



**APLA Symposium, Melbourne, Parliament of Victoria  
Friday 8<sup>th</sup> February 2008**

**Challenges and Innovation Group Discussion  
(facilitated by Paddy Plunket from NZ Parliament)**

## **1. Challenges Facing our Research and Reference Services**

### Challenges Associated with Providing Information to MPs

- Selling the services to MPs: informing the MPs of what services are available
- Clarification of the information needed – requests being passed from Member to Electorate Officer to Researcher can sometimes lead to confusion over what information is required
- Disproportionate use by some clients – being monopolised or doing work that should be done by government departments
- Constituents' requests drawing on resources
- Clients asking for legal opinions
- Seen as being the "Opposition's library"
- Supporting Members during an election period
- Knowing the right amount of information to give MPs
- Not knowing how the information is going to be used – feeling the library may be misused or used for political games
- Issues relating to confidentiality

### Challenges Associated with Obtaining Information

- Difficulty in getting information out of government departments
- Being restricted to information that is publicly available
- Resources and funding – "small budget, big task", quality of work compromised by lack of funds and lack of time
- Some parliamentary libraries don't have research units, varying levels of resources and staff allocation to research services
- Increasing complexity of the work/requests that are coming in
- Deadlines – often too tight with staff not wanting to say 'no' to requests

### Other Challenges

- Requests from the public
- Keeping up with the pace of change in an electronic environment – web 2.0, client training, usability of websites, blogs, interactive tools, e-briefs, etc.
- Ambiguity of the research services and what our role is – committee research staff getting the library to do research, lack of recognition of the role of the library within the Parliament
- Reference vs. research requests
- Quality vs. quantity – judging how much information and detail is necessary – finding the information/research balance

## 2. How Parliamentary Libraries are Responding to these Challenges

### Theme: 'Good Practice – Innovation'

#### Intranet

- Provide similar access to regional and urban offices
- Victoria's intranet is tailored to specific needs, which allows library staff to access information quickly. It can however be information dense for MPs
- Commonwealth Parliament has a Wiki that is constantly updated on particular issues e.g. climate change.
- Working from home – remote access to websites
- Commonwealth has a new electronic media monitoring service that allows better access by members to programs from 12 – 18 months ago e.g. ABC Four Corners etc

#### Public Internet

- New Zealand's Media Monitoring Unit - streams debates live on the internet, and can now record this for MPs later reference
- UK is experimenting with turning research papers into podcasts.
- Victoria has a strong engagement with the community e.g. suffrage petition, biographical database of MPs, and timeline of Parliament on public website.

#### Current awareness services

- ACT tailor news service themselves i.e. select which news articles go out to MPs
- South Australia distributes 'current readings' electronically, giving MPs an overview of issues.
- Victoria's 'Bills Backgrounders' put info out there for MPs
- NZ Bills Digest is very popular with MPs
- Victoria has training and current awareness for EOs and MPs
- New Zealand has a weekly 'In Focus' – written on various topics, with links etc, and value-added with an abstract
- Queensland emails 'daily alerts' with news clippings
- Queensland delivers extended reporting of regional news during election campaigns
- Queensland targets ministerial offices with tailored information

#### Electronic Document Management

- NZ Document Management System is parliament wide, and allows re-use of material; no doubling up.
- IPRIN – collaborative website that features research by UK parliaments. This is a centralised, searchable communication system.
- Also – developing new ways of distributing research (e.g. pdfs)

### Promotion of the Library

- Library staff visit Electorate Offices (although WA doesn't visit – has EOs come in)
- Victoria collaborates with outside groups e.g. universities, incl. Library Fellowships
- Victoria gives new members a package with a photo of a person to contact if they have queries
- Tasmania attracts new Members by personalising their service: they hand deliver requests to the Member or their staffer, and discuss it with them. This allows MPs to get to know you and trust you.

### Quality of Research

- Victoria has a Bills Analysis Group to determine what outputs are necessary
- Commonwealth has a triage / vetting systems for jobs in order to refer requests to the appropriate person
- Quality control – peer review to ensure high standard of research papers
- South Australia has created a positive workplace culture (via a new librarian and external review) which has improved the quality of research and ensured a willingness to share information with colleagues

### Stretching limited resources

- NZ - One week per month is request free! Allows time and space to work on new papers
- A Bills Digest can be big resource, so a one page electronic version is useful; incl. newspaper articles allows nuance of opinion
- Commonwealth has a strict policy on client hierarchy, which gives MPs better service, and the public little service
- Reference interview – discuss why they want the info; helps avoid doing research for students etc
- Ideas about bringing in new staff at a lower level, to deal with basic requests
- The more the service is advertised or promoted the more it is used – so educate MPs / clients to help themselves – self-directed research.

### **3. Conclusion**

The facilitated workshop session provided an opportunity for rich discussion between Parliamentary reference and research staff. Participants were given an opportunity to talk about the challenges they were experiencing in their libraries, then the good practices and recent innovations that helped them to meet those challenges.

Challenges focussed on the specific issues facing reference and research services in a Parliamentary environment, as well as those relevant to research services in general. Participants found it stimulating to explore these challenges with others who understood the particular environment they operated in.

Sharing good practice and recent innovations gave participants a wealth of ideas and approaches for dealing with the challenges. The ideas discussed were wide-ranging, from looking at the way we work (request free research weeks, and remote working for example) to making use of new technology (such as Wikis and the UK Parliaments' collaborative research website).

As well as sharing knowledge the workshop allowed participants to get to know the professional strengths and interests of others in the APLA community. This was seen as particularly useful for research and reference staff, who recognise that it's often who you know that makes the difference between finding and not finding the answer to an obscure research request. Subject expertise is a rare commodity, and workshop participants recognised that keeping the connections amongst research staff in APLA alive and dynamic enhances our ability to make the most of our collective expertise.

### **4. Follow up**

- A feedback questionnaire to be sent to all participants to gauge the success of this inaugural symposium and seek suggestions for future directions the symposia could take
- Papers to be circulated to all participants
- It was decided unanimously that the research & reference symposia should be held annually and rotated amongst APLA parliaments (not necessarily in the same city as the annual APLA conferences)
- Attempt to seek another parliament's commitment to host the next symposium in 2009