

Managing the Political Environment: Issues arising in the provision of information and research services to members of Parliament

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Introduction: The Australian Context

On my way into work on the morning of 23 May 2001, the day after the Budget was brought down, I stopped to pick up a cappuccino at Aussies, our very famous Parliament House coffee shop. Before 9 am there was already an unusually long queue and in the queue were a large number of staffers and at least two Senators. The Treasurer of Australia arrived at the back of the queue — and patiently waited his turn to be served.

I cannot think of many countries in the world where this would happen. But it happens in Australia which takes defiant pride in its egalitarian tradition. And the same principle underpins access to the services of Information and Research of the Department of the Parliamentary Library. Everyone takes their turn, whoever they are. The policy is equal access for all on a first come, first served basis. And, particularly importantly, although it has power over our funding, the Government does not seek special advantage nor does it attempt to influence the way in which we do our work.

While this principle of operation is widely and generally understood and accepted, in the hothouse environment of politics, where passions, commitment and ambition run high, it is unsurprising that there is nonetheless sometimes pressure from one side of politics or another to favour its point of view, or, more seriously, that there is occasionally some perception that WE are favouring the particular point of view of

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one or other side of politics. But, importantly, this accusation has been made by both sides of politics.¹

Later that same morning of 23 May, a Senator rang me to complain that one of her staff had met with 'a barrier' when seeking some data from one of the staff and the Senator protested that this was because he 'clearly didn't think like us'. We had been asked to provide data on the former government's expenditure in some key social policy areas. Our staffer explained that the data would not support the case the Senator wanted to make — and for his trouble was effectively accused of political bias. I met the Senator and explained that if we had indeed behaved as suggested, we would lose our credibility and jeopardise our future as independent advisers to all sides of politics. I also explained that we did our best to help members of Parliament to make the case they wished to make but, to protect them, also saw it to be our responsibility to point out where that case may be weak. The situation was resolved amicably as a misunderstanding. But it did make quite clear how very careful we need to be, even in the language we use in dealing with clients, to make sure we leave no impression at all of political partiality.

This incident reminded, too, that the closer we are to an election the more the political temperature rises and the more we need to be even more careful in our dealings with members of Parliament. It also reminded that we can never take for granted the trust we have built up over the years among politicians of all political parties. This trust is founded on absolute confidence in the confidentiality of the service we provide, complete impartiality and our independence, that is, our freedom from commitment to any particular point of view.² It cannot be emphasised strongly enough that the trust that results is nonetheless mercurial. It can slip away

¹ The perception of partisanship will always be there and staff continually need to be mindful of it. In one of the Department of the Parliamentary Library's triennial external evaluations there was a caution about complacency on this matter. It said that '11 per cent of Government Senators and Members who replied to the survey, indicated that they were not always satisfied that DPL information, analysis and advice was balanced and impartial', *Shaping Parliamentary Information and Research Service for the Future*, Albany Consulting Group and ARTD Pty Ltd., p. viii, January 1997. In the next evaluation, the same external consultants reported what can perhaps be interpreted as improvement: 'Senators and Members strongly indicated that the DPL provided balanced and impartial services and while Senators and Members actively sought advice and analysis from the DPL which was deliberately tailored to meet their needs the majority were not aware of any systematic bias or partisan behaviour in the provision of services', *1999 Client Services Evaluation*, 30 June 1999, 4.

² *The Parliamentary Services Act 1999* (No. 145, of 1999), which gave the parliamentary service an identity separate from the mainstream Public Service, sets out as its first objective 'to establish a non-partisan Parliamentary Service that is efficient and effective in serving the Parliament . . .'. The Parliamentary Service's statement of *Values and Code of Conduct* states that:

- The Parliamentary Service provides professional advice and support for the Parliament independently of the Executive Government of the Commonwealth;
- The Parliamentary Service provides non-partisan and impartial advice and services to each House of the Parliament, to committees of each House, to joint committees of both Houses and to senators and members of the House of Representatives

with just one false move. As our external evaluators have pointed out,³ research into customer loyalty patterns reveals how quickly forgotten is all the good service in the face of just one bad experience.

The reputation we enjoy on all sides of politics was far less certain when the Legislative Research Service was created in 1966 to add to the services provided by the Department of the Parliamentary Library. Because the Labor Party (ALP) was in opposition for the early years of the Research Service's life, and because the major client is the Opposition Front Bench, there was a tendency to assume that we were supporters of the ALP. But the reality is, today's Opposition is tomorrow's government. A very major contribution to the strengthening of our credibility was the fact that thereafter, for 13 years (from 1983 and 1996), the Coalition was in Opposition for whom we did just as much rigorous work. This means that while we are sometimes an irritant to the government of the day some ministers, particularly those who built up a strong relationship with the IRS in Opposition, continue to use our services. Because of the very nature of our work as independent analysts, they recognise that there are things we can do that departments of State cannot.

I sometimes provocatively say 'isn't it a wonderful comment on the quality of Australian democracy that governments pay us to help the Opposition oppose'. What I should say is 'governments pay us to help the Parliament as a whole hold the Government to account'. And our role in this is now a well accepted part of the Australian political process. This is illustrated by the fact that on the rare occasions when our *raison d'être*, or our *modus operandi*, or the conventions which allow us to respond to requests so quickly and so well have been called into question, the Parliament almost literally rises up as one, in bipartisan unison, to defend the independence and integrity of the service we provide.

Access to publicly available information: the Albanese issue

On my return from IFLA 2000 my boast there about the strength of support across the Parliament for the role that the Information and Research Services (IRS)⁴ of the Department of the Parliamentary Library played in the Australian democratic process was called into question. As we took off on the last leg of the journey from Bangkok, I saw my first Australian newspaper for two weeks. On the front page of *The Australian* of 18 August was an article headed 'Library ruling risks members of Parliament independence'. It began:

The independence of parliament has been undermined by a ruling giving ministers the power to force MPs to pass requests for information through ministerial offices. The ruling overturns a long tradition of independence of the Parliamentary Library in its pursuit of information for all parliamentarians.

³ Albany Consultancy Group Pty Ltd & ARTD Management Research Consultants Pty Ltd, loc. cit., p. 27

⁴ Information specialists (librarians) and research specialists (analysts) were combined in subject teams to provide a single client service in January 1997.

Opposition MPs were outraged last night at what they saw as another grab for more executive power over the parliament . . .

The issue had arisen from a question asked on 27 June 2000, by Anthony Albanese, the member for Grayndler (NSW):

Mr Speaker, my question to you is in relation to the proper functioning of the Parliamentary Library, which I'm sure all members agree provides us with an excellent service on the basis of its being independent and confidential. Are you aware that the Minister for Community Services has directed the Parliamentary Library to send any requests relating to Centrelink⁵ to an officer in his ministerial office? Are you further aware that this has resulted in delays to answers and that the library has been asked to identify the member making those requests? Will you investigate this issue and report back to the House on measures to ensure that the independence and integrity of the library are maintained?

On 17 August the Speaker ruled:

While the minister's decision to direct requests through his office adds an additional step to the process of obtaining information, ministers are responsible to the parliament for the administration of their departments and agencies and it is open to the minister to give that direction.

This triggered a public and parliamentary corridor debate about the role of the DPL and its right of access to departments of State for publicly available information. One result was a general reluctance on the part of a number of other departments to respond to our inquiries suggesting that they, too, were obliged to inform their minister of them.

As well, there was scrutiny of the relationship between the DPL and departments in both quantitative and qualitative terms⁶ and correspondence with counterparts overseas to seek precedents and practice in like-minded democracies. Most significant, however, were perhaps the two discussions of the matter in the Library Committee.⁷ It upheld in no uncertain terms cross party support for the DPL's right to continued access to publicly available information from departments of State.

⁵ Centrelink is a Commonwealth Government agency delivering payments and a range of services to the Australian community on behalf of ten client government departments.

⁶ Examination of the relationship between the DPL and departments of State revealed that contacts average 100 per week and the majority of requests are short, sharp and oral. Occasionally, very resource intensive requests are made such as calculation of forward estimates of departure tax or revenue raised from passports in a given timeframe. In these cases, departments often suggest that a Question on Notice will be a better way to proceed. It should be noted that the traffic is not all one way. For example we help departments with statistical electorate division data and in areas where we are regarded as having the institutional memory on policy issues (Timor is a case in point).

⁷ The Joint Library Committee is an advisory body elected by the two houses of the Commonwealth Parliament and chaired by either the Speaker or the President. Its first two terms of reference are:

- Advise the Presiding Officers on major policy matters relating to the Parliamentary Library's role in assisting Senators and Members fulfil their Chamber, Committee and representational roles
- Advise the Presiding Officers on client service policy, including the types, levels and priorities of service to be provided . . .

The experience in parliaments overseas illustrated the centrality of the relationship between parliamentary libraries, information and research services and departments of State. Those consulted stated emphatically that without this contact, it would not be possible to do the job they did. In all cases the contact was extensive and daily. In all cases there were also occasional hiccups, usually in the areas of the highest or most sensitive political contention and in all cases these were eventually resolved in favour of continued access.⁸ In all cases, too, delay was seen to be the primary result. However, as strong in the Australian case were fears for confidentiality. That is, even if the name of the source of the request was not required, its nature would often make this obvious.

Departmental workload was the reason given by the Minister for the need for his office to monitor requests from the IRS to his Department. But the low key, informal, officer-to-officer contacts between IRS staff and departments on matters in the public domain to clarify publicly articulated policy or establish the public facts (perhaps not yet published in readily accessible form), avoids even more work for departments. If the informal channel is closed, members of Parliament have no choice but to seek the information by putting a Question on Notice. The formal departmental response then required is likely in the long run to create far more work for the Department than the quick, informal telephone call.

On 9 October the Speaker tabled correspondence from the relevant Minister reporting that the Minister no longer saw the need to have such requests channelled through his office.⁹ While the central paradox of the issue remained unresolved, namely the right of a Minister to instruct his department to do whatever he wishes as is his Executive prerogative, the Speaker's actions in writing to the Minister expressing concerns raised in the Library Committee, concerns which he pointed out were shared across party lines, were interpreted to support the Parliament's right of access to publicly available information and our role as intermediary between members of Parliament and departments of State. In effect this was support for a

⁸ In Canada's federal Parliament it appears that in the case of politically sensitive issues ministers will typically require that requests to departments be channelled through their offices. The UK judges that its position is stronger and that the principle that providing information to Parliament is a normal part of government accountability to Parliament is generally accepted. Moreover, because ministers have used the services and appreciate their value, they will often go out of their way to ensure information is made available. In the US, the position is strongest of all. There the Congress has given the CRS legal power to obtain information from departments and this is drawn on in the case of difficulty.

⁹ Tabled correspondence from Hon Larry Anthony, MP, Minister for Community Services, to Hon Neil Andrew, MP, Speaker of the House of Representatives, 28 September 2000:

Centrelink originally contacted my office to advise of the considerable workload created by information requests from the Parliamentary Library. Given that Library requests for information were detracting from the portfolio's ability to respond promptly to requests made by Members and Senators through the usual parliamentary processes, it was agreed that the requests to Centrelink would be submitted through my office.

After reviewing the processes surrounding requests for information, Centrelink is now in a better position to process requests in a timely and efficient manner without the help of my Centrelink Liaison Officer. My office no longer needs to be involved in such processes.

return to the *status quo ante*, namely the good sense of recognising the relationship that inevitably needs to exist between officers of the DPL and officers in departments of State.

Also in October, Anthony Albanese thanked the Speaker in the House ‘for your assistance in resolving the issue of the relationship between the Parliament and the Library and Ministerial accountability’.

The genie was back in the bottle — for now. A little like the mercurial trust referred to earlier in this article, relations between information and research services and departments of state in democracies are mercurial. The evidence suggests that some departments will create some problems in some jurisdictions for some of the time.¹⁰ The evidence also suggests that whenever, recently, those conventions have been challenged, at least in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and Australia, they have been strongly upheld. But nonetheless, that they are occasionally challenged demonstrates the sensitivity of the balance between the interests and rights of the Parliament and the interests and rights of the Executive — and the need for us to manage the consequences.

Bills digests

A different sort of difficulty arises with departments of State in the area of proposed legislation. The IRS produces Bills Digests on virtually 100 per cent of government bills. The object of the Digest is to complete the circle of information available to Senators and Members in the relevant Department’s Explanatory Memorandum and in the Minister’s second reading speech on the proposed legislation. That is, the Digest does not duplicate the plentiful case for the bill already made but sets out its main provisions, explains its significance in straightforward, layperson’s terms and points to what will change as a result. It also notes what proposed legislation will do and what it will not do and provides the policy context in which it occurs (for example, whether this has been tried before and how much support, or otherwise, it enjoys in different places).

Unsurprisingly, and again especially in areas of greatest political contention between the parties, to point out what the bill does not do, or to anticipate some of its consequences, is not necessarily something its sponsors would welcome.

¹⁰ Access to departments has also arisen in another Australian jurisdiction. It was raised as a matter of privilege in the New South Wales Parliament by Mr Yeomans on 28 October 1986 when he moved: That this House reaffirms the rights and privileges of all honourable members to have made available to them non-confidential information from government departments through the services of the Parliamentary Library.

After an interesting debate, it was.

A number of the ‘brickbats’¹¹ we receive come from departments who claim that the Digests are either or both factually incorrect or contain errors of interpretation.

Not least because of the speed of their production — we do not see the bill until it has been tabled and debate can follow fairly quickly thereafter¹² — and because of the often lengthy and complex documents that they are, we will not always get it right. We are therefore appreciative of any factual errors drawn to our attention (usually by the originating department) and quickly make amendments. While we are open to discussions about interpretation (and these have been known to go on for some days), unless it can be demonstrated that these were based on false premises, usually we will stand behind our own professional judgment and remind departments of the independent role we play.

It should be emphasised, however, that these problems arise on only two or three Digests of the average 200+ produced in any one year and this often in predictable areas of greatest sensitivity. We take all feedback extremely seriously. We have done, and we will do, the very best possible job in the time available which may involve taking risks to ensure that clients get the assistance they need in time. Digests are valued extremely highly by all sides of politics and almost all members receive them.¹³ Even speakers on the bill on the Government’s behalf want to know the full story, and value the pointers a Digest can give to the direction of the debate.

In the course of discussion of Bills Digests during an Inter-Parliamentary Study course run in the Australian Parliament in 2001, a colleague from a like-minded parliament expressed surprise to see that the Bills Digests we produce can criticise government legislation and suggested that their own would do no such thing. We were equally surprised at his dismay — and disappointed that (give or take the occasional departmental difficulty) the same robust acceptance of the role Bills Digests play had apparently not been achieved in his parliament.

¹¹The IRS keeps a file, Bouquets & Brickbats (B&B), for correspondence from parliamentarians on aspects of service which was converted into a database able to report on different kinds of feedback in 1998. Client-initiated feedback is considered to have a quality — and possibly a weight — quite different from the feedback formally sought by means of questionnaires, evaluations or even individual interviews designed for the purpose.

¹²The sequence is that the bill is tabled and the first and second reading speech follow immediately. There may be some preliminary debate and then adjournment. The Explanatory Memorandum is available on tabling. Unless it has been a long anticipated piece of legislation expected to be of major significance when some preparatory work will have been done, it is only at this point that work can begin on the Digest. Because we only get access to the Bill on tabling, the debate may be brought on before a Digest can be completed and this is a source of continuing grievance (‘brickbats’) on all sides of the House given the heavy reliance throughout the Parliament on the Digests to assist the different contributions to the debate.

¹³At the beginning of each Parliament we invite all Senators and Members to elect to receive Bills Digests or not. 218 out of a total of 224 currently receive them. (We also do this in the case of one other publication, the *Monthly Social and Economic Indicators*, (MESI), because it is also commonly used by all. For all other GDPs (anticipatory products), each Senator and Member is invited to request it on publication.

Quality control

A major commitment is made to quality control to ensure that our General Distribution Products (GDPs) which are in the public domain are a quality product, the best possible in the time available and that they are balanced and impartial.

There is a rigorous process of GDP selection and development both to justify the resource commitment and ensure its parliamentary quality. A *Forecast of Emerging Issues* process, a biannual strategic resource planning and project identification exercise (above and beyond the routine) leads to resource adequacy assessment and, for example, whether a GDP, a consultant, or a Vital Issues Seminar (VIS) is suggested. A *Tracking Sheet* signed off by the Group Director presents the rationale for the GDP, indicates the estimated timeframe for production and identifies the external reader. A workshop is held on the draft paper attended by specialists and non-specialists (usually a representative from each subject Group, interested Committee staff and the Head) where organisation and presentation, balance and parliamentary focus and ease of comprehension for the non-specialist reader, are considered. A revised draft is prepared in the light of workshop and external reader comments. All GDPs are cleared by the relevant Group Director and then by the Head (except E-Briefs and Bills Digests which for reasons of volume and of time constraints, if non-controversial, are cleared at Director level).

Quality control in the case of one-on-one work with individual parliamentarians is intrinsically more complex. However, when time allows, staff will seek a second opinion on all written work, or consult others on the approach for an oral briefing or complex reference response. When directed research calls for a particularly proselytising approach, inflammatory language, or loaded terminology, is strongly discouraged.

Political affiliation

Staff, of course, have political opinions. They would be unlikely to be working in Parliament House if they were not interested in politics and the political process. But those opinions and those interests must not influence the way we do our work, for whom we do it and how well we do it. Perceptions of partisanship have to be accepted as an occupational hazard of working in the political environment and that perception constantly worked on — both with clients and with staff. There has to be a strong culture of professionalism to ensure that, as far as is humanly possible, we do not allow our own views to influence our work. If we are not capable of leaving our opinions at the front door when we walk into work every morning, if we are uncomfortable with the anonymity of what we do,¹⁴ or if we

¹⁴ Authors are identified in General Distribution Products produced to anticipate parliamentary interest which are also put on the internet. In the case of directed research, the one-on-one individual confidential responses to requests which make up 75 per cent of work, we ask clients not to cite DPL as the source. This can sometimes mean that a major contribution to a debate or even the

ourselves wish to be political activists, then membership of the Parliamentary Service is not the place to be.

A selection criterion for all staff is ‘understanding of the parliamentary and political environment, and sensitivity to the requirements of parliamentarians’. Staff selection processes are designed to detect applicants with bias. The corporate culture places very heavy emphasis on impartiality, perceptions of partiality, confidentiality and all those other qualities required of staff operating in a sensitive political environment. Not least of these is the willingness and ability to provide the best possible service to members of all political persuasions, including presenting arguments with which we may not agree.

One wonderful illustration of this point was made by a current Shadow Minister who, when addressing staff at our annual Meet-the-Client Special Branch meeting, reminded us that before her political career, she had been an analyst in the Economics Group of the then Parliamentary Research Service. Early in her time there, she had been asked to write a paper presenting a certain perspective with which she disagreed strongly. She told her Director that she could not possibly write such a paper and what the member really needed was . . . (something more in line with her own ideological view of the world). She was reminded about why we are here and what we are here to do . . . and she reported that she finally wrote the paper that was requested, as requested.

The feedback she was giving to us, now as a frontbench spokesperson, was an expression of confidence that we would do whatever the job required, even if, personally, we did not agree with what was being done just as, eventually, she had done when she was in that position.

This is a lesson that all new staff must learn very quickly. We are not here to proselytise or to promote particular issues or particular points of view. This is one reason why there is a rigorous assessment of the need for the (published and public) papers we choose to write in anticipation of parliamentary interest.

Staff need to be aware of possible conflicts of interest and to declare them if they arise. Two examples of this are a staffer coming to me to express extreme discomfort about handling requests from a minor party because of what that party appeared to represent. Now if this had been a discomfort in dealing with one of the major parties, this would have presented us with a dilemma. As it was, I greatly appreciated that the staffer did declare this problem and it was not difficult to ensure that no such requests came her way.

genesis of a policy initiative made by staff of IRS will never be acknowledged. One fundamental dilemma that arises is that because of the confidentiality of our work, we can not use these examples as performance indicators or to demonstrate our effectiveness.

Another example is my own situation. While I did not hold my current position until the very end of my spouse's political career when he was no longer a minister, I am married to someone who was for ten years a senior Cabinet Minister in the Labor Government. In a world still inclined to think that (in particular female) spouses share the views of their partner and/or are likely to be easily swayed by them, there were obviously some difficulties, at least of perception, that had to be entertained. It certainly helped that I came to the position with unquestionable qualifications so that allegations of 'jobs for the boys' were less credible. It probably also helped that my spouse is held in high regard across the political spectrum for the work he did in a very difficult portfolio area.

But some (none insurmountable) difficulties nevertheless naturally arose. For example, on one occasion a request from a (different) government member came in through me for some work to be done on options for the future of the Australian Meat and Livestock Corporation of which my husband was then Chairman. In passing the request on to the relevant Director, I made a point of asking, in writing, that the Director in question make sure that the work was done and that it was kept confidential from me.

We live in a democratic society and enjoy the freedoms associated with it, including those of free speech and rights of political association. However, to maintain our credibility among ALL our clients, while we accept that our staff who are naturally interested in politics may join a political party, we prefer them not to take up office in those parties or to otherwise appear as spokespersons for that party's particular point of view.

Working for members of Parliament

Should we recruit staff who have been on the staff of a particular MP, or should we encourage our staff to be seconded to the offices of members of Parliament? This is a particularly difficult issue. At a Parliamentary Research Seminar held in Ottawa in April 1998 one Senator expressed the very strong view ('it leaves a bad taste in the mouth') that staff of Canada's Research Service should not spend time out as Member's or Minister's staffers. I am sure that, if asked, most Senators and Members of the Australian Parliament would hold the same view.

But it happens, if not extensively. While I cannot recall a situation in which we have recruited from a member's staff, selection processes are based on merit and, while we do look for bias, we cannot discriminate against people on the basis of their political affiliations. I can recall applications from staff of members of Parliament along with strong recommendations from the politician concerned, but these have not, to date, met with success.

Movement the other way, while still very small, is more common. We have, at the moment, for example, three staffers on leave without pay who have joined the staff

of members of Parliament, two to the ALP and one to the Australian Democrats. Additional movement of this kind typically follows a change of government. Often because of the respect built up by work done for the Opposition, our highly qualified staff, familiar to them and to the environment, are 'head hunted' by new Ministers.

Staff are expected to offer their expertise to members of all parties with an interest in their area of expertise. Some clients, however, may be reluctant to approach a staffer who has been known to work for the opposite party. It is therefore up to the individual to establish their professional credentials across the political spectrum. While this may not happen over night on return from an MP's office, it does over time. I was exceedingly anxious, for example, about a staffer who returned to us after 10 years of working in Labor Ministers' offices when the ALP lost government in 1996.¹⁵ I was doubtful that this officer could be a credible resource for members other than those of the party with which he had been so closely associated for so long. And I watched him like a hawk! But over not too great a time, his depth, experience, wisdom and capacity to make a contribution across the spectrum became obvious. Today, for example, while conceding that it was not always easy, he boasts some very loyal clients among the Coalition and is called upon — and highly commended for the advice and support he now regularly provides to the Government Chair and his committee in its semi-annual meeting with the Governor of the Reserve Bank.

Publishing and public speaking

Because we recognise the benefits of staff having status among their professional peers and developing associated networks (the lifeblood of our operation), and because our clients appreciate privileged access to distinguished specialists, staff may publish in their professional field (with the caveat that this work will be done in their own time and using their own resources). These include the qualification that any views expressed are their own.

Staff are strongly encouraged to present papers at professional conferences (which may result in publication). To do so contributes to their own professional development and to the profile of the organisation they represent. But often because they are stretched to the limit with day-to-day client work few, in fact, do so.

More are likely to be invited to comment in the print or electronic media, often on General Distribution Products available on the internet. Guidelines suggest avoiding being drawn to make controversial comments (or comment on controversial issues) and, as far as possible, to avoid identification with DPL.

¹⁵ The *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act* 1984 (Cth) was assented to on 25 June 1984. The purpose of the Act was to create a legislative scheme for the engagement of consultants to provide services for Ministers of State, and for employment of staff by Ministers, office-holders in the Government and Opposition, and by Senators and Members. It means that departments of State are obliged to release staff to work for members of Parliament and to take them back when they wish to return.

If, however, staff wish to engage in political debate in print, for example, in letters to the editor, we ask that they do not identify themselves as officers of the Department of the Parliamentary Library. The reason is to maintain the confidence of all the clients. We had one example of a member of staff writing passionate letters to the press criticising the government's policy in a given area. Imagine the impact of this on that officer's credibility with members of the government party. How could members of the government party be confident of the advice of that officer, or indeed trust that advice if, publicly, this same officer was engaged in partisan criticism? And imagine how it would reflect on our organisation if it appeared that we condoned such conduct?

Work practices

We have to keep records of client requests to monitor demand and thus resources. We also have to share information about clients and their requests in order to know as much about each of our clients as possible in order to deliver the parliamentary and personalised service which gives us our comparative advantage — and to manage work flows. But record keeping, and thus its possible misuse, is a very sensitive issue in a highly charged political environment.

The questions of the confidentiality of client records and of sharing information about requests have been raised at the last two or three Senate Estimates hearings. In response we emphasise how carefully we handle the data collected: it is confidential and, in total, available only to the heads.¹⁶ A print out of a client profile is made for the sole purpose of the heads' individual interviews with clients,¹⁷ if the client requests it or if there is a problem in our relationship with that client. Monitoring each client's request profile assists our understanding of the individual client's focus and interests, how they prefer to use our services and whether they are aware of the full range of services to which they are entitled.

Similarly, objection to our sharing client information, something done primarily by circulating each subject team's work within subject Groups, is unrealistic. Staff cannot work in a vacuum. They have a professional responsibility to know what issues are running, how they are running and which members are focussing on what (the better thereafter to meet their needs). Newer staff also learn a great deal about how we respond to client requests by regular access to these records. Senators and Members do not work with the individual but with the organisation, and it is our responsibility to establish how best that can be done. That said, the 'need to know' principle underpins access to client data.

¹⁶ Directors of subject teams have access to the records created by their staff, staff have access to their own request data and staff searching for a request for a member can get access to it as required.

¹⁷ The head or deputy head of IRS attempts to call on all Senators and Members once in the life of a parliament. The purpose is to discuss their client profile to make them aware of the full range of services on offer and to establish whether additional assistance can be provided. It is also to elicit feedback on services.

There was no evidence of breaches of security or confidentiality to explain the emergence of this as an issue in Estimates and there has been none since the creation of the first interactive electronic client request data base. Nonetheless, to respond to concerns expressed, in designing the successor request database, we have included the capacity to provide an audit trail of any unwarranted access to the system.

Other work practices which irritate some Senators and Members are our determination of which issues to make the focus of General Distribution Products (GDPs) or what should be the subject of Vital Issues Seminars (VIS). We hold to the view that it is up to us to judge the issues which warrant the considerable resource commitment of a GDP or a VIS. To do otherwise would be to open these processes to possible political manipulation or to accusations of 'pushing agendas'. One Minister's office this year was very unhappy with our choice of a certain seminar subject and with our choice of chair. They held that we could not hold a seminar on such a controversial issue. My response was that to us it was a current issue and not a controversial one. And as for the chair, the policy is to rotate it between Government and Opposition. In this case offers were made to two government representatives before it was made to a very well qualified representative of the Opposition.

Difficult clients and difficult requests

The Acting Speaker of the Israeli Parliament, Professor Naomi Kazan, in welcoming the Parliamentary Section of IFLA to the Knesset at IFLA 2000, spoke frankly about the character of politicians to much mirth of recognition. She commended the forbearance of our profession in dealing with it. 'Prima donnas' and 'dilettantes' were descriptions she applied, 'impatient' and 'demanding' to boot. Members of Parliament, she said, wanted to be educated on so many matters only superficially and immediately; everything was wanted now.

The good thing about politicians, perhaps, is that they do acknowledge what an impossible bunch they are. But that cheerful acknowledgment is as far as they are likely to go by way of apology and in no way is a commitment to change. Rather just as, I suspect, the book *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus* is a subtle plot by the male gender to explain gender differences in such a way as to make the female of the species even nicer, even more accommodating and even more understanding, this general good humour among politicians about their style is their way to encourage us to go on being even more tolerant and even more accommodating of their sometimes impossible demands.

Some generalisations can be made about politicians. They are committed, driven, ambitious, 'hyper', usually hard working, often impatient and, of course, articulate. They have a strong sense of themselves and their position and will not hesitate to capitalise upon the 'aura' around them (created, one suspects, not least by the extent

of the systems which support them). The value we place on our democratic institutions makes them more than the sum of their individual characteristics. They have a status as members of Parliament which is respected, whoever the individual. The status divide, however, between this kind of client and our information specialists and analysts can present difficulties in dealing with their demands.

Balancing respect for members of Parliament, recognition of their position and the pressures upon them, with the requirements of, for example, equal access for all on a first come first served basis consistent with client entitlements can be a difficult business when confronted by parliamentarians pressing their needs. And time constraints, ever a fact of parliamentary life, make negotiation an unpopular option. But negotiate we must, and clarify requests whenever we judge that to do otherwise will risk the wrong response. Everything is urgent and immediate for an MP, when we know full well this may not always be the case. Efficient resource management makes it absolutely essential for us to establish priorities. For example, we will give priority to Chamber work when the Parliament is sitting. Also, members of Parliament willingly concede that they often make 'ambit' bids not thinking for a minute that we will go as far as we often do. When they see the resource cost of some of their requests (via their client record), they are often startled that some requests which may have been less important to them took as long as they did.

We must develop in staff the skills to deal firmly with Senators and Members, to probe the request to establish its parameters and, if possible, its purpose in order to provide the most cost effective, professional and targeted response. We must clarify the 'dos' and the 'don'ts' of service entitlement and make absolutely sure that they are applied consistently to all clients. And, perhaps most importantly, we must stand behind staff and back them up and be willing to deal with any Senator or Member who seeks to 'stretch the friendship'.

Difficult requests in this context include requests for things that we do not do. The list includes pursuit of personal information about other members of Parliament or their families, legal advice, unreasonable pursuit of the elusive quotation, assistance with school or university projects, responses to constituents' requests (as opposed to assistance on issues on which the MP needs advice because it is an issue in the constituency) etc

The difficult request also means responding effectively but credibly and constructively to the highly political request. For example, a request calling for commentary on the Government's budget cuts in a given portfolio area need not criticise the government of the day. Good basic research technique suffices: attention to context (the policy setting environment) and perspective (the Government's policy objective) allows a response which conveys the data without being confrontational. That is, it could be couched in terms of the difficult choices the Government had had — and still has — before it. It could suggest that the challenge facing that government was either to reverse policy or to review it in order to be able to operate within the changed budgetary circumstances.

The political cycle

As already suggested, the Department of the Parliamentary Library is most likely to get caught in the cross fire on issues and at times of greatest political difference between the major parties. Experience of a number of election campaigns suggests to me that, naturally enough, our relations with our clients are also more likely to become strained the closer we are to an election, especially if it looks as though it will be closely fought.

And the electoral cycle itself creates its own tensions, for example, in the case of a change of government. The new Opposition (shadow) Front Bench is the new major client and has probably forgotten the role we play or, so recently in charge of departments of State, has unrealistic expectations of us. At the same time there is a need to wean-off from very heavy use of our services the former Opposition, now the Government Front Bench, which has those same departments of State at their disposal.

Ministerial staff who come to Parliament House for the first time with a change of government or, as a government looks like changing and loses its experienced people, with no experience of opposition, are inclined to be very suspicious of us and often, like some officials in departments of State, do not understand the role we play. They may even be outraged that we (dare to) write something which may not be fully supportive of the policy of the government of the day. Similarly, it is ministers who arrive on the front bench without much experience of the backbench or of opposition who are also most likely to misunderstand the role that we play. It is these who, more often than not, make for much of our 'brickbat' business.

I began this article with an example of a perception of bias and suggested that one reason for it could be the rise in the political temperature that inevitably comes as elections draw near. There have been some examples of similar sorts of things since and there will be more yet before the election takes place. Unlike our counterparts in the United Kingdom, for example, we continue to provide a service during the election campaign, something which could itself be contentious if candidates for office who have not been sitting members, and who are not entitled to service, should choose to make it so.

Conclusions

The providers of information and research services to parliaments can never take for granted the confidence they enjoy across the political spectrum. Awareness of the requirements arising from this ever mercurial environment is one aspect of our comparative advantage (against possible competitors). As our external evaluators found, perhaps our greatest strength is our understanding of the 'rhythm of politics' — with all its highs and lows. Working in the parliamentary environment calls for some very special qualities of staff and presents a very particular set of priorities for management. None of us can afford to drop the ball. ▲