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THE NEED FOR KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION IN THE PARLIAMENTARY PROCESS THE ROLE OF INFORMATION IN THE PARLIAMENTARY PROCESS

1.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this question before this audience of distinguished representatives for libraries and research services around the world.

I speak to you now in my present capacity as head of the parliamentary research service in the Norwegian parliament, a position I have held since February 1st this year.

I have, however, also a political background – as head of staff for a number of years for one of the parties in parliament (the Centre Party) and as a state secretary for 2 ½ years from 1997 to 2000 – in the Prime Minister's Office and in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

My academic background is as a political scientist.

I will therefore in my address here today draw upon not only my experience from my present job but also from the previous jobs from different parts of the political process. I will therefore in my presentation not only limit myself to the process in parliament. And I hope this will provide for a fruitful discussion afterwards.

2.

The Danish prime minister said in his New Years speech in 2002: (my translation)
 “There are tendencies to a tyranny of experts, that risks undermining the popular debate. The people should not have to find themselves subject to warning fingers from so called experts, who knows what is best. Experts can be good to transmit factual knowledge. However, in making personal choices, we are all experts.”

The committee in the Norwegian parliament that in 1996 recommended the establishment of a parliamentary research service here in Norway, quotes on its front page one of Norway's foremost judicial thinkers who wrote (also my translation): “Political decisions requires knowledge about the subject, but is also based on considerations that we cannot expect the experts to make. In principle the relationship between expertise and political considerations is very clear. The experts has to present all the relevant material...”

3.

I believe we all agree that we need different kinds of experts. We all want to be examined by a trained doctor – the more the better, and we all want the highways to be built by people with engineering background.

But the political process – and the parliamentary process – is not only a question of information or having the facts right. In this respect I subscribe to the view of the Danish prime minister. Politics is – not the least - also a question about values, about the hearts and minds of people.

And as Bismarck said: there are two things one would not like to know; how to make sausages and how to make laws.

4. I will, however, argue that information and expertise, is highly important in all parts of the political process. We all have a responsibility for the democracy to function, this is not only laid upon the elected officials, but also us as civil servants.

5.

The chain of the political process can be divided into four parts: 1) identification of a problem, 2) policy-formulation 3) implementing 4) evaluation

6)

The first stage in a political process is that we define a certain question as a problem that has to be dealt with by politicians. Of course, here can and will the views differ sharply by ideology. What should we as ordinary citizens do or what should be dealt with by government officials either on local or state level?

For a politician one of the most important things is to have what a Swedish author called the privilege to define; what is the problem? When you come into a restaurant and ask for a table the owner says; sorry; we are full. And you answer; no, the problem is; you don't have enough tables.

How you frame the question is of course highly political sensitive. For example, when do unemployment start to be a political problem? By 1, 2, 3 or 6 or 7 per cent? This has much to do with values, the hearts and minds of people. Is it a problem that people go without having anything to do (and if so, is that a question for politicians) or is the main problem that people are too little mobile? Everyone in this audience knows that the views on this have shifted and will shift over the years.

What should we as experts and responsible for information then do? My answer is; make sure that all relevant questions are asked. We must make sure that all different angles of the problem are taken into consideration. Politicians – as everyone else – would like to have the answer before the question is asked – or not ask the question if they are doubtful about the answer. But someone has to do the job – and we are those who should do it.

7.

The next stage in the political process is to formulate the policy to deal with what someone has defined as a problem that has to be dealt with by politicians.

What should our role then be in the policy-formulation process?

Here in Norway we have a tradition where all relevant non-governmental organizations – together with different government ministries – are invited to present their views, or to work together – for example when writing a new law. Then is the question; which are the most

relevant organizations? A study of Norwegian environmental politics in the 1970's shows that this was highly influenced by the thinking in the Ministry of Finance.

Once again, we have to make sure that all relevant questions are asked and the different policy-alternatives are laid before those who make the decisions.

One important aspect in this regard is to have the same figures as the starting point for the discussion. To use Norway again as an example; when discussing the annual budget all parties in parliament – also those in opposition – have to rely on the Ministry of Finance and their calculation on what a proposal will cost. And since this is information sent between the government and the parliament – it is also open to the public and the press.

In the research department of the Swedish parliament a unit is set up to do the calculations for all the parties represented in parliament – thus also the opposition parties. As I understand, their experience is that this has enhanced the budget process – the different parties come up with more realistic budget proposals.

Let me add another last point to our role as experts in the policy-formulation process. We must also dare to ask questions outside what we can call the political hegemony. When the British prime minister Ramsey MacDonald in the early 1930's removed the pound sterling from the gold, the Labour politician Sidney Webb said: "No one ever told *us* we could do that". Our job is to show different ways to formulate a policy to meet a political objective.

8.

The last two stages of the political process are implementation and evaluation. Was the policy that was formulated and implemented an answer to the political problem one wanted to address?

Many parliaments have in recent years strengthened their role in control and scrutiny. In this parliament we established a committee back in 1993 on constitutional affairs and scrutiny. The committee could on its own decide to take up a matter – and it is the only committee that could do so.

The Office of the Auditor General – which is this parliament's main instrument in doing the auditing work, has for some years now – in addition to the financial audit, also done performance audit – looking into how the performance suits the overall objective of the parliament decisions and intentions.

To go to Sweden for another example, they have a special unit in the research department that work with the different committees in parliament who want to undertake a project on evaluation - how the decisions of the parliament was carried out in practice.

It can in some instances be difficult to pinpoint the real intention of a decision. I think our role could be – together with the committee in question - to single out what one wants to evaluate. What was it that one really wanted to achieve by the decision?

9.

Let me in the end, just mention two points that are very important in our work here as a research and documentation unit here in parliament. The first point is of course that the

information has to be accurate. The 2nd point is that this must be as useful as possible for our customers, that is the members of parliament and those employed by the parties in the parliament. One important aspect here is that we deliver on time. However, if there is conflict – and frequently there is – accuracy must have the priority.

Thank you for your attention.