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Client Needs Assessment in the Parliamentary Library and Research Services Context

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INFORMATION, ANALYSIS
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AUSTRALIAN COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENT

INFORMATION AND RESEARCH SERVICES

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CLIENT NEEDS ASSESSMENT IN THE PARLIAMENTARY

1. Introduction

In order to carry out their legislative and representational role effectively, parliamentarians need to be able to rely on quality, timely, impartial, accurate, relevant and useable information, analysis and advice. In the Australian Commonwealth context where 75 per cent of requests are for individually tailored assistance, they also want absolute assurance that this will be provided in confidence.

This much we know. But how do we move beyond this to understand the particular needs of parliamentarians? We do it by developing parliamentary 'nous' and we do it by seeking feedback from them in a variety of ways. I have been asked to address the more formal major evaluation of the kind that we conduct in the Australian national parliament once every three years. However, I will also use this occasion to rehearse other feedback mechanisms which have been developed in the Australian Commonwealth Parliament's Department of the Parliamentary Library's (DPL). Together, these amount to an impressive mix which make for ongoing, independent, qualitative feedback on both the big and the small aspects of the DPL's Information and Research Services (IRS).

But first a note on the Australian context. I am aware of our very good fortune which I know is not shared to the same degree by all of us attending the Parliamentary Libraries and Research Section of IFLA. We are an old, well established, well resourced service held in high and strong regard by all Australia's major political parties and, increasingly, by the community. In addition, in Australia, we are privileged to enjoy a very robust democracy which makes many things possible. These circumstances make us strong and enable us to be bold. It is against this background that the following needs to be considered.

2. The Triennial External Evaluation of Client Services

Why we do it

We are funded by governments to assist the Parliament hold the Executive accountable. Our role, therefore, is to assist contribute to the quality of debate in the Chambers (the Senate and the House of Representatives in Australia's bicameral system) by providing Members of Parliament (MPs) with information, analysis and advice which contributes to this end. In us resides the expertise that no parliamentarian alone (including with their relatively small staff) could hope to duplicate. Our responsibility, therefore, is a very applied one: we exist solely to assist MPs make their contribution to the democratic process.

If we are spending resources on activities or products which fail to meet this practical test, then we are failing in our responsibility. It is not our role, for example, to write erudite, esoteric and lengthy research papers which could only be appreciated by the specialist. And it is not our role to develop and maintain a perfect, general library collection most of which is unlikely ever to be used by busy parliamentarians. The role of parliamentary libraries and research services is to provide parliamentary value-added products - no more, and no less. This means that a parliamentary library focuses on parliamentary materials in its collections - committee reports, parliamentary papers etc. supported by an extensive range of electronic materials for "just in time responses" to a wide range of public policy issues. And analysts prepare briefs on those issues of current concern to the Parliament.

We have developed a set of work practices to keep us focussed in this regard, including a bi-annual *Forecast of Emerging Issues*. And we have also developed a set of informal feedback

mechanisms to seek to identify unmet need as it arises and these are outlined in what follows. But we need to be aware that our ringside seat may blind us to the obvious. And it is in this that lies the value of the independent, external evaluation of client services.

In the Australian Commonwealth Parliamentary context, accountability requirements include conducting an external evaluation of client satisfaction with the Department of the Parliamentary Library's Information and Research Services once every three years. (The federal parliamentary cycle is three years.) When I came to the Parliament of Australia as the Head of the Research Service in 1993, the kinds of evaluation the Department was in the habit of conducting was the quantitative evaluation. The sum total of this effort was to tell us, invariably, that we were 95% or even 97% perfect on all measures. This in fact told us nothing at all. It did not assist identify areas where there was room for improvement and, most seriously of all, it tended to generate complacency.

Such complacency is extremely dangerous and leads to eyes and minds closed to the possible need for change, or innovation and, very seriously, closed to the prospect of growing competition - or alternatives for information, analysis and advice that may be increasingly available to members of parliament (MPs).

So we entered into the era of the qualitative evaluation, the first of which was conducted in 1996, the second in 1999 and the third which will take place over the second half of 2002. While rarely the sole feature of the methodology, the essential central characteristic of the qualitative evaluation is the in-depth personal interview with a credible cross section of clients conducted by professionals to elicit confidential feedback on aspects of service.

What it costs

So why do we do it? We do it because we have to but, more importantly, we do it because we gain an independent outside perspective on our operations. And we do it because we always learn from it and gain new insights into our business and that of our clients which assists us to move forward.

When budgets are hard pressed, the approximately \$A50,000[1] an external evaluation typically costs may sound like a lot of money. But this needs to be put into the perspective of DPL's three year budget, since it represents only 0.098% of the total and, as such, is certainly value for money. However, there is as well the cost of the input of our time and potentially also an impact on (very busy) clients. We therefore take very great care to scrutinise the proposed methodology of prospective consultants to satisfy ourselves that both these concerns are in balance.

To be effective, an external evaluation will include major input from senior and at least a cross section of junior staff. The consultants need to be briefed on the local environment and culture and they need to be able to come back with issues as the process unfolds. They also need to engage the staff as a whole, to seek their insights into the delivery of client services and to ensure that they will 'own' the results.
The qualitative evaluation thus requires a lot more input than a traditional quantitative one. And we don't get to see the reports of those interviews - they are always kept confidential to ensure that Senators and Members can speak freely and frankly.

We were very fortunate in our choice of consultants for the first qualitative evaluation in 1996 - so much so that we elected to use them again for the second in 1999. However, personable, innovative and creative as they were, and very stimulating to work with, we felt obliged to seek fresh consultants in 2002. Had we used the same team again we could be accused of 'capturing' them, or being captured by them. And, self-interestedly, we judged that these consultants had been milked of their good ideas and there would be benefit from casting around afresh.

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[1] US\$26,678 or EUR27,604 as at 09 August 2002

While it could be seen as a cost to our reputation, the inevitable negatives in the reports, paradoxically, add to their - and to our - credibility by reinforcing our understanding of the business we are in. These negatives have included complaints that not enough expertise is available in a key policy area, some failures of timeliness, some perceptions of bias and the judgement of a reluctance to launch ourselves into the electronic era to the degree that we might. All of these findings were considered and followed up even though they were but a small part of the picture. There is always room for improvement and the occasional lapse out in the open and pursued, adds rather than detracts from our enterprise.

What it returns

The two completed qualitative evaluations have contributed centrally to the big picture of strategic planning and direction in Information and Research Services. While all of the recommendations may not be accepted - in the case of the 1966 one, for example, the recommendation that we provide direct assistance for MPs' office management of information was not accepted because it was judged that we are not funded to perform that function. Nevertheless, that particular need has not gone away and, in the absence of alternatives, we are in some small way providing major clients with more information management than was the case in the past.

Some examples of key findings which have influenced the way we subsequently do our work include the tendency identified to 'one size fits all' and the need to replace this approach with the recognition of each of the (then 224, now 226) Senators' and Members' office as a different business whose idiosyncrasies we need to know if we are to give them the best possible service.

While it wasn't entirely new to us, it was an important recommendation which urged us on. Certain needs will arise, for example, because the MP is a new backbencher in a marginal seat. Others will stem from the fact that they bring a specific professional expertise with them to the Parliament and have policy aspirations in that direction. Others still will be determined by their ambition - to be on the front bench - or its absence - they will be retiring at the next election. And there will always be the needs that arise from the geography and economics of their electorate - that they represent rural and remote Australia, for example, or that they come from an inner city electorate where the socio-economic indicators of employment, education, health and welfare dependence are among the highest. To deliver the best service we need to know about these characteristics - and to recognise that they may often overlap.

A multitude of strategies have flowed from the articulation of the 224 separate businesses concept, most importantly working for an attitude and a practice change among staff which includes them engaging personally as often as possible with MPs and their staff.

Another finding from 1966 was that of the structural barrier to efficient services created by the then division between the library and research service. MPs do not need to know whether their request should go to a librarian or a researcher; they simply want the best answer to the question in the timeframe stipulated. The decision to amalgamate the two services had already been taken as this evaluation was underway but its findings provided powerful reinforcement of the logic. (For this reason in this case, we kept the consultants on to assist facilitate the integration after the evaluation was completed.)

From the 1999 evaluation, two examples of findings we did not particularly want to hear were, first, of the unapproachable image we were unconsciously projecting with the distracted frown at the front desk or the weary tone on the phone and, second, our apparent reluctance to rise high enough to the challenge of the electronic era. It proposed that we were not thinking forward far enough to identify how we needed to change our work practices to accommodate electronic options open to us, to capitalise on them and, where appropriate, compete with them.

A great deal has been achieved in the development of electronic services since the 1999 evaluation but, as can be seen from **Attachment A**, the Terms of Reference, timetable and

key foci of the 2002 review, the electronic issue remains central. We are providing a very significant number of electronic 'self-help' services available 24 hours a day, seven days a week - but we have, at present, insufficient means to measure actual usage or by whom they are being used. Also, this year, in response to enough client feedback over time to need to address the issue, we are seeking to tackle that sacred cow of proactive as opposed to reactive services.[2]

In sum, from the triennial external evaluations, we learnt that MPs need help with information management. We learnt that their needs must be understood - and met - on an individual basis if we are to retain their primary loyalty. We learnt that they do not want to be bothered by distinctions between library services and research services but rather need a one-stop-shop client service point. We learnt that we need to improve our interpersonal skills. We learnt that we need to think far more strategically about electronic options and challenges.   In addition, very few though the incidents were of concerns expressed about partiality and confidentiality, we learnt that we need to go on reinforcing the vital importance of our values in this respect. In the very sensitive parliamentary environment in which we operate, we know that it would only take a very small loss of confidence to undermine the trust we have built up over the years between the DPL and parliamentarians of all political persuasions.

3. The 'Bouquets and Brickbats' database

The *Bouquet and Brickbats (B&B)* database is a very different creature - and in that lies its exceptional value. The triennial evaluation is mandatory. External consultants go out and test the client water in personal interviews. The feedback provided and recorded in the *B&B* database is, by contrast, entirely volunteered - and, in my very strong judgement, the more valuable for that. Client initiated feedback obviously has a quality and, possibly, a weight quite different from feedback formally sought by means of questionnaires or interviews.

Feedback included in this database arises from both written and oral qualitative comment on services provided. It also includes references to our work which appear in Hansard, the press and academic journals and peer recognition, for example in the form of invitations to specialists to present papers at conferences or contribute to specialist round tables.

TABLE 1

39th Parliament: Requests and Hours by Party

PARTY	No. of Requests	No. of Hours
Liberal Party	24,634	31,487
National Party	4,758	6,558
Country Liberal Party	375	578
Coalition Subtotal	29,767	38,623
Australian Labor Party	39,123	63,237
Australian Democrats	4,851	6,502
Australian Greens	1,045	1,782
Independents	2,291	3,103
One Nation	118	191
The Greens (WA)	337	713
Independents & Minor Parties Subtotal	8,642	12,291
Subtotal for Parties	77,532	114,151
Others	20,231	67,993
Total for the 39th Parliament	97,763	182,144

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[2] Because of the privileged (access) position staff in parliamentary libraries and research services enjoy, there is a strong convention of not pushing issues or advice on them but rather of waiting to be asked. Thus MPs make individual requests or elect to receive each brief advertised as available to all.
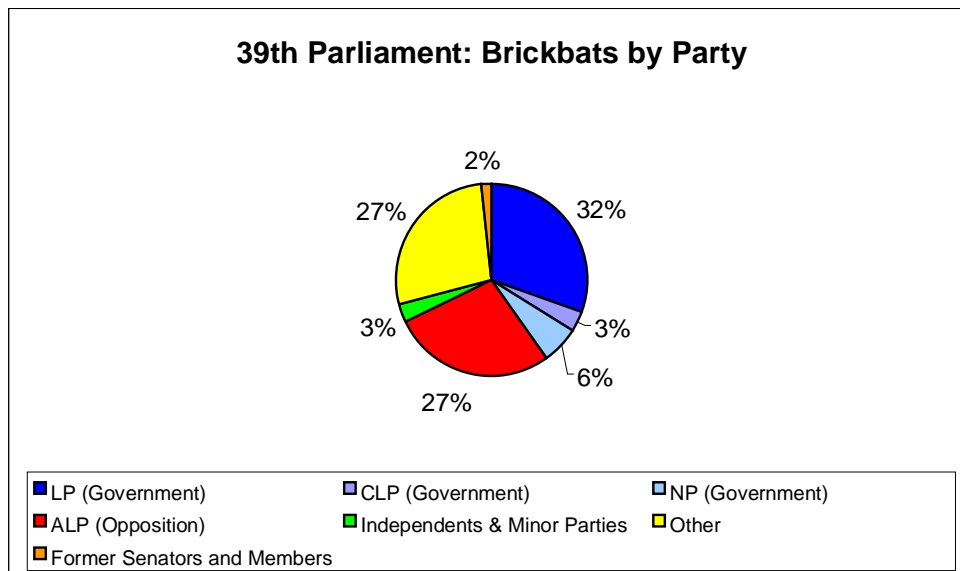
The balance of the feedback is overwhelmingly positive. In the 39[3] Parliament 1,366 incidents of spontaneous qualitative feedback were provided (generated from 97,763 individual information and research requests in that same period, see Table 1). Of these, 62 were negative (*Brickbats*).

39th Parliament: Bouquets by Party

Party	Positive	
	No.	% of Total Bouquets
Liberal Party	285	21.86
Country Liberal Party	3	0.23
National Party	40	3.07
Coalition Subtotal	328	25.15
Australian Labor Party	462	35.43
Independents & Minor Parties	120	9.20
Total for Parties	910	69.79
Other	384	29.45
Former Senators and Members	10	0.73
Total Others	394	30.21

	Bouquets	% of Total	Brickbats	% of Total
TOTAL	1304	95.46	62	4.54
Total Bouquets and Brickbats	1366			

For analysis and follow up, *Brickbats* are listed in six categories: bias (8), confidentiality (3), communication (8), quality (21)[4] technology (12) and timeliness (10). **Diagram 1** shows these as percentages of the whole and **Diagram 2** illustrates the source of the complaints.
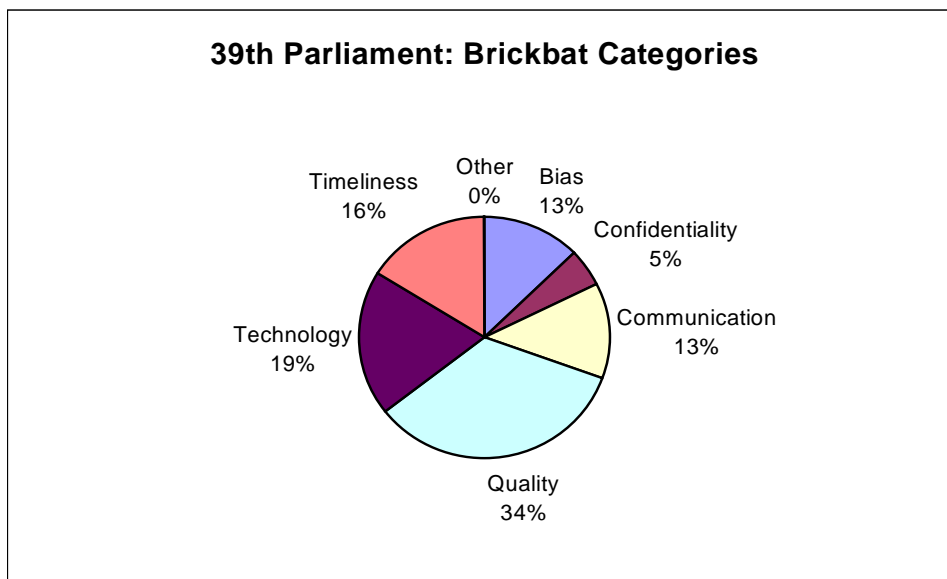
DIAGRAM 1

39th Parliament: Brickbats by Party

- LP (Government)
- CLP (Government)
- NP (Government)
- ALP (Opposition)
- Independents & Minor Parties
- Other
- Former Senators and Members

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[3] The 39th Parliament ran from 3 October 1998 - 8 November 2001

[4] Feedback is recorded under the '*Brickbat*: Quality' category when it questions accuracy, direction, content or general argument. Most often, items in this category arise from (vested) interest group opposition to the case being made or from Department of State comment on Bills Digests. This latter is to be expected since the Bills Digests not only explain proposed legislation and what it will do but also what it will not do - and what may be the downstream consequences. This includes issues Departments of State may prefer not to be addressed.

DIAGRAM 2

Each and every *Brickbat* is taken extremely seriously and followed up with the client in question. Whatever the outcome, even when the problem was created elsewhere, for example a timeliness problem may have arisen from poor staff work in the MPs own office, they remain on the record as *'Brickbats'*. Research from other businesses and organisations shows that it is the perception of just one poor or inadequate episode of service which, even if demonstrated to be unfounded, will remain in the client's mind as a possible deterrent to further service while all the good service that went before it will be forgotten.

DIAGRAM 2

39th Parliament: Brickbat Categories

Other 0%
Bias 13%
Confidentiality 5%
Timeliness 16%
Communication 13%
Technology 19%
Quality 34%

Thus while analysis of the *B&B* database for the last Parliament revealed that there are pockets of poor practice, or perceptions of poor practice which we need to be seen to address to maintain the confidence of clients in the quality and reliability of DPL services, the balance was heavily in favour of *Bouquets*. The *B&B* database establishes without the shadow of a doubt the high regard in which the Information and Research Services of the Department of the Parliamentary Library are held in both the Parliament and, increasingly, in the community. Comment was volunteered, for example, from Shadow Ministers on the invaluable contribution IRS makes to policy development. Backbenchers across the political spectrum commented on the speed and clarity of service, the help provided in understanding issues and the reliance so many of them placed on the service. Ministers recorded that we made them look better and noted DPL's professional judgement and impartial advice. Reference to DPL's 'influential researchers' was made in the press where the Department was also depicted as a 'catalyst for national debate'. And John Citizen expressed his appreciation of the world class value DPL's public website provides to the community.

Positive reinforcing feedback indeed - but also insight into what clients value. And, for those accountability requirements, also very valuable performance indicators.

4. Outreach

When I last addressed the question of client feedback in a parliamentary environment at the Ottawa Parliamentary Research Seminar in 1998, this category comprised Heads' calls on Senators and Members. Today, in response to both to the findings of the external evaluations and from our own reading of the changing needs of increasingly busy Senators and Members, some aspects of this approach have been extended to include all client service staff. The objective is to take every opportunity to:
- promote and market the range of Information and Research Services to which MPs are entitled
- to create opportunities to hear of any unmet need and
- when possible, to provide some hands on training on DPL electronic self-help services.

Outreach is both a systematic and an opportunistic tool to seek any and every opportunity for dialogue with clients which may include feedback. It arises out of the philosophy that the time has long gone when we can remain the silent, anonymous, earnest hard working back room beavers who produce miracles on demand by some kind of divine intervention rather than by dialogue.

One strand remains the Heads' goal, (me or my deputy) to seek a meeting with every Senator and Member once in the life of a parliament. Such visits are hard to procure and persistence and flexibility are of the essence. But once through the door, MPs invariably give of their time generously and, in confidence, provide extremely valuable feedback on services, staff and insights into areas for improved performance.

A second aspect of *Outreach* has arisen out of the geography of our vast New Parliament House which makes a personal visit from clients far more time consuming than it was in the more intimate old Parliament House where we were more strategically located. We have replaced nostalgia for an irretrievable past (and dressing down because they never see us!) with visits. Staff are encouraged to visit MPs offices to discuss the more complex requests at initiation, to provide oral briefings on request or to deliver the job done when there may be an opportunity to discuss it, or other aspects of service with the client or their staff. Also, when these opportunities occur, staff will also seek general feedback, raise the issue of electronic self-help services and, if possible, demonstrate how to use them.

A third opportunity to promote and facilitate good use of our services is provided by the Contact Officer network which, for this the 40th Parliament, has been extended from the focus on new Senators and Members to the not-so-good users from previous Parliaments. Already we are finding that some relatively long standing MPs, who we previously had expected to be fully familiar with what was available to them, are sometimes amazingly ignorant of their service entitlements. The Contact Officers, too, now personally deliver the hard copy of the *Guide to Services* and, simultaneously, seek to take the opportunity to show them how to use the electronic version and other self-help services.

The fourth element of *Outreach* is the newest and still being carefully monitored. In Australia, all MPs not only have offices in Parliament House in Canberra but also in their electorates. All have at least three staff, for more senior MPs more, giving a staff client group of approximately 1,000. Some of these staff remain in the electorate office, some come to Canberra when the Parliament is sitting. Staff in the electorate have huge demands placed upon them to respond to constituent inquiries on a host of matters from immigration rights, to welfare benefits to every thing else that constituents may draw to the attention of their representatives. While we do not directly respond to constituents' requests, we do assist MPs and their staff to do so. Electorate staff are therefore critical users of our services - but often do not use them well because they may not have had the opportunity for familiarisation in Canberra. An initiative this year, therefore, has been to ask staff who may be inter-state for conferences to call on MPs electorate offices and, at no extra cost to the Department, offer help and advice in the use of DPL services.

While still at a very early stage, the response to this initiative is overwhelmingly positive. Isolated staff are enormously appreciative of being given more help to access our self-help services and, when necessary, advice on how to get assistance from Canberra. Careful preparation is necessary for these visits, including appreciation of competing pressures; we once made the mistake of sending someone to visit three Tasmanian parliamentarians in the middle of a Tasmanian State election.

We are learning all the time. One difficulty is high client staff turnover. Another is what may often be the very competitive culture among those staff many of whom, it seems, rarely pass on to their colleagues how to use our services or even that they do use them. It appears that there is often little sharing of knowledge about systems and processes and ways of doing things, and no hand over to successors. The reason, we can only conclude, - and we have to make adjustments for it - is that the culture of political offices is so very different from our

own and one in which the bottom line may well be competition for the pre-selection for the seat when their MP retires!

5. Client Forum(s)

More seasoned staff will be more likely to seek individual assistance with new products or perhaps attend a *Client Forum*. In the last Parliament a series of informal *Client Fora* were organised to hear from clients, primarily, staff, how they think Information and Research Services is doing its job and how it could be done better. Except for Ministers' staffers permanently based in Canberra who are more likely to be attracted when the Parliament is not sitting, these are organised on sittings days, usually when MPs are at party meetings. The sessions provide an opportunity for comment, suggestion, and criticism, questions - and initial training. For each *Forum*, there has been an aspect of service introduced to generate discussion but anything at all can, and is, raised.

TABLE 3   *Forums* Held and Planned to Date

24 March 1999	How DPL communicates with you
21 June 1999	Use of electronic services
28 June 1999	Repeat use of electronic services
14 March 2000	Electronic Newspaper Clipping Database
4 April 2000	Orientation and training programs
27 June 2000	Electronic Guide to Services
6 December 2000	Using Information and Research Services from your desktop - Drop In Session
7 December 2000	Repeat using Information and Research Services from your desktop - Drop In Session
6 March 2001	Electronic Guide to Services - new features
19 March 2002	ABS@ Parliament - a new electronic service from the Australian Bureau of Statistics
3 September 2002 (planned)	Ministerial Staff Briefing - services available on your parliamentary network account
5 September 2002 (planned)	Repeat Ministerial Staff Briefing - services available on your parliamentary network account

An extension of this service is the creation of the 'Drop-In' Centre set up close to the entrance of the Department which will begin operation when the Parliament returns at the end of August. It is an experiment in offering ongoing opportunity for assistance in the effective use of DPL services and, just as importantly, for dialogue.

6. MPs Meetings with Staff

Proud of our parliamentary 'nous' as we are, and seeing it as our particular comparative advantage, we nonetheless need to continue to work at acquiring it. For example, we have to remind ourselves when thinking about a response to a client request that to do it best we need to put ourselves in the shoes of the MP making it and try to imagine what we would want, delivered in what way, if we were them.

It is incumbent upon us to understand very well not only the general parliamentary environment and the particulars of MPs' usage of our services and the interests this reveals,

but also indeed the nature of their lives, the pressures upon them, and the competing demands on their time.

One tool we use for this, which is always extremely successful and very popular with staff, is the annual staff meeting with two MPs representing different parties, of which there have been five to date. The MPs selected, usually good users of our services, have invariably, and with geniality given generously and interestingly of their time and been willing to engage in lively dialogue about services. While providing very positive feedback, MPs at these meetings have also been willing to point to areas where there is room for improvement. A common theme is the pressure on their time and the need for brevity, brevity and brevity in briefing. Another is the timeliness of Bills Digests (albeit often beyond our control on account of the timetable for legislative tabling). There have also been the requests to take more initiatives and be more proactive - 'I need you to let me know about things I should be aware of given my portfolio interests'. This initiative to be more proactive has flowed through to become one of the foci for this year's triennial evaluation.

7. Library Committee

The DPL is fortunate to have a Library Committee (LC) which is chaired alternately by either the President of the Senate or the Speaker of the House of Representatives (the Presiding Officers). The Senate and the House of Representatives elect their own Library Committee which then meets together as a joint LC. Its present membership includes eight members of the Coalition (the governing parties) and 6 members of the Labor Party. Small parties are not represented on the Committee because of the large numbers of Committees they have to cover.

The Library Committee has a long and strong history and was a subject of robust debate as early as Federation in 1901.[5] From the outset it provided a direct link between the producers and the consumers of library and then research services (the Legislative Research Service was established in 1966). While its interest and influence has waxed and waned over time, usually depending on the nature of the membership, and while always an advisory and not a decision making body, it has maintained an essential link between DPL and its clients and provides legitimacy for overall direction.

That the LC is not a decision making committee reflects respect for the role of the professionals in making their recommendations to the Presiding Officers. The LC, however, supports and advises the Presiding Officers in determining appropriate policy and direction for the DPL. Its Terms of Reference are at **Attachment B**. It meets on average four times a year and its agendas over the last year, for example, have included issues such as the DPL's budget, new products and services, direct client access to commercial databases and the appointment, project and progress of the annual Parliamentary Fellow. In this context it can act as a very useful sounding board, its members tending to act as representatives of the broader parliamentary user community able to bring its concerns to the table.

As the business of the provision of parliamentary library and research services has changed, and corresponding needs for new services and approaches has been identified and become more critical to more MPs, so the relevance of the LC has grown. From being a congenial gentlemen's, club it has in the last few years become much more interested and activist and its membership has tended to include more prominent MPs.

Perhaps the best recent example of its support is the Albanese issue. In June 2000, the member for Grayndler, Mr Anthony Albanese, raised in Question Time his concern that a Minister was requiring requests from the DPL made to his Department to go through his office. This was in breach of the convention by which DPL routinely has officer-to-officer

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[5] Andrew and Margaret Osborn, The Commonwealth Parliamentary Library, 1901-1927 and the Origins of the National Library of Australia, Department of the Parliamentary Library in association with the National Library, 1989 pp5-12.

access to Departments of State for publicly available information. The Minister stated that his reason was pressure on his department. Whatever the intention, the effect, Mr Albanese implied, was censure of information in a politically sensitive area. There was also the issue of timeliness (delays caused by the requirement), confidentiality (while DPL never divulges in whose name a requests is made, it can be obvious that the inquirer is the Shadow Opposition spokesperson) and the DPL's capacity to do its job in general.

The reaction was universal, immediate and, more importantly, common across the political spectrum in defence of the DPL's right to continued access to Departments of State for publicly available (even if not 'published') information. There were two discussions on the matter in LC and a unanimous decision in defence of the convention of access. The LC, in representing its constituency, was able to bring this matter to a head, win the support of the Presiding Officers and put this genie back into its bottle. [6]

8. Some Conclusions

All this suggests how markedly we have had to change the way we do our business and will continue to need to do so. No longer can we expect clients to come to us, knowing what amazing value-added parliamentary awareness we are able to bring to the task at hand in competition with any possible alternatives, and also to know how best to use the range of services on offer.

'We're free we're there and we're parliamentary aware' - certainly a comparative advantage - but not enough, in itself, to guarantee the clientele. This places different expectations on staff than was the case even five years ago. No longer can we just rely on being highly qualified specialist librarians and analysts. As well, we have to have the tools and the training - and, most importantly, the inclination and aptitude - to go out to clients, be able to teach and preach effectively as well as seek, find, sift, sort, assess and analyse.

The Department is scheduled to review its staff selection documentation. Selection criteria for staff, which now focus on the very important priorities of professional skills, parliamentary sensitivity and team playing, will need to be adjusted to include this element - this capacity and inclination for *Outreach*. The implication is that we now need to recognise that promotion, marketing and training is as much core business as delivering the product. And it is the responsibility not only of our Publications and Client Relation team, but of each and every one of us.

Neither these changes to work requirements and work practices nor the series of feedback tools described above, need cost a great deal. The tail must not wag the dog. Rather they are essentially changes of attitude and practice and a little bit of record keeping. Lack of resources is thus no excuse - and nor is lack of courage.

For the newer or smaller parliamentary library and research services, there is a well recognised basic framework and set of services MPs need. As noted at the outset, we know they all want quality, timely, impartial, tailored, confidential parliamentary aware information and analysis. The common denominator is parliamentary value added. Thus, for example, if you are providing the same kind of library service as any public or national library, or writing long and complex research papers comprehensible only to specialists, you are not doing your job. This is where the framework of the Parliamentary Libraries and Research Services Section of IFLA can be so helpful. So often, we amaze each other with the sameness of the issues that confront us - parliamentary sensitivity, geographic proximity, brevity of briefs and, yes, even the difficulty of the nature of our clients as so well described by the Deputy Speaker of Israel at this session in 2000.

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[6] For a fuller discussion of this issue, see 'Managing the Political Environment: Issues Arising in the Provision of Information and Research Services to Members of Parliament, Dr J R Verrier, Boston IFLA Workshop paper 2001.

Thus provide the basic 'classics' of parliamentary library and research service value added product and, for the rest, avoid hand wringing and worrying (you and them) about what is required. The most effective approach is just to do something, advise your Library Committee that you are doing it and see how it goes. After a respectable period, ask a selection of the users what they think about it. The 'something' is something which you have a pretty good idea they will want because you have done your anthropological homework and it is something which may be a product of thinking outside the box.

The most recent example in the Australian Commonwealth context is the *Audio Brief* - a triumph of response to the particular needs of Australia, a country so vast that it has most MPs spending many hours in their car wanting to use their time productively. The *Audio Brief* can be used in their car, in their kitchen or from their laptops wherever they are. A preliminary review after the first release series earlier this year (carried out by calls to the MPs who had requested it) demonstrated that this product is indeed meeting a real need and, at the same time, providing an exciting and stimulating new venture for staff.

So don't waste time and money establishing the basic essentials. Instead think through what may be different about your polity/political culture which may provide constraints or opportunity and respond accordingly.

In all this 'knowing the client' and needs assessment framework, a fundamental dilemma for us - and I suspect for all of you - is parliamentarians' concern about 'keeping a file on them'. In Australia this has been an issue in discussions in Library Committee. It is also quite a regular theme in scrutiny of DPL management at Senate Estimates. While the need to know the client in order to deliver the best service to them is critical, and this is a well understood sound business practice, this concern needs to be respected to retain credibility with clients - and ultimately their custom. We do, inevitably, get to know a great deal about MPs and, in the interests of good service, this is shared informally and orally on a need-to-know basis. Client information is kept very close and reflects DPL values, culture - and survival instincts. We are VERY aware of the sensitivity of this data and the danger, for example, of the press getting hold of any of it.

Parliamentary 'nous' - or enough of it - cannot be taken for granted. Feedback mechanisms like the ones described above provide invaluable input into ongoing continuous improvement to services and work practices. The attention paid to them is a commitment to evolution and change and to the flexibility we must have if we are to do the best job for our parliamentary representatives and remain a key to their capacity to carry out their increasingly onerous responsibilities effectively.

ATTACHMENT A

TRIENNIAL EXTERNAL CLIENT SERVICES EVALUATION

Terms of Reference:

1.   To design and implement an independent qualitative client services evaluation.

2.   To obtain detailed confidential feedback from Senators and Members and staff about the extent to which the DPL provides or could provide:
    - balanced, impartial, confidential and timely quality services in all circumstances
    - appropriate services to meet client needs for information analysis and advice
    - added value compared to the services provided by other information and research providers.

3.   To prepare a report based on the research, covering:
    - description of the key findings
    - recommendations for strategies to improve client service.

Draft Schedule:

Monday 10 June 2002	Advertisement placed online at www.ads.gov.au
Saturday 15 June 2002	Advertised in the 'tender' section of the Canberra Times and Melbourne Age
Monday 17 June 2002	Advertised in the 'tender' section of the Sydney Morning Herald
Monday 1 July 2002	Briefing Session - 2pm Committee Room 2 R 1
Thursday 18 July 2002	Applications close
Wednesday 24 July 2002	Working Party meeting to shortlist candidates
Friday 26 July 2002	Telephone interviews of shortlisted applicants
August 2002	Consultant to start
February 2003	Draft of Survey
March 2003	Final of Survey

As well as the ongoing issues for evaluation canvassed in the Terms of Reference, three specific sets of issues for exploration are of interest in 2002:

1. DPL's Electronic Relationship with Clients: Issues to Explore

- Are DPL clients aware of our electronic resources?
- Is there a mismatch between DPL's need for, access and usage of electronic resources and its perception of client need for or usage of those resources?
- Do clients make optimal use of DPL electronic resources available?
- What are the barriers to client use of electronic resources?
- Are there ways in which DPL e-resources could be presented that would enhance client access?

2. DPL Awareness of & Responsiveness to Different Client Characteristics, Requirements and Office Arrangements: Issues to Explore

- Is DPL clients' staff induction, training and support achieving the degree of self-help proficiency and usage on which the service is based?
- Is flexibility of service and responsiveness to individual client requirements a policy myth or a practical reality?
- Are we striking the right balance between electronic and personalised services?

3. The Balance Between Reactive and Pro-active Provisions of Service

Traditionally from consideration of the pressures on Senators and Members and a concern not to promote or proselytyze on specific issues, there is a DPL tradition of reaction and responsiveness to specific requests rather than pro-activity and promotion of issues and services. However, the emerging needs of Senators and Members have lead to the delivery of services such as:

- General Distribution Products (GDPs) to anticipate client needs
- DPL internet and intranet sites
- advertisement of new products in *This Sitting Week*
- negotiation of Alert profiles
- arrangements with individual clients for updates on specific issues
- provision of prominent speakers on key issues for *Vital Issues Seminars.*

In an environment shifting in terms of increasing pressure, competitiveness and exponential technological change, has DPL got the balance right between reactive and pro-active services, does DPL need to review the balance and is our position in the market competitive?

Australian Commonwealth Parliament

Joint Library Committee - Terms of Reference

1. Advise the Presiding Officers on major policy matters relating to the Parliamentary Library's role in assisting Senators and Members fulfil their Chamber, Committee and representational responsibilities;

2. Advise the Presiding Officers on client service policy, including the types, levels and priorities of services to be provided by the Parliamentary Library and consider both the mechanisms for client service evaluation and the outcomes of such evaluations;

3. Advise the Presiding Officers on the corporate planning strategy proposed by the Parliamentary Library, prior to the submission of the Department's Corporate Plan to the Presiding Officers for approval;

4. Assess, and advise the Presiding Officers on, the achievement of the Parliamentary Library's corporate objectives and the effectiveness of its program evaluation practices;

5. Consider such other matters as may be referred to the Library Committee from time to time by the Presiding Officers.