



**Informing democracy: Building capacity to meet
parliamentarians' information and knowledge needs**

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**THE VALUE OF LIBRARY AND RESEARCH SERVICES
SPECIALLY DESIGNED FOR PARLIAMENTARIANS**

Under its general title, the topic of our second session is based around three questions:

- Why make library and studies services available to parliamentarians?
- How must these services evolve today?
- What adaptation efforts must the personnel in charge of these services make themselves?

I will strive to summarise the answers which my experience of the National Experience brings to mind.

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I.- TO DATE THE IDEA PREVAILED THAT, IN ITS MISSION, THE PARLIAMENTARY INSTITUTION MUST COMPRISE A DOCUMENTARY AND STUDIES SERVICE FOR PARLIAMENTARIANS

First remark: from a regulatory viewpoint, nothing prevents a parliamentarian wishing to do so from organising, without the material and human support of the National Assembly departments, the documentary and studies tasks involved in drafting the parliamentary documents entailed by the exercise of his mandate.

Second remark: very soon, however, the need arose to create a legislative library, in other words a place making available to parliamentarians everything that is published, at least at French publishers, in the legal, economic, social and political fields. As a reminder, the National Assembly Library was created in 1796 and it was from 1830 on, with the strengthening of the parliamentary regime, that its mission as a legislative library began to develop.

Still today, the Library meets the need of having a documentary collection providing the National Assembly with external information (a few figures: 14,500 linear metres of shelving in the basement; 700,000 books with an annual increase of 3,500 to 4,000 titles; 3,000 periodicals including 670 still published; 220 French dailies (with the local press).

This collection has adopted the approach of being geared rather towards the 'generalist' reader, the 'man of breeding', but who is a professional jurist, with:

- A collection comparable to that of a university library as regards law and the economy. For instance, a lawyer would find at the National Assembly library all the documentation necessary to exercise his profession;

- A 'general culture' collection: arts, biographies, history, literature, philosophy, religions, etc.;

- A collection composed of popularisation books as regards, for example, science. I mean here that the National Assembly library doesn't hold the books forming the collection of a science faculty library.

Third remark: in practice, until today, neither the political authority nor the administration have challenged the usefulness of the funds the National Assembly requires to provide parliamentarians with the material and human means they need to carry out the work and studies required in performing their mandate. However these costs have been increasing.

Fourth remark: the response given to this need has been organised, in successive strata, in keeping with the growing specialisation and technicality of political issues.

The Library remains an exceptional documentary collection which parliamentarians and the personnel assisting them can use, for instance, to find a book, a bibliography, documents or a piece of information. But it is not tasked with carrying out studies or preparatory work (reports for instance).

It is around the **secretariats of the various committees** that an immediate documentary 'memory' has been created for convenience sake (on the basis of legislative proceedings) to which is added the 'memory' of parliamentary proceedings. It is to this secretariat that the parliamentarian turns, in his capacity as the rapporteur appointed by his committee, to obtain documentation, the studies he needs, and the drafting of the legislative or information reports presented by him to the Assembly.

Then, **a studies and documentation department** was created to meet, on their request, the needs of parliamentarians in the exercise of their mandate, leaving aside their task as rapporteurs (for instance, request for documentation files, preparation of general studies, follow-up of the implementation of acts and regulations on the basis of the specific cases submitted to them). This department operated for 30 years (from the middle of the 1970s to the middle of the 2000s). It had its own documentation (in other words the library and the committees sometimes

held duplicate reference works and duplicate parliamentary proceedings). But it had created its own general or specific studies collection on the basis of the studies it had made on request by the parliamentarians. It also provided studies and specialised documents of the governmental reports or professional federation proceedings type.

A **European studies and documentation department** has been created to compile Community documentation and information on the various Member States. This department has particularly developed in its Community component. The creation of a delegation which has become the European Affairs Committee tasked with preparing drafts of Community instruments and committing to the consideration of the various standing committees 'resolutions' on these various instruments has led to creating a secretariat comparable to those of the standing committees.

The scientific dimension has developed with an **office for science and technology assessment** which has also led to the creation of its own secretariat.

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II.- HOW ARE THESE SERVICES EVOLVING?

First remark: There have been major technological changes in recent years.

Computerisation is central to the evolution of documentary services owing to its repercussions:

– On the management of the collection, with the computerisation of catalogues which facilitates thematic bibliographic researches and simplifies compilation of the subject catalogue;

– On the compilation of the collection, with the development of the Internet and the Web and data bases. For instance, the cost of

subscriptions to data bases is twice as high as the amount devoted to the purchase of books and it is at the Library that the management of documentary data bases is centralised.

Second remark: the increase in the number of and the professionalisation of the personal staff of parliamentarians has its own consequences. (These are not National Assembly officials, but assistants freely hired by them and for whose remuneration they receive a staff allocation to be used as they choose).

The possibility of getting an increasing number of issues dealt with by personal staff and the generalisation of data processing access to many sources of information and documentation led to the suppression of the studies and documentation department. Previously, for instance, parliamentarians turned to the studies department to obtain an administrative report. They can today access a library of public reports on the Internet site of the *Documentation française* and, by a link, on the site of each ministry. The suppression of the studies and documentation department has led to a strengthening of this function at the secretariats of the standing committees. A redeployment of means has therefore taken place.

Third remark: the approach to many issues has grown in complexity.

This brings to mind straight away the international dimension, especially that of the Community. Preparatory legislative proceedings are increasingly leading to questions like 'What is the Community legislation on the topic?' or 'What do our neighbours do?' But parliamentarians are also attaching more and more importance to their communication. The language of communication, even written, is not always that of the written report. A concomitant pluridisciplinary approach will therefore not fail to be increasingly necessary. This calls into question the traditional professional practice of the administrator tasked, for instance, with a text or a study, and whose customary work method is a private conversation with his rapporteur and the written style, academic language.

Fourth remark: information sources are becoming diversified.

For long, the information sought was information of State origin (administrative reports, State Audit Office proceedings). Also, professional federations spontaneously offered their information to parliamentarians and rapporteurs. Today, an assessment market is developing with the appearance of public or private studies services on the model of think tanks, foundations or auditing firms. Social pressure is increasing to refuse the presupposed objectiveness of administrative reports. Parliamentarians must be alive to this change.

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III.– WHAT ADAPTATIONS ARE COMING?

First remark: the evolution of mentalities will not fail to have its effects, even if these generally find their institutional expression after a certain delay.

At the time of the advent of parliamentarianism, a 'good' parliamentarian was one who had studied classics and had great feeling for writing and beautiful language. This naturally led to the creation of a library. The monumentality of the latter at the National Assembly is a sign of this attachment. However, it is hard to understand the reasons why the changes in society at large now affecting the relationship with writing and books couldn't one day cross the doors of Parliament.

The question is likely to be raised at the time of budgetary choices. There will be an inevitable temptation to force the various user departments and the library to choose between subscriptions to data bases or the purchase of printed books or reviews. Admittedly, using the heritage for institutional communication purposes (in France, the Heritage Days,

which are open days, are extremely popular) can easily show to advantage a monumental library. But does this go as far as developing the collection?

Similarly, a pernickety conception of the separation of powers attached importance to its administrative and managerial expression. In the various fields of activity, whether legislative or administrative departments, this has resulted in the propensity to assume 'internally' the required functions, in other words creating departments to which material and human means were assigned on a long-term basis. In this field also, mentalities are evolving. Criticism of service regulations for the civil service is finding an increasing number of supporters. Flexibility is valued and is frequently compared to recourse to external service providers. For instance, parliamentarians today frequently highlight the assessment of policies and 'legislative coproduction' between the government and the majority group. Nothing guarantees that such an approach can be reconciled on a long-term basis with the existence of a parliamentary civil service assuming, alone, all the intellectual support behind parliamentary legislative work.

Second remark: change is also envisageable in terms of managerial rationalisation.

Already, computerisation has had its effects on the tasks and the organisation of departments. It has led to an upgrading of tasks, an obligation to work together with the information systems department, and it is also raising questions with considerable budgetary impacts such as the treatment of the past (digitisation of the collection).

Modernisation by means of data processing has also brought about the appearance of two parallel approaches: enrichment of traditional documentation on paper and computerisation, which have given the impression of higher net management costs, even if efforts to substitute digitised documentation for paper documentation have continued.

An ideal model would be that of a central documentary resource where personnel in charge of carrying out studies, of whatever type, would search as and when required. A vast department of the 'Assembly Library' type would exist, the central documentary memory to draw a data

processing comparison, which would be used by all the subdivisions tasked with using this mutualised collection to carry out studies and legislative work per major topics. This vast department would employ personnel tasked with librarian duties, personnel carrying out studies including in this respect international comparisons, at least of the European dimension, and there would be supervision by sub-division heads.

The advantages would be at the least:

- The absence of duplicates in collections;
- Systematic interdisciplinarity with the generalisation of team work on each topic.

But this vision comes up against practical obstacles, if only material obstacles. For instance, the location of the National Assembly in the very heart of an old city like Paris makes it difficult to have the necessary space to effectively set up such a department in the immediate vicinity of the Palais-Bourbon, where the hemicycle and committee rooms are situated.

Third remark: beyond strict rationalisation in the use of means, is an enrichment of the profession exercised by parliamentary officials envisageable? The opportunity for this could be the desired strengthening of Parliament's assessment competence of public policies. In this respect, two approaches are envisageable:

– The first would consist in conceiving legislative reports in terms of 'legislative dossiers', by separating a documentary report (it would present the terms of the general debate) and the legislative report strictly speaking (analysis of the enacting clauses proposed by the government or the author of the member's Bill) or the assessment report of the policy or legislation implemented in the field in question. The purpose of the documentary report would be to relate the society debate and it would be updated according to its own periodicity. Legislative and assessment reports for their part would be aimed at defending and illustrating the political responses given by the majority to the debate in question. Such an

approach could be achieved in the framework of a redeployment of means;

– The second approach would aim at acknowledging the legitimacy of the studies service in defining and conducting a programme assessing or exposing the terms in which 'major issues' arise. The goal would be to form a documentary collection like 'The National Assembly assessments'. Potential fields are not lacking (for instance regarding the energy policy, the tax system, geopolitics, etc...). A contribution in terms of an anticipation of needs and political approaches would be the added value provided by this type of studies, which are close to those of an Analysis and Strategy Board. Such an approach would be upgrading for the personnel but can barely be achieved by a redeployment of means.