hand, national issues likely to be deliberated during the ordinary session are designated as “ focal research items” in January when the Diet is open. Anticipatory research on them is also conducted. The results of this research are published almost on schedule. *The Reference* is monthly, and contains papers and articles from the mid- and long-term perspective. *The Foreign Legislation* is quarterly, and is mainly composed of translations and commentaries on current legislation of foreign countries. *The Issue Brief* is irregular, and contains concise explanations and comments on the national political issues and topics now being considered in the Diet. This is limited to within 10 A4 pages. *The Research Material* is also irregular, and mainly contains the results of the interdisciplinary research (‘Sogochosa’ in Japanese) in our Bureau. In addition to these publications, we have an electronic one named *Focal Points of National Political Issues*, which is accessed by the intranet only by Diet members and their staff. This is summarized concisely within one page. We always make efforts to reflect the urgent needs of the Diet. To make sure whether our anticipatory research is appropriate or not, we conduct a small scale questionnaire once a year. In general we have had favorable answers.

Here I would like to explain some aspects of the interdisciplinary research, as the most important anticipatory one. In 2001 the Research Bureau started it under the auspices of the Interdisciplinary Research Service. This Service is staffed by four senior officials. Two of them are senior specialists, and the other two are associate senior specialists. The role of the Service is to lead the interdisciplinary research for themselves, to review all the manuscripts produced by our staff before publication, and to coordinate the interconnected subjects requested by Diet members.

From 2001 through 2002, we conducted the first research, focusing on emergency measures taken by local communities and residents against large-scale natural disasters. As you know, all the local people faced a calamity caused by a volcanic eruption on Miyakejima Island, and they hastily evacuated from the island to Japan’s mainland. In those days this was a hot national issue. The report of this research was published in July 2002. From 2002 through 2003, we conducted the second research, focusing on emergency management in major countries. This research covers the management of emergency or risks caused by terrorism such as September 11 attack, natural disasters described above, and imminent threats to national security. And the report of this research was published in June 2003. During almost the same period, we conducted another interdisciplinary research, focusing on the U.S. reforms since the 1980s. As background to this, we can refer to the economic hardship and deflation in Japan contrasting with the New Economy in the U.S. in the 1990s. We tried to look into the background, causes, and factors of the differences between the two countries, and then to derive some implications and lessons from those experiences. I was the chief of this study group, laying stress upon the capacity of ‘self-correction’ in the U.S. political system (as Professor Allen Schick pointed in his famous *The Federal Budget*) and the role of congressional support agencies such as GAO, CBO, and CRS during the fiscal restructuring period. The result of this research was published in December 2003.

So far, the theme has been selected cautiously throughout the Research Bureau. At the outset, several candidate topics are submitted from each division, then are coordinated and incorporated by the Interdisciplinary Research Service, and finally decided by Director General of the Bureau. Each research team consists of ten or more out of 175 staff in our Bureau. Younger staff have especially benefited from the process of this research. One of the reasons is that continuous coordinated work is needed among the staff in charge of various spheres. In addition, we always make efforts to do field studies in order to ascertain the actual situation and to avoid the bias caused by our propensity to overestimate the importance of paper materials. As a result, we have improved the competence of our younger staff. To our satisfaction each report has gained some reputation. Now, we are proceeding with two other interdisciplinary research projects. One is the aging society and measures to deal with it in Japan and in major industrialized nations. The other is the reconstruction or revitalization of areas which have been damaged by the long-term economic slump and the extension of depopulated or

industrially devastated districts across Japan. Both of these research projects should be and actually are given high priority in the stage of national politics.

Last but not least, let me say one more thing. As Diet members become more and more busy, they are likely to want quick, concise and summarized responses. But, if we are overly obedient to this trend, we will fall into difficulties in the future, because we run the risk of gradually losing the ability to make substantial and analytical papers. Professional expertise is often the antithesis of brevity. I am afraid that the shorter the paper becomes, the more superficial it is likely to be. Therefore we must maintain the tradition of conducting analytical and long-term research, which of course has to correspond to the needs of both current and future Diets.