

## **Making information from the Diet available to the public: The history and development as well as current issues in enhancing access to parliamentary documentation**

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### **Abstract:**

*The National Diet Library (NDL) was established in 1948 by the National Diet Library Law, which defined the NDL's primary objective as providing assistance to members of the National Diet (Parliament) of Japan by performing research necessary to legislative activities and parliamentary oversight of government.*

*The House of Representative and the House of Councillors draw up a wide variety of parliamentary documentation, including minutes of Diet deliberations and other important sources of information concerning legislation. The NDL preserves these documents and, in cooperation with both Houses, strives continuously to enhance public access to these documents, which are an important source of information on the Diet's activities under Japan's representative system of democracy.*

*Since 2001, the minutes of the Diet have been available via the Internet. The Full-text Database System for the Minutes of the Diet provides the whole text of Diet proceedings, starting with the very 1st Session from May, 1947. And documents are also available as graphical images. The database contains more than 3 million pages of proceedings. Users can conduct cross-session searches using a variety of search criteria, including speaker's names or keywords from the proceedings.*

*In 2014, we made some improvements to the system that boosted retrieval capacity and improved access for people with disabilities. As we look toward the future, we are considering ways to enhance access not just to minutes of Diet proceedings but to other documents issued by the Diet.*

**Keywords:** Parliamentary Library, Parliamentary Documentation, National Diet Library Japan

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## **1 Introduction**

The National Diet Library (NDL) was established soon after the end of World War II, in 1948. The primary objective in striving to develop an unprecedentedly large library was to support the Diet (Parliament), to which the supreme national power was bestowed by the new Constitution. The National Diet Library Law (the NDL Law) stipulates that the NDL is to perform the research functions necessary to legislative activities and parliamentary oversight of government with a large collection of publications from Japan and abroad.

Article 15 of the NDL Law stipulates that the main missions of the Research and Legislative Reference Bureau, a legislative support organ of the NDL, are “to gather, classify, analyze and make available in translations, indexes, digests, compilations, bulletins and otherwise, materials for or related to legislation, and to provide serviceable materials to the Diet and to the committees and members thereof.” Article 15 also stipulates that the Bureau is “to make its collection of information (for the Diet) available to the executive and judicial agencies of the government or to the general public.” Now, some 70 years after the establishment of the NDL Law, we have reaffirmed that one of the principal tasks given to the Bureau based by this legislation is the enhancement of public access to parliamentary documents. Accordingly, this task is defined as one of the strategic goals formulated under the NDL’s Mission and Objectives 2012-2016, which explicitly states the need to “facilitate people’s access to Diet-generated information.”

The House of Representatives and the House of Councillors draw up a wide variety of parliamentary documents, including the minutes of both Houses during plenary and committee meetings, bills for proposed laws, budgets and audits, and journals of both Houses. The NDL preserves these documents and with the cooperation of both Houses strives continuously to enhance public access to these documents.

## **2 History of indexing for Japanese parliamentary documents**

Among a variety of parliamentary documents, the Minutes of the Diet are considered an especially important and detailed source of information. The minutes of plenary meetings and standing committee meetings, which record proceedings of a session in question-and-answer style, provide diverse information on current political, economic, and social issues.

Article 57 of the Constitution of Japan stipulates that “Deliberation in each House shall be public...Each House shall keep a record of proceedings. This record shall be published and given general circulation, excepting such parts of proceedings of secret session as may be deemed to require secrecy.” While the provision of the Constitution is interpreted as the requirement for plenary meetings, the rules of each House also demand that records of committee deliberations should be compiled, and we usually describe all of these documents as the Minutes of the Diet.

Prior to 2001, however, there was, in fact, only limited opportunity for the general public to access the Minutes of the Diet. The minutes of plenary meetings are distributed as special supplements to the Official Gazette, which anyone can purchase at Government Publications Service Centers or other locations nationwide. The minutes of committee meetings, however, are not available for purchase, because they are not circulated as Supplements of Official Gazette. The public can read and acquire photocopies of those minutes at the libraries of prefectural assemblies, which receive them from the NDL. But the NDL is ultimately the

only institution that keeps a complete set of the minutes in printed form for the use of the general public.

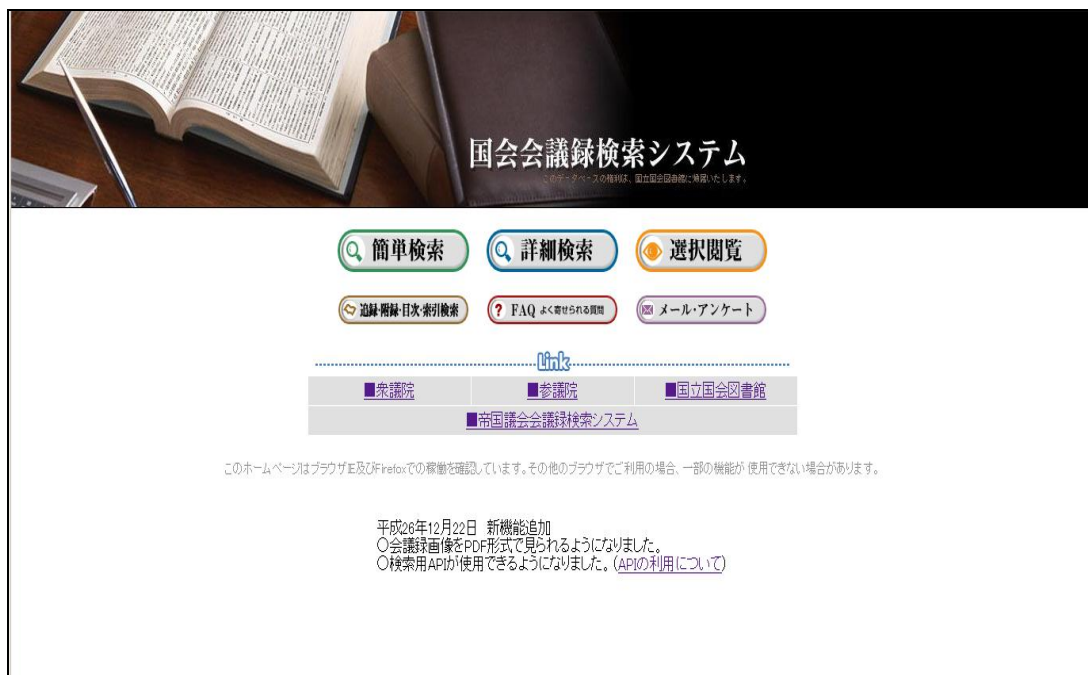
Apart from accessibility to the Minutes of the Diet, another essential problem is how to search for and find specific information in them. The NDL has compiled and published annually a General Index to the Debates in book form since 1961. It comprises two volumes: a Speakers Index and a Subjects Index.

And index of subjects has been compiled for the General Index since 1965. Compiling index was difficult at first, because everything was done manually using index cards. This situation was greatly improved with the introduction of electronic compilation using computers in 1967, and data has been accumulated electronically since then. This electronic data was first configured into a database of the General Index in 1982.

These projects resulted only in an index of the minutes, but did not contain the text of the minutes. So the general public still had only limited access to the content of the minutes of the Diet. It would not be until much later that the next major improvement in providing access to parliamentary documents was achieved.

### 3 Full-text database of the Minutes of the Diet become available via the Internet

Fig. 1 The top page of the Full-text Database System for the Minutes of the Diet



In the latter half of 1990s, a Full-Text Database System for the Minutes of the Diet was developed, and has been used to provide access to the Minutes of the Diet via the Internet since 2001. Here is an overview of the development of the Full-Text Database together with a detailed explanation of its functionality and usability.

Prior to development of a full-text database system, an Optical Disc Filing System for the Minutes of the Diet was developed in 1992, data input for which was completed in 1996. This system comprised graphical image data of the Minutes of the Diet stored in optical magnetic discs, and which was linked to the General Index database via an improved, user-friendly menu-based display. Patrons were able to search the index database and display, print, or transmit by facsimile text of the retrieved minutes. During this phase of development, we also completed a project to scan minutes from the first session of the Diet, held in 1947, to the latest.

Although this system was linked to the already developed index, there were difficulties with further development due to limited capacity. In fact, the Optical Disc Filing System had been implemented as add-on functionality to the index database.

In contrast, the Full-Text Database System for the Minutes of the Diet was completely different from any of the preceding databases. It enabled stenographers to create minutes efficiently as digital data right from the start, thereby providing patrons with the ability to search the minutes in context and retrieve the desired information directly for display or download as text.

In June 1995, the NDL reached an agreement with both Houses, which stipulated three objectives for the development of a Full-Text Database System:

1. To improve the accessibility to records of Diet deliberations, both for Diet Members and the general public,
2. To enhance the efficiency of the tasks performed by all three organizations in compiling and providing access to the Minutes of the Diet, and
3. To make the Diet more transparent by promoting access information, in line with similar efforts at disclosure of information undertaken by the administrative and judicial branches of the Government.

These objectives reaffirm the emphasis placed on enhancing the general public's accessibility to the minutes as well as of improving the efficiency of tasks necessary to compilation of parliamentary documents in the early phases of system development.

After agreeing on these objectives, the NDL and the two Houses of the Diet began joint development of the Full-Text Database System for the Minutes of the Diet in 1996.

The Full-Text Database System for the Minutes of the Diet was developed in several phases. The first stage was implemented in 1998, when a trial version of the Database was made available in-house to Diet Members and their staff from terminals in the Diet buildings. The second stage involved making this trial version available to the general public via the Internet in 1999. Following this, the official version of the system, incorporating a full-text database of both the oldest and the latest meeting minutes of the Diet released in April, 2001.

The system itself comprises four subsystems: a text-producing support system, a research support system, a retrieval system, and a retrospective input system. The first two systems help the staff of the Records Departments of the Diet compile minutes speedily and accurately. The retrieval system allows patrons to carry out full-text searches and display retrieved text. The retrospective input system converts graphical images of past minutes stored in optical magnetic discs into text data using Optical Character Reader (OCR) technology and incorporates this data into the database. By configuring the system with

multiple subsystems, we have been able to make simultaneous improvements in disparate areas of the system, thereby working in parallel to achieve multiple yet interconnected objectives.

To understand how the system functions as a whole, it is necessary to know how the retrieval system operates. The retrieval system has a search menu, into which any word or sentence that might be spoken during a Diet meeting, as well as any part thereof, can be input to provide functionality equivalent to an and/or search. You can also retrieve information by searching on the names of Diet Members, Ministers, government officials, witnesses, or other speakers as well as the names of political parties, the role of the speaker, the title of the speaker (such as Minister of Finance ), the date, the session number, or committee name. It is not necessary to enter an exact name or word. It is also possible to select from a list of suggestions on the screen. A list of minutes containing the specified keyword appears, from which the desired text can be selected for display. Keywords are highlighted and underlined in the displayed text. A list of speakers is always shown on the left side of the display. Multiple records can be selected for downloading by checking the boxes in the list. The system is also linked to graphical image data of the printed minutes, which can also be downloaded to view or print the minutes as they originally appeared. When first released in 2001, graphical images were stored in Tagged File Image Format (TIFF), which saved data as raster graphics images.

Fig. 2 Graphical image data of the Minutes of the Diet (proceedings of the Committee on Financial Affairs of the House of Representatives, June 22, 1966).



Visits to the Full-Text Database System for the Minutes of the Diet website have increased, and during FY2013, roughly 9,100,000 page views resulted in the viewing of about 3,160,000 pages of minutes. As of the end of FY2013, a total of approximately 183.23 GB of data was contained in the data base, and each year another 20,000 to 30,000 pages of data—about 3 to 5 GB—are added to keep the database up to date.

## 4 Database system for the Minutes of the Imperial Diet

Fig.3 The top page of the Database for the Minutes of the Imperial Diet



Here is another similar database system containing the Database for the Minutes of the Imperial Diet.

The Imperial Diet was the bicameral legislature established under the Constitution of the Empire of Japan (the Meiji Constitution) of 1889 (antecedent of the present Constitution). The first session was held in 1890, and the Imperial Diet continued to meet for over 56 years, until it was dissolved in the aftermath of World War II, to be succeeded by the National Diet based on the Constitution of Japan. (Promulgated on November 3, 1946, and effective as of May 3, 1947.)

Development of the Database for the Minutes of the Imperial Diet began at the NDL during FY2004, after development of the Full-Text Database System for the Minutes of the Diet was completed. A portion of the minutes of Imperial Diet, primarily, those meetings held just after World War II, became available in July 2005. All graphical image data for minutes from 1890 to 1947 were finally included in the Database and thus made searchable in 2010.

The database can be searched by date, session number, and speakers' names. Full-text search is also available for minutes of meetings held after the end of World War II.

The minutes of the Imperial Diet are important source of information, especially for scholars researching modern Japanese history. They are particularly valuable with regard to certain fundamental laws that were originally deliberated in the Imperial Diet yet remain in effect to this day, such as the Civil Code, Penal Code, and Health Insurance Act. Within this database are minutes that illuminate the process behind the establishment of the Constitution and laws of Japan.

By the end of FY2013, the Database for the Minutes of the Imperial Diet provides about 314,000 pages of graphical image data that is of particular interest to scholars and specialists of history.

## 5 Recent improvements to the full-text database system

Here is an explanation of some recent improvements of the Full-Text Database System for the Minutes of the Diet, made after it was released in 2001.

First, I would like to mention that the Full-text Database System for the Minutes of the Diet has been searchable via the National Diet Library Search (NDL Search) since the start of formal service of the NDL Search in January, 2012. NDL Search is an integrated search service for a variety of formats of information owned by the NDL or other institutions, including printed materials, digitized images and other resources. NDL Search enables cross-file searching of the Full-Text Database for the Minutes with other materials (books, reports, articles of the magazine, digitized information in the archive, etc.), making the texts of minutes searchable in parallel with other information resources in the library system for the very first time.

In December 2014, the Full-Text Database System was further improved with some new functions. Retrieval capacity was boosted and search response greatly improved. Keyword searches of all Diet proceedings are now processed much more quickly than before. We also made efforts to improve usability and accessibility of web content generated from the database for people with disabilities. We also added graphical images in PDF format to complement the TIFF format mentioned above. PDF offers some advantages over TIFF format, particularly since it is now used almost universally on computers worldwide. The ability to add hyperlinks in PDF files is also regarded as a merit.

Fig. 4 Information about the selection of format for output, indicated in the retrieval process of the Full-text Database System for the Minutes of the Diet.

No	回次	院名	会議名	号数	開会日付	リンク		
001	189	参議院	予算委員会	9号	平成27年03月19日	PDF	TIFF	選択閲覧
002	189	参議院	総務委員会	2号	平成27年03月19日	PDF	TIFF	選択閲覧
003	189	参議院	予算委員会	8号	平成27年03月18日	PDF	TIFF	選択閲覧
004	189	衆議院	経済産業委員会	2号	平成27年03月18日	PDF	TIFF	選択閲覧
005	189	衆議院	外務委員会	1号	平成27年03月18日	PDF	TIFF	選択閲覧
006	189	参議院	予算委員会	7号	平成27年03月17日	PDF	TIFF	選択閲覧
007	189	参議院	予算委員会	6号	平成27年03月16日	PDF	TIFF	選択閲覧

Lastly, Web API (Application Programming Interface) for searching was released on this occasion. Introduction of the Web API has enabled the connection and cooperation between the Full-text Database and other databases or digital archive systems outside the NDL. Web API enables data from the Minutes of the Diet to be used more easily when researching government policies on specific subjects, such as taxation, environmental issues, or other policies conceptualized by individual members of the Diet. The use of Web API in

conjunction with the Database of Minutes of the Diet also provides a significant body of basic data for Japanese language studies.

The cross file searching of Full-text Database for the Minutes and other materials within the NDL Search, as well as the new opportunity for the connection and cooperation with other databases using Web API, have highly expanded the public accessibility of the Full-text Database and all parliamentary information in the minutes .

The NDL hopes the further enhancement of access to parliamentary documents and information resources in addition to the minutes of Diet proceedings, and here I can mention, as one of the examples, the video recordings of House floor proceedings of both Plenary Meetings and Standing Committee Meetings included into the NDL digital material collections, in the scheme of National Diet Library (NDL) Great East Japan Earthquake Archive. This portal site is developed to enable integrated search of all kind of records and reports of the earthquake disaster on 11 March, 2011. After this major earthquake, the NDL decided to construct a special archive in cooperation with various organizations to collect and preserve records of the earthquake, including not only texts but also photographs, sounds, videos, web materials, and provide them to the public. The archive, which was first made public in March 2013, is still expanding its content, and videos of the meetings concerning the Great East Japan Earthquake, made and provided by both the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors, was included in this archive firstly in 2015. This means that the video recordings of the meeting in both Houses concerning the Great East Japan Earthquake are preserved as library collections in parallel with other various materials.

## **6 Final remarks**

As a researcher for Diet Members, we frequently find the importance and usefulness of the Database System for the Minutes of the Diet, which contains all of the contents of Diet meetings since the inauguration of the Japanese parliamentary system. The Database as well as the printed parliamentary documents is an important source of information on the Diet activities under Japan's representative system of democracy and is obviously one of the most valuable resources for those interested in political, economic, and social affairs of Japan. The NDL is committed to enhancing the accessibility and user-friendliness of this database.