

Association of Parliamentary Libraries of Australasia Conference, 26 July 2007

Opening Address

Thank you for inviting me to address this distinguished gathering, and for providing the opportunity to refer to the vital significance of parliamentary libraries in the operations of parliamentary institutions.

Some of you may have heard an account, which may or may not be apocryphal, of an incident in a certain northern state during the rule of a certain long-serving and powerful premier. An opposition member of the state parliament quoted some research provided by the parliamentary library to make out a case against some activity of the government. According to the story, the parliamentary librarian was summoned to the office of the great man, who advised: "Listen, libraries is for lendin' books. You stick to lendin' books, and you won't get into any trouble." It may be apocryphal, but it has a certain ring of authenticity about it.

Fortunately for the health of our parliamentary institutions, parliamentary libraries have not taken this advice. They have continued to provide members of parliament with facts and analysis. By doing so, they necessarily live dangerously. The holders of power do not necessarily welcome facts and analysis which do not support their cause. They spend a great deal of time and energy suppressing and manipulating facts and analysis which appear to threaten their hold on power. Anyone who produces facts and analysis contrary to that consideration is likely to be unpopular with the powers that be.

We live in the age of spin-doctoring and information management. It seems that there are no objective facts or impartial analysis anymore; all information is ideologically determined. In recent times, some holders of power have openly stated that they can ignore the reality pointed out by their opponents, because they have the ability to make their own reality.

In spite of this, facts and analysis remain effective in making the holders of power accountable. There was a recent small demonstration of this point, which involved one of these rare occasions on which a parliamentary library was identified as the source of inconvenient information. Over many years government has told the Senate and Senate committees that it will not release its legal advice. Sometimes it is stated that that legal

advice is never released, and at other times it has been claimed that it is only released in exceptional circumstances. These claims have always been regarded as spurious, because there are many occasions of government releasing its legal advice when it suits its purposes.

The current government proposes to sell Medibank Private. A Parliamentary Library paper was published suggesting that this proposed course is of dubious legality, and this paper attracted considerable publicity. It had the potential to undermine the sale in the market, as buyers would hesitate to take part in a sale which may be challenged in the courts. Also, anyone who floats anything on the stock market is required by law to reveal any possible legal problems. The government then voluntarily produced the advice of its own legal advisers indicating that the sale would be legal. (It is wonderful how government legal advisers are always of the considered opinion that whatever government proposes to do is lawful.) It was pointed out that this publication of the advice rather undermined the claim that advice should not be disclosed, or only in exceptional circumstances. Since that time, government refusals to produce advice have been couched in different terms. They have frankly conceded that the rule now is that advice will not be disclosed unless it suits the government to do so. So one parliamentary library paper changed the language, and probably eventually the balance, of interaction between the legislature and the executive.

The power of facts and analysis to influence events and to make the holders of power accountable adds to the element of danger in the lives of parliamentary librarians and their institutions.

Parliamentary libraries have become great users of high technology. One of our long-serving and soon-to-depart senators made a profound observation when he said that rubbish conveyed by high technology remains rubbish in spite of the high technology with which it is conveyed. Much of what is conveyed in the world by high technology is rubbish, and its purveyors hope that we will be so dazzled by the technology that we will not perceive the deficiencies of the material. Parliamentary libraries have a very high reputation not only for using technology but for conveying information and analysis of very high quality. It is the latter part of their reputation that they must strive to maintain.

The theme of this conference is collaboration. Such collaboration occurs not only between libraries in serving their clients but between libraries and other servants of the same clients. There is a great deal of collaboration between the Parliamentary Library here and Senate staff, particularly committee staff. It may take the form simply of telephone calls between committee and library staff who know each other, or more formal modes such as the preparation of detailed papers. This collaboration makes a great contribution to the success of the committee system.

Conferences of this sort have the great value of confirming the devotion of the participants to their high calling. I hope that that devotion will be strengthened by this conference. It is vital for the survival of parliaments.

I wish you well in your deliberations.

Harry Evans