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According to a paper presented to a parliamentary library conference in Edinburgh in 2003 by Philipp Harfst and Kai Uwe Schnapp:

The primary means to secure accountability and transparency from a parliament's point of view are:

- *an efficient parliamentary timetable (enough time for proper consideration of legislation and for scrutiny of government policies),*
- *an effective committee system (with independence of action, quality staff, and enough resourcing to hold public inquiries and present reports which are guaranteed a government response),*
- *a robust parliamentary library and research service (able to provide independent, quality, impartial information, analysis and advice to MPs across the political spectrum) and a timely Hansard service of plenary and committee proceedings.*

The degree to which these are accepted as givens of the parliament is a major indicator of the parliament's independence of the executive and a parliament's capacity to hold the executive to account.

As the leader of a party whose whole raison d'etre is holding the executive to account, I am therefore very interested in hanging on to a robust parliamentary library and research service and that's why I asked for a spot on the Parliamentary Library Committee formed late last year. Putting in place the mechanisms to keep governments accountable is of limited interest to government members and often to the opposition who hope to soon be in government so it was important for the cross bench to be represented.

The Democrats – all four of us now – are fully engaged in the business of parliament – on every bill, in the vast majority of inquiries, in procedures of the Senate and in safeguarding the parliament's ability to bring to bear the checks and balances on the executive of government, of whatever persuasion.

People often ask, how can you possibly be across all the issues within your portfolios – mine are Treasury, PM&C, Energy and Greenhouse, Schools, Health and Nuclear. (And right now I should be doing media on Minister Downer's stated intention to ask cabinet if we can sell uranium to India – that country that took up nuclear weapons and refuses to sign the NPT.)

My answer is always that this would be impossible without the parliamentary library. I go on to explain that it so much more than a place with librarians and books, that crucial to our grasp of the substance of legislation

(particularly those that don't perhaps warrant an inquiry) is the analytical research capacity of the library.

I tell them our library is not a creature of the executive of government and is free to provide independent advice to members of parliament, from whatever political party, that it can be relied up, that it is timely and that there are no restraints on what I can ask for by way of this advice.

I also tell them that the parliamentary library is crucial to democracy because the vast majority of its advice is also available to anyone who cares to get onto its website.

And all this is true but the library is not perfect and the management of the library within parliamentary services has been subject to big changes and some anxieties about what this means for accountability and transparency.

Like so many other parliaments, we've been corporatised and amalgamated and forced to endure annual productivity cuts. The Parliamentary services department had to wear the cost of quite a lot of extra security after 9/11.

It is said that the key to independence for libraries is control of their budgets which is not the case for our parliament.

Corporatisation is driven by the dollar and not accountability and whilst we have a library committee there are questions about its capacity to know what's really going on. In any case, it's an advisory committee, not a decision-making board.

Some say you need a Library commissioner to do this job and this is the case in the UK for instance.

Six of the seven parliamentary library executive staff have left since these reforms. Were they all dunces? I doubt it, given the very high international reputation of our library.

Many of us are worried about the move from specialist analytical researchers to generalists. Early on there were threats, perceived or real, that library resources would need to be handed out equally which sent shivers down our collective small party spine, knowing that our need is a good deal greater than that of a government backbencher.

Our Department's new CEO came from the department that drafted the Government's legislation. Would she curtail the advice from the library that might criticise legislation? Either we fought off these threats, for now, or they were non-existent in the first place.

What we do need I think is the capacity to draw on independent expert advice about our library – I doubt that a library committee or surveys can do this adequately – parliamentarians are often too busy to give accurate responses.

The Committee has had difficulty finding a meeting time that suits its big membership and our few meetings so far have been hampered by attendance and division bells.

So far the committee has not I think found its feet in driving an agenda or even knowing what that agenda might be. In my experience a parliamentary committee that is just there to tick off the day-to-day decisions that are effectively already made, will have difficulty in the competition for our time.

Perhaps we could learn from library committees in other countries.

These are some of the political tensions in safeguarding our wonderful parliamentary libraries.