

The 21st Annual Pre-Conference of Library and Research Services for Parliaments
The Information and Research services of the Icelandic Parliament.

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Introduction.

Iceland is Europe's westernmost country, a large island in the North-Atlantic ocean, at 66°North. The island has population about, 300.000 with only 3 persons per km² living mostly along the coast.

The native language is Icelandic. Sometimes called Old Norse, but I do not think that the Norwegians can understand but a few words nowadays. The Icelanders settled in Iceland in the Viking age in 9th and 10th Century and as science and the Sagas tell us, the Icelandic settlers were mainly Scandinavian, Scottish, Irish and English people.

The Icelandic Parliament, Althingi, was originally held as an outdoor assembly in the year 930 A.D. From about 1262 we were under Norwegian rule until the end of the 14th century when royal succession brought both Norway and Iceland under the control of the Danish monarchy.

A consultative assembly was established in 1845 in Iceland and a new Parliament gathered in Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland. In 1944, in the wake of World War II, Iceland declared its independence from Denmark. The Republic of Iceland was established on June 17, 1944. At that point there were 52 members of Parliament which was bicameral. There are 63 members of Parliament now and it is unicameral since 1991.

Information and research services of the Icelandic Parliament

The purpose of the Information and Research Services is to provide the members and staff of the parliament with timely, impartial and trustworthy information and research services especially on issues under debate in the Parliament.

The Information and Research Service is a relatively new unit, within the Secretariat's office. In 1997 when there were organizational changes in the secretariat it was decided that a modern information service should be introduced.

In 1998 the department of Information Services was established. Two information specialists were added to the former one-person-library. At that time the Information Services were located in a small house that used to be a private dwelling, close to the parliament building. There we began in a couple of rooms but quickly expanded to almost the whole house. We were able to have only reference books and about 10% of the library collection on site. The remaining 90% was in storage in a nearby house belonging to the parliament. In 2001 we were allocated three floors in a larger and more convenient building. It is two minutes walk from the Parliament building. There the offices of the specialists are on one floor along with reference collection. On the two floors below we have almost all of the library collection. The first task in the modernization was to make information on the library collection available online and accessible to everyone. A retrospective cataloging project was implemented along

with access to electronic information resources through the parliament's website. The parliament of Iceland website was set up in 1995 and was the first of its kind in Scandinavia. In 1998 we introduced an intra-web with links and information about sources available as well as periodical holdings and books.

With the introduction of the Portal based Parliament website in 2002, the Information Services Group is responsible for the following:

- Collections of useful annotated links to internet resources, catalogued in a database, according to subject.
- Collecting links to media and published news.
- Collecting links to reference sources available to members and staff.
- Subject indexing of the Parliament website content.

Now there is also a web portal for our services where all the material such as books, periodicals holdings, internal research memos, economic news indicators are available within one click of the mouse.

As for services that are frequently asked for is:

- Researching laws from other countries that are connected to issues under discussion and debate.
- Researching the political, economical and cultural history and situation of other countries as pertaining to the work of the Parliament.
- Compiling clippings on subjects relevant to the parliamentary discussions.

Marketing the information services

Most people contact us on phone or by e-mail. Do people know about our services? We know that many do, but we are very interested in reaching out to those who do not.

This is always a big issue – are we doing the right thing for the right person at the right time?

The following is what we do to market our services:

- Hold regular courses on how to find information on the Althingi's web and on the internet. During the sessions we also introduce the services that can be expected from the information and research services and we make an effort to become better acquainted with our customers needs.
- Send out weekly e-mail with Icelandic economic news.
- Send out e-mail with information about new holdings once a month.
- Access to new databases or new services are introduced to MPs and staff by e-mail and in person.
- Personal contact with MPs and staff is maintained..

If we look at the use of our services as far as they can be measured we have some information available.

In the last decade the MPs have twice been asked formally about their opinion of the services of the secretariat. From those we have found a mixture of satisfaction and demand for more

services. Also one of our staff member is working on a Masters thesis which is based on a research on the information needs of MPs.

There has been some discussion among our colleagues on the contact with parliamentarians as compared to their assistant and other staff. Statistics were kept for two weeks and it turned out that the ratio is about 40% MPs and 60% staff. This shows a small personal setting.

New developments

Late last year, a new position was created in economics and international affairs. This allows us to offer more comprehensive research services. Weekly news about Icelandic economic indicators, memos and short reports on issues in economy and international affairs and advisory services is provided as needed. The work is done based on demand as well as our own initiative. This year 14 research papers have been written. Topics include several issues regarding the war in Iraq; European issues such as the enlargement and the EURO and for internal issues such as housing prices, the role of the Central bank and unemployment.

This service has been very well received and we plan to expand it further in the direction of more specialization of the staff and hopefully later on to add specialist in environmental issues to our staff. We also look towards outsourcing to the university research institutes some of the research needed. We do not as of yet have lawyers working in our group. In the Parliament there are six lawyers working for the secretariat. Most of them work for the committees and specialize in different subjects. We work for and with them. In a relatively small setting such as ours it is very important that the departments and divisions of the secretariat work together.

Cooperation

When I first began to work for the parliament to modernize the information services in 1997 I looked toward the other Nordic countries for guidance and good examples. As you have heard from Tuula Laaksovirta, our Finnish colleague there is a long tradition of regular meetings of the heads of secretariats and various offices in the Nordic parliaments. Following that tradition I visited my colleagues in the parliaments of Denmark, Norway and Sweden and Finland during my first years of work. From these visits I got excellent advice and support on many issues. To name a few I can mention education, level of service, automation, marketing of services. And I made personal connections that were of great help and inspiration.

Our regular meetings have always been very good to find source of ideas and solutions. I would like to show you a translation of the last meetings agenda. That meeting was held in Reykjavik in June. We always give reports for each country then we discuss themes that we think are actual to our work. At this last meeting Education of our users and Consortia and the part the Parliamentary Libraries take in such were discussed.

I must add that I also found inspiration from the first IFLA pre-conference that I attended in Brussels 1999. A visit was made to the research services at House of Commons Library in Westminster and among the things that inspired us was the way that they would gather information on enquiries in a database. We used that idea as a basis for our own database. That database a staff member from the Finnish parliament library set up for us, while working on exchange program in our Information services in 2000.

I also had a chance to visit the Congressional Research Service and met William Robinson and Donna Scheeder. Robinsons paper: *Knowledge and Power. The essential Connection between research and the work of the legislature* is very good and informative reading.

All these connections are very important for a newcomer from a small country with limited resources. It is important to be able to pick out the best practices we see around us to make the most use of what we have.