

SERVING ONTARIO COMMITTEES: THE CASE FOR LIBRARY RESEARCH STAFF

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As committee activity intensifies so too does the search for ways to make committees more effective. The onus will always be on elected officials to make committees successful but professional support staff is also necessary if committees are to effectively discharge their mandates. There is some debate as to who should provide this staff. In this article the author argues that responsibility for serving Ontario committees should rest primarily with the Legislative Library's Research and Information Service.

Effective committee work depends in large measure upon capable, competent staff. Staff assigned to standing or select committees can suggest lines of questioning, brief witnesses, summarize testimony, provide background papers, organize material and assist in drafting reports. There are at least four possible sources of staff support for committees in Ontario: the Legislative Research Service, outside experts, permanent committee staff for individual committees or staff hired by the committee's branch.

The main argument in favour of library support for committees is that such staff is accustomed both to the nature and timing of parliamentary business. They can assess the needs of specialist committees for materials relating to their inquiries. This fact, coupled with the library researchers' awareness that committees are not academic seminars and do not have the same needs for published material, is the basis for arguing that there are definite advantages in providing such a service from within the library. Committee research occurs within tight time frames and the effectiveness of a researcher depends not only on adopting the committee's own sense of urgency but also on a clear grasp of the resources of the Legislative Library in general and the role of reference librarians in expediting the location and retrieval of needed information. Library researchers, have these skills before they ever meet a committee.

Unlike outside experts, library researchers can usually be assigned to committees on relatively short notice. Even more important, their goal is to serve the committee, to meet its needs and not to advocate specific policies. Above all, they are impartial and non-partisan in their work. The importance of these considerations is

underscored by the experience some years ago of the Senate Committee on Poverty. According to Philip Laundry, Director of the Research Branch of the Library of Parliament, one Senate Committee which hired its own special staff encountered a major obstacle. "Unfortunately, as the investigation proceeded, these experts found that they did not see eye to eye with the Committee, and motivated no doubt by their dedication to the task of alleviating poverty, they publicly broke with the Committee, denounced it and all its works, and proceeded to produce their own report on poverty."¹

Finally the assignment of library researchers to committees also has the obvious merit of ensuring that during periods of committee inactivity, staff are usefully occupied in other tasks. At the same time, ongoing committees like Public Accounts can be given continuity of service. In terms of the effective employment of available personnel and cost, the use of in-house library researchers seems to have much to recommend it.

The Ontario Legislature established a Legislative Research Service in May 1979. Since then its research officers have served the Standing Committees on General Government, Public Accounts and the Administration of Justice as well as Select Committees on Plant Shutdowns and Employee Adjustments and on Constitutional Reform. The response of Members has been very positive. The Select Committee on Constitutional Reform noted "that this is the first occasion that the Legislative Library has provided this service for a Select Committee and considers it a valuable precedent that should be followed."² A report of the Procedural Affairs Committee also noted that "the Library Research Unit has provided invaluable staff assistance to several committees."³

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Two potential difficulties are sometimes associated with the use of library research officers on committees. First is the understandable fear that if research officers serve committees, there may be a danger that the research needs of individual members will go unanswered. The second and related problem concerns the inherent limitations that size places both on the number of research officers available for committee work and the range of subject expertise within the group. But if the existing research service is providing competent service to committees, and there is reason to think this is the case, then the answer to these very legitimate concerns is to increase the number of researchers and thereby broaden the range of subject expertise that can be drawn upon. It should be remembered that the mandate of the Legislative Research Service, as stated by the Morrow Committee in 1977 was to respond to the information needs of members *and* their committees.

The cost effectiveness of expanding the size of the Legislative Research Service rather than hiring outside experts is another factor. The fees paid by one committee for its part-time counsel last year were substantially higher than the total salaries of the five library research officers who constituted the service during its first months of operation.⁴

It may well be that the nature of a committee's work requires specialized knowledge that no in-house research unit could provide. There are, however, factors that mitigate against hiring outside experts until other avenues have been explored thoroughly. Ronald Robertson, principal advisor to the federal Finance, Trade and Economic Affairs Committee some years ago, indicated that outside consultants routinely require significant lead time to familiarize themselves with government intentions and to acquire a better understanding of how government agencies operate. Moreover, Robertson pointed out that "an inordinate and . . . disproportionate amount of time, effort and expense was spent by professionals in summarizing briefs."⁵ Nonetheless, the need for special expertise may, on occasion, compel committees to consider outside consultants.

Another possible way to provide research support consists of hiring permanent staff for individual committees. Such a practice might work for the Standing Committee on Public Accounts which has a regular and clearly defined schedule of work but for most committees the workload is unpredictable and there may be extended interludes of inactivity. These periods of inactivity might well discourage alert and active researchers from accepting such employment. Moreover

the subject of committee investigations varies considerably from session to session and as a consequence the need for particular expertise changes. This issue has been raised at the federal level and more than one observer has concluded that the sporadic nature of committee work and respect for the public purse make it difficult to recommend the idea of permanent committee support staff.

In Ontario the possibility of hiring researchers through a Committee Branch within the Clerk's Office has been discussed. These researchers would work exclusively for committees of the House. Such a service would parallel the existing service offered by the Legislative Library. In addition to hiring research officers, the Committee Branch would probably find it necessary to appoint an administrator to supervise the staff and allocate personnel. Additional support staff and equipment would also be required. There would also likely be a duplication of effort with similar research projects undertaken in two different centres within the Offices of Assembly. This eventuality coupled with periods of committee inactivity might lead to the inefficient use of professional staff and a poor allocation of scarce resources.

There is every reason to believe that the pool approach to providing research for committees is a good one. It has worked well in Ottawa, Washington, Westminster, Canberra, and elsewhere. But in each case the pool of experts is situated within the organizational framework of the library that serves Members. Rather than risk expensive duplication by establishing a second centre of research within the Ontario Legislative Assembly, serious consideration might well focus on the wisdom of expanding the pool of experts that is already available within the Legislative Research Service.

NOTES

1. Inter-Parliamentary Union, "The Member of Parliament: His Requirements for Information in the Modern World," *Third International Symposium, 18-20 January 1973*, Geneva: International Centre for Parliamentary Documentation, 1973, vol. 1, p. 173.
2. *Report of the Select Committee on Constitutional Reform*, October 21, 1980, p. ii.
3. Standing Procedural Affairs Committee, *Proposals For A New Committee System*, 1980, p. 2.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
5. Peter C. Dobell, "Committee Staff — What Else is Needed?" Paper prepared for the Conference on Legislative Studies in Canada, 1979. Simon Fraser University, February 1979, p. 19.