

Developing parliament's oversight capacity through MPs' professional development¹

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INTRODUCTION

In parliamentary democracies, a parliament's oversight capacity is a key factor affecting the functioning of a political system as a whole. The parliament is the apex institution through which the people determine the rules and standards applying to individual members of a community, the executive government and the public and private sectors. A parliament also plays a central role in determining the relationships that exist within a particular jurisdiction and beyond. In parliamentary democracies that adopt the Westminster system of responsible government, the executive is required to account to the parliament for the discharge of executive responsibilities. The executive's compliance with rules and standards relies on a culture of compliance, detection of breaches and the use of sanctions for wrong doing. A culture of compliance reduces the transaction costs of social exchanges, leaving more resources available to achieve the goals of the socio-political systems. Accordingly, the functions of any democratic parliament should include oversight in the form of feedback loops to the parliament, the executive and the people. It needs to include the collection and analysis of information, which monitors the executive's compliance with rules and standards, processes to detect breaches and the capacity to apply sanctions to those who fail to comply. These functions require both institutional and individual capacity to enhance accountability and a desire to do so. This article reports on the findings of an international study into formal induction and further development programs in a range of countries. Information through surveys and interviews was collected from elected members of ten national parliaments and those responsible for conducting training programs. Although oversight is generally accepted as a key parliamentary function, the research found that MPs' perceptions of their own and the parliament's responsibilities in this regard were less definite. Indeed, induction and training programs for MPs can be considered weak in relation to making MPs aware of their oversight responsibilities. The authors argue that it needs to be enhanced and make some suggestions about how this might be achieved.

1 The research that underpins this article has been supported by the Australian Research Council [LP0989714]. The project is co-funded by: Monash University; the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU); and the Australian Government Overseas Aid Program (AusAID). Further research partners are: Victoria University of Wellington; and The University of Sydney. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Research Council, IPU or AusAID.

DEMOCRATIC SYSTEMS OF GOVERNMENT

Parliamentary democracies can be understood as complex, evolving socio-political systems (Mittleton-Kelly, 2003) in which the parliament's oversight capacity is a key factor affecting the functioning of the system as a whole. Without oversight, there is no accountability. For contemporary democracy to fulfil its promise of responsive rule (Saward, 1998), accountability is essential. Oversight and its distal outcome – public accountability – afford voters the opportunity to assess the performance of the government and hold it accountable via the electoral process. Free and regular elections allow citizens to elect, re-elect or vote against parliamentarians based on their performance and governance regime (Adsera, Boix and Payne, 2003). Indeed, cross-national, longitudinal research conducted by Adsera, et al. (2003) found that accountability (the presence of free and regular elections and well-informed citizens via a free press) explained between one-half and two-thirds of the variance in the levels of governmental performance and corruption.

The parliament is the apex institution within the governance system. It is the medium through which the people determine the rules and standards applying to individuals, executive government, the public and private sector and other organisations. It also lays down formal relationships within and across its borders. Commenting on Westminster parliaments, Griffith (2005) discusses three forms of accountability, which can be differentiated according to whom the accountability is owed. The first is *legal accountability* where the behaviours and decisions of ministers and public servants, via administrative law, can be subject to judicial scrutiny (i.e., accountability is owed to administrative law). The second is *political accountability* where the doctrine of ministerial responsibility requires ministers and government officials to be accountable to their respective Parliaments. The final form of accountability identified by Griffith (2005) is *administrative accountability* where the parliament, working through its various committees and independent watchdogs (Auditor General, Ombudsman, anti-corruption bodies etc.) hold the executive government accountable for any corruption, maladministration and waste of public money.

The executive's adherence to rules and standards relies on a culture of compliance, detection of breaches and sanctions for wrong-doing. A compliance culture reduces the transaction costs of social exchanges – in this case between the parliament and the executive – leaving more resources available to achieve whatever are the desired priority goals of the socio-political system.

This is consistent with the conservation of resources theory (COR; Hobfoll and Lilly, 1993; Halbesleben, Harvey and Bolino, 2009), which is a human resource management framework that explains how resources operate in individual and social systems. Resource theories such as COR are grounded in the notion that a minimally sufficient resource threshold is required for acceptable performance, with increasing difficulty occurring as demands outstrip the available resource pools. According to this theory, individuals, groups, organisations and institutions strive to attain, retain and protect valuable resources. This is particularly the case during times when there are few internal or external threats or demands. For institutions such as parliaments, COR theory suggests that resources contribute to further resource

gains and provide a reservoir that can buffer them in hostile circumstances or allow them to refocus resources to achieve other goals desired by these institutions

Two central tenants of COR theory are that resources are required for adaptation and change and that they must be optimised for adaptation. Essentially, there is an asymmetry between the impact of resource loss and the impact of resource gain, with the former significantly outweighing the latter. However, individuals, organisations and institutions possessing greater resources are less susceptible to resource depletion, more resilient to external threats/demands and more capable of utilising a wider repertoire of behavioural and strategic responses than their more challenged counterparts (Alvaro, Lyons, Warner, Hobfoll, Martens, Labonte, and Brown, 2010). The increasingly complex environment in which parliaments are situated, coupled with the moral hazards faced by executive government, the opposition and individual members of parliament, and where the negative consequences of their decisions may be distal and manifold, makes attaining and protecting resources essential. Accordingly, a parliament's functions should include oversight in the form of feedback loops including the collection of information that monitors the executive's compliance with rules and standards, processes to detect breaches and the capacity to sanction the executive for breaches.

These parliamentary functions require both institutional arrangements to enact democratic control and individual capacity in terms of monitoring the decisions, omissions and commissions of powerful actors in the executive, in particular. Moreover, according to COR theory, these functions (i.e., resources) should be proactively developed and nurtured during stable/munificent times, rather than reactively deployed during turbulent/hostile circumstances, so that they can be utilised for maximum benefit (Halbesleben, 2006). By institutional capacity we refer to the structures, resources and organisational culture required to oversee the executive. These complement and interact with each other. The structures are largely the constitutional environment, which the authors refer to as the legal infrastructure, including for example constitutions, statutes (e.g. audit acts), rules of procedure (or standing orders), resolutions, and rulings by the presiding officers. The resources clearly include physical resources (e.g. buildings and equipment), human resources including support and expert staff with relevant knowledge, skills and abilities (particularly in the sphere of ethical competence and good governance) and budgets for travel related to parliamentary functions. The third element is the culture affecting the attitudes and behaviour of MPs.

The interactions are familiar. The legal infrastructure establishes rules that enable political actors to perform their functions and places limits on what they do and how they do it. It creates boundaries within which cultures develop. These cultures are dynamic, adapting and changing according to political circumstances and the styles of influential personalities. Within the constraints of the legal infrastructure, cultures influence how and to what extent: individual non-government MPs and parties press for accountability; rely on newsworthy media 'grabs'; ministers respond or stonewall; and whether government backbenchers become mere foot-soldiers.

The independence practiced by independent officers of the parliament, such as the Auditor General, Ombudsman and anti-corruption commissions, must give effect to their legislated independence. Likewise, the resources determine the capacity of parliamentary committees and independent officers of the parliament to give effect to their oversight roles. Parliamentary committees must have sufficient staff and other resources to conduct research including meeting away from the parliament and holding public hearings if they are to scrutinize the executive and discharge effective oversight. Likewise, the above-mentioned independent officers of the parliament must have sufficient staff and the powers needed to investigate and report on government performance. The legal infrastructure, resources and culture are each inter-dependent, key elements of the parliamentary subsystem within the system of government.

The individual capacity of each MP is a key human resource required by the parliament as a fundamental part of its institutional capacity. The capacity of MPs is this article's central concern. Its premise is that the ability of members of a parliament to support and discharge parliament's oversight function affects its ability to perform its oversight role effectively. This is supported by the human resource development and management literature (Wexley and Latham 1991, Boxall and Steenveld 1999, Delery and Shaw 2001, Boxall and Purcell 2008, Boxall and Purcell 2011). Whilst that literature is largely derived from the study of management in private and public sector contexts, it is a useful framework when analysing and evaluating the issue of MPs' knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities and how they can best learn and enhance those skills.

Many parliamentary oversight functions occur through parliamentary committees. The capacity of committees to perform these functions effectively is largely contingent on the knowledge, skills and abilities of individual committee members. Whilst the authors recognise that parliament, the legal infrastructure and parliamentary culture are important, this article is more interested in human resource matters, which are crucial to an oversight function.

RESEARCH

This article adds to research findings reported previously (e.g. see Coghill, Holland, Kinyondo, Lewis, and Steinack (2012), Coghill, Donohue et al. (2008), Coghill, Donohue, Holland, Lewis, Neesham, Richardson and Rozzoli (2009), Neesham, Lewis, Holland, Donohue and Coghill (2010), Coghill (2012), Coghill, Lewis and Steinack (2012). They arise from an international study of formal induction and further development programs for MPs in representative countries (Australia, Canada, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Jordan, Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, Romania, South Africa, Timor Leste, Tonga, United Kingdom, Uruguay, Vanuatu, Vietnam). These countries were chosen because they include established and newer democracies, parliamentary, executive presidential and hybrid models, and a range of geographic regions. The focus of the research was on the role of parliaments in producing or facilitating such programs. It examined, among other things, the parliamentary function of scrutiny, also referred to as oversight.

A small number of previous studies into education and training programs for MPs have been reported. Among the earliest was Sawicki's research on the situation (as it was then) in Poland (Sawicki, 1993). Rush and Giddings investigation into the induction of members of the United Kingdom's (UK) House of Commons (1992 and 1997) was largely concerned with practical matters that concerned MPs. However, they did report that the induction programs made reference to the scrutiny of European legislation and to MPs' accountability for their own entitlements.

Queensland Speaker Hollis reported in 2004 that the unicameral parliament provided a comprehensive induction seminar for newly elected MPs, regular information sessions for Members and a Members' Information Manual. The two day induction seminar included practical matters, a mock sitting, sessions dealing with ethics, a briefing by the Integrity Commissioner and advice on avoiding workplace harassment (Hollis, 2004).

A comparative perspective on a number of induction programs was published in *The Table* (a journal published by the Society of Clerks-at-the-Table in Commonwealth Parliaments) (The Table 2006). Those programs appear to have been overwhelmingly concerned with practical matters affecting the individual rather than focusing on knowledge and skills that could enhance the parliament's scrutiny role (Rush, 2000).

In 2007, the Inter-Parliamentary Union produced a draft program for members in advance of the first ever Timor Leste election (June 2007). Because of this somewhat unique circumstance the program had to be broader than for an already functioning parliament. In addition to orientation, it offered a series of sessions dealing with the wide range of the responsibilities and policy areas MPs were likely to encounter (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2007).

Fox and Korris (2012) reported on the induction activities offered to UK MPs elected in 2010. Although the induction program was comprehensive, overall attendance by MPs was disappointing. While almost all new MPs attended the '... unique briefing meeting in the Commons Chamber' (p566) attendance at other inductions sessions was less than optimal. This was despite political parties' 'pre-election commitment to encourage their new Members to attend the sessions once they had arrived at Westminster'. As Korris and Fox go on to explain this 'did not actually translate into any noticeably significant attendance levels' (p. 562). They also lamented the absence of ethics from the program. They explained that there had been a 'session that focused on the budget and financial scrutiny process' (p. 570) but made no reference to any on scrutiny as it relates to oversight.

In another study Johnson and Nakamura (1999 p.4) noted that MPs' perceived oversight as 'generally synonymous with scrutiny'. It 'involves monitoring executive activities for efficiency, probity, and fidelity'. The variations between parliaments use of these terms largely relates to the description of the function rather than rejecting it as an expected task.

In the research conducted for this article (referred to earlier), it became evident that MPs and parliamentary staff used terms such as 'scrutiny', 'oversight', 'parliamentary control' and 'holding the government to account' to classify oversight functions of the parliament. As one interviewee explained:

One of the things that they tend to do is to, very often they will just decide that they're going to be a very good representative, and they become a kind of ombudsperson for the constituency and they help them navigate the various bureaucracies at various levels, and so forth. And in that sense, they play a good kind of social worker role. But they're not really doing anything in terms of holding the government to account. Because that's a whole other exercise. And one I think that really frankly the parliament does rather badly. (Interviewee CA 5, para 21) (Coghill, Holland, Kinyondo, Lewis, and Steinack, 2012, p. 64)

This explanation indicates a somewhat indistinct understanding of what oversight means to MPs and the parliaments and individual parliamentarian's obligation in this regard. The use of more concise terminology may help to overcome this vagueness.

FINDINGS

Although oversight functions are generally accepted as key functions of the parliament as an institution, the perception of MPs' as to their own functions was less definite. Representation

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was highly rated but bifurcated. On the one hand it was perceived as acting as a 'trustee' when deliberating and voting on legislation. On the other hand it was seen as taking up constituency grievances. Legislating was also recognised as an obvious major role but not so scrutiny or oversight. The latter was not identified strongly by MPs. Overall, induction and training for MPs was highly variable between parliamentary chambers in relation to their oversight responsibilities and that of their MPs. In some countries, such as Ethiopia, MPs were highly aware of induction and training programs having emphasised scrutiny and oversight. In contrast, and

despite an extensive induction program available to the very large number of new MPs elected to the House of Commons in 2010 (referred to above), one interviewee, when asked about the scrutiny/oversight role of the parliament, explained that:

Again, I think that's all done very informally. I think that'd be a case of learning on the job in this parliament. The best example there would be the select committee system, which for scrutiny, you could if you wished to go and seek guidance on how does a select committee work and there are, for example, various bits of written information about that. In fact, there's a compulsory element there because you have to sign a certain piece that says, 'I have understood the rules of select committees'. But again, once you've had that little bit of information, you just go and suck it and see and make sure you seek out experienced role models for that (UK interviewee 550048).

In Australia, all MPs newly elected to the House of Representatives in 2010 participated in an induction program conducted over one and a half days. However, it seems that any mention of scrutiny or oversight made little impression as it was not mentioned by MPs as an area of importance in the program. The lack of importance MPs attached to these responsibilities most likely reflects the priority given to them in the induction program. As the Department of the House of Representatives implied, it would have received only superficial reference. Future induction programs need to ensure that oversight functions receive a greater priority and that the same applies in all other education and training programs for MPs.

In the case of committee roles, induction is often handled at the level of each committee and consequently the pace at which it is offered provides for a thoughtful learning environment. This approach may allow for a more effective induction program, however it also points to a lack of uniformity in the education and training of committee members, which could produce less than optimal training programs in some instances.

The research findings indicate many MPs are ill-equipped at election to meet the parliament's human resource needs and that parliaments generally perform poorly in supporting MPs to learn and develop the knowledge, skills and abilities required by parliaments to enable them to undertake their oversight role in an effective manner. Much of the knowledge, skills and abilities needed for effective parliamentary oversight are not ones an executive would necessarily be keen to encourage. It is a rare government (regardless of its political leaning) that seeks vigorous scrutiny by opposition MPs. Parliamentary committees, in particular, could assist in improving oversight though their scrutiny and good governance remit. Committees are capable of assisting governments and parliaments to address more difficult and complex problems, however, to do so, they need to be properly resourced and their members adequately trained.

Given the 'wicked' policy-related issues that confront governments and the opposition, it is becoming increasingly important for parliaments to assert their separation from the executive and take a lead in developing and offering more effective induction and professional development programs. There is often a gap of at least a few weeks between the election of a new parliament and the commencement of sittings. This creates an excellent opportunity for a comprehensive induction program to be offered to newly elected MP and for updated education and training for returning MP. A more comprehensive induction program should include the elements that bear on the oversight function of parliaments and individual MPs. This needs to include the basics, as earlier research by Indra found a remarkable ignorance of the Auditor-General's role and the appropriate relationship the office should have with the parliament, government and individual members (Indra, 2005).

Parliamentary privilege is not usually associated with a parliament's oversight role. However, it does offer MPs the right to raise matters without the risk of litigation and it is expected that they will do so in a considered fashion and not for party political advantage. Education in the responsible use of parliamentary privilege could assist parliaments in exercising their oversight functions and raise the awareness of parliamentarians with regard to behaviours

that could lead to a charge of misconduct in public office. It is an area that is worthy of further attention in future induction programs.

Fundamental to an MP's parliamentary role is the ability to recognise the legal principle that parliamentarians are obliged to act in the best interests of the jurisdiction they serve and not their personal interest or the interests of lobbyists, business associates, friends or family. A more complex obligation, and one that is likely to be challenged by some parliamentarians and political scientists, is the obligation for MPs to put the interests of their electorate, the parliament and the geographical jurisdiction they are elected to represent ahead of political party interests. Given what Doring describes as the 'rather ubiquitous power of the whips' and the usually strong cohesion of political parties *vis a vis* the majority of parliamentarians, this could prove to be near impossible to achieve. However, that does not mean that the topic should be excluded from education and training programs.

Along with these obligations, is the concept of a fiduciary duty that MPs owe to members of the community. This relates to their responsibility to discharge a public trust. In Australia, these are not regarded as justiciable. Even though the United States of America (USA) does not adhere to the system of responsible government, it provides valuable signals for other parliaments. For example, a number of state courts have recently upheld atmospheric trust litigation, ruling that state governors and legislators are obliged to protect the atmosphere from pollution (Our Children's Trust, 2013). The experience in the USA has some parallels in Iceland, where the Court of Impeachment convicted a former Prime Minister for negligence whilst in office (Neate, 2012). Whilst these two examples do not relate directly to the parliament's role, they do illustrate the complexity of the system of government and the need to take these complexities and the other issues raised in this article into account when designing training programs for future parliamentarians.

Complementing and underlying these considerations is the necessity for ethical competence training throughout the membership of any parliament. The failure of even a small proportion of MPs to behave ethically can jeopardise the integrity, reputation and legitimacy of the institution of parliament and undermine its scrutiny/oversight responsibilities. The importance of such training has been recognised by the Hansard Society. It recommended mandatory scrutiny training for MPs in its report *The Challenge for Parliament: Making Government Accountable* (Hansard Society Commission on parliamentary scrutiny, 2001).

Parliaments and parliamentary staff are strongly divided on whether they should assist in training MPs to enhance their competencies when applying moral values to the identification and resolving of ethical dilemmas. The arguments against such a role include important pragmatic concerns about inadequate skills to deliver programmes intended to develop ethical competence. Another consideration relates to concerns about whether parliamentary staff should be telling MPs how they might best behave, especially about issues which fall into the ethical dilemma category. However, Australian state parliaments such as Queensland and Victoria have delivered such programmes, as have a number of foreign national legislatures. The authors maintain that training in helping to solve

ethical dilemmas is a legitimate role for parliaments and one that they should take up in defence of the interests of the institution and the system of government and governance more generally.

CONCLUSION

The following offer some suggestions for enhancing parliamentary oversight by enhancing MPs' capacities to undertake their role in a more considered and effective manner. First, the authors argue that substantial induction and professional development programs for MPs are a legitimate and necessary role of a parliamentary institution if it is to exercise its oversight responsibilities effectively. Continuing professional education is now common-place, if not a standard condition of professional practice in most professions and occupations of lesser responsibility. While the role of MP is unique, it does not preclude them from undertaking education and training programs to enhance the knowledge, skills and abilities they need to undertake their role and functions in the complex environment that is the parliament. Furthermore, participation in such programs could help develop and strengthen a culture favourable to the improved performance of oversight and other parliamentary functions. Second, such programs should be offered by the parliament or under its authority. It is a legitimate and necessary role for the peak institution of a democratic polity to undertake. Third, political parties should, as a condition of parliamentary party membership, require new and re-elected MPs to participate in continuing adult education programs orientated to enhancing the parliament's oversight (and other) functions. This suggestion is made because in many parliaments it is still the parties that exercise the greatest influence over the decisions made by MPs, including their attendance at training programs. By that the authors mean that if political parties made attendance compulsory, all MPs would attend induction and additional training programs. In practical terms, this means that party leaders and whips must demonstrate their support and insist on attendance.

The evidence from the authors' research suggests that improved induction programs and continuous professional development are needed to strengthen parliamentary oversight and that this approach is consistent with what happens in other public sector organisations and in the private sector. The performance of organizations is understood to be linked to the development of the knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes of the people who make up those organizations. Accordingly, organizations invest in developing these qualities in the interests of the organizations themselves, not just the benefits they may bring to individual personnel. Parliaments stand to gain from investing in members of parliament in a similar manner. It is now time that they did.

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