

# KNOWLEDGE, POWER, AND NATIONAL ASSEMBLIES<sup>1</sup>

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“Knowledge is Power”—that was the motto of my secondary school and probably many others across the United States. This motto evidently was intended to convey the message that knowledge is not to be valued for its own sake, or at least not for its own sake alone (surely a regrettable position for educators to take). Knowledge is instrumental; it is useful. Somehow it brings power or makes possible the acquisition of power, although precisely what kind of power and how one leads to the other were questions left to puzzle young minds, in the unlikely event the questions ever occurred to them.

I freely admit, with no residual remorse, that if I ever thought about that motto when I was a student, it was only to dismiss it as one of those platitudes that my teachers sometimes substituted for thought. Now, however, after studying, observing, and working for the United States Congress for more than thirty years, and learning a bit about some of its counterparts in other countries, I have come to appreciate the importance of knowledge for power in democratic governments. This essay discusses the connection between knowledge and power as it affects national assemblies, especially the relationship between the assembly and the government (executive branch, in American terms), but also the relationships between the majority and the minority (the opposition) and between political parties and their members.<sup>2</sup>

This essay is written primarily from the vantage point of Capitol Hill in Washington. Although I have had some exposure to other national assemblies, obviously it is Congress that I know best. So before proceeding further, I need to address, if only sketchily, the assertion sometimes made that the American model and the congressional experience are largely irrelevant to the needs and circumstances of most other national assemblies, especially those in nations that are or claim to be in transition to democracy.

## AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM?

I have met frequently with assembly members and staff from other nations to discuss Congress, its role in the U.S. constitutional system, and the role of the Congressional Research Service (CRS), the organization that was my professional home for most of my career.<sup>3</sup> At some point in these conversations, I often would mention what was then the size of the CRS budget (more than \$60 million per year) and its staff (roughly 700 more or less warm bodies). I soon became accustomed to watching visitors react by turning to their interpreters with quizzical expressions on their faces, as if to say that there must be some misunderstanding, that those numbers could not possibly be correct. And in fact, the scale of

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<sup>2</sup> I use the phrase “national assembly” to encompass both legislatures and parliaments, and I use “member” to include MPs, Representatives, Senators, and elected assembly members by whatever other names.

<sup>3</sup> CRS is the department of the U.S. Library of Congress that provides information and analysis to the members and committees of Congress on a non-partisan and, when required, confidential basis.

congressional operations—whether measured in dollars, personnel, or services—is not merely unusual, but unique.

From these differences in scale, it would be easy to jump to the conclusion that Congress has little to offer as an example (for better or worse) to national assemblies in new, emerging, or simply less affluent democracies. The United States is so much larger and so much richer, and Congress as an institution is so much larger and so much richer, as to be incomparable. At some point, quantitative differences become so large as to become qualitative—differences of degree become differences of kind—and Congress is far beyond that point in relation to other national assemblies. Furthermore, of course, Congress is part of a presidential system, whereas many other democracies appear to be purely or primarily parliamentary in form. So while it may be interesting to know how Congress works, there is little in that knowledge that can inform discussions in other nations about whether their national assemblies need to be strengthened and, if so, how to go about it. Or so the argument would go.

Consistent with this argument, some critics of U.S. programs intended to assist democratic transitions have contended that these programs and the people implementing them have sought, naively and inappropriately, to try to transplant American organizations, processes, and practices into soil for which they are not suited. If that is so, I have been fortunate in not having encountered those programs or people. Instead, sometimes I have feared that the programs with which I have been involved (always at the margins, to be sure) have suffered from precisely the opposite weakness—a pseudo-sophistication, if you will, manifested in a simplistic sensitivity to the distinction between presidential and parliamentary systems, and, therefore, a tendency to under-estimate the value and relevance of the U.S. experience.

In my view, the best democratic assistance programs usually are those that do not favor any model or any nation's experience—whether presidential or parliamentary, or whether American, British, French, German, Polish, Japanese, or whatever. I have been most comfortable with programs that identify problems confronting all democratic regimes in one way or another, that present different approaches to addressing those problems, that discuss honestly the strengths and weaknesses and the successes and failures of each approach, and that encourage those for whom the programs are intended to decide for themselves what lessons, if any, they can draw and how best to apply those lessons to their own needs and circumstances.

I argue only that the U.S. experience belongs in this mix. And I make this argument in part because the problems and challenges created by the American constitutional system are not as exceptional as they sometimes are made out to be. In some respects, the distinction between American presidentialism and non-American non-presidentialism is sharper in principle than in practice. It is true that only a minority of democratic constitutions are explicitly presidential—i.e., characterized by an executive and a legislature that are elected independently of each other for terms of fixed length, and by a division of responsibility that assigns law-making primarily to the legislature and places control of the departments (ministries) primarily in the hands of the executive, usually with some overlap in responsibility that creates an ongoing competition for influence or primacy. It is equally true, though, that the alternatives often reflected in recently-adopted constitutions have not been purely parliamentary, if by that we mean a system in which the government (executive) is chosen by, acts as the agent of, and actually is accountable to, the parliament as an institution. It is my sense that many of these newly-installed regimes share more of the characteristics and problems of a presidential system than might seem to be the case at first blush.

The practical realities of a political system can re-shape the institutional relations that a constitution seems to intend. Imagine a nation with a constitution that establishes an unambiguously parliamentary, "Westminster-style" system. But imagine as well that one political party dominates the nation's political life for years or decades, and that the party's leader dominates the party (perhaps in concert with a small coterie of allies). The leader may have founded the party or been among its founders; in fact, personal support for the leader, more than any shared ideology or philosophy of government, may have been the primary unifying force that led to the party's creation in the first place. Through the leader's control of the party machinery, he effectively controls the selection of his party's parliamentary candidates. Once elected, the party's MPs elect the party leader or his surrogate as prime minister, and they remember always that their political futures (and, quite possibly, their personal prosperity as well), whether in parliament, as ministers in government, or perhaps as officials of some government-influenced or controlled corporation, depend on the pleasure of their leader.

In what sense can we say that this is a political system in which the government is the agent of the parliament? The parliament may go through the formal motions of creating the government. In reality, though, it is the parliament that does the bidding of the government, rather than the other way around. Perhaps the most fundamental principle of parliamentarism, the accountability of government to parliament, is turned on its head. The ultimate source of the prime minister's power lies outside of parliament, in the party organization and his dominance over it. In fact if not in theory, his power does not depend on his ability to retain the support of his fellow party members in parliament because that support is never in much doubt. Each of his supporters in parliament generally needs him far more than he needs any one of them.

Instead of the prime minister and cabinet being responsible to the parliament, they actually may be accountable instead to a president. Purely parliamentary regimes as well as purely presidential regimes seem to have become less popular recently than constitutional constructs that combine elements of both systems in different ways and to varying degrees. The current vogue in democratic constitution-writing appears to favor hybrid systems in which there is a president, a government (prime minister and cabinet), and the national assembly. What are the intended and actual relationships among the three? The answer lies in part in how the constitution answers a series of questions. For example, who designates the prime minister and the cabinet, the president or the assembly? If the president makes these designations, must the assembly approve them? Who can dismiss the prime minister, other ministers, or the government as a whole? Must the government resign if it loses the confidence of the assembly? Can the president convene and dissolve the national assembly; if so, under what circumstances? What part, if any, does the assembly play in the election of the president? How and why can the assembly remove the president from office? Must the president give his approval to certain acts of the assembly or the government, or may he invalidate them? The possible combinations of answers to these (and probably other) questions create an array of potential constitutional relationships that we might be able to place along a spectrum between presidential and parliamentary systems.<sup>4</sup>

Parsing constitutions, however, reveals only part of the story. Constitutional relationships can be ambiguous, leaving uncertainties as to what the actual relationships among president, prime

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<sup>4</sup>For a rich discussion of such questions, see Matthew Shugart and John Carey, *Presidents and Assemblies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

minister/cabinet, and assembly are expected to be, and perhaps creating opportunities for each to resolve these uncertainties in its favor. Suppose, for example, that the constitution empowers the president to designate the prime minister upon recommendation of, or after consultation with, the majority party or coalition in the assembly. Perhaps this means that the president's role is only a formality, that he or she merely announces the name of the person preferred by the assembly's majority party or coalition (in much the same way that the Queen designates the leader of "her" government in London). However, the same provision also may be interpreted to allow the president to exercise his or her own judgment, considering but not being bound by any preference expressed by or on behalf of the assembly's majority, especially if the assembly does not have to approve the president's choice.

In sum, the existence of what ostensibly is a parliamentary regime does not necessarily produce a political system in which the government truly is accountable to parliament. Furthermore, the current popularity of constitutional regimes combining presidents with prime ministers can produce, whether intentionally or not, systems with important similarities to presidential systems even though their assemblies are called parliaments. If so, then some of the challenges that a legislature confronts in a presidential system also can be faced, if in somewhat different terms and to different degrees, by assemblies in non-presidential systems. While the scale of Congress and its operations may be exceptional, its problems are less so, and it is at least possible that the successes and failures of Congress in trying to deal with these problems may contain useful lessons to supporters and defenders of national assemblies elsewhere. One such lesson is that parliaments as well as legislatures need to protect themselves against encroachments or domination by the executive power (whether vested in a prime minister or president or somehow shared between them).

## **POWER AT RISK**

The argument underlying this essay is that the power of national assemblies is at risk. The risk is continuing and it confronts all assemblies, whether imbedded in presidential or parliamentary systems or in systems combining elements of both. The risk is one of executive domination, whatever the structure and nomenclature of the political system may be.

Why does the risk arise? In presidential systems, or at least in the American system, a competition for power is built into the constitutional structure that, according to a now familiar formulation, creates not a separation of powers but a pair of separated institutions (president and congress) that share powers. Precisely how these powers are to be shared is a matter for the two institutions to resolve between themselves, within broad constitutional limits that are subject to possible adjudication by a constitutional tribunal (in the United States, the Supreme Court). Naturally enough, each institution usually prefers that the balance tip in its direction. The sharing of power almost inescapably implies a competition for power.

Why should the president want to dominate the congress? Directly-elected presidents portray themselves as leaders who want to set national policy, not to serve as bureaucrat-in-chief, implementing policy decisions made by their legislatures. Indeed, presidents frequently argue that they have a mandate to govern, and certainly to implement their policy agendas. They also anticipate that they or their party will be held to account for the state of the nation when their terms end. So if they enjoy this mandate and carry this burden of accountability, is it not only fair that they exercise as much

authority as the constitution permits? Whatever their rhetorical stance may be, American presidents sooner or later have tended to view the U.S. Congress less as a partner and more as an obstacle to enacting their legislative agendas and as a potential hindrance to the presidents' exercise of judgment in implementing the laws and managing the government. During periods of divided government, when the president's political party does not also have majority control of Congress, there is a powerful political incentive for conflict that magnifies the permanent incentives that are inherent in the constitution.

Is there a comparable and opposite risk that the legislature will, or will try to, dominate the executive? This was a concern during the first century of U.S. political history. In *The Federalist Papers*, James Madison concluded in 1788 that, "[i]n republican government, the legislative authority necessarily predominates." One "remedy for this inconveniency is to divide the legislature into different branches" (bicameralism). And "[a]s the weight of the legislative authority requires that it should be thus divided, the weakness of the executive may require, on the other hand, that it should be fortified."<sup>5</sup> Later, almost a century after publication of *The Federalist Papers* and several decades before he became president, Woodrow Wilson wrote *Congressional Government*, in which he questioned the conventional model of the U.S. constitutional system, characterized by "a balance of powers and a nice adjustment of interactive checks:"<sup>6</sup>

How is it, however, in the practical conduct of the federal government? In that, unquestionably, the predominant and controlling force, the centre and source of all motive and of all regulative power, is Congress. All niceties of constitutional restriction and even many broad principles of constitutional limitation have been overridden, and a thoroughly organized system of congressional control set up which gives a very rude negative to some theories of balance and some schemes for distributed powers, but which suits well with convenience, and does violence to none of the principles of self-government contained in the Constitution.

In fact, most 19<sup>th</sup> century American presidents were considerably less assertive than most of their 20<sup>th</sup> century successors. Now, however, the balance has swung markedly and probably irrevocably in the other direction. Certainly no modern president or student of the American political system would think Wilson's assessment to be a fair characterization of the current balance of power. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, presidents became accustomed to accusations of constitutional aggrandizement,<sup>7</sup> and observers have been far more likely to worry about "the imperial presidency" than about a domineering Congress. Presidents continue to complain, of course, about congressional delays and obstruction, including Congress' excessive and unwarranted intrusions into matters that should properly be left to the executive branch. But few would argue today that the presidents must worry more than legislators

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<sup>5</sup>James Madison, "The Federalist, No. 51," in Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Co., Inc. 1996 edition), pp. 266-267. After Madison was elected president in 1809, he had ample opportunity to appreciate how assertive Congress could be, especially in connection with the War of 1812.

<sup>6</sup>Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1967 edition of 1885 original), p. 31.

<sup>7</sup>One exception was Wilson's predecessor as president. William Howard Taft, *Our Chief Magistrate and His Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916).

about preserving their constitutional prerogatives and exercising their assigned share of constitutional powers.

In some respects, Congress has been willing to relinquish or undermine its own powers. While the House and Senate have sought to strengthen their part in making budgetary and fiscal decisions, they have been more or less willing partners in the abdication of the congressional power to declare war. More regularly if less dramatically, Congress also has been willing to share its law-making responsibilities with executive branch officials by delegating to them broad authority to write regulations, having the force of law, that are necessary to implement laws that are deliberately vague, ambiguous, or incomplete. In principle, at least, Congress could reassert its war- and law-making powers (though there is little evidence that it is inclined to do so). However, there have been other developments, over which Congress has far less control, that also have contributed to the shifting balance of power toward the White House and the executive branch more generally.

These developments include the larger number of issues on which action by the national government is expected, an expanded agenda that stretches the resources of an institution even as well-staffed and equipped as Congress. The increasingly technical nature of many of these issues also strains the competence of generalist legislators, tempting members of Congress to defer to the presumed expertise of the executive branch. Furthermore, the agenda for national policy-making reflects the increased importance of international affairs, about which members of Congress generally are less comfortable and know less in comparison with domestic issues. Presidents have been inclined to assert that international policy questions are peculiarly ill-suited for congressional determination because they so often require speed and secrecy, two things at which legislatures do not naturally excel. Many legislators also have been willing, at least some of the time, to defer to presidents on international questions so that the nation appears to be unified in support of one clearly articulated policy. And all of these developments have occurred in the context of the profound impact of television on public affairs, especially its tendency to personalize politics and thereby focus more attention on the president than on a confusing and seemingly cacophonous legislature.

I have condensed this argument severely because, though some might disagree at the margins, I think most American observers would accept the core assertion that there are characteristics of contemporary government and policy that direct the flow of power more to the presidency from Congress than in the other direction. So if the constitutional division of, or competition for, power is to remain vital in fact as well as in theory, the burden falls on Congress to protect itself against abdications, accretions, and encroachments that ultimately could lead to even greater executive dominance.

Generalizing about this argument beyond the American context involves two steps. The first is to contend that the modern tendency for power to flow toward the executive is at least as marked, though perhaps for a somewhat different constellation of reasons, in other political systems that are presidential in form. I am not competent to defend this contention, and if experts should prove it wrong then the strength of my argument may well dissipate at America's borders. However, the contention does strike me as more than plausible, based on what familiarity I have with recent political experience in Central and South America, the regions in which presidential regimes are most prevalent. The examples of Menem of Argentina and Fujimori of Peru come to mind, as do the more recent ones of Chavez in Venezuela and Morales in Bolivia.

What may seem to be a more problematic step is to extend the argument to non-presidential democratic regimes: to assert that, for at least some of the same reasons and perhaps for some entirely different ones, the power of national assemblies also is increasingly at risk in parliamentary regimes and in hybrid regimes that are primarily parliamentary. (The latter would include regimes in which the president is essentially a head of state, not the head of government. Israel and Germany are plausible examples; France and Russia are not.)

Clearly enough, the risk of executive dominance in such regimes does not derive from a constitutionally-based competition for power between institutions elected independently of each other. As discussed above, an essential principle underlying a parliamentary regime is that the government is empowered by and remains accountable to the parliament. In some parliamentary systems, the members of the government are chosen from among the members of the parliament; in others, this is not necessary or even permitted. These differences can be important in some respects; for our purposes, though, they are incidental in comparison with the overriding requirement that the government, however constituted, must continue to enjoy the support of a majority in the parliament. How then can there be a danger of executive dominance when the executive (that is, the government) is the chosen instrument of the parliament and expires if and when it loses parliamentary support?

First, some of the developments that have contributed to the trend toward executive dominance in presidential systems push in the same direction in parliamentary regimes. Many of the same reasons why legislatures in presidential systems often defer or delegate to the executive can lead parliaments to do the same. There are too many policy decisions that must be made, so the argument goes; there simply is not enough time for parliament to make them, especially in view of its cumbersome and time-consuming procedures. Many of these decisions involve scientific or other technical considerations that are beyond the capacity of generalist MPs to make in a reasoned and well-informed way; the only responsible avenue open to parliament is to entrust these decisions to professional experts, subject (in principle, at least) to parliamentary review of their decisions. Most of the government's legislative program supposedly was approved by the electorate at the last parliamentary election; so the parliament has an affirmative obligation to speed it on its way to enactment.<sup>8</sup> Other government proposals are reactions to domestic or international crises, so they have to be made quickly; the nation cannot afford the luxury of leisurely parliamentary scrutiny and debate.

Second, as I argued in the preceding section, parliaments may be the agents of the governments they ostensibly create and control, not the reverse. The parliament may go through the official procedures of installing the government and approving its members, individually or collectively; and parliament may retain constitutional power to compel the resignation of the government or any of its ministers. In reality though, as I have suggested, it may be the president or prime minister who effectively controls these decisions or reduces them to empty formalities, if the head of government also is the head of party, and so controls the political (and sometimes personal) futures of the majority of MPs. If the president or prime minister also has the authority, as he or she often does, to dissolve a recalcitrant parliament, MPs may conclude that the most certain effect of their attempts to assert the parliament's constitutional powers is to put their own political security at risk in new elections.

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<sup>8</sup> A pernicious form of this argument is the claim of election mandates, even when there is little or no empirical basis for such claims. See my critique in *Platypus and Parliament* (Canberra: Department of the Senate, 2003), pp. 276-299.

Under these circumstances, parliamentary acquiescence or obedience is a course that can be appealing and rewarding, both politically and personally. It also may be the course that is most consistent with the parliament's own conception of itself and that comports with MPs' understanding of the parliament's proper role. It is my impression, though admittedly an unsystematic one, that national assemblies in nations that once were European, especially British, colonies, tend to take parliaments as their model and to think of themselves as parliaments, even if their own constitutional structure is essentially presidential and their political tradition is most compatible with presidential rule. The result is an institutional mismatch of president with parliament, in which the assembly's members generally define their responsibilities as would a parliament, not a legislature, even though confronted by an assertive and constitutionally autonomous president.<sup>9</sup>

I conclude, therefore, that, in addition to factors deriving from constitutional design, there are contextual factors, and there also may be political and perceptual factors, that tend to strengthen presidents and prime ministers, governments and executives, in their relations with their national assemblies. If so, the power of all national assemblies is at risk. And if a concentration of power is anathema to limited and accountable democratic governance, whatever the specific constitutional arrangements may be, then national assemblies need to protect against *de facto* executive dominance, however benign the intentions of presidents or prime ministers may (or may not) be.

Lest I be dismissed as one of those stereotypical American observers (of whom I have met but a few) who assume—or worse yet, argue—that U.S. constitutional arrangements are preferable to all others, let me emphasize that I am not contending that parliaments should be, or become, congresses. Nor do I suppose that every self-respecting national assembly must actively compete with the executive/government for primacy or even co-equality in law-making. I do believe, however, that in every truly democratic political system, there must be an actual balance, though not necessarily an American-style separation, of powers. In a presidential system, this balance is preserved by the legislature and the executive each protecting and asserting its constitutional powers. In a parliamentary system, the balance requires that the government be responsible to the parliament in fact as well as in theory. There is no such balance, obviously enough, if the government can depend on parliament to be its faithful and obedient servant. I believe that governments, especially those in nations without long democratic traditions, are all too likely to be content with precisely such a parliament, however much it may pay lip-service to the principle of parliamentary equality or supremacy.

A parliament, therefore, cannot safely rely on the government to ensure that the parliament is strong enough to preserve the balance of institutional power that representative democracy requires. The parliament must do that for itself by protecting and asserting its own constitutional powers, lest it see those powers flow gradually but inexorably to a government that will surely prove willing to accept them.

Let me put it this way: at a 2010 conference, Philip Norton, now Lord Norton of Louth and one of the most esteemed students of British government, described the U.K.'s House of Commons as a "law-

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<sup>9</sup>See, for example, my "Parliamentary Reform in Zambia: Constitutional Design and Institutional Capacity," a paper presented at the XVIth World Congress of the International Political Science Association; Berlin, Germany; 1994; and my briefer "President and Parliament in Zambia," available from the author.



assenting" institution. The obvious contrast is with the U.S. Congress, which considers itself, first and foremost, a "law-making" body. I defer to Lord Norton's characterization of the British parliament; if it is accurate, it certainly emphasizes that "parliament" and "congress" are not equivalent. However, giving assent need not, and should not, be a passive act. Just as there is the doctrine of informed consent in the world of medicine, so too there must be a doctrine of informed assent in democratic governance. Defenders of parliaments, even as "law-assenting" and not "law-making" bodies, point to the important role they play as legitimizers of government policy. They cannot be seen as playing this role in any meaningful way, however, if it is obvious that their assent constitutes little more than a rubber-stamp that is placed, however decorously, on decisions that executive governments already have made.

## CONNECTIONS AND DIMENSIONS

What does all this have to do with knowledge, power, and the relationship between them? The theme of the first part of this essay has been that there must be an adequate balance of power between an executive government and a democratic national assembly, regardless of the constitutional design of the regime. The balance need not be perfect. Indeed, for some of the reasons I've already mentioned, I expect that executive predominance will continue to characterize democratic political systems for the foreseeable future. The concept of separation of powers as we know it in the United States is not universally or even widely applicable, but the accompanying concept of checks and balances is. A democratic national assembly needs the resources, ability, and will to check executive control and thereby maintain enough of an institutional balance to ensure restrained and accountable governance.

In this political context, the connection between knowledge and power is straightforward. Simply put, the more control I have over what you know, the more influence I will have over what you think and, therefore, what choices and decisions you will make. In terms of democratic political institutions, a national assembly, whether a parliament or a congress, must be reasonably well-informed if it is going to maintain that institutional balance and defend itself—preserve its constitutional standing vis-a-vis the executive government. An assembly that lacks policy-relevant knowledge is likely to abdicate its responsibilities and delegate its powers. An assembly that acts without adequate access to policy-relevant knowledge is likely to discredit itself and make citizens receptive to assertions of executive prerogative.

If I have access to only one forecast of today's weather and that forecast is for a bright and sunny day, I probably will leave my umbrella at home. That forecast determines what I "know," so it has a powerful influence on what I decide to do. But what if I receive a second forecast and it predicts rain? In this situation, I may decide which forecast I think is more credible and act accordingly. Or I may have no basis for choosing between the forecasts, so I may decide to carry my umbrella because the actual cost (in inconvenience) of doing so is less than the potential benefit (of staying dry). Or I may go searching for other forecasts, hoping that one prediction, whether for sunshine or rain, will be more prevalent and, therefore (or so I hope), more likely to be right.

In the more complex legislative context, suppose I am a member of a national assembly that is considering a bill to reduce taxes on farmers who grow corn that will be used to produce ethanol as an alternative fuel for vehicles. If all I know about this bill is what I learn from corn producers, I am likely to

think that enacting and implementing the bill will improve farm incomes, reduce fuel prices, and reduce our dependence on oil that is imported from unreliable allies abroad or produced at environmental risks at home, and, therefore, I am likely to decide to vote for it. But what if I also learn from other sources that the savings in fuel prices may not materialize, while diverting corn into fuel production is very likely to increase the cost of feeding livestock and, therefore, the cost of food for domestic consumers? Now I am likely to think that my choice is more complicated and difficult than I had first thought, so my decision will be more uncertain and require a more careful calculation of the bill's likely benefits and costs.

Or suppose that the same national assembly of which I am a member has been asked by the leader of the executive government (president or prime minister) to authorize the use of our nation's armed forces against a nation that, the executive government assures us, has launched a rocket attack against one of our naval vessels while it was in international waters. If that is all I know, I still may decide it is an insufficient justification for committing an act of war, so I may vote against giving the executive government the authority it requests (assuming that it bothers to ask). But suppose I also know from other sources that the missile attack may have been provoked and that our ship actually may not have been in international waters. In that case, I am almost certain to view the executive government's contentions and request with greater skepticism.

Knowledge is power. If one information source monopolizes what I know about a decision I have to make, it can greatly influence, if not control, what that decision will be. The more I know about the decision, and the more sources of information I have about it, the more difficult my decision is likely to become because some of what I know will point in the direction of one decision whereas some of it is very likely to point in the other direction. I may have to work harder at making my decision than I would if I knew less and if everything I knew pointed toward the same conclusion. On the other hand, at least I will know that the decision I make will be a thoughtful and informed one (or so we may hope).

This is true for me as an assembly member; it also is true for the assembly as a whole. If its members have ready access to information from diverse sources and they are able to evaluate the credibility of the information available to them, they are at least capable of making decisions that do not simply ratify or oppose the wishes of the executive government. Knowledge is power, or perhaps it would be better to say that knowledge is potential power because there never is a guarantee that any of us, assembly members or not, will bother to learn what there is to know or will use that knowledge wisely and well.

This is not an essay in philosophy, so I will not delve into such questions as "What does it mean to know something?". However, it is important to distinguish between two dimensions of "knowledge" as I am using the word here: information and analysis. To return to one of my earlier examples, I may receive information (and accept it as fact) that a missile almost hit our naval vessel when it was in international waters. But what I decide on the basis of that information depends largely on how I analyze its implications and put it in context. For example, what had been the recent pattern of relations between the two nations, and does that make the likelihood of an accidental launch more or less plausible? What are the respective military strengths of the two nations, especially in light of whatever other military commitments they already have made? What are likely to be the political as well as military consequences of launching some kind of retaliatory military action? Could the executive government be trusted to launch only a proportionate military response, or might it use the incident as an excuse for a response that is disproportionate and, thereby, unjustifiable? And what

would be the budgetary costs of any such military action in light of the current state of the economy and other demands on limited government spending?

Engaging in analysis such as this—identifying such questions and bringing relevant information to bear on them—creates knowledge that is policy-relevant, knowledge that policy-makers such as the members of a national assembly can use to make a decision, whether the choice before them is an easy one or a hard one. Absent such knowledge, assembly members still will make a decision, but it is much more likely to be a choice between supporting or opposing the executive government, rather than one between policy options on their own merits.

This may seem to some to be a rather naïve line of argument. Of course, it may be argued, assembly members support or oppose the executive government, and of course they make their individual legislative decisions accordingly. It is the bonds of party that tie leaders of the executive government with their partisan supporters in the assembly, and separate them from the assembly members who oppose the government. Assembly members of the government's party have a powerful incentive to support the government in the assembly because their own political futures, whether they remain in the assembly or hope to join the government, depend on their party's reputation and success while in office and, therefore, its prospects for winning the next election and remaining in office. By the same token, there is good reason why it often has been said that the job of the opposition is to oppose. Instead of supporting government policies, the opposition serves democratic governance best by criticizing government proposals and performance and by presenting alternatives to them that the public should prefer.

All of that is true but too simple. Assembly members who automatically support or oppose government policies without subjecting them to critical review do no favors either to the government or to the electorate. In any national assembly elected on the basis of districts, ridings, states, or constituencies by other names, its members surely can claim to be able to predict better than any president, prime minister, or other executive government officials how a proposed policy will affect disparate parts of the nation.<sup>10</sup> Government policy-making is likely to be self-defeating if it is insulated from influence by fellow party members who are best positioned to anticipate its short- and long-term effects on their constituents and constituencies. Encouraging the voices of all party members to be heard does not have to mean endorsing public opposition from fellow partisans during plenary debates of the assembly. Assembly members can make their influence felt behind closed doors, as government policy and legislation are being developed without the appearance of serious divisions within the party's ranks. But such influence has value only if it brings to the process of policy formulation insights, ideas, and opinions from assembly members that do not derive exclusively from what their allies in government have told them.

Similarly, an opposition that only opposes will, more often than not, remain in opposition. True enough, there will be times when the opposition is the inevitable beneficiary of profound public dissatisfaction with the incumbent party or coalition. In such situations, the opposition may be content

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<sup>10</sup> Even in national assemblies whose members are elected by proportional representation from national lists—that is the entire nation is a single constituency for election purposes—parties still may take advantage of the local roots and connections of their assembly members. It was once the case, and still may be so, that Dutch parties made their members of the Tweede Kamer (the house of parliament to which the government is responsible) their unofficial representatives and spokespeople in the regions in which they were best known.

to be critical and patient, contributing all it can to that dissatisfaction and waiting patiently for the next election at which it is virtually certain it will prevail. However, more often there are at least two reasons for the opposition to engage in more than knee-jerk opposition to the government of the day.

First, voters typically want some reasons to vote for the opposition party as well as reasons not to vote for the government party. Any party seeking office benefits from having a credible and appealing policy agenda of its own. And lacking the resources of the government, the opposition should benefit even more from what each of its members can contribute to developing that agenda. Second, it is risky for any opposition party to depend entirely on its prospects at the next election, and forego any possibility of ameliorating government policies and reducing the damage they will do until that election occurs. Opposition parties, even more than those in government, need whatever contributions its individual members can make to improving government legislation in the near term and developing alternative policies that will be as widely appealing as possible in the longer-term.

I acknowledge that parliamentary parties, whether in government or opposition, may prefer “backbench” members who are quiescent or at least dependable supporters of their leaders’ positions. I contend, however, that this attitude is as short-sighted as it may be comfortable for those party leaders. First, it fails to recognize and to take full advantage of the human capital available to them. Second, it also fails to take advantage of the unique ability of their colleagues who are not in leadership positions to anticipate reactions to new party policies in constituencies where the leaders’ party already has enjoyed enough support to elect those “backbench” members. The cost of an inclusive policy—of welcoming the policy initiatives and opinions of all parliamentary party members—need not, as I have suggested, be public discord and the appearance of disunity. In the long-run, in fact, it may promote party unity and harmony by satisfying all party members in the assembly that they have been heard and their positions have received thoughtful consideration.

## A PATH FORWARD

I have argued that, even in parliamentary systems with strong party discipline, it benefits the parties in government as well as those in opposition to have assembly members who can make independent contributions to the process by which their party formulates and fine-tunes its legislative proposals, as well as to the process of evaluating the efficacy of government policies and the efficiency of government operations. If I have been at all persuasive, then the next task becomes identifying the sources of information and analysis that can be available to assembly members, and how those sources can be combined to enable members to develop the policy-relevant knowledge required to contribute as best they can.

“But wait!” I can imagine a skeptical MP from Molvania<sup>11</sup> or elsewhere interjecting:

All that is fine in principle, but I live and work in the real world of severely limited resources. It’s entirely unrealistic to think that our national assembly could employ 500 people to staff a research office like your Congressional Research Service, and the hundreds more who work for your Congressional

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<sup>11</sup> A fictitious nation, used here in homage to an enjoyable guidebook parody: Santo Cilauro, et. al., *Molvania: A Land Untouched by Modern Dentistry*. New York: The Overlook Press, 2004.

Budget Office and Government Accountability Office, much less the more than 10,000 people, whom you didn't even mention, who work for the various members, leaders, and committees of your Congress.

Even if we could identify such people in Molvania and wanted to hire them, our constituents would be outraged by what our opponents at the next election surely would describe as gross parliamentary extravagance. But it doesn't matter because it's the executive government that effectively controls our assembly's budget. And even if we could find and hire an adequate staff of analysts and experts, most of the best of them soon would be lured away by better paying jobs in the private sector, including U.S. and western European organizations and companies.

All that probably is true, sad to say. But it does not mean that the Molvanian national assembly should just throw up its collective hands in frustration and resignation. No, it means instead that the national assembly needs to do two things. First, it should develop a long-term plan that leads to the informational and analytical support that it thinks it needs and deserves, even while knowing that implementing the plan may take years and a prolonged struggle with the executive government which probably will claim that there is no need for any significant expansion of the assembly's staff. And second it should cobble together the best support system that is available in the short-term, taking account of budgetary constraints and such practical considerations as limitations on office equipment and space, while capitalizing on the various sources of informational and analytical support to which it can turn.

There are at least six potential sources of information and analysis—knowledge—on which national assemblies can rely:

1. the ministries and other officials of the government,
2. its own institutional resources, including a central research and analysis office,
3. research arms of the political parties represented in the assembly,
4. the staffs of individual assembly members,
5. communications from constituents, and
6. private organizations, including business and labor organizations and NGOs, as well as universities and other educational institutes.

Each has advantages and disadvantages, strengths and weaknesses. It would be a mistake for an assembly to rely solely, or even too heavily, on any one of them. The assembly's goal should be to mobilize as many of them as possible and to strike a balance in what the assembly seeks from each and how much it relies on each.

I already have argued that relying too heavily on the executive government is dangerous and self-defeating in that it makes the national assembly too dependent on what that government wants it to know, and that undoubtedly will be what seems to support the government's actions and legislative proposals. That is not to say that assembly members should close their ears and eyes to what their government wants to tell them, but it means they should assess that information and analysis with skepticism.

In fact, if any people or organizations are ready and willing, even anxious, to inform and advise the national assembly, it is prudent to ask if and how they want to influence the assembly's decisions. In other words, they probably hope to use their knowledge as a weapon of persuasion. That does not

mean that what they have to say is untrue, but it is likely to be incomplete and one-sided. I revert to my earlier example about the hypothetical group of corn producers explaining the benefits of a proposed new law to reduce their taxes if they grow corn for manufacturing ethanol. Those benefits may in fact accrue; the problem is that they may not be the only effects of the bill if enacted, but those same farmers have little interest in laying equal stress on the unhappy consequences the bill also might have. In the world of public policy, there are few proposals that have no disadvantages, even if they only are the costs associated with implementing them. Those who have an interest in what proposals a national assembly approves or rejects—whether that interest is one of principle, financial self-interest, or something else—have little incentive to tell both sides of the story.

That is one of three principal virtues of a central research and analysis office within the national assembly—an office that provides assistance to all members and committees on demand, and that does so in as balanced and disinterested a way as possible. It has been argued that no policy analyst can truly be neutral—that his or her personal preferences cannot help but shade and shape his or her analysis, however unintentionally. And that may be true, but it also is true that if perfect neutrality is unachievable, it is possible for an organization to approximate it quite well through a series of checks and reviews on whatever its individual analysts may write. I acknowledge that many people with an interest in public policy are not suited for such work, and that it can be difficult to persuade all members, particularly those from opposition and minor parliamentary party groups that the office's work is not intended, however subtly, to advance the majority party's agenda. I also insist, however, that it can be done, especially with the benefit of careful staff recruitment as well as supervision and monitoring by an all-party board or committee of MPs.

A second virtue of such an office is its ability to serve as the national assembly's institutional memory. It is a fact of life, whether desirable or not, that there is a fairly steady and rapid turnover among members of most national assemblies. There are exceptions, of course, but most MPs do not intend to make a career of parliamentary service, or would have been happy to do so only to discover that their party or constituents had other ideas. For the most part, MPs also are generalists. Even if they arrive to begin their service in the national assembly with real expertise in a particular field of public policy, their expertise is unlikely to extend to other fields, much less to the entire range of issues that will come before them and on which they must take positions and vote. Much the same applies to parliamentary staff who are hired to assist individual national assembly members; in fact, their tenure tends to be even shorter than that of those whom they serve. On the other hand, parliamentary research and analysis offices are much more likely to attract people who will remain in their posts for years or, as in my case, for decades. One benefit they offer to the national assembly, therefore, is their ability to explain how issues and problems developed, what ways to address them already have been explored or attempted, and, therefore, how MPs can avoid repeating the mistakes and failures of the past.

Third, such an office also offers the advantage of economy. An alternative that works reasonably well in some national assemblies, especially those with members elected from party lists, is to rely on party research offices, established and supervised either by the national party organizations or by the parliamentary parties themselves. Such an arrangement makes sense if the MPs of each party group are expected to vote together in a reasonably disciplined fashion, in part because it maximizes the influence that their parties have on MPs' thinking and tends to reduce what may be the contrary influence of research and analysis that comes from non-party sources. However, developing knowledge independently for each party in the assembly is expensive and duplicative. It also produces

imbalances, with larger or better funded party groups having the luxury of larger and more capable research staffs that smaller groups simply cannot afford.

A central research and analysis office, if it is credible to all parliamentary parties and members, is economical in that it can minimize the need for each party or party group to recruit and retain its own cadre of analysts and experts. Such an office can provide a baseline of information and analysis on which all parties in the assembly can rely without having to produce it for themselves. For example, there is not a left-wing or right-wing way to present data on trends over time in interest rates, or in the cost of housing or fuel or other necessities of life, especially if the research office's baseline reports take account of different ways of estimating or calculating such things, and if they present and assess the arguments made for and against any such differences. It has been said that "[t]here are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics."<sup>12</sup> I am most inclined to accept the credibility of statistics relating to public policy that come from people and organizations with no vested interest in how I apply those statistics in making decisions among policy options. A central office that presents baseline information and analysis that no party has good reasons to doubt can combine well with party research units that use this information and analysis to develop and defend their own policy positions.

Members of national assemblies who are elected from individual constituencies instead of from national or regional party lists are less likely to be willing to depend too heavily on party research units for their information and analysis. Such members should want to remain sensitive to the needs, interests, and preferences of their own constituencies, which will not always correspond exactly with the national positions of their parties. Rare must be the nation that is so homogeneous that the same policies suit all constituencies equally well. So even in assemblies with strong parties, MPs from individual constituencies must ask themselves if supporting a certain party position may put at risk their own prospects, and that of their party, at the next election. Whatever they conclude, they still may decide that they have to put party before constituency, but who would argue that they should not be able to make this decision in an informed way? And should not wise leaders of any parliamentary party want to understand how their legislative program may have disparate effects in different constituencies?

From this perspective, every MP in a constituency-based electoral system has unique informational and analytical needs because he or she always should be asking how a policy issue looks to his or her constituents and how they are likely to be affected by, and later react to, whatever proposals the government party and other parties make in the national assembly. The problem is that no central or party research and analysis office can satisfy these needs for all MPs. This is something that, ultimately, they must do for themselves, albeit with the assistance of whatever personal staff the assembly allows them to hire. If MPs believe that their respective political futures can be affected by how their constituents assess the consequences of the policy choices they have made, they have a compelling personal interest in gathering as much information themselves as they can about their constituents' needs, interests, and preferences, and applying that information or at least having it in mind as they make voting decisions in the assembly.

This situation illustrates how fuzzy the lines can be among the representational, electoral, and legislative activities of national assembly members. Visiting the constituency and listening to constituents not only gives MPs opportunities to display themselves and heap praise on their own

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<sup>12</sup> On the origin of the comment, see [www.york.ac.uk/depts/maths/histstat/lies.htm](http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/maths/histstat/lies.htm).

heads for their hard work and accomplishments, whether in promoting the government's legislative program or in opposing it. It also should give them opportunities to improve their understanding of how government proposals and programs are likely to affect the part of the nation that each of them represents and whose affection and support they crave for the next election. In this respect, each MP in such systems becomes his or her own information gatherer and analyst. The danger, of course, is that what he or she observes and hears may be unrepresentative of constituency sentiment and, therefore, misleading. All the more reason, then, for MPs to seek out opportunities to meet with constituents who, as leaders of organizations of workers, businessmen, farmers, teachers, or other groups, can reasonably claim to speak for more than just themselves.

Because the work of national assembly members is (or should be) demanding and multi-dimensional, they need access to whatever staff support the national assembly can provide. From time to time, there have been calls in Washington, even by some Representatives and Senators, to reduce the number of staff paid by Congress, but that is not an outcry likely to be heard in many or any other capital cities. Instead, the much more widespread concerns are how to increase staff resources and how to use available staff most effectively.

With respect to staff for national assembly committees, there are essentially two models for how these staff should be allocated and managed. In Washington, most committee staff serve the members of one party on each committee, not the committee as a whole. The chair of each committee and the most senior committee member of the minority (opposition) party usually hire and fire the staff who will serve their party on the committee. These staff have no job protection, and are expected to view the issues before the committee from the perspective of the party members whom they serve. Sometimes the two halves of each committee staff cooperate closely with each other; just as often they do not. Usually they occupy separate office suites which are not necessarily adjoining. This system ensures that the staff of committees is responsive to the preferences and priorities of their political masters, so it gives committee members the confidence that what the staff does on their behalf is what they would do themselves if they had the time and expertise to act for themselves. On the other hand, this system also produces a great deal of duplication and sometimes more partisan disputes than would arise if committee members always did act for themselves instead of delegating considerable responsibility to their partisan committee staff.

The alternate model, which tends to be characteristic of Westminster-style parliaments, is to have a central committee office with policy and administrative specialists who are primarily responsible to the assembly's chief clerk, secretary general, or whatever its chief administrative officer may be called. Whereas congressional committee staff rarely move from one committee to another, committee staff under the alternate model are assigned to assist specific committees as the need arises. Consequently, they tend to be less sensitive and responsive to the policy and political interests of the members of the committee to which they are assigned, and they must attempt to serve, and to be seen as serving, the members of both or all parties on the committee with equal zealotry and skill. Staff who belong to a central committee office probably remain in parliamentary service for longer than their counterparts in Washington, and view themselves as servants of the national assembly as an institution, rather than as employees of a political party or a specific party leader on a committee.

I doubt it can be said that, as a general rule, one model is preferable to the other. Committee staff in the first model may be too well-attuned to, and concerned with, the partisan interests and preferences of the committee members they serve; committee staff under the second model may be



too detached from those same interests and preferences. What we can say, though, is that the second model is more economical. In the congressional system, the Democratic or Republican staff members of a committee remain in place, usually without regard to how much work there happens to be at the moment; they can be too busy or not busy enough. The only way to adjust the size of committee staffs is by hiring and firing; there is no established way to reallocate staff from one committee to another in order to take account of changes in committees' workloads. A central committee office, on the other hand, can allocate and re-allocate staff as the need arises; the danger, though, is that any such decisions may rest effectively in the hands of an unelected staff official of the national assembly rather than in the hands of committee members themselves.

In light of the budgetary constraints faced by so many national assemblies, one sensible approach may be to concentrate first on developing the core staff of a central research and analysis office. The second step in this plan would be to assemble a comparable core staff for a central committee office—a staff that has or will develop expertise in arranging and managing committee work and that, at first at least, can draw on the staff of the research and analysis office for complementary policy expertise. In time, the committee office could be expanded to include staff who are policy experts in their own right, freeing the staff of the research and analysis office to devote more time to work that is not directly in support of committee activities. If it then is thought that this system does not serve the distinct interests and policy preferences of the national assembly's party groups well enough, the final step would be to add to the staff structure one or more assistants to serve each party group on each committee, and to assist their party's members on a committee in interpreting and applying the more politically-detached knowledge and support available from the two central offices.

All such staff should be distinguished from whatever staff the national assembly allows each member to hire to support his or her official responsibilities. These staff should best be conceived of as extensions of the members whom they serve—acting on the behalf of individual members as additional eyes and ears, reflecting their interests and priorities, and enabling the members to do more than they could do by themselves. Such staff members may well become invaluable policy and political advisors. Most are unlikely to become policy experts in their own right, but it may be said that they are the assembly staff members who are best positioned to assist in the translation of knowledge into power, as they assist MPs in applying the knowledge available to them to the policy choices they must make from their unique partisan and constituency perspectives.

## **OPENING THE DOORS OF GOVERNMENT**

The reality is, however, that the kind of staff system described here, however well-managed and limited in size, still may strain the resources of many national assemblies, especially those that do not have control over their own annual budgets. Furthermore, and especially in poorer societies, there are likely to be only a limited number of people who are ready, willing, and able to serve their national assembly, and especially to continue serving it as they become more mature, more knowledgeable, and, therefore, more attractive to other potential employers in government or the private sector. So it would do well for national assemblies and their members, facing this kind of situation, to ask how they can supplement the policy-relevant informational, research, and analytical resources that their own institution and the executive government can provide.

In Washington, the problem facing Representatives and Senators often is not a dearth of policy-relevant knowledge, but the difficulty of digesting and assessing all that is available to them. The city is full of organizations that claim specialized and expert knowledge that is relevant to one or more aspects of national public policy, and that are more than happy to share their expertise with Congress. That is precisely why they are located in Washington. Many of them are membership organizations, representing private individuals and organizations, and even other levels of government—state governors, state legislators, cities, and counties, as well as specialized entities such as water districts—all of which recognize that they have an important stake in what the national government does. So a principal reason they exist is to influence what new laws Congress enacts and how the executive government implements the laws Congress already has enacted. Exerting such influence is the profession of many of their employees; they are “lobbyists,” as are the employees of other organizations who can be hired to try to influence government decisions on behalf of their clients.<sup>13</sup>

When a bill affecting the interests or clients of such an organization may be considered by a congressional committee or in a plenary meeting, they contact members as well as committee and personal staff members, offering information and analysis that, they explain, will help Congress understand the issue the bill addresses, whether or not there is a problem that requires a legislative solution, and, if so, what approach would best serve the national interest and, not coincidentally, the best interests of their members or clients. Their role is not passive; they do not wait for members of Congress to come to them. Instead, they volunteer and even press for opportunities to present their views at committee hearings, they try to arrange meetings with Representatives, Senators, and their staffs to make their arguments, and they also communicate with congressional offices by mail, telephone calls, and, now of course, email messages. Leaders of these organizations also recognize that members of Congress are particularly sensitive to the opinions and preferences of their constituents, so the organizations frequently mobilize communications to Congress from the “grassroots,” encouraging affected individuals and organizations around the country to contact their own Representatives and Senators directly in support of the organization’s position.

Attempting to influence congressional decisions in this way often has been controversial, but it also is well-entrenched in American political life, as is the underlying tendency of people to form and join organizations that exist to defend and promote their own “special interests.” For example, soon after I retired after 30 years of federal government service, I joined an organization that lobbies on behalf of me and all other retired government workers and officials when proposals are made that might affect our pensions and other retirement benefits. That is an accepted part of government, American-style. The information and analysis that are provided by organizations such as the one to which I belong almost always is accurate and rarely is intended to deceive. The reason lies not in the virtue of their leaders, but in the recognition that if they deceive Representatives and Senators once, and are discovered doing so, their credibility will collapse as will the willingness of legislators to listen to them in the future.

But while what such organizations tell Congress may be true, it is universally understood, if not spoken out loud, that it is only part of the truth. To reiterate an argument I made earlier, these organizations seek to use knowledge as a weapon of persuasion, so they mobilize whatever facts and arguments will support their position. They may acknowledge that there are countervailing arguments,

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<sup>13</sup> The term derives from the practice of their 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors who would wait in the lobbies outside of the House and Senate chambers to meet and speak with members on behalf of their organizations or clients.

but they have little interest in calling attention to them. The task for Representatives and Senators (and their staffs), therefore, is to sort through all the information that comes to them, digesting and assessing it from the perspectives of their own constituencies and political philosophies, but also recognizing the biases and self-interests of those who provide it.

The situation is likely to be somewhat different in representative systems where most policy formulation as well as policy execution takes place within the executive government—that is, where executive governments shape new legislation much more than do parliaments. In such situations, those wishing to influence policy are more likely to concentrate more of their attention and energies on government ministers and those assisting them, because by the time government legislation reaches parliament, the position of the government already may have hardened beyond the ability of representatives of organizations and “special interests” to re-shape in any significant way. And the situation is likely to be even more different in newer democratic systems whose people historically have thought of themselves more as subjects of government than as citizens with a legitimate role to play in affecting the decisions that government makes.

An important aspect of democratic development in such societies is the growth of civil society and the increasing numbers and activism of non-governmental organizations. This phrase often is associated with organizations that concentrate on protecting democratic rights and procedures—by monitoring elections, for example, or by defending the rights of journalists or the government’s opponents, or by publicizing and protesting alleged violations of civil liberties and constitutional rights. However, non-governmental organizations also include those that advocate for the rights of workers and trade unions, or that represent the interests of manufacturers or farmers, or that are concerned primarily with the legal rights and economic conditions of women and various racial, ethnic, or religious minorities. An important step in the evolution of such organizations is to move beyond monitoring and complaining about what the national assembly (as well as the government) does to trying to influence its priorities and decisions.

In fact, there is much that such organizations should be able to offer to a national assembly in the form of policy-relevant information, analysis and insights. Initially at least, though, more of the burden may fall on assembly members to solicit assistance from these organizations and to make themselves accessible to them. Some non-governmental organizations may not think that it is possible for them to influence national policy-makers in addition to commenting on and often criticizing the policies they make. They may not think that MPs will be interested in what they have to say or that they have opportunities to be heard. Some of the problems are physical and logistical. National assembly buildings can be forbidding places which discourage people from seeking out MPs to present facts and arguments on their own behalf or on behalf of others whom they represent. And even when committees hold hearings on proposed legislation, it can be difficult to learn about them in advance, to present statements at the hearings, or even to attend them in rooms that may not have been designed with public participation or attendance in mind.

In addition, capitol cities tend to be the homes not only of national assemblies but of major universities and other educational institutions. Much of the scholarly expertise that the nation has to offer and that can be brought to bear productively on policy deliberations probably is to be found within miles of the national assembly building. Some scholars have no interest in asking what insights their knowledge can contribute to the relatively mundane business of making and implementing laws, but others certainly should be more than willing to contribute to policy dialogues if they believe that their

offers of assistance will be welcomed. In this case, too, the burden is likely to fall, at first at least, on national assembly members and committees to seek out such advisors, rather than expecting them to invite themselves into what may be the unfamiliar and previously unwelcoming halls of government.

Valuable as NGOs and educational institutions may be, however, as sources of policy-relevant information, research and analysis, MPs always must bear in mind that each of them may have its own biases and agendas that can affect what it shares with the national assembly and, just as important, what equally important insights it chooses not to share. As policy makers, MPs should be as careful as they are voracious in seeking out and capitalizing on policy-relevant knowledge wherever they can find it.

In sum, then, the latter sections of this essay has tried to make three essential arguments. First, the ability of MPs to make the most constructive and informed contributions to national policy-making depends on the policy-relevant knowledge available to them. Second, this knowledge depends on the information, research, and analysis on which MPs can draw or that is presented to them in user-friendly form. And third, there are multiple possible sources of such information, research, and analysis—some that the assembly can develop within its own staff structure, and some that active and imaginative MPs can find among private individuals and non-governmental organizations with specialized expertise. Governments will exercise their powers; on that we can depend. Now, as national assemblies are able to play more of a part in more nations in affecting how those powers are exercised, they have special opportunities and responsibilities to see to it that, in their deliberations and decisions, knowledge is put to work on behalf of the nation.