



Interview

The First Twenty-Five Years

Erik Spicer, Parliamentary Librarian

November 16, 1985 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the appointment of Erik Spicer as Parliamentary Librarian. He has the distinction of being the only person of deputy minister status appointed by Prime Minister John Diefenbaker who still holds office. In this interview Mr. Spicer reflects on the role of the Library of Parliament and recalls some of the changes and developments it has undergone during his tenure as Librarian. He was interviewed for the Canadian Parliamentary Review by Barbara Benoit in October 1985.

Can you describe briefly the history of the position of Parliamentary Librarian?

The position has existed since Confederation and has always been a prestigious one. There used to be two positions of equal status: General Librarian and Parliamentary Librarian. This dual system was an invention of that consummate politician, Sir John A. Macdonald. Before the *Library of Parliament Act* (1885), there had been only one position and, as it carried deputy-ministerial rank, there had been a great deal of competition for it. Sir John argued that the job of Parliamentary Librarian should go to an English-speaking Canadian, who would be more familiar with parliamentary tradition, and that the General Librarian should be a French-Canadian. French-Canadians were known as men of culture and the General Librarian would be responsible for building up a general collection to be the basis for a national library. So Sir John made everyone happy.

We did not, however, get a National Library in Canada until 1953. Until then, and indeed for some years after, the Library of Parliament fulfilled some of the functions which the

National Library gradually took over. After the National Library was created, the *Library of Parliament Act* was revised and the position of General Librarian abolished.

How did you come to be appointed to the position of Parliamentary Librarian?

The Conservatives had argued strongly, while the *Library of Parliament Act* was under review in 1955, that future appointees to the position of Parliamentary Librarian should have professional training. They remained committed to that principle.

Professional qualifications for librarians were still a relatively new thing in the 1950s. It was clear, however, at least to people working in the field, that professional training would be increasingly necessary. The Canadian Library Association had taken a very strong stand that the Parliamentary Librarian should be professionally trained.

I was, at that time, deputy librarian at the Ottawa Public Library and had some of the most advanced professional training then available. I had completed a master's degree in library science at the University of Michigan and, in the course of my studies, had also taken courses in business administration and journalism.

I had political as well as professional credentials. My father-in-law, Dr. W. G. Blair, had been the Conservative member for Lanark for twelve years. He was re-elected in 1957 but died before the Cabinet was announced.

Although my political connections certainly helped, I think, however, that my professional qualifications were of fundamental importance.

Did the government remain committed to the need for professionally qualified staff?

On the whole, yes. The Associate Librarian position has become vacant twice during my time here. In each case, I waited a decent period and then wrote to the prime minister offering to provide a list of suitable candidates. Both Mr. Pearson and Mr. Trudeau accepted my recommendations. There are not many deputy ministers who can successfully recommend the appointment of their associates to the prime minister.

The position of Parliamentary Librarian carries with it some very special demands. How did you go about establishing yourself in the position?

I knew, of course, that it was important to get in touch with Members of Parliament as quickly as possible, to make myself known and to meet people. I remember thinking that I should waste no time in introducing myself to the Speaker, Roland Michener. I went down to see him and chatted away for quite a while. Finally, he said, "Well, Mr. Spicer, this is all very interesting. But what are you doing here and why are telling me all this?" I said, "I'm here, sir, because I have been appointed Parliamentary Librarian." He was quite astonished. It was news to him. It was an awkward beginning to our relationship, but we later got on quite well and I liked him very much.

Was it a daunting task, imposing professional standards of organization on the library?

When I came, it was administrative chaos. Doug Fisher, the former NDP Member of Parliament, had been a

professional librarian — is in fact, the only librarian ever to be elected to the House of Commons. I remember that he said to me: "Erik, if you can not turn the library around in two years, it will defeat you". It took me three years, but I did it.

I do not want to give you the impression that I was the only professional around. I had about 65 people on staff, working in one capacity or another. A number were trained librarians. There were some very good people and they worked very hard but, because of the structural set-up, they were sometimes working at cross-purposes. I think the

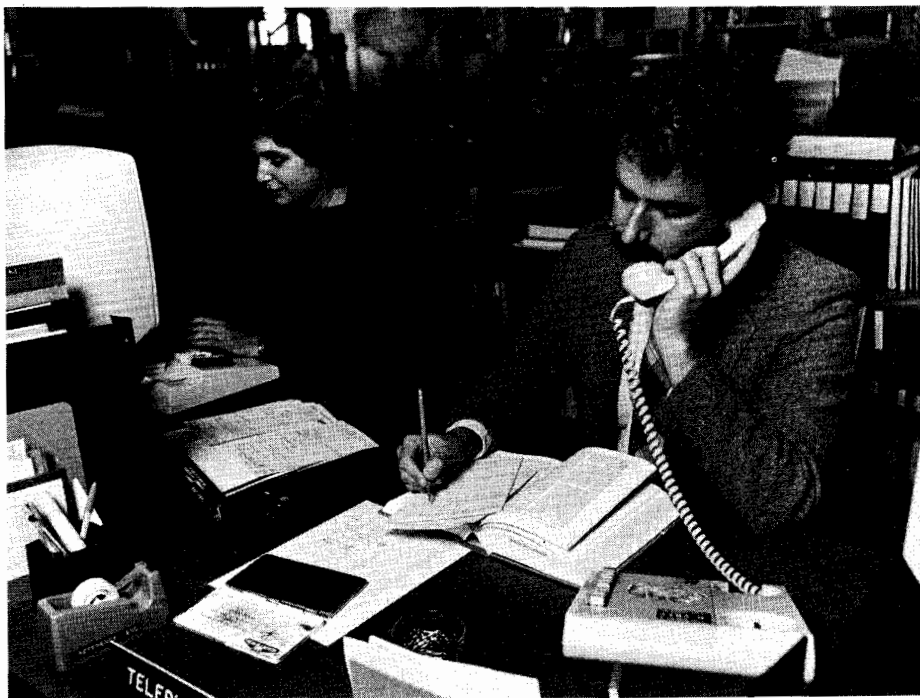
volumes of reports, trying to answer some simple query from a member.

Were the Members of Parliament at the time particularly aware of the need for better service?

I do not think there was much active dissatisfaction. The sessions were shorter then and the pressures were not what they are today. Members were not particularly aware of how much better the service might have been. A few wished to make speeches on our behalf, saying we needed more money and more staff. But I discouraged this. I was used to the

said. He replied with quite disarming candour, "Because I've already asked everybody else and they said no." That is an amusing example of what was, of course a more serious situation.

Assuring confidentiality was another key to improving library service. I knew that some members who could have used the Library of Parliament were going elsewhere to do their research. I asked a few why they went elsewhere, and one said: "Oh, as soon as I ask for a book at the parliamentary library, everyone knows what I am working on, and the opposition gets right to work preparing its attack." Now part of the problem was just the structure of the Library. The books are in bays around the dome and voices carry. Some of the librarians were careless and in the habit of simply calling out to a colleague: "Can you help me with such-and-such? I need it for so-and-so right away." Frequently there would be journalists or other members within earshot. So we began to take a number of measures to eliminate this problem. The staff were instructed to respect the confidentiality of any request from a member and access to the Library to outsiders was severely restricted.



For librarians books have long ceased to be the only tools of the trade.

Have the research services expanded a great deal under your direction?

Oh, it's simply not the same library! When I came, members were getting rather relaxed library service, certainly not the research service they needed. The research branch was founded in 1965 and modelled after the Congressional Research Service in Washington. We have more research officers now than librarians.

most valuable asset I brought to the library was sound administrative training and expertise.

Even the basic tool of a card catalogue was quite a new thing when I took over in 1960. Until the fire of 1952, new acquisitions were simply recorded in ledgers and given location numbers which showed where they ought to be on the shelves. There were no classification numbers. After the fire, the Library was closed down for three or four years while the collection was classified according to the Library of Congress system. Although much of the basic work of classification was complete by the time I came, there was still a great deal of work to be done in making the information in our holdings accessible. I was appalled, for example, to find that committee reports were not indexed. A librarian could spend three or four days leafing through old

Ottawa Public Library, which was chronically understaffed, overworked and underpaid. My first goal was to organize my existing staff to ensure that they were working as hard and as effectively as possible.

How did you move toward this goal?

I did not set out to make myself liked. I made it clear that my standards were more exacting and that I expected them to be met. You cannot be a good administrator if your main goal is to be liked. But you do not have to be hated either. The army has a phrase for good administrative technique: the three Fs — fair, firm, friendly.

Straightening out the lines of command was another priority. I recall that one day, shortly after I took over, a very junior staff member came to my office and asked if he could have the day off. "Why are you asking me?" I

How did the research branch come into being?

It was created in response to a sub-committee report in which the then Members of Parliament, Pauline Jewett, Gordon Fairweather and George Lachance, strongly recommended its formation. Of course, their recommendation was not the end of the story. There was opposition in cabinet to the idea and, to prevent the formation of the branch from being blocked, I had to go myself and personally persuade two ministers that this was a useful and indeed necessary service.

The Research Branch proved its usefulness immediately and underwent quite massive expansion within three or four years. The former Liberal Whip, Jimmy Walker, is one of the unsung heroes of the expansion. I went to see him and pointed out that the parliamentary committees needed



The statue of Queen Victoria adds a touch of serenity to an increasingly frenetic ambiance.

more formal and more specialized research services. He agreed and helped set up an in-camera meeting. There was some acrimonious dispute, but, in the end, the members asked for ten research staff to serve House of Commons committees.

Senate Speaker Madam Fergusson was also most helpful. She gave a luncheon to which she invited the chairmen of the Senate Committees. After much discussion, they asked for ten research officers as well. I had originally envisaged a total expansion of only ten positions. Now Parliament wanted twenty! Ten were approved.

It was eminently logical to provide the research service through the Library. Bills go through the House and the Senate and *vice versa*, so it seems logical to have the same research officers follow the legislation through both houses. If the Senate and the House had their own separate research services, neither service would be large enough to offer interesting career possibilities to officers. Neither would be able to keep officers busy full time. Neither would

be able to hire a broad range of specialists. But through the Library, a large staff with expertise in many different areas can work for Parliament as a whole.

I think we have given Parliament a quality of service unrivalled throughout the world, except, of course, in Washington.

What kind of services does the research branch offer?

We prepare background papers and papers on specific issues and we do oral briefings as well. We do a great deal of work for committees. We help write reports, suggest names of witnesses and prepare questions for witnesses. At the request of a committee chairman, our staff may take part in questioning witnesses. At times, senior officers have even filled in on speaking engagements for members who were unable to address a particular group. We do not, of course, have experts in everything, and so we engage outside experts when required. For example, we hired

a prison guard once to work with a sub-committee looking into problems in prisons. The research branch also prepares a *Current Issues Review List* and background papers for individual members' information. They also give considerable help to Parliamentary Associations with briefings, papers and direct staff assistance. For example one member of the research branch has been seconded to the Association of French-Speaking Parliamentarians in Paris; another provides the editorial services for this journal.

What are some of the other services offered by the Library?

We have an extensive clipping file. Twenty Canadian papers are clipped on a daily basis and many more dailies and weeklies as the need arises and time allows. *Quorum* is our very popular daily selection of xeroxed clippings. Staff are in every week day at 6 a.m. preparing *Quorum* for circulation. The clipping services are provided through our information and reference branch. This branch also produces a *Selected Additions List* of

books, bibliographies and government documents that might interest MPs and a *Selected Periodical Articles List*, including reference to recent articles.

Do you think members make optimum use of your services?

No, certainly not. Almost all members make some use of the Library. A large number of members and senators make very full and intelligent use of the services we offer. But there are still many who are simply unaware of the extent to which we could expedite their work or who don't need extensive help.

One of our big problems is being taken for granted. I remember at a political science meeting listening to a paper on information for Parliament. Now, the Library is the single most important source of information, but it was not mentioned once. On another occasion, I approached a journalist who had written an article on information systems on the Hill without mentioning the Library and I expressed surprise. He said he had got all his information out of our clipping file!

What is your view on the uses of automation within the library?

First, let me say that we are very highly automated and have been for a long time. Our catalogue is entirely on line: there is no more card catalogue. Automation is a necessary tool in a modern library, but it carries with it some dangers.

It is not access to information but interpretation of information that is the great problem at the present time.

Unfortunately, many people believe that anything that comes out of a black box must be right. It is very difficult for people who are swamped with information to maintain their critical faculties. All of the MPs have more information than they can handle. What they lack are information and subject specialists who know how to use the data banks, have some knowledge of the particular strengths and weaknesses of the different banks and are able to interpret the information they gather, who are able to say, "this book is considered seminal," "this periodical is considered eminently reliable," and to process the raw data.

The major federal libraries, including the Library of Parliament and the National Library, use DOBIS (the Dortmund Bibliothekssystem) in a version modified to suit Canadian requirements, such as bilingualism. It is a very complete and very flexible system and its data base contains nearly two million records. This is the

system through which all of our cataloguing and many of our bibliographical searches are done.

Access is maintained through 33 terminals. To access outside data banks and automate inside information, we have eight personal computers (IBM, COMPAQ and NORTH STAR) and three computer consoles (HEWLETT-PACKARD and ANDERSON-JACOBSON). These permit access to over 400 data bases. I should point out, however, that although the machines are used extensively in response to some questions, only about four per cent of the requests we receive require their use at all. Because of the nature of the parliamentary system, we are less dependent on automation than, for example, the Library of Congress. We have no need for an elaborate bill-tracking system.

Speed is of great importance in filling requests for information, and, to reply with optimum speed, we need to have material on hand in our collection. But we are overstocked with some 700,000 items. We look forward to the time when the National Library will have the space to accept about 200,000 items and when we will have the time to select the items for transfer.

Has the need to provide bilingual services posed any special problems for the Library of Parliament?

I would say that, at present, the Library is a model of bilingualism. I mentioned earlier that Sir John A. Macdonald saw fit to appoint two librarians of equal status, one French and one English. Now, although these librarians were supposed to fulfill distinct functions, in practice they appear to have run two parallel libraries, one French and one English. Such a system was unwieldy administratively. I amalgamated all the services. For example, it did not make any sense to me to have separate English and French References Branches and Cataloging Branches. We used even to have separate English and French letterhead, but I made that bilingual as soon as we ran out of the old stock.

Because we were a small organization, we were able to pursue bilingualism in other ways. We were giving French and English lessons to the staff long before the practice was introduced in the public service. It had nothing to do with the politics of the language issue. It had everything to do with sensible administration. We used our own staff as teachers. One person from the Maritimes had formerly been a teacher. The other was just naturally gifted. We held the

classes from 5 p.m. to 6 p.m., half on work time and half on the employees' own time. The classes were very popular and successful — so successful that House of Commons employees asked me to set up a French school for them. But I said, "No, I am trying to run a library and don't have time to run a language school."

What would you say has been the most interesting aspect of your job during your 25 years here?

The job has been absorbing and interesting in many ways. In addition to establishing professional research and professional administration on Parliament Hill I think one of the most interesting individual things I have ever done was to go to Nigeria for UNESCO in 1982 to run a seminar for parliamentary librarians there. There is an important international aspect to the job of Parliamentary Librarian. It is part of my responsibility to keep in touch with other parliamentary librarians in Europe, in the Commonwealth and around the world. We are in many ways a world leader and have received observers and trainees in legislative research from many countries — Korea, Nigeria, Trinidad, Tunisia, Cameroon, Switzerland and Bangladesh to name a few. Our people have gone abroad to advise on the setting up of library services in other countries and we have had exchange programs with England, Australia and the United States. I have been quite heavily involved with the work of IFLA (the International Federation of Library Associations) since I first went to an IFLA meeting at the Hague in 1966. I later became Chairman of the Parliamentary Libraries Section of IFLA.

Can you sum up the general pattern of development in the administration of the Library under your direction?

In a word, service. We are much more oriented toward service than we used to be, and much less collection dependent. We used principally to be custodians of enormous holdings where members, senators, journalists, and others could come to search for what they needed. Now we are geared to providing specific information in response to specific needs and requests, and to providing it with great speed, confidentiality and thoroughness in an appropriate format. Our orientation is much less general. We are geared toward the special needs of parliamentarians and we give real research, in depth, in many fields.■