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The “Disadvantaged” or “Special” Legislator Client: The Parliamentary Research Service’s Challenge

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Introduction

I think the greatest challenge facing a Parliamentary Research Service today is not so much how to cope with the rapid changes brought about by modern information technology. Rather, it is the challenge of how to handle or deal with the problems posed by what I have chosen to call, for want of a better term, the disadvantaged or special legislator. This client, in my opinion, constitutes about 20% of the legislator population in the case of Ghana and that proportion is probably similar elsewhere.

This client is, understandably, “unattractive” to deal with because he is not an ordinary client. He is the Librarian/Researcher’s Boss. There is this lurking suspicion that the Researcher might have known about the existence of this client all along but then the instinct of self-preservation might have cautioned him to choose the path of least resistance – that is to pretend that such a client did not exist. This paper wants to confirm his existence and, therefore intends to call for a healthy and dispassionate debate on the role of the Parliamentary Research Service and also help to answer the question on whether Parliamentary Research Services should “lead or follow”.

To lead or follow

Some of you may still recall that in 1995, in Istanbul, Dr J R Verrier¹ asked what appeared then to be a provocative question: “The Future of Parliamentary Research Service: To Lead or to Follow?”

It is my considered view that in order to maintain its importance and relevance the Parliamentary Research Services (PRS) must always lead. In other words in the provision of information it should always be steps ahead of the Legislator. Has it any choice in this crucial matter? It is the duty of the PRS to identify the information needs of ALL Hon. Members and try as much as possible to satisfy them. Fortunately I am not alone in this regard as William Robinson and Francis Miko² have advanced a more forceful view. According to them “The key to democracy is an effective legislature...In turn, an effective legislature in today’s complex world is dependent on information and analysis that permit it to make informed decisions”.

Admittedly many PRSs are said to be performing their roles well and according to Philip Laundry³ have metamorphosed into “a many faceted complex of information-processing operations offering everything from current awareness services to in-depth research”.

Notwithstanding this highly rated performance the PRS has an Achilles heel. It is in the form of the problem of the disadvantaged legislator client. This client has not been given the needed attention he deserves. This assertion is amply demonstrated by the various PRS client services evaluation reports. After a detailed examination of some of these reports one is tempted to conclude that the evaluations deal only with services provided to the enlightened or the “normal” legislator clients. The evaluations tend to “focus on understanding the nature and extent of clients satisfaction with PRS”.

For the sake of emphasis let me quote extensively from one of the best evaluation reports. That is the “1999 Client Services Evaluation Final Report”⁴ prepared by the Department of the Parliamentary Library of the Commonwealth of Australia”

The evaluation aimed to obtain detailed feedback from Senators and Members and their staff about the extent to which the DPL provides or could provide [certain services].

The findings of the report concluded that there was an overall client satisfaction.

Senators and Members remain highly satisfied with the service they receive from the DPL. The majority of Senators and Members consider the Library accessible and capable of meeting their individual needs. The Library's speed, flexibility and uncomplicated way it provides information was of particular importance to Senators and Members. Clients appreciated the Library’s ability to respond to a wide range of requests for information and advice...

The question, however, is what have these evaluation reports said about the disadvantaged or special client? None of the reports admitted the existence of this client. Neither was it able to identify and solicit feedback from him.

Some characteristics of the special client

Who is this special or disadvantaged client? I guess the answer may vary from Parliament to Parliament depending to a large extent on the conducive information environment prevailing and the cultural milieu in which the legislator operates.

Our special client could be the legislator who either never uses or is unlikely to use the PRS or the Library or has used it once or twice and has since not gone back.

He could be the type of very busy legislator who claims to have no time to spare for the PRS.

He could be the type who, during his previous career, was not exposed to the use of libraries but did his work all right and therefore would normally not see the need to patronise the services.

He could be that not-so-well educated introvert legislator who lacks self confidence and is afraid to expose his shortcomings to the staff.

He could be the type who, even though well educated, has, since becoming a politician, lost enthusiasm to seek information or even read as he used to do previously.

He could be that type of lawmaker who is physically disabled and is supposed to use a disable-friendly PRS.

He could be that back-bencher who only warms the bench and scarcely contributes to debates in the house and therefore has no need for information.

He could also be the type of legislator who having used the traditional library or PRS for most of his life is now confronted with a Parliamentary Research Service packed with electronic facilities and devices.

He could be the sickly type who spends a considerable amount of his time looking after his health.

He could be the type who is just allergic to libraries or suffers from bibliophobia etc.

What can be done?

A rough attempt has been made to draw a sketch of the disadvantaged legislator client who could now possibly be recognised by most of us. The problem, as I see it, is that he has all along been taken for granted or even ignored for obvious reasons. The Library or the PRS, in my view, should exist to cater more for the disadvantaged client than the enlightened one. After all, if a person knows the value of information he will not need much prompting to satisfy his information needs. This is however not true in the case of the disadvantaged client who, in fact, will lose his right to vital information if the PRS does not go to his aid. In other words such a Legislator may not be equipped to make informed decisions.

“To win over a disadvantaged client has always needed some missionary zeal”.⁵ It could be a tough, costly and time consuming job for the PRS taking cognisance of the fact that one is dealing with a responsible, independent adult with a high societal profile, and, of course one’s boss – so to say. Nevertheless this paper would like to put forward the following suggestions to serve as a basis for further discussion:

1. Parliamentary Libraries & Research Services should now admit openly that there exist disadvantaged legislator clients
2. They should try to identify these clients and cater for them.
3. They should carefully assess their needs and interests and offer “customised” services.
4. They should try and find out the “focus” of the client and address it. Dr J R Verrier⁶ describes the client focus thus, “politicians are at once Parliamentarians...legislators, Party functionaries...constituency minders; and minders of the reputation of the Parliament/Party...”. The PRS should therefore determine what the client’s focus is and assist him to overcome his difficulties.
5. They should provide well programmed user education.
6. They should encourage personal interaction (especially interviews and one-on-one briefs in addition to providing subject related policy papers.
7. They should maximise the use of their SDI facilities.
8. They should put in place carefully thought out monitoring evaluation and feedback mechanisms mindful of the sensitivity of information collected and of the status of those involved.

9. They should maintain a personal profile or “dossier” on each client without being seen to be acting the “detective” or the spy.
10. They should make it possible for the client to experience that pleasant phenomenon described as serendipity.
11. They should make use of peer influence especially legislators who serve on the Library Committee.

It is very important to maintain the respect and dignity of the client and scrupulously respect his right to make choices in the course of implementing the above suggestions. It is being suggested here that the disadvantaged client should be “pampered” but then making sure that he is not spoilt.

How to walk this tight rope depends on the professional skill and the ingenuity of the Librarian or the Researcher.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to establish the existence of the disadvantaged legislator client. Having done that, the more difficult job of “converting” him is left to the professionals in the field. It must be noted that this client is found in varying degrees in all the PRS categories established by William Robinson and Miko,⁷ to wit – the “rubber stamp” legislature, the “nascent” legislature the “informed” legislature and the “Independent” legislature.

Finally, let me suggest that Parliamentary Libraries or Research Services should conduct special research into this subject with a view to laying a scientific basis for it.

¹ J R Verrier, *The Future of Parliamentary Research Services: To Lead or to Follow*, Paper prepared for the IFLA Conference, Istanbul, August 1995.

² William Robinson & Francis Miko, *Parliamentary Development Assistance in Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union, In Legislative Studies*. pp. 409-428

³ Philip Laundy, *Parliamentary Librarianship in the English Speaking World*. London: The Library Association.

⁴ Department of Parliamentary Library (of Australia) by ARTD Management and Research Consultants and the Albany Consulting Group *1999 Client Services Evaluation Final Report*. Canberra, Australia, 1999.

⁵ Kosi Kedom, *The Need for a National Library for Effective Management of Information Systems for Development*. Paper presented at a conference to mark the Golden Jubilee of the Ghana Library Board, La Palm Royal Beach Hotel. Accra. Sept. 2000.

⁶ J R Verrier op. cit. pp.12 “Politicians are at once parliamentarians (representatives, committee members, communicators, policy developers, executive trainees etc), constituency minders (dignitaries, glorified welfare officers and speech makers) and minders of the reputation of the Parliament/Party (public relations agents for themselves and their profession).”

⁷ William Robinson & Francis Miko. op. cit., pp409-428