

Submission to Senate Inquiry into the Performance of Department of Parliamentary Services

Main points

- This inquiry by the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee offers a most timely opportunity to catalyse improvements to the structural and resourcing arrangements of the Parliamentary Library.
- Unless appropriate changes are forthcoming the Parliamentary Library will not be on an equal footing with the Parliamentary Budget Office in terms of independence, resourcing, dealing with Government agencies and enabling legislation.
- Prior to 'the new paradigm', the DPS Research Branch was 30% below the necessary minimum critical mass for adequate provision of client services. With the increased legislative and committee activity of the current Parliament even more resources are needed.
- Not only has Research Branch total staffing levels been steadily reduced over the longer term but there has been a shift in the staffing mix with an increase in lower level researcher positions. This represents a major change from, and potential risk to, the previously highly successful approach of recruiting staff with high level subject knowledge and substantial experience in fields relevant to the Parliament's knowledge requirements.

Introduction

The opportunity to contribute to this inquiry by the Senate Finance and Public Administration (FPA) Legislation Committee is most welcome. Unlike the vast majority of public sector organisations, the performance of DPS and the Parliamentary Library (the Library) are not subject to regular attention by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO), except, of course, for their financial reporting. This means performance evaluations of the non-financial aspects of both organisations are far less frequent than experienced by public sector agencies and hence public scrutiny of operations is comparatively lower.

This submission draws on over 20 years of experience in the now Research Branch (RB) of the Library. It is a very much a perspective from 'the sharp end' of client service provision. While the views expressed therein should not be considered as formally representing the views of other staff they are not held in isolation. They have been heavily informed by interactions with colleagues over a long period and are likely supported to some degree by a good number of library staff.

Apart from some comments about DPS and the proposed Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) the submission mainly relates to term (g) in the Committee's Terms of Reference — "any related matter".

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Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO)

Should the proposed PBO be established as per the recommendations of the Joint Select Committee on the PBO (the PBO Committee) it should significantly enhance the support provided to the Parliament for budget and fiscal analysis as well as policy costings.

Parliamentary Library to be the poor relation?

One significant consequence of the PBO is that it will be a stronger institution than the Library as it will:

- be fully independent of any other organisation;
- have much more robust and comprehensive enabling legislation;
- be in a far stronger position when dealing with other agencies;
- be better resourced relative to the scope of work undertaken.¹

It would be entirely within the scope of this inquiry by the FPA Committee, to say nothing of most timely, for consideration to be given to the appropriateness of the current structural and resourcing arrangements for the Parliamentary Library as well as its associated legislation.

Locating the PBO within Parliament House

During the DPS Budget Estimates hearings on 23 May 2011, DPS management indicated preparations were being made for the PBO to be physically located within space currently occupied by the Library. This prompted the Chair of the PBO Committee to remind DPS management that the PBO Committee's recommendations were unanimous.²

Despite one of those recommendations being for the PBO not to be located in Parliament House, DPS management continues to plan for the 'within the Library'

¹ The PBO is expected to have a minimum budget of \$6 million annually compared with the total cost of DPS subprogram 1.1—Research Services, in 2009-10, being \$12.2 million.

² House of Representatives, *Inquiry into the proposed Parliamentary Budget Office*, The House, Canberra, March 2011, pp. xv–xx, viewed 1 August 2011, <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jscpbo/report/front.pdf>

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option.³ In the absence of information available to staff that DPS has been asked to undertake this preparation, it is concerning that DPS persists with activity.

Library staffing review

Recently a review of the Library staffing was conducted by HBA Consulting, as part of the post 2010 election Agreement between the ALP and Greens/Independents.

A key finding of the HBA Review was that current staffing levels were adequate for the services presently provided.⁴ This assessment was both surprising and disappointing to many staff as it simply does not tally with the situation at the coalface.

Indeed there is a significant disconnect between the views and information gathered via the staff consultation undertaken by HBA, and the main conclusion reached.⁵

I suggest that a key reason for HBA's finding that staffing is adequate is an over reliance on data from the Library's system for recording client requests—TARDIS—and their acceptance of this data as a measure of client demand. Some limitations of the TARDIS system are discussed in the next section.

TARDIS

Using TARDIS data as a measure of demand for RB services is an exercise fraught with danger both methodologically and conceptually.

TARDIS was initially designed as a system to track and record client and non-client work by Parliamentary Library staff. For RB the TARDIS system was particularly intended for recording commissioned services. However, for most RB staff it is now only used as a record of activity undertaken/time spent in responding to individual client requests and preparing publications. Other activities which support the provision of client services are no longer recorded.

³ In Library Update of 30 May 2011 staff were advised "We have said that with projects mobbing [sic] out there would be sufficient room to accommodate a separately petitioned area, somewhere in the library, for a Parliamentary Budget Office.

⁴ Given that there has been little change to the core suite of services provided by the Library for some years this HBA finding also invites the corollary conclusion that when Library staff numbers were greater services were provided in a far less efficient and effective manner!

⁵ Having attended one of the staff consultation sessions it did seem to be the intention of the consultants to keep discussion away from the key issue of staffing levels.

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With regard to the quality of information entered into TARDIS, work practices and 'TARDIS culture' have deteriorated over time and now vary considerably across RB staff to the extent there is a significant degree of non-compliance with the relevant Library operating policy. This policy requires all client requests be recorded in TARDIS as soon as practicable after their receipt, preferably before the end of the same day.

A number of staff have adopted a fairly minimalist/dismissive approach to TARDIS data entry. For example, responses provided by phone are not recorded; requests which only involve a small amount of time are not recorded; and TARDIS records not completed until many weeks after the work has been undertaken. As a result data used for reporting purposes by Library management almost certainly understate considerably both the number of requests and time spent on them.

The diminished attentiveness of RB staff to TARDIS activity is attributable in significant part to management decisions of some years ago, as documented in the February 2009 internal report of the TARDIS review group. One outcome of these developments is that there is neither incentive nor disincentive for staff to complete their TARDIS records in an accurate and timely manner.

I for one, and I suspect other RB staff, would be most hesitant to use a data series with the limitations of TARDIS in their research work for clients.

TARDIS as a measure of demand

In the context of client service such as provided by RB, demand is a far more complex concept than just the number of requests received and hours spent on these, even if it were possible to have confidence in the integrity and accuracy of TARDIS data.

The TARDIS data does not report client requests that were declined and why, nor client requests that were only responded to partially and why. These are important dimensions of client demand and service provision.

For many of the client responses and publications provided by RB the nature of the parliamentary environment is such that supply creates demand. This means, if there are staff available with a particular skill set/subject expertise that aligns with the clients' requirements then clients will utilise them. Remove that capability from RB then demand for services based on that capability will consequently fall.

Rather than being a measure of demand it is far more appropriate to consider TARDIS figures as an indicator of RB's supply capacity. This capacity has been reduced over an extended period due to factors including:

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- the reduction in staff numbers, particularly at the PSL6/EL1 level which is the 'engine room' of the RB;
- EL staff spending more of their time training and supervising Research Assistants (RAs). As this has not been offset by a reduction in other non client work tasks this has been at the direct expense of client service;
- EL2s in particular, but not only, having to spend vastly increased amounts of time attending to corporate and administrative matters greatly reducing the time available to provide direct client service.

Given the limitations of TARDIS data and the reduction in the supply capacity of the RB it is hardly surprising that there has been a reduction in the recorded number of client requests undertaken. Any suggestion that demand for RB services has fallen is significantly at odds with the coalface experience of many staff.

Further observations about developments affecting the Library's client service capacity were made in my recent submission to the parliamentary inquiry into the establishment of a Parliamentary Budget Office. The relevant section is provided at Attachment 1.

Library staffing levels

Prior to 'the new paradigm' the RB needed at least 30% more staff to have the necessary minimum critical mass of resources to appropriately respond to the level of direct client requests and produce the required number of Bills Digests. The inadequacy of the current staff resource is especially evident during sitting periods when client demand for RB services is noticeably higher and the number of client requests involving quite short deadlines increases.

Since the 2010 election it has become even more obvious that a further significant increase in staff is required if the Library is to adequately support Members of Parliament (MP) with their parliamentary and representational functions.

Staffing mix

The reduction in the number of information specialists/librarians in RB has reduced the specialty service previously provided by those positions affecting both direct client service and essential support for researchers. In times of peak work load for researchers or where very short deadlines might apply it was often the case an information specialist could 'come to the rescue' by being able to 'find something' that would at least in some ways assist the client in a timely manner.

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The conversion of some higher level positions into RA positions has resulted in the employment of RAs who, inevitably and through no fault of their own, offer clients far less subject expertise and experience. This would appear to be in contradiction of the legislated requirement for the library to maintain the highest standard of scholarship in its service provision.

The value of the RA staff classification as a succession planning tool is questionable given:

- It appears there has been a higher staff turnover at that level compared with higher levels;
- Although the first RAs commenced four years ago, only one of the original recruits remains and only one RA has reached a substantive PSL6 level;
- In the Economics Section the one remaining PSL6 position—the step between the RA and PEL1 positions—has effectively been removed from the advancement ladder as it has not been advertised for filling since the previous occupant left in July 2009;
- By comparison with the Australian Public Service, RB sections are relatively large and cover an enormous scope of policy areas. For example the Economics Section includes primary, secondary and tertiary industries; public finance; industrial relations; the domestic and international economies; financial services; etc. The single RA cannot be expected to obtain high level expertise in all the areas.

Hence progression through the RB ranks from RA to EL1 seems likely to become very much the exception rather than the rule and thus contrary to the stated succession planning rationale for introducing RAs.

Historically the foundation for the RB's high standard of client services has been the recruitment of staff with high level subject knowledge and substantial experience in their field/s. This expertise has then underpinned the provision of research services to the Parliament i.e. preparation of responses to individual client requests by RB staff along with the production of Bill's Digests and other Library publications. The introduction of lower levels of staffing represents a major change from, and potential risk to, the previously highly successful approach.

Another perspective on the RB staffing mix issue is provided by comparing the Library's approach with that taken by Government agencies in their dealings with Members and Senators on policy matters. In both individual briefings and Committee hearings MPs typically have dealings with SES and PEL2 level staff. Direct dealings with APS graduates—the equivalent of RAs—would be virtually unheard of.

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In conclusion I would just emphasise that the forgoing comments about the arrangements for RAs are not in any way a reflection on any of the people who have been appointed as RAs nor the contribution they have made to the Library. Rather the comments concern the strategic issues around RAs and client service.

Thank you for consideration of this submission.

Yours sincerely

1 August 2011

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Attachment 1

Extract from submission to the parliamentary inquiry into the establishment of a Parliamentary Budget Office.

Parliamentary library

The Parliamentary Library is one of the major resources currently available to provide the Australian Parliament with timely and independent budget analysis and policy costing. However, the Library's capacity to provide these services is significantly limited because the Library only deals in publicly available information or information the Executive Government chooses to release if requested.

This means that currently many requests made to the library can only be partially answered, or possibly not answered at all, because the necessary data is simply not available or cannot be obtained in a timely fashion.

The need for a PBO has arisen because of the Parliament's increased interest in budget analysis and policy costing and because of the shortcomings of the present arrangements. Had the Parliamentary Library been equipped with an appropriate mandate and resources, it would already be filling the role of a PBO.

Instead, the Library's client service capacity has been weakened by the following developments:

1. The gradual decline in staff numbers.
2. The substitution of higher classified positions with lower ones, often resulting in staff being recruited to these positions who, inevitably and through no fault of their own, bring far less subject expertise and experience to offer clients.
3. The need for EL1 and EL2 level staff to spend a greater amount of their time providing supervision and training to junior staff, thereby reducing the time they can spend on client service. Furthermore, and based on casual observation, it appears there has been a higher rate of staff turnover in these junior positions, compounding the training and supervision effect.
4. The negligible level of funding available for training and development. The average allocation for Research Branch staff is \$1100 per person per annum. To demonstrate the inadequacy of this amount, the registration fee for the forthcoming 5th CPD Immigration Law Conference in Melbourne is \$695 (a moderately priced conference). Associated travel and accommodation costs easily take the total cost of attending past \$1100. Hence current funding does not usually permit every Research Branch staff member to attend a major conference each year.

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5. The advent of the Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS) has seen the imposition of a public service management culture in the Library. The vastly increased demands on the time on the Library's EL2 staff to attend to corporate and administrative matters has been at the direct expense of their capacity to provide direct client services.
6. The failure of the creation of DPS to deliver the predicted savings has resulted in greater cuts to the Library's budget than would otherwise have happened.

The concerning state which the Library's service delivery capacity has reached is encapsulated in an incident late in 2010 when a client requested some research on what was an extremely topical issue yet the library was unable to provide any assistance on that occasion.

In addition to the forgoing 'supply side' issues the nature of requests made of the Library has undergone some change in recent years reflecting:

1. The continuous media cycle in which Members and Senators operate and their associated need to know about more topics more often.
2. Similarly, with technology facilitating increased communications between parliamentarians and their constituents and stakeholder groups (and vice versa), there is greater demand for the services of the library, both analytical and information, in parliamentarians undertaking their representational functions.
3. The greater number of Members and Senators who are independent or represent smaller parties has brought a greater number and more diverse ideas and interests into the Parliament's sphere of operations. The Library's assistance is often called upon as these are pursued in the forums of the Parliament and elsewhere.
4. The increased number and prominence of Private Members Bills. The Library is endeavouring to manage the provision of support for these from its existing resources.

These factors have also put pressure on the Library's service delivery capacity.

Source: Joint Select Committee on the Parliamentary Budget Office, *Inquiry into the proposed Parliamentary Budget Office*, Submission 12, Mr Peter Hicks, January 2011
<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jscpbo/subs/sub12.pdf>