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### **Working with committees: why do it and how to start**

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#### **A LITTLE BACKGROUND**

Work for parliamentary committees has been a function of the Canadian Library of Parliament since the early days of its Research Branch. In fact, its first Director was hired in 1965 to assist the Procedures and Organization Committee. In those early days, committees had limited authority and did not often engage in substantive policy studies.

The Research Branch was an obvious source of professional assistance when ten special committees were created in 1980 to conduct in-depth studies of various policy issues. But there were other sources as well. Of course the Library had a competitive advantage given we were immediately available, had subject expertise, were familiar with the work of Parliament, and did not charge for our services. On the other hand, the competitive advantage of outside consultants was that they charged for their services. (The theory being that a service you have to pay for must be better than one that you don't.) Moreover, at that time the Branch had a young staff and was competing with experienced consultants. These special committee studies had a team of professionals assisting them, one member of which was often appointed the team leader to whom the others would report. Our staff would participate on the team and in some cases act as the team leader. Committees in these days were staffed either by the Library alone, by the Library working with outside consultants or by outside consultants alone.

This early experience with committees established a strong base for the Research Branch in its future work assisting committees. It allowed our staff to develop experience and knowledge in the fields of expertise required by parliamentary committees and for Parliamentarians to get to know our staff. Many of our staff from those years have remained with the Branch giving us an excellent mix of experienced specialists and newer recruits.

As a result, today we provide subject matter specialists to almost every parliamentary committee in the two Houses of Parliament. We have a core group of experienced professionals in each main subject field. It has even come to the point where we recommend hiring outside specialists for specific studies in order to complement the expertise of our staff. We often propose who should be hired and provide them with office space and support staff and integrate them with our staff serving the committee.

In 1974 our Branch assisted nine standing and special committees. Currently, we are assisting 29 standing committees, an additional 12 subcommittees and 3 special committees – a total of 44 committees in the two Houses. Almost all Branch staff are assigned to one or more committees on an ongoing basis. They serve committees either individually or in multidisciplinary teams of two or three. At the same time, they also handle individual requests from Members and parliamentary associations and contribute to the publications program. We offer a team of 70 specialists upon which committees can draw different individuals as their needs change.

#### **WHY DO IT? THE BENEFITS OF COMMITTEE WORK**

Much of the **important work of Parliament** flows through committees. Committees are a key area in getting the work of Parliament done. This is where the action is – policy development, in-depth issue studies, departmental oversight, review of government spending, legislative work. This is where parliamentary research services want to be.

It is a **key area of expansion** for parliamentary research units. Committee work started slowly in Canada but it has expanded considerably. It is a **natural extension** of the policy and other work parliamentary research services do for legislators. Parliamentary research services have the **trained and knowledgeable staff** to offer this type of service

It is among the **most challenging work** the Branch does – suggesting areas to study; preparing background documents and issues and options papers; recommending witnesses; briefing committee members on the issues; preparing notes for meetings including questions for members to ask; in some cases, asking questions of witnesses. And, most important, drafting reports of committees on policy and legislative issues that can change, influence or at least make an important contribution to the debate.

It significantly increases **the visibility of the service** because it provides the **opportunity to work closely with Parliamentarians**. Your staff are your product. Members get to know staff through personal contact on committees. With Members able to hire more of their own staff, research services tend to work more often with Members' staff than the Members themselves. On committees, you work directly with Members.

Committee work **increases the knowledge, capabilities and experiences** of staff. They are able to use and expand their expertise in policy areas. And there is a **spillover effect** -- the knowledge and skills staff gain on committees is used in their other work for Parliament – for Members, associations and publications -- and vice versa.

Committee work is important in **attracting and retaining your best staff** because they continue to be challenged by the work. Staff have considerable autonomy working for committees, taking their instructions from the chairperson. And they appreciate it.

**It improves assistance** to Parliament if no committee assistance yet exists. Good research greatly improves committees and their role in Parliament. Investing in research can be most productive in terms of improving committee and legislative capacities.

**Cost efficiency.** One multi-purpose, centralized service providing research to a variety of clients – individual legislators, committees, parliamentary associations -- can be less expensive than separate services for each of these different areas of work.

**Institutional Memory.** Parliamentary staff retain the knowledge of the institution over time. This is important in all work for Parliament but especially in committee work where there is considerable turnover in membership and Members rely on staff for this knowledge.

**If you don't do it, someone else will (or already is)** – and they could send work to the research service. So your research staff will work indirectly for the committees (through the committee staff) yet lack the visibility and importance of directly assisting them.

### **SOME OPTIONS IN PROVIDING COMMITTEE ASSISTANCE**

The following are some possible options to be considered with regard to the level of assistance that can be offered to committees based on availability of resources.

- 1) **Ad Hoc Assistance.** In this option, the service responds to requests from committees for research in the same manner as a request from an individual Member. There is no formal assignment of staff to the committee. Staff may prepare background and issue and options papers, witness lists or respond to any other research request from a committee. This option may limit the amount of resources required but it does not provide the type of ongoing assistance committees need nor the full benefits to the research service of working on committees.
- 2) **Secondments.** A subject matter specialist is assigned exclusively to work for a committee for a specific study. The person acts like other consultants or ongoing staff hired by a committee for a specific period of time. They may be the sole staff of the committee or part of a team assisting it. During the secondment period, the person is dedicated to the committee and would not work on other assignments from the research service. This gives control to management over its resources by limiting the number of staff from the research service that are working for committees at any one time. On the other hand, you lose the services of those staff during the secondment periods. Another consideration is that studies often take longer than expected, extensions of time are often the rule. This makes planning of resources more difficult.
- 3) **Ongoing assistance.** This is the full service option followed in Ottawa providing committees with the range of research assistance they require. An individual researcher or a multidisciplinary team is assigned to a committee. For example, in our Parliament, a criminologist and two lawyers work for the Justice Committee; an economist, a lawyer and a scientist assist the Industry Committee; specialists in health policy, economics and medicine assist the Health Committee. Staff assigned to committees continue to respond to requests from individual members and other clients as well as prepare publications as time permits. Assignments are juggled to ensure all deadlines are met; other staff assist as required.
- 4) **Outside Contractors.** The service hires outside specialists to assist committees either distinct from other Branch services or in conjunction with assistance provided by the Branch. In the case of Canada, we make use of outside specialists for committee work to complement our own staff. This adds experience and a specialized perspective that committees require in a major study. The Branch has also arranged for secondments of experts from government departments. This

approach works best when the consultants are integrated with the research team so that the knowledge and experience they bring to the process complements the knowledge and expertise of the staff who work in the parliamentary environment on the particular policy issue. It also reduces the resources the service must directly provide committees.

## ISSUES TO CONSIDER

**Resources.** Committee work is a resource-intensive role and an ever increasing one at that. Are you adding committees to your workload without additional staff? Unless you already have the resources, this can be a major additional workload (unless limited in accordance with some of the suggested options elsewhere in this paper).

**Who do committee staff report to?** Are your staff responsible to the committee chairperson? To each committee member? To the head of Research? Working for the chair who is a member of the government party, can make you be seen as the chair's personal staff instead of committee staff. It is important to work with all members and been seen to be doing so (although a partisan chair may not look on this favourably). How does the service continue to assign non-committee work to staff assisting committees?

**Potential Conflicts of Interest.** Working for Members in their individual capacity and working on a committee can raise conflict situations. For example, a researcher may prepare a paper for a Member in support of his\her arguments on an issue. Then the issue is examined by the committee to which the researcher is assigned. We had the situation where our expert on gun control wrote a paper at a Member's request "Arguments Against Gun Control". He was later assigned to the committee reviewing the government's gun control legislation. He sat at the table next to the chairperson as is normal for our committee staff. A witness appearing before the committee held up this researcher's paper (not knowing who he was) declaring its excellence and suggesting the author be called as a witness.

**Balancing work assignments.** What are the priorities – work for an individual Member or for the committee? First come first served? What is the effect on other programs such as publications which tend to be the lowest priority although they are very important and help manage the overall workload of the service?

**Staff as Witnesses.** On several occasions committees have proposed to call one of our staff as an expert witness. The concern is that if our staff are questioned as to their opinion on a policy matter, our non-partisanship could be at issue. Our response has been that our staff serve as advisors to committees; they should not be considered in the same light as an expert witness. This applies even if they are not the specific individuals assigned to the particular committee. Staff can provide the same information by arranging *in camera* briefings for committee members. This informal setting serves the same purpose as appearing as a witness in terms of providing information but enables staff to avoid questions involving policy matters. It also underlines the fact that they serve as the staff of the committee.

**Competition with outside consultants.** If committees already engage staff, how will you compete? If the staff are outside consultants paid on a contract basis, there are many factors in your favour. And competition can be healthy. When we faced that situation, our staff tended to work at the peak of their abilities given they were constantly being compared to our competitors.

**Influence** of chair\members in your procedure of hiring new staff for committees.

## GETTING STARTED

**Taking stock:** What is the **current role of committees** in your Parliament? How are they staffed? What are their needs? Are these needs being met? Is there a research service? What is its current role? If there is no research service or it is small and committees do not have permanent staff, this may be an **opportunity to initiate or improve the service**. A **needs assessment** (discussed in another research session) and strategic analysis of how important committee work is within the Parliament is a crucial starting point.

**Whose support do you need** in order to work for committees or get the resources to do so – committee chairs; the secretary general; a member of the government; senior party officials? Draw up a plan, meet with and make your case in support of assisting committees to these key people.

**Sell cost efficiency** and centralization where funding is limited. The research service can assist committees, members, associations. Why have separate services, separate staffs, separate costs?

The optimal situation to establish a service is that in which **committees are in an embryonic stage**. If they are developing their role and mandate, it is an opportunity to make a proposal to provide assistance from the outset. Perhaps committees do not have permanent staff or they have only an administrative officer (secretary, clerk). This was the case in Canada (see above, A Little Background). As the work of committees expanded and became more complex requiring specialist staff, we were in the right place at the right time to offer assistance. As our staff developed expertise in the subject areas and needs of committees, there was less reliance on outside staff.

In the situation where committees are in the development stage, resources required may not be that heavy and the tasks may be **added to work already being done**. At the same time, it provides the opportunity to request a modest increase in resources for a few additional positions. It is crucial to get that initial “foot in the door” involvement and grow with committees as their work develops.

**Offer to prepare some issues and options papers** for several committees on topics they are studying. Use this as a starting point to offer additional services to increase your role for the committee.

Another approach is to request funding for a **pilot project** to include 2-3 more positions on a **temporary basis only** to be used to assist 2-3 committees. One of the key functions in many parliaments is fiscal oversight so an appropriate example for a pilot may be for budget or public accounts-type committees. You should **assign your best staff** to the committee(s) to improve the chances of success.

A common situation is where **the clerk also handles the role of committee researcher**, providing any research the committee requires and writing the committee reports. Often this makes for an overworked clerk. It may be possible to offer your services to individual clerks to assist their work or to make a proposal for a research component that would work cooperatively with the committee clerks. Research support will reduce the clerk’s workload allowing dedicated research personnel to prepare substantive, qualitative reports that could have a greater impact. Some clerks may see researchers as a threat to their job and their relationship with committee members. They may have to be convinced that the two roles complement each other. It is therefore important to define the role of the researcher and clerk and avoid “turf” wars which can be detrimental to your committee work.

Where committees have been using **outside contractors** on an ad hoc basis, there should be opportunities to make proposals to provide ongoing staff for the committees and to show the lower cost (based on hourly salary rates and overhead costs) and benefits of ongoing staff (corporate memory) from your service. Perhaps initially your staff could complement the work of the outside contractors and eventually replace them.

**Obtain supporting documentation** and suggestions from your colleagues in other jurisdictions that provide staff to committees to make your case.

### **PRACTICAL TIPS: WORKING WITH LIMITED RESOURCES**

There are various **approaches to limiting your committee work** to fit your available resources.

- Restrict your assistance to one or two committees initially
- Limit the types of assistance you provide – rather than staff being actually attached to a committee, limit your work to preparing research papers, reports and other studies. Although this would not meet your need to staff committees on an ongoing basis, it is a “foot in the door”.

#### **Work To Avoid (If You Can)**

- Taking notes of meetings
- Making administrative arrangements for witnesses (as distinguished from suggesting witnesses to appear before the committee and briefing them in advance of meetings which are key tasks).
- Organizing meetings
- Organizing travel
- Writing letters for the chairperson
- Acting as chairperson’s personal assistant

#### **Other Sources of Assistance**

There may be other resources that can be called upon during a particular study that will assist the researcher in carrying a heavy committee workload.

- Member’s staff can join the research team
- Other parliamentary staff – legal counsel, committee clerk\secretary can assist in their areas of expertise.
- Outside consultants – you hire them, they work for you, committee pays. Perfect! But there is a danger. If the committee likes the consultant, he\she may get an ongoing job. And compete with or replace you
- Government staff on secondment to the committee. This has worked well in our service. They are a valuable source of expertise. However there can be a perception of conflict of interest. Government staff may promote the government position or be perceived as doing so. This can usually be managed. You need to know how to work with them so a conflict does not arise, for example by excluding them from committee meetings discussing policy, committee recommendations or the final report. It is important that the distinction between legislative and executive branches of government be maintained.

### **ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS**

Research staff should try to **maintain the key staff role with the committee**. There may be a formal or informal staff coordinator or research director position. There can be competition for the attention of the chair by the clerk\secretary and other staff. At the same time, staff should never make their interpersonal problems, disagreements or “turf” wars a problem for the chair or the committee.

**Don’t oversell your services.** Don’t sell something you cannot deliver. Committee work is not for everyone so make sure you are matching the right staff to committee work. Use your best staff. If you don’t deliver the first time you may not get a second chance. Stay within your abilities and strengths; don’t try to do everything; let others play their roles – committee clerk\secretary; members’ staff; chairperson’s assistant. Work with them.

## ADDENDUM

### SKILLS REQUIRED FOR COMMITTEE WORK

*Ten of the most senior staff of the Canadian Parliamentary Research Branch with considerable committee experience were asked what they considered as the key skills required in working for committees. They identified certain qualities that would be applicable to all facets of the work of a parliamentary research service but which take on heightened importance in a committee setting, such as:*

- thorough knowledge of one's areas of expertise.
- strong analytical and writing capacities
- function effectively in a non-partisan manner
- quickly synthesize a great deal of material on complex issues
- think quickly and carefully and be able to communicate advice and information in written and oral form at a moment's notice;

The following skills were identified as particularly appropriate to committee work:

- incorporate disparate views and opinions; find compromises and common links in divergent viewpoints; be aware of the variety of perspectives, both political and other, that influence different approaches to any matter under consideration; sensitivity to the political context of any discussion;
- sense the dynamics on the committee and where the committee is heading (often before the committee knows itself); "read" the committee to ascertain direction of discussion, political environment
- strategic planning to organize the work plan of the committee and the committee report;
- patience to be able to work calmly in a highly stressful and politically-charged environment;
- people skills\diplomacy in order to work closely with members of all political views;
- inspire confidence
- coordinate and/or work as part of a team (clerks, members staff, chair, support staff, publications etc).
- know all the players -- political, governmental, and non-governmental, their roles and their influence
- work autonomously in a constantly changing environment where priorities are in constant flux
- good judgement and common sense (e.g. knowing when to intervene in a committee discussion and when not to);
- apply analytical and conceptual skills to a dynamic, oral environment;
- drawing out members' opinions without being adversarial;
- read clients' needs;
- multi-tasking (handling numerous assignments concurrently)