

Book Reviews

Pathways to Information. The Information, Policy Analysis and Advisory Needs of Senators and Members by Ed Parr, Alison Ransome, Alan Davies and John Warhurst (Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1991), xiv + 127 + appendices, ISBN 0 644 1471 4.

This book offers an interesting look into the evolving legislative environment worldwide, as well as the Australian Parliament specifically. It reflects a number of tensions within modern legislative bodies as they grapple with increasingly complex policy dilemmas and attempt to maintain their traditional institutional workings in a rapidly changing technological world. Access to information remains critical in the political arena. That access is being affected by changing power alignments, increased activity of interest groups, and the pervasiveness of information technologies. These factors, in turn, affect the role of information support services to parliamentarians.

Some of the major findings of the surveys highlight the accelerated pace of legislative life today and the accompanying problem of information 'overload'. Parliamentarians often confront a dizzying array of issues with only limited time available to analyze any specific agenda item. As a result, when decision time comes for a particular issue, information is needed in a hurry and they are more likely to telephone or use their staff, than stop by the Parliamentary Library and search for the needed information themselves. Parliamentarians also want access to information as readily in their constituency offices as in Parliament House. In today's technological world, geographic distance is no longer considered a barrier to getting timely responses. Yet, while technology holds the solution to many information problems, it also brings new challenges with it. The effective introduction and use of modern technology in such traditional institutions as parliaments, where many of the potential users have no technical background, can prove difficult. Parliamentary library and administrative support groups worldwide now find themselves taking on an increased training responsibility to respond to this situation.

Ongoing political tensions create another dimension to be considered in providing useful information services in the Australian Parliament. While often less the case in a parliamentary system than in the American model, policy debates between the Government and Parliament can be contests over access to information. The political divisions within Parliament further complicate the issue of how to provide information services equally to all members, while considering their special needs. The findings also reinforce the need to maintain close contact between the Library and its clients, emphasizing the value of ongoing user feedback. The fact that the Library ranked as the third most frequently used source and the most important source of information, combined with the high response rate of parliamentarians and staff to the survey, indicate an already strong link to the Library and an interest in co-operating to achieve service improvements.

* The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Congressional Research Service or the Library of Congress.

The recommendations offered by the study team of Ed Parr, Alan Davies, Alison Ransome, and John Warhurst offer ways that the Parliamentary Library can adapt its current practices to more effectively support parliamentarians. The work of the Library falls generally into two categories: responses to requests for information, documentation, and media resources; and impartial advice and consultation through oral and written research and analysis. The Information Resources and Services (IRAS) program and the Parliamentary Research Service (PRS) program of the Parliamentary Library respectively perform these tasks. Many of the recommendations are fairly straight forward improvements to the Library's services, (e.g., providing a wider range of reference materials on the Parliamentary database or extending the available video programming beyond those received in Canberra). Others, however, reflect an effort to confront some thornier issues faced in today's legislative setting (e.g., providing "draft responses" to Parliamentarian's requests or supporting the special needs of the Opposition frontbench).

Several themes run throughout the survey results and recommendations. One is that while the information services of the Parliamentary Library exist to respond to requests, it is increasingly important to engage in outreach to parliamentarians and their staff. Given the competing demands on a Member's time and the availability of other sources of information, the Parliamentary Library needs to "to the client" to ensure a high level of use and user satisfaction. The recommendations for intensifying efforts to contact all parliamentarians and their staff at Parliament House, to offer workshops for electorate staff in all capital cities and regional centres, and to institute annual visits to each parliamentarian's office reflect the importance of establishing personal contacts and maintaining them. Although such outreach efforts can yield positive results, they also are time consuming and require a commitment of resources that may be difficult to sustain. Providing evaluation forms with individual services rendered and undertaking limited user surveys on an annual basis are other procedures for regular client feedback that may supply additional information useful to the Library for maintaining quality control and tailoring services to the needs of parliamentarians. As indicated in the report, care would need to be taken, however, so that parliamentarians did not feel burdened by continual surveys.

Another key point revealed in the study is that ratings are highest for services that offer quick and brief responses to requests for information. The longer a response takes and the more it moves into the realm of policy advice, the less unanimity exists about its value. In part this is a reflection of the fact that the Parliamentary Library provides a quick reference service that is simply not available elsewhere, while other groups prepare longer, analytical studies. To prepare more indepth analyses with a limited staff also takes a longer time than many in Parliament were willing to wait. Several of the study recommendations attempt to address this issue in various ways. Among the most intriguing is the suggestion that a system of "draft responses" be introduced where clients could agree to accept a preliminary draft with the agreement that the Library would not be responsible for inaccuracies or other limitations and that the client would not attribute the draft to the Library or its author. While this approach would address the problem of timeliness of reports, it runs the risk of undermining the Parliamentary Library's credibility. Even if clients accept the ground rules,

they are unlikely to be very forgiving if errors result in potential embarrassment or poor decisions.

More fundamental to the operations of the research service are the recommendations regarding the setting of priorities that reflect "the importance parliamentarians attach to prompt, brief and informal advisory services" and that "afford an equal opportunity to all parliamentarians in the preparation of in-depth analysis of policies and issues". Recognizing the particular information demands of the Opposition frontbenchers, who may lack access to other sources for analyses, the authors suggest that the Australian Parliament provide some separate or additional resources to satisfy those needs. This is an interesting proposal because it highlights the difficulties faced by a non-partisan research service in a changing political environment.

An Underlying issue that emerges from the study is the impact of technology on accessing and disseminating information in Parliament. A number of the recommendations focus on enhancing online databases, expanding access to existing systems, improving user interfaces to parliamentary systems, and providing additional hardware to parliamentarians and their offices. The recommendation for a single authority to be responsible for necessary equipment and basic services highlights the increased importance attributed to the development and maintenance of parliamentary information systems. Along with the increased availability of information in electronic formats, however, comes the concomitant requirement for training and support services. While this is an essential element to insuring that information systems are effectively used, it also entails substantial resources. Without a recognition that adequate resources need to be devoted to training and support, investments made in electronic information services would fail to provide the full benefits anticipated. Among the other critical recommendations is the establishment of a User Group to provide advice on use and development of parliamentary information systems and new technologies. Such a group comprised of parliamentarians and their staff, as well as technical and Library staff could help to direct the expansion of information technology in ways most responsive to the needs of the end users. By doing so, the User's Group could help to avoid costly errors and could greatly enhance use of new systems and equipment.

Pathways to Information provides a valuable tool for the Parliamentary Library to establish future priorities and determine how best to improve service to its clients. It can assist in identifying where resources should be concentrated and which services should be enhanced or eliminated. The demands on parliamentary information support services will continue to grow as Parliaments grapple with an increasingly complex world. How to offer improved access to timely information, maintain high quality analytical reports, and respond to the changing needs of Parliament without requiring expanded resources is the challenge facing all legislative libraries today.

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