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Challenges and opportunities to deliver research services to parliamentarians in the Japanese Diet

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Summary

Since the 1990's, parliamentary research services in Japan have been influenced by the changing political environment and the worldwide development of information technology. The National Diet Library (NDL) has been trying to cope with such changes. The Research and Legislative Reference Bureau, the department of the NDL which is in charge of research services for the Diet (Japanese Parliament), has achieved good results in applying new technology to its services and products. The development of the Full-Text Database System for the Minutes of the Diet and the Total System for Research and Information Services are examples.

The widespread use of the Internet has threatened the NDL's advantage over other legislative support organisations: the advantage that it has a huge library collection as a major resource for its research services. The Internet is superior to traditional information resources from the viewpoint of accessibility and quantity. However, information obtained through the Internet is not always reliable. We can say that various forms of printed publications are still important and, more importantly, the Internet cannot compete with the role played by analysis.

It has become more and more important for the NDL to cooperate with other legislative support organisations of the Diet such as the Secretariats and Legislative Bureaus of both Houses, the House of representatives and the House of Councillors. The Research Bureau of the House of Representatives and

the Research Office of the House of Councillors play an important role in supporting Committees and Diet Members. They work very closely with them preparing materials and questions for the Committees, examining petitions and researching and drafting bills sponsored by Diet Members. There is some overlap between their work and that of the NDL, as I understand is the case in some other parliaments. As is also the case in some other parliaments, there is also some competition between them for increasingly scarce resources. The challenge for the future, therefore, is to work cooperatively, not competitively, to realise the common goal of strengthening the legislature and making the Diet open to the public.

Introduction

In Japan, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) had been in power for nearly forty years and the operation of the Diet had been largely influenced by prior arrangements and consultations between the LDP and the ministries. But the LDP split during the political reform arguments in the late 1980's and the beginning of the 1990's and was defeated in the general election of 1993. Since then, Japan has entered into a coalition era and Diet Members have discussed reform of the existing systems which are widely thought to be associated with political scandals and economic recession.

Under these circumstances, many Diet Members stress the need for reinforcing the Diet. The major goals of Diet reform are:

- to strengthen parliamentary control over the administration
- to stimulate parliamentary discussion
- to promote efficiency in parliamentary deliberations
- to make the Diet more open to the public.

The National Diet Library (NDL), together with the Secretariats and the Legislative Bureaus of both Houses, has been providing support services which meet the Members' needs. In addition to such political changes, information technology has developed enormously and it has a great impact on legislative research services.

In this context, I will outline the challenges and opportunities for the services of the NDL, especially the Research and Legislative Reference Bureau (hereafter referred to as the Bureau), by using a SWOT (Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis.

Strengths

The Collection

The NDL has a large collection of Japanese and foreign publications that counts 7.3 million books and 160,000 serials. All publications published in Japan are collected by the legal deposit system. As the only national library in Japan, the NDL preserves publications as cultural assets, compiles catalogues in database and other forms, and utilises them in providing services for the Diet, executive and judicial branches of the Government, as well as the general public. The collection is the major resource for its research service to the Diet and this is its most advantageous point as compared with legislative support organisations of the Houses.

Timely and Relevant Responses

While the NDL as a whole primarily serves the Diet, it has this special department, the Bureau, which assists Committees and Members of both Houses by providing information and research services. The

Bureau, staffed by 160 personnel, answers 30,000 requests a year and prepares a vast amount of analytical reports and articles on many issues. Researchers in the Bureau have so far succeeded in answering the Members' inquiries promptly. The Bureau has been playing a leading role in providing foreign information in particular, as there is not much published material on political, economic, and social systems in foreign countries.

Technological Developments

The Bureau has been making the best use of information technology. The Bureau developed the Total System for Research and Information Services in 1997. It consists of two subsystems: Tracking Request System and Information Sharing System. The Tracking Request System makes it possible to monitor the status of inquiries from the Diet Members, analyse the needs of the Members and the operations of the Bureau, and make use of the results of past research, whereas the Information Sharing System stores the materials and information the researchers found useful for their work and makes them available to the Bureau at large and to the Diet. The Bureau also developed, jointly with the Secretariats of the two Houses, the Full-Text Database System for the Minutes of the Diet, which now contains 1,330,000 pages of the record of the plenary and committee meetings going back to 1947. The database is open to the public through the Internet.

Status

The NDL is independent from the Secretariats of the Houses. The status of the Librarian is equal to a Minister of State, and higher than the Secretaries-General of the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors. The Librarian is responsible for all operations including policy and budgetary issues. As an independent support organisation in the Diet, the NDL serves all Members and Committees of both Houses. The Bureau answers requests on a confidential and nonpartisan basis.

Weaknesses

Resource Pressures

In spite of the increasing number of inquiries from the Diet Members, it is hardly possible to increase the staff of the Bureau. In 1989, the number of inquiries from the Diet Members was 14,661 and after ten years it increased to 29,656. Nevertheless, the number of the staff in the Bureau is almost the same, namely around 160. Therefore, researchers are heavily occupied with research on request and it has become difficult for them to conduct anticipatory studies, taking up issues expected to be debated in the Diet. Such anticipatory studies, which are provided to the Members in the form of publications of the Bureau, have been key services of the Bureau, and the fact that most researchers have little time to prepare analytical reports will affect business.

Staff Recruitment and Turnover

The staff of the Bureau is recruited through an open examination held once a year by the NDL. In addition, there are frequent personnel transfers. Therefore, it takes time for newcomers in the Bureau to become skilled in research activities.

Lack of Personal Contact

The NDL is located apart from the Diet building and the relationship between researchers and the Diet Members is businesslike. The Bureau receives most inquiries by the telephone and fax (and also e-mail in the near future) and answers them by making photocopies of articles, producing research reports, or briefing the Members orally. Perhaps because of their physical location in the Diet, the service of the Secretariats and the Legislative Bureaus of the two Houses seems to be more personal, assisting Members, from beginning to end, in drafting bills or preparing for deliberation in the Committees.

Opportunities

The Mood for Change and Reform

After the non-LDP coalition government emerged in 1993, the newly elected Speaker, Ms. Takako Doi, took the initiative in discussing Diet reform. She set up a consultative group of experts to discuss the enhancement of the functions of the Diet. The group reported in 1996 on the theme how the Members could draw up more bills and reinforce the policy-making power of the Diet. One of the proposals in the report was to strengthen the function of research organisations in the legislature, that is, the Research Offices of the Committees and the Legislative Bureaus of both Houses and the Bureau of the NDL.

Policy Productivity

Since 1993, there has been a chance for every political party to come into power and opposition parties have changed their attitude from merely resisting the government-sponsored bills to presenting their own counterproposals. The number of Member-sponsored bills has gradually increased and more of such bills have become law than before. The Bureau has especially committed to the policy-making process of the Members by analysing the issues and presenting examples from foreign countries.

Technology

One of the goals of Diet reform is to improve access to information on the Diet. The aforementioned Full-Text Database System for the Minutes of the Diet has contributed greatly to this end. The next project is to create a web-site in which the Minutes, Bills and Measures, Legislation, Petitions and Representations, and other information on the Diet are provided in an integrated manner, the information being interlinked.

A Second Base

The NDL will open a new facility in the Kansai region (Osaka-Kyoto area) in 2002 the second major city in Japan? situated 'x' miles from Tokyo?. The functions of the new facility, provisionally called Kansai-kan, are extensive storage of national collections, provision of document supply service, provision of information from Asian sources, library cooperation and R&D in the field of library and information science. The NDL is developing a new system named "Electronic Library Infrastructure System," so that the Library in Tokyo and the Kansai-kan can function as an integrated whole. The information services for the Diet are expected to be enhanced by this project.

Threats

Keeping ahead of the Internet

The Internet has now become a useful and indispensable tool for research activities. Thanks to the NDL's large collection, the Bureau has enjoyed a dominant position among the legislative support organisations of the Diet in obtaining information. But the situation has changed. A vast amount of information is readily available for everybody through the Internet. It will become more important for researchers to have ability to select information, and to be prepared to give further information and in-depth analysis in response to the clients' needs.

Downsizing and Competition

It is widely believed that the Japanese political system ought to be more efficient; in other words, the expenditure of the Government and the number of public servants must be reduced. In this context, a reorganisation of the ministries was carried out in January 2001. There is a possibility that the legislature will be exposed to downsizing pressure in the next stage. If each legislative support organisation is absorbed in differentiating itself from the others and does not cooperate with them, the true objectives of reinforcement of the legislature will give way to a show of streamlining. Cooperation among the legislative support organisations is also needed to make the Diet open to the public. The aforementioned project to create a web-site through which various information from the Diet can be obtained in an integrated manner will be a test of such cooperation.

Conclusion

Japanese politics have entered a period of exciting change. The challenge for the Japanese Research Service is to maintain recognition of the value of its independent services and improve cooperation with other support services of the Diet to make the necessary efficiencies.