



**Resources for members of parliament:
More Australian anomalies?**

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In the interest of fair elections and in the context of a federal election year, it is timely to consider how far electoral competition in Australia is being distorted by incumbency benefits and to what degree, if at all, this may be at the expense of other resources available to Members of Parliament to perform effectively.¹ In previous Audit contributions, Norm Kelly has commented on increased ‘slush’ money, for example both the very significant rise in printing and postage allowances² and resources in the form of an additional staffer for each MP³. These, he argues, are at the expense of democratic equality and skew electoral competition. It is surprising that non-sitting candidates for election to Parliament have yet to raise questions about such benefits. Another incumbency benefit, available to all Members of Parliament and often overlooked, is access to the information and research services of the Parliamentary Library.⁴

This paper suggests that both the role of MPs’ staff and access to the Parliamentary Library during an election period demonstrate yet more bias in favour of incumbents.⁵ I also suggest that the increase in resources for MPs’ staff unfortunately corresponds with a worrying squeeze on other elements of the Parliament—elements generally seen to contribute to its democratic effectiveness.

Astonishingly from the point of view of a level playing field, sitting members in Australia continue to have access to information and research services from the Parliamentary Library during the period of the election campaign. In the UK, by contrast, when the Parliament is dissolved after the calling of an election, sitting members are no longer regarded as Members of Parliament, but as candidates. As such, they have no

¹ The author was head of the Parliamentary Research Service and then the Parliamentary Library and Research Service from 1994 to 2005.

² Norm Kelly, 2006, ‘MPs incumbency benefits keep growing’, Discussion Paper 27/06, Democratic Audit of Australia. <http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au/>

³ Norm Kelly, 2007, ‘Extra staffing means super expensive MPs’ *Canberra Times*, 19 January.

⁴ But see Kate Hannon, 2007, ‘War over allowances’, *Canberra Times*, 10 March.

⁵ The term ‘incumbency benefits’ refers to the advantage enjoyed by those holding elected office over challengers. There is a hierarchy of incumbency benefits, depending on party status, as well as a gap between benefits enjoyed by all members of parliament and those restricted to members of the government.

entitlement to Library services: ‘No research or reference work will be carried out for candidates, whether recently Members or not’.⁶

Similarly, House of Commons guidelines stipulate that no member of staff paid from the public purse shall engage in party political work during election campaigns (though they may do so in their own time). There is no such stipulation in Australia. This means that all four staffers to which each and every member of Parliament is now entitled can be directed to the campaign effort, despite the ostensible reason for the fourth staffer being for ‘constituency’ work in what are certainly very large constituencies by international standards.

The role of an MP is, or should be, a balance between their representational (constituency-focused), legislative (bills scrutiny) and parliamentary roles and, some would argue, especially in Australia where very strong party discipline applies, their role as a representative of their party. Constituency support is undoubtedly becoming an increasingly demanding part of an MP’s job. The Prime Minister announced that the extra staff in 2007 were being provided to assist with constituency work. It is significant that a constituency construction was put on this increase in staff, with the implication that this is what all staff resources provided to MPs are for. Yes and no, or now and again. In safer seats, which do not need to be nursed so assiduously, the practice tends to be to have at least one Canberra-based staffer whose main purpose is to assist the member with parliament-oriented work. This is particularly the case if the member is a front bencher or an aspiring front bencher. It would seem necessary to have at least a minimal commitment of staff resources if MPs are to perform their parliamentary roles effectively. To assume—or to encourage—the view that the role of MPs’ staff is no more or no less than to assist with constituent responsibilities is to downplay the significance of the wider role of the MP or, indeed, of the Parliament.

The provision of adequate staff support for secretarial, constituency and research purposes is generally regarded to be one of the characteristics of an effective democratic

⁶ ‘Dissolution of Parliament and General Elections: Guidance for Staff’, House of Commons, internal memo.

parliament. So are well-resourced committees and access to independent information, analysis and advice from a Parliamentary Library and Research Service⁷. It would be contrary to the preferred balance in the MP's role if the provision of one kind of resource—personal staff—were to be at the expense of the other—supports provided to assist parliamentarians as a whole to perform their democratic function.

There is another aspect to this issue of the provision of additional staff to individual MPs. There is a debate about how best to provide MPs with the kind of research assistance they require to perform their multiple roles and particularly to assist them, together, to hold the government to account. One way in which mature Westminster-style parliaments choose to do this is through a parliamentary library and research service available to each and every MP for independent information, analysis and advice⁸. This choice is made because it is recognised that a core—in Australia's case until recently of up to 110⁹—highly qualified information specialists and research analysts will be better able to provide the sophisticated information, analysis and advice required in the contemporary parliamentary environment than will relatively junior or less well qualified personal staff. The relatively junior status of personal staff is inevitable given the pay available¹⁰.

I have argued elsewhere¹¹ that the best way to assist MPs with their legislative, parliamentary and representational responsibilities is not to provide additional personal staff or, indeed, to increase the resources available for party-based research. In the first case, at the levels funded, personal staff cannot compete with the sophisticated resources

⁷ See WH Robinson and F Miko, 1994, 'Parliamentary Development Assistance in Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union: Some Lessons from Experience', in L D Longley (ed.), *Working Papers on Comparative Legislative Studies*, Research Committee of Legislative Specialists, Appleton, Wisconsin.

⁸ Interestingly, in Western Australia, the Commission on Government recommended that the Parliamentary Library be funded to provide an independent research service along the lines of the Canberra model. The Court Government chose not to accept this recommendation and, instead, provided all MPs with a research officer entitlement.

⁹ The Annual Report of the Department of Parliamentary Services 2005-06, page 39, shows a further reduction in the Research Branch in the last Financial Year from 95.82 (sic) to 79.03 staff.

¹⁰ The modest (by Public Service or private sector standards) salary offered (currently typically in the range of \$40 000–\$60 000) suggests at best recruitment of a new-ish graduate—or a party zealot willing to forego material reward for proximity to parliament/power.

¹¹ See 'How to Establish a Parliamentary Library and Research Service: Does One Size Fit All?', chapter 2 in *The Theory and the Practice of Developing Parliamentary Information and Research Services*, Department of Parliamentary Services, Parliamentary Library Information and Research Services, Subject Collection No.13, pp 31-40, ISBN 0-9752015-1-4.

and the critical mass available through a high-performance parliamentary library and research service. In the second case, party-based research will always be party-based ‘research’—following the party line is perfectly appropriate for some purposes but cannot compete with professional and independent analysis and advice.

Nevertheless, as scrutiny of Senate Estimates hearings records demonstrate, resources for Australia’s federal parliamentary library and research services are being increasingly challenged following the amalgamation of parliamentary departments; the inclusion of the Parliamentary Library in the Department of Parliamentary Services; and the requirement that it, along with all other elements in that department, find savings to fund the exponential increases in the costs of providing security in this great public building.

It is probably fair to say that, unsurprisingly (given the many issues to worry about) most of Australia’s MPs have not yet woken up to the fact that the resources for the highly regarded Commonwealth Parliamentary Library may be increasingly compromised, notwithstanding its independence. Or is it that MPs, especially in an upcoming election environment, are easily bought off by all these other resources made available to them whether they want them or not (Independent member, Peter Andren, does not) and without any kind of consultation? Penny Wong, the relevant Shadow Minister was not even advised before the announcement was made.

While comparative costs are difficult to assess because MPs, their entitlements, Parliaments and their administration are funded from a mix of buckets and in different ways, it appears that the Australian Parliament is among the most expensive in the world¹². From a Democratic Audit perspective at least, no one would challenge those costs which make for a more democratic parliament: including effective committees, accessible Hansards, and access to quality information, analysis and advice services. And no fair-minded person would challenge the appropriateness of giving MPs with no security of tenure, and a lifestyle that most of us would abhor, a respectable salary and

¹² The Speaker of the House of Representatives makes this point in ‘Funding Arrangements for the Parliament of Australia: A View to the future’, a paper given at the 37th Presiding Officers and Clerks Conference, Perth, July 2006, reproduced as Discussion Paper 5/07 (March 2007), Democratic Audit of Australia.

compensation in superannuation or other form. What is up for challenge is the provision of those buckets of money that have nothing to do with the efficient running of a democratic parliament and the effective support of quality MPs and everything to do with incumbency advantage in campaigning. What also ought to be up for challenge is the profligate provision of ‘parliamentary’ resources for party political purposes, when this runs parallel with a serious squeeze on the support services of the parliament itself.

It is not surprising that what is becoming a persistent whittling away of the resources for the support of a democratic parliament is not in the forefront of MPs minds, because its implications may be hard to see, or to see in the immediate term. But it is an extraordinary paradox that this is taking place at the same time that high-cost additional resources of all sorts are being provided to MPs, essentially, it seems, to assist them to campaign. It is hard to resist the conclusion that MPs are being bought off with the wherewithal to assist them achieve electoral success and secure a place in the Parliament so that they do not notice—or do not care—that the Parliament itself is being reduced to a cipher.

Is it not time for Australia to begin to follow international best practice and make for fairer elections by limiting the use of publicly-funded staff for party political purposes, particularly during election campaigns? Access to the Parliamentary Library should also be withdrawn once an election is called, so that those candidates who happen to have been MPs are not unfairly advantaged. And, if we are serious about the democratic quality of the Australian Parliament, it is time to rebalance the public resources dedicated to the parliamentary process. This means reducing election-focused ‘perks’ and staff and augmenting services that support a wider parliamentary role, including adequate resourcing of the Parliamentary Library.