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A combined parliamentary library and research service: changes and challenges over thirty years

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It is customary when you grow older to look back and reflect how much better everything was in one's youth, but when I started to think about this lecture I quickly concluded that I had very few real regrets about how things used to be. Indeed, the more I reflected the more conscious I became that almost all the changes that I have seen in the world of parliamentary libraries and research services have been for the better. It is not that we did that badly when I joined the House of Commons Library as an agricultural economist early in 1968, but in practical terms we could do far less so our horizons were much more limited and we were correspondingly less ambitious. Today, there is still plenty of scope for us to do more, and to improve what we already do, but in almost all respects our users are getting a substantially better service than they did when I first arrived at Westminster. It has been a period of continuing development and growth, driven by the possibilities that technology has offered and increasingly, in recent years, by the changing requirements and expectations of our users. In some ways, it is difficult to say which has been the more important driver but as we are essentially service organisations I think it is appropriate to start by looking at our users, their needs and how those needs have changed.

The feature we share is that our primary users are politicians and, more importantly, parliamentarians and participants in the democratic process. As June Verrier acknowledged at the 2000 IFLA conference, not all democracies are equally robust and parliaments are extremely varied organisations, especially in terms of size. They tend to be complex organisations with patterns of internal governance and accountability that reflect both national political culture and constitutional differences. I happen to come from a large and generally well-resourced parliament with its share of eccentricities but my own observations suggest that democratic parliaments tend to have a lot in common and so do their members: the

politicians are remarkably similar wherever you go.

In the last thirty years the lives of our Members at Westminster have changed a great deal and most other parliamentarians have had similar experiences. By almost every measure, parliaments have become busier and the demands on their members correspondingly greater. As government policies have become more complex and pervasive, and the process of policy-making more inclusive, so the task of holding the executive to account has become more exacting. There is more, and complex and far-reaching, legislation, more questions are tabled, there are more committees that meet more often and consider more difficult policy areas, and so on. Parliaments and their members have become a major focus for lobbyists and pressure groups of all kinds. Our individual Members are increasingly expected actively to engage, and be seen to engage, in all these aspects of the House's work as well as being ever more closely involved in the affairs of their constituencies and constituents. This concern with their constituencies is partly a product of our electoral system, but it is an aspect of our Members' work that we cannot ignore and it is one that some other parliaments share.

Politicians tend to be people in a hurry with their own priorities and agendas. Our typical Member is extremely busy, with a lifestyle that can only be described as punishing. Furthermore, while parliaments and parliamentarians often appear to be held in low public esteem, the institutions and their members are the subject of intense media and public interest, encouraged by non-stop news programmes in national and local media as well as routine broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings. Voter turnout may be low and falling but in many respects the public's expectations of our Parliament and its Members appear never to have been higher. The need to respond to the perceived demands of the public and the media is one of several factors that influence parliamentarians' approach to their work and hence their priorities.

Our users' social and educational backgrounds have also changed. As personalities they remain very diverse, as are their personal histories, but their social origins are less varied and they are generally more highly educated – most have university degrees, for example, and relatively very few come from blue-collar occupations. Many are professional politicians with experience of local government or other political work. They are also increasingly IT-literate. Their expectations of the scale and scope of the services that will be available to them are rising all the time and they depend increasingly on support from a range of sources, including parliamentary staff as well as their own personal staff. They are no longer one-man (or woman) shows and the growth in the numbers of their personal staff means that the size and diversity of our user base have increased steadily ever since the mid-1970s. Our Members may have more help than ever before but that does not mean that the demands on the information providers are reduced – if anything, it means the reverse especially as it often means that we have to work for or with intermediaries.

Taken together, our users form a heterogeneous and very demanding community that depends heavily on ready access to information from a wide range of sources for its members to do their jobs. Pressures on accommodation at Westminster, combined with our Members' growing focus on their constituencies, now mean that many of our users need to have access to our services away from Westminster. Like their equivalents elsewhere, they increasingly expect that those services will be available to them 24/7, on-line, wherever they may be. Information technology allows us to meet those expectations in a way that we could not previously have contemplated and we now have to consider meeting our remote users' needs as part of our core services.

Some of their requirements have not changed. We still have to provide very wide subject coverage, while the depth of response sought for individual enquiries remains extremely varied. Speedy responses are still required: short deadlines have always been a major feature of our work and our users often have a strong preference for an immediate oral briefing from a specialist, if necessary on the telephone, over any other form of response. It has, however, become increasingly apparent that the pervasiveness of the internet as a means of obtaining information has changed the nature of the demand. As Donna Scheeder noted at the 2003 IFLA conference, most users now routinely perform basic self-service reference searches at the desktop without the intervention of intermediaries. This means that although fewer enquiries may reach us, those that do are more complex and correspondingly more demanding to answer and it is arguable that in that respect we are adding more value than when much of what we did was saving someone else's time. There is still a substantial demand for our traditional bespoke responses to individual enquiries, but there is also a growing expectation that we will have pre-prepared material readily available on the Intranet on virtually any topic of current interest. This pro-active approach is not an entirely new development but it has meant a significant shift in how we focus our resources, while the trend towards self-service access to information has begun very noticeably to affect how we provide information to our users.

These changes in the demand for our products started gradually but their pace has accelerated very noticeably since the 1997 election and we have had to re-think how we assess our users' requirements. We have never found it easy to obtain reliable feedback and until the mid-1990s, steadily rising demand for our enquiry services meant that we did not really feel the need. We were self-evidently successful and popular with our users and marketing our services hardly figured, partly because we could not have handled a bigger workload. Like many service organisations, we were very committed to providing a good service but were also very producer-oriented – we thought we knew best what our users needed, and they could take it or leave it.

A fresh approach has been triggered by our need at the end of this year to replace POLIS, our long-established on-line bibliographical database of parliamentary sources and principal information retrieval tool. Our new Parliamentary Information Management Service (PIMS) will be a state of the art search and retrieval system with much greater functionality that will allow us to manage information and deliver our services in very different, more user-friendly, ways. We have had to examine our users' requirements in detail in order to determine how best to exploit PIMS' functionality to provide and deliver the most effective range of services. Some intensive work with our users early in 2003 helped us to discover what aspects of our services they most valued and gave us some new insights into how they see our services. In some respects, that work was reassuring in that it confirmed that many of our long-established services are still highly valued but it was also revealing in that we learnt much more than we had previously known about the views of those that rarely or never use us. We identified some significant gaps in our services and how they are delivered. We also discovered that many users found the style of our publications too academic and over-detailed – something that we are now trying to address. The feedback exercise, which we will undoubtedly have to repeat, has encouraged us to become more user-focused and outward looking. It has also enabled us to plan the future development of our services on a much firmer basis than before, helped by what technology can now do for us.

Technology has, of course, been the most important driver for change in the past thirty years and not just information technology. When I look at the work we did thirty or more years

ago, there are some striking similarities between then and now but also some important differences. The most noticeable difference is its appearance rather than its content, which in some important respects has changed remarkably little. It all looks much more professional because it is so much better presented as well as much more comprehensively sourced. My younger colleagues find it difficult to believe that in 1968 we still had manual typewriters, only two very unreliable photocopiers and most of us had to share telephones. All our work was initially handwritten, then typed by secretaries. Indeed, we often had to send handwritten letters when time did not allow typing and were very much constrained by physical limitations such as whether we happened to have a particular publication in our holdings.

Our search and retrieval tools were much more limited and, more significantly, much slower to use. There were fewer researchers who had to be much more versatile because our research service was only beginning to develop the subject specialisation that has become a major source of its strength. As an agricultural economist, I had to turn my hand to such diverse topics as animal welfare, transport and public sector finance as well as the common agricultural policy. We had none of the specialised subject collections that still underpin much of our work. In the circumstances (and I do not want to sound unduly complacent), I think we did pretty well in terms of the quality of the content and speed of response. When I look at our letters or reference sheets of the late 1960s and 1970s, I am struck by the depth of analysis and high standards of accuracy and reliability that we achieved in what would now be regarded as unbelievably primitive conditions.

Our working tools began to improve, albeit slowly, in the early 1970s. With hindsight, three key developments can be identified apart from the growth of subject specialisation. In terms of automation, we were a long way behind much of the rest of the library and information community but the arrival of our online database, POLIS, in 1980 first allowed us to glimpse the possibilities ahead, although even that step was strongly resisted by some of our users, including quite a few of our staff. The later 1980s saw the (belated) acquisition of our first word-processors. Initially we had only two, but they were the start of dramatic changes in our working methods, as well as in the presentation of our work. As their availability spread, they gradually transformed how we wrote (where would we be without the ability to cut electronic text from one place and paste it into another?), as well as allowing the use of graphics, diagrams and footnotes which had previously been impossible within our sort of timescales.

Lastly, for our statisticians, for whom the revolution had already begun with electronic calculators in the 1970s, the arrival of their first micro-computer in the early 1980s heralded a new era. It transformed not only their working methods but also the content of their products by enabling them to add value by manipulating and analysing data rather than having to spend much of their time on routine data extraction. They led the way in developing the more proactive approach to providing information, first with paper publications and more recently with an extensive range of statistical information on our Intranet.

The most spectacular changes have, of course, happened since the beginning of the 1990s with the arrival of the internet, the web, networks, intranets, e-mail and so on. Westminster was a late (and initially somewhat reluctant) convert to IT but in the early 1990s all the Library staff followed the statisticians, always our technical advance guard, in acquiring their own desktops and the internet and e-mail soon followed. No audience knows better than this how pervasive information technology has become in the last ten years or how it has transformed almost all aspects of our working lives. But we need to remind ourselves about two things. First, the technology is not an end in itself but a means of providing or delivering

and, often more importantly, managing information so that we can provide and enhance our services for our users. We should never underestimate its power and the scale and scope of what it can do, or its impact on our own and our users' methods of working. It is, however, essentially an enabler and a facilitator that means that we can do our jobs better and improve our services.

Secondly, there are things the technology cannot do. In particular, it is morally and intellectually neutral. It cannot evaluate information or make judgments or decisions for us, although it can often assist those processes by enabling us to marshal or present information in helpful ways. In itself it does not add value: that depends on what we do with it. In other words, the existence of the technology does not remove the need for human intervention. The people are as important as they ever were, whether as users or as staff, and we ignore them at our peril. In particular, we now need a range of specialist technical skills in both systems and management so that we exploit fully the possibilities that technology offers. This is a matter of real concern as without those skills, which are often scarce and expensive, we will not be able to deliver the services that our users now require and expect.

So where are we now? What has this technology done for us and how are we doing better? Our products look much more professional and we should not ignore the importance of presentation when it comes to providing information to our users in more helpful ways. We have significantly greater subject expertise and can work much faster so that we do much more, more quickly. We can analyse large amounts of data quickly and easily so that we can provide more useful information from the raw material we have. The processes of finding and assembling information have changed out of all recognition in terms of both speed and more particularly scope, mainly because we are no longer limited to paper sources, although they have by no means entirely disappeared and possibly never will. We can obtain material on-line world-wide at the click of a mouse and no longer have to depend on our own holdings or on whatever material that can easily be obtained within our own immediate physical environment. There far less routine drudgery involved in both managing and finding information and that is gradually beginning to affect our staffing. We are just beginning to see some real staff savings from our investment in IT.

The latest information management techniques allow us to store and share information, re-use it as many times as we need and deliver it to multiple users in real time at virtually no marginal cost to ourselves. We can also begin, albeit slowly, to undo probably our single most expensive mistake: the decision to allow our research sections to develop their own subject collections independently of each other. Our methods of delivery have also changed beyond all recognition. We no longer depend on paper, thus enabling us to meet our users' demand for self-service access to information to our own products, wherever they may be. Delivery by e-mail has significantly improved our ability to respond to specific requests within very short timescales. To ensure that we exploit all these opportunities to the full, we have had to become very different organisations: much more managerial, more resource conscious but more innovative and flexible so that we can respond to our users' evolving requirements in cost-effective and imaginative ways.

Our users often appear to take the existence of our services for granted but they clearly value them, at least if their continuing demand for our products is any indication. But what value are we now adding? We now face genuine and very obvious competition and many of us will have been asked why, with the internet and all the information out there, we still need specialised library and research service when users can do it for themselves. The principal

answer has to be that in practice many of them cannot do it for themselves to the level that they need, often because they do not have the time but also because they lack the necessary knowledge and skills, especially in relation to the higher level analytical work that we do. Those skills include managing and presenting information to meet their specific requirements but there is also a qualitative element. The evidence suggests that our users continue to value our work because it is perceived as balanced and impartial, with no spin on it. It is also seen as reliable, robust and properly sourced. It may be free at the point of use and dedicated to meeting their particular needs – but our users can now look elsewhere with no real effort, so the fact that they do not suggests that our services are still meeting a genuine need.

This may seem a negative way of saying that in my judgment we are still adding value but that judgment is confirmed by the continuing world-wide growth of parliamentary libraries and research services. This suggests that the importance of information and research to the parliamentary process is still recognised and understood, although we have to continue to justify our existences by demonstrating that we add value in cost-effective ways. The nature of the demand for our services has unquestionably changed, as have our delivery mechanisms, but parliamentarians still need information as much as they ever did and information technology now offers us better opportunities than ever before to manage and present that information in the interests of our users.

As our colleague Bill Robinson from the CRS has often reminded us, knowledge is power and high-quality, properly focused, information and research are an important element in ensuring the effectiveness of parliaments. The origins of parliamentary libraries have often been strictly practical and based on the need for parliaments to manage the usually very substantial volumes of information that they either create themselves or receive from elsewhere. The ability to retrieve and use that information whenever required is an essential element in all aspects of the work of parliaments – legislating, debating and holding governments to account and it is no accident that librarians have played a key role in the development of search and retrieval tools, now almost invariably electronic, to enable that process to happen. The development of parliamentary research services is a more recent but logical response to the growth in the complexity of government and the expectation that parliaments, and their members, will be properly equipped to hold those governments to account.

That is how we have traditionally played a vital part in making parliaments more effective and thus in enhancing the democratic process, and I have every confidence that we shall continue to do so. It may seem pretentious and even far-fetched to suggest that such relatively small-scale organisations can act as counterweights to the might of governments who control so much of the information agenda, but it is no accident that we have become a world-wide growth industry and the creation of a library and information service, however rudimentary, is often among the first things to happen in newly established or re-established parliaments. I think that speaks for itself.

I have been very fortunate to have had a long and rewarding career in a parliamentary library and research service, doing a worthwhile job and contributing to the democratic process. I have had, and still have, some wonderful colleagues whose friendship and support I shall always value and with whom it has been a pleasure to work. I have also gained a great deal from the friendship and contacts that I have made in recent years with my colleagues in other countries. Thank you all for listening and allowing me to share these valedictory thoughts with you.

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