

## Libraries in the cut and thrust: parliamentary library and research services

Have you ever wondered how members of parliament are able to produce information – statistics, international examples, costings – for an enormous range of policy issues? Parliamentary research and library services are a very important source for members of parliament, their contribution to debates, discussion in committees, and public representations.

Australia's parliamentary libraries have existed almost as long as its parliaments. As the Australian state and federal parliaments were established, so too were their libraries; the first parliamentary library was established in Australia in 1840 to serve the Legislative Council of New South Wales. Compared to this, the federal Parliamentary Library is a relatively recent organisation, having been launched on 9 May 1901 in the Exhibition Building in Melbourne. These early parliamentary libraries provided quite a different range of services to those offered today:

Parliamentary libraries grew up in the nineteenth century tradition of the cultured gentlemen's library and were, for many years, little more than well appointed clubs where members could read their favourite newspapers and find the occasional literary allusion or quotation for speeches.<sup>1</sup>

Today, parliamentary libraries are far removed from these static 'gentlemen's club' environs; they play a critical role in supporting the democracy of the nation.

Our clients are members of parliament and their staff and parliamentary department staff, but generally not ministerial staff. In total approximately 320 parliamentary library staff in Australian and New Zealand serve approximately 5800 core clients. Our clients are demanding, time pressured, and required to be across all the issues that are relevant to national, state, and territory parliaments. They greatly appreciate our services:

"...sometimes think we do not realise how well we are assisted by this parliament. We certainly do not go around recognising that we have one of the best parliamentary libraries in the world, and we should. That is one of the things I can tell you all from this conference: that we are up there with the Library of Congress and perhaps the Canadian parliamentary library. Firstly, we should be aware of that; secondly, we should be very proud of it; and, thirdly, we should be concerned to make sure that the excellent library to assist parliamentarians in this place continues... We are dealing with decisions that need to be made, I believe, to maintain our parliament—because, in the end, what the Parliamentary Library provides to parliamentarians in this place contributes to that precious thing called democracy."

- Senator Crowley, Senate Hansard 29 August 2001

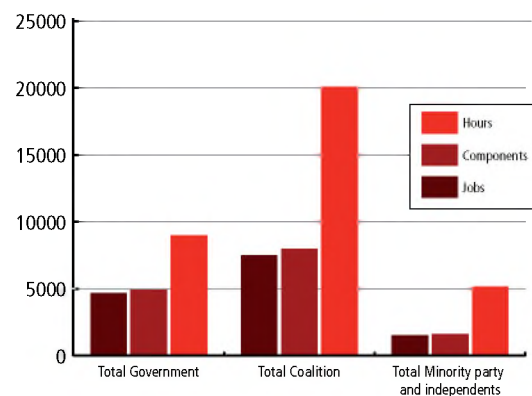
But what do we do? Parliamentary library and research services have some different services and characteristics to other special libraries. Many parliamentary libraries have research services where experts in areas such as law, statistics, economics, health, education, politics, and science provide advice through written analysis provided to clients and publications. For many enquiries from clients the collaboration between library staff and researchers is vital for the response. We also have a focus on news and many have online systems to provide access to press clippings, radio programs, and television programs. At the Parliament of Australia Library over half the collection budget is spent on media including online newspaper collections, newswire services, and databases, including newspapers.

Our clients are on the move – more often than not in electorate offices, electorates, or travelling in their representational role. For parliamentary libraries this means online and now mobile technologies are a vital part of our service delivery. We are keen 2.0 users. You can find the Parliament of Australia Library on Facebook and twitter. Our RSS feed was the second top-used page on the Parliament of Australia website (over 2.9 million page views in 2009).

In addition, there can be great change in our client group – at the last federal election almost a quarter of those elected were not members in the last parliament. A strong focus of parliamentary libraries is therefore on helping new parliamentarians, and their staff, understand and use the services available to them.

The majority of our clients are those who are not in government, primarily because those in government have access to support through government agencies. For the Parliament of Australia Library approximately 32% of enquiries are from government senators and members:

Research enquiries 2009 by party



Parliamentary libraries provide services through working closely with other parliamentary support areas, for example:

- Parliamentary Education
- Management of Historical Information on MPs
- Management of Current Information on MPs
- Digitising of parliamentary records including Hansard and other document
- Whole of Parl Website Management
- Exhibitions; and
- Parliamentary history.

For more information go to the Association of Parliamentary Libraries of Australasia (APLA) website <http://www.apla.org.au>

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<sup>1</sup> Biskup, P. and D. Goodman, D. 1994. Libraries in Australia, Wagga Wagga, Centre for Information Studies p 280.

<sup>2</sup> <http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansards%2F2001-08-29%2F0076%22>