Benchmarking and Measuring the Management of Parliament

Paper by Tom Duncan,
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There has to be some way to measure success in the Service. British Leyland can measure success by the size of its profits. However, the Civil Service does not make profits or losses. *Ergo*, we measure success by the size of our staff and our budget. By definition a big department is more successful than a small one. It seems extraordinary that Woolley could have passed through the Civil Service College without having understood that this simple proposition is the basis of our whole system. *(Memo from Sir Humphrey Appleby)*

**Introduction**

The management and administration of parliaments by presiding officers and clerks is becoming more complex and time consuming. Whilst the procedural issues appear to be under control, administrative issues are increasingly taking presiding officers' and clerks' time. Not only must presiding officers and clerks be the custodian of parliamentary practice and procedure, more than ever they must have at their disposal an array of management tools to ensure that resources - human, financial, and technological - are being deployed in such a way as to produce optimal outcomes. In recent years, performance measurement and benchmarking have come to the fore in the Australian public sector as a means of gauging how well organisations perform against their objectives as well as where they sit in a spectrum of similar organisations in terms of performance.

The issue of benchmarking parliamentary departments has been raised by treasury and finance officials from most jurisdictions over the years, and local councils around Australia have been asked to benchmark their performance with each other. The ACT Legislative Assembly Secretariat has yet to be asked by its treasury department to perform benchmarking, but with successive ACT governments firmly stating a commitment to the development of a strong culture of performance across the ACT Public Service, it is likely that the Secretariat will submit itself to more rigorous performance reporting in the future. In the Legislative Assembly Secretariat's most recent strategic plan, the importance of benchmarking is recognised. The Secretariat sees as its vision:

**By 2009, we will be a leader in the provision of parliamentary services in Australia**

*How will we know we have achieved this vision? There is currently a movement amongst departments supporting parliaments across Australia to better measure and benchmark the services that they provide. The ACT Legislative Assembly Secretariat will participate in this measurement work and we aspire to be in the top performance quantum for service delivery by 2009*.  

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1 Secretariat for the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory, *Strategic Plan 2004-2009*, p. 6.
This paper examines the issue of benchmarking parliament’s performance in areas that are under the control of the presiding officers and clerks. In doing so, the paper canvases the questions of whether benchmarking is of any value, whether it is possible to ensure that we are comparing “apples with apples”, and discusses what types of activities could be used to benchmark.

Background

Benchmarking has been defined as:

A systematic process through which an agency process or activity compares its performance with alternatives. For example, it tests an agency’s functions, particularly the efficiency and price of outputs, against a standardised function or set of achievements. The objective of benchmarking is to introduce and sustain best practice by making valid comparisons with other processes or organisations, resulting in a continual improvement of activities. ²

The Australian Public Service Commission has pointed out that:

Benchmarking is an increasingly important tool in the kitbag of Australian Public Service (APS) management improvement techniques. APS agencies and managers can use it to review their existing performance to reset priorities, re-allocate scarce resources, and promote substantial improvements in APS quality and service. ³

However, the term benchmarking covers a variety of practices. To some people, it means simply the process of comparison, while to others it also includes identifying ways of improving services. A definition used in the United Kingdom is “using structured comparisons to define and implement good practice”. ⁴

A report of the Productivity Commission has stated:

Providing performance information across jurisdictions can help spread innovation (and thus facilitate performance improvement) by identifying potential jurisdictions from whom other jurisdictions may learn. Reporting comparative performance can foster yardstick competition by promoting greater debate about comparative performance. Performance reporting is an important step in benchmarking. ⁵

For benchmarking to be implemented successfully, the following factors should be considered:

- adequate planning and resourcing for benchmarking;
- having clear objectives;
- focusing on important issues;

⁴ UK Audit Commission, Getting Better All the Time: Making Benchmarking Work, June 2000, p 6
⁵ Local Government Association of Queensland, Best Practice Simplified, Internal and External Reporting for Local Governments in Queensland, March 2002, p 4
• identifying partners;
• organising the process of benchmarking;
• defining the measures for comparison;
• understanding why performance varies; and
• implementing change.\(^6\)

There are some levels of government that have successfully implemented benchmarking practices. Local governments have been particularly active. For example, Wyong, Liverpool, Sutherland, Gosford and Newcastle councils have benchmarked activities in a range of areas including mobile plant workshops, civil engineering, civil infrastructure maintenance and building maintenance.\(^7\) However, these are operational activities/service delivery functions, and for benchmarking to be successful in the parliamentary environment, functions of a parliament would need to be measured and benchmarked.

Issues

Are Australian parliaments already benchmarking?

There is an argument that we are already benchmarking. Conferences such as these are a form of benchmarking. The Parliaments of the Australian and Pacific Regions gather once a year to compare how well they perform their duties and exchange ideas on the role and functions of presiding officers and clerks. Through this conference, participants become aware of practices and issues that have arisen in other parliaments, as well as hearing how other parliaments have dealt with these matters. The annual Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) conferences, are similar forums for discussion and learning.

There is another form of benchmarking that has gained momentum over recent months. Many Australian, and some United Kingdom parliaments are linked to the Canadian Clerks at the Table Server (CATS) email service. This is an email service that enables clerks of the various Canadian parliaments to pose procedural and administrative questions to their respective colleagues.

Equally important, but not quite as well established is the COPYCATT email service that was established under the auspices of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Clerks at the Table (ANZACATT). Operating in a similar fashion to CATS, it aims to have an exchange of information between Australian parliaments on a wide range of issues, as well as be a repository for papers presented to various parliamentary conferences, such as this one.

All three of these methods could be described, using the definitions set out above, as a form of benchmarking, albeit a minimalist form. They provide the opportunity to share different approaches to a range of similar issues confronting parliamentary departments and further our understanding of any best practices that emerge. In addition to these somewhat formal comparisons, there is a continual informal benchmarking process, where officers of the various jurisdictions contact each other directly to discuss how a jurisdiction has handled a certain issue.

\(^6\) UK Audit Commission, op cit, p 5
\(^7\) Local Government Association of Queensland, op cit, p 15.
Is there value in a more formal process of benchmarking, and would it be a worthwhile exercise for parliaments?

Given that private and public sector agencies have embarked on various forms of benchmarking in order to improve their levels of service, is there value in establishing a more formal process of benchmarking between parliaments that leads to consensus or at least broad agreement about what constitutes best practice in particular areas?

In 2000, the Queensland Parliament undertook a benchmarking study, and the results of the study were reported to the ANZACATT Professional Development Seminar in Sydney earlier this year. It was noted that while the level of resources in other jurisdictions may well be different, it could be inaccurate to make comparisons without a full understanding of the environment in which other jurisdictions were operating. In his paper, the Clerk stated that:

Benchmarking is not a panacea of performance reporting. It is simply another tool that can be used alongside other performance tools (like surveys, independent audits/reviews etc). It has serious limitations in some service areas and processes, particularly when it comes to comparing quality v quantity.

I do not propose to provide an answer to the question of whether benchmarking is worthwhile in this paper, as it is a decision that each parliament must make for itself. Some other organisations have undertaken benchmarking to obtain the following outcomes:

- cost reduction;
- better value for money;
- improved ‘customer’ satisfaction;
- achievement of targets; or
- implementation of good practice.

What I hope to do is to set out some issues to consider should parliaments attempt to embark on this process.

What to measure?

Should there be a willingness amongst the various parliamentary departments to undertake benchmarking exercises, choosing meaningful and feasible service delivery areas for comparison is of crucial importance. Activities to be benchmarked should be tightly defined, as it is difficult to cover a wide area in a single benchmarking review without losing focus, or the review becoming superficial. It has been suggested by the Australian Public Service Commission that what an organisation should benchmark will depend largely on the strategic objectives and the critical success factors of that organisation. Examples given of what could be benchmarked include:

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8 Clerk of the Parliament Queensland, Benchmarking, KPI’s, Annual Reporting for Parliamentary Departments and the Use of Member Surveys, paper presented to the ANZACATT Professional Development Seminar, Sydney, 29 January 2004, p. 3.
10 Audit Commission (UK), op cit, p 13.
• quality of advice to government [members] and community
• resource costs of programs and services;
• the quality of programs and services;
• outputs and outcomes of programs;
• productivity and financial performance.\textsuperscript{12}

It is also important to measure only those activities that parliamentary departments have some degree of control over. For example, the amount of legislation that a parliament passes in any one year does not necessarily reflect the performance of the bureaucracy supporting the parliament and nor is it something that presiding officers and clerks have any control or say over.

Possible programs to measure could include the core functions of most parliaments, namely:

• Chamber support services
• Committee support services
• Hansard services
• Corporate support services (including Members’ services)

Other possible programs are:

• Interparliamentary services.
• Building management services
• Parliamentary education services

The usual performance measures that are utilised across most parliaments are cost, timeliness, quantity and quality. Whilst the first three are easier to measure, the last one is a notoriously difficult area to operationalise.

It should be noted that assessing organisational or activity performance is usually not done utilising only one indicator, rather, a whole suite of indicators is necessary to give a more comprehensive picture of organisational or work unit performance.\textsuperscript{13}

`Apples and apples’ comparisons

It would seem clear that benchmarking should be conducted between organisations that provide similar types of services. Using this approach, parliaments benchmarking against other parliaments seems the obvious answer. However, it has been suggested that this may not necessarily yield the best results. It is possible that an organisation operating outside a particular field or sector could still produce meaningful comparisons in relation to performance. For instance, a company making car parts may be able to bring about performance improvements by benchmarking against the distribution processes of a

\textsuperscript{12} Australian Public Service Commission, MAB MIAC, op cit, p 4.
\textsuperscript{13} Dr Sylvie Trosa, Benchmarking for a Better Performance, paper presented to the Performance Benchmarking in the Public Sector Conference, Sydney, March 1996, p 6.
similar-sized firm engaged in the business of making computers.\textsuperscript{14} Similarly, a hospital may improve its admissions processes by copying those of the best performing hotels.\textsuperscript{15}

I am not sure what other non-parliamentary organisations could be appropriate objects of comparison, but perhaps the judiciary provides some possibilities, in that registrars of law courts have similar service provision functions in relation to judges and magistrates that parliamentary departments have to members.

To ensure that the right benchmarking partner is chosen, some sectors have used the ‘nearest neighbour’ model to identify which organisations are comparable with one another. Using this model, the factors that could be used to determine similarity include:

- the nature of the area, in terms of the population and its distribution (for example, is the area urban or rural, and if the latter, is the population concentrated in towns or more generally over the area?)
- the type of area;
- the wealth of the area (unemployment level, population age breakdown).\textsuperscript{16}

It would be a very time consuming and costly exercise to benchmark the performance of, say, all the parliaments within both the Australian and Pacific regions. A small group of parliaments would be likely to conduct an open debate about how it will compare performance, and would find it easier to agree on appropriate measures but it may lack the variety of performance needed to provide opportunities for learning. Conversely, a large group may provide plenty of educative examples but may find it difficult to agree on what constitutes good performance and what data could be collected.\textsuperscript{17}

Using the above criteria and applying it to parliaments in the Australian region, and recognising the difficulty of benchmarking all Australian parliaments, a possible grouping of ‘near neighbour’ parliaments could be (not in any particular order):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group A</th>
<th>Group C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commonwealth Parliament</td>
<td>Northern Territory Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK Parliament</td>
<td>Tasmanian Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand Parliament</td>
<td>Norfolk Island Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Australian Capital Territory Parliament</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group B</th>
<th>Group D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Queensland Parliament</td>
<td>Western Australian Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales Parliament</td>
<td>South Australian Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victorian Parliament</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p 6.
\textsuperscript{16} Audit Commission (UK), op cit, p 17.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, p 19.
How do parliaments take into account all the extraneous factors?

Whether or not parliaments benchmark themselves against other parliaments or non-parliamentary organisations, particular care would need to be taken to ensure that other factors do not render the comparisons meaningless. Whilst benchmarking may provide different parliaments with what appear to be very stark differences in the way a particular service is provided, the parliament should ask itself the following questions before accepting any finding or making any conclusions:

- what factors are there that led the better performer[s] to achieve a higher level of performance?
- are there environmental factors (eg legislative requirements, efficiencies due to size, factors of workload and volume) or do they arise because of the way in which the organisation(s) deliver what is essentially the same service?\(^{18}\)

Essentially if such an exercise were undertaken, parliaments would need to ensure that they are measuring “apples with apples”. This would be a complex undertaking as can be seen from the table attached to this paper. Parliaments that are unicameral are somewhat different to bicameral parliaments in the way they provide services to members. Information on each parliament can be difficult to gather, and may not be easily presentable to reflect the financial or other performance of a particular program.

Conclusion

Whether or not there is value in developing a more formal process for benchmarking parliament’s performance remains to be seen. If it is to be undertaken, some of the issues identified above, and no doubt other ones, will have to taken into consideration.

I would welcome other delegates comments and views on the matter.

\(^{18}\) Deaprtment of Finance, op cit, p 3.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population of State/Territory</th>
<th>Length of road network (kms)</th>
<th>Land area (square kilometres)</th>
<th>Annual budget (operating expenses) of the jurisdiction</th>
<th>Budget (operating expenses) of the Department/s supporting the legislature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>2,358</td>
<td>2,618</td>
<td>$2,369m (2003-04)</td>
<td>$8.6m (2002-03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>479,956</td>
<td>22,514</td>
<td>$2,405m (2003-04)</td>
<td>$16.2m (2002-03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>3,840,111</td>
<td>1,723,936</td>
<td>$70,534m (2003-04)</td>
<td>$57.1m (2002-03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>5,815,677</td>
<td>802,000</td>
<td>$80,809m (2003-04)</td>
<td>$1.9m (2001-02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commonwealth</td>
<td>186,706</td>
<td>1,335,742</td>
<td>$21,226m (2003-04)</td>
<td>$57.1m (2002-03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>20,008,677</td>
<td>7,069,030</td>
<td>$41,562m (2002)</td>
<td>$31.9m (2002-03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>59,231,900</td>
<td>244,800</td>
<td>A$696,587 (2002-03)</td>
<td>Total = $691.2m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total = $717.5m</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of members of the legislature</td>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>Queensland</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>17\textsuperscript{xi}</td>
<td>25\textsuperscript{xi}</td>
<td>15 members of the Legislative Council</td>
<td>89\textsuperscript{xvi}</td>
<td>42 Members of the Legislative Council\textsuperscript{xxiv}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total = 40\textsuperscript{xii}</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Executive members/parliamentary secretaries</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members available to perform scrutiny role (number of non-executive members minus the presiding members and executive members)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of committees (minus housekeeping committees)</td>
<td>2 select committee</td>
<td>4 standing committees</td>
<td>10\textsuperscript{iii}</td>
<td>7 standing committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Standing committees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 select committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total = 8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total = 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Matters of Public Importance/Urgency motions</td>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>Queensland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total = 55</td>
<td>Total = 21</td>
<td>Total = 48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total = 1239</td>
<td>Total = 2527</td>
<td>Total = 48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total = 158</td>
<td>Total = 1219</td>
<td>Total = 2683</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some statistics are affected by the time taken out of the year for the general election. There was a gap between 11 June, and the next was 26 August 2002.


http://www.transit.govt.nz/Schools%20Page/Frequently%20Asked%20Questions.jsp#How%20many%20kilometres%20of%20highways%20are%20there?


UK 2004 Budget, page 252, accessed at http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/1CE4C/bud04_che_212.pdf


Correspondence with Clerk Assistant


Statistical summary for the Department of the House of Representatives
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