

PARLIAMENTARY REPORTING IN CANADA

Charles Fisher

In May 1980, *Hansard* celebrated its centenary amid general applause. Tribute was paid to the past and the achievements of notable men were recalled. Even then, reasonably enough, speculation was turning to the likely course of parliamentary reporting in the next 100 years, especially in the light of the relatively new word processing and recording technology which is currently delighting — or upsetting — just about everybody concerned with the printed word. In this article a former parliamentary reporter and consultant to the Administrator of the House of Commons, outlines his views on the future of parliamentary reporting.

Possibly on the principle that all institutions, even venerable ones like *Hansard*, should look around from time to time and enquire how others are getting along, the Administrator of the House of Commons, Mr. Art Silverman, decided early in 1981 that the time had come to make a wide-ranging study of parliamentary reporting methods in use not only throughout Canada but in major centres abroad.

No-one who reviews reporting procedures adopted in national parliaments can fail to note the number and influence of the institutions which continue to rely on manual reporting by shorthand writers. They include — and this may come as a surprise to some — the United Kingdom, the United States Senate and House of Representatives, the United Nations, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Japanese Diet and Australia. All these institutions, on the surface at least, are still using the methods which served so well in 1881, save that the fountain pen has replaced the quill and that the typewriter, one supposes, has everywhere superseded transcription in longhand. Which shows, of course, how effective those methods have proved themselves to be.

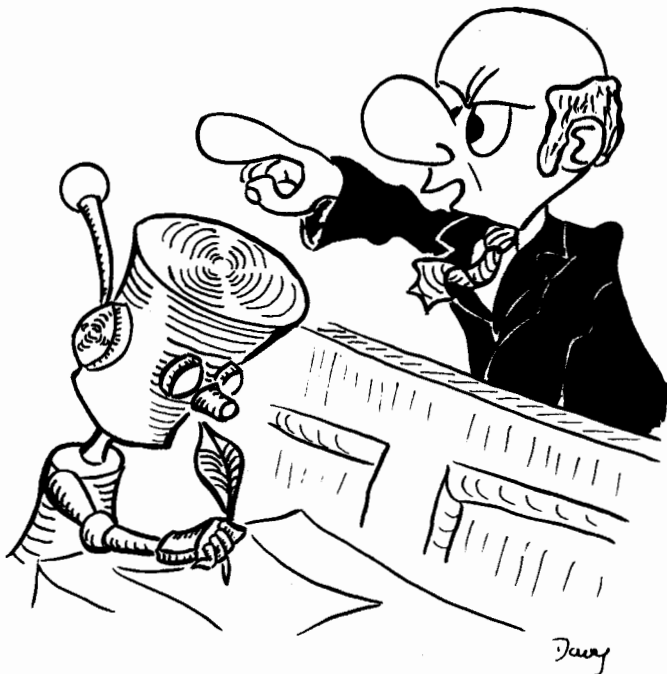
One should be cautious, though, before assuming that nothing of importance has changed. Reporters nowadays, as everyone knows, have access to an important resource which was not formerly available. In this generation they may, for the first time, turn to a taped record and reconsider precisely what was said, no matter how rapid the speaker or how garbled his syntax.

At the very least, then, the tape is a marvelous aid to reporting along traditional lines. It is not an unalloyed blessing, though, mainly because the tape, presumably free from "error" and readily available — for comparison purposes, let us say — to all who are interested, is very often incompatible with "good" parliamentary reporting (judged by standards of the past) which has never, for sound literary and other reasons, been as verbatim as many have supposed. Undoubtedly the use or availability of the tape has influenced parliamentary reporting a great deal and one effect has been a trend toward strictly verbal accuracy at the expense of style or meaning. Another has been to slow up the process of transcription: the old hands were "whizzes" and there seem fewer of them today as note-books take second place to tapes (except, predictably enough, in the United Kingdom House of Commons where the Speaker has ruled to the contrary in a gallant show of support for tradition).

Editors with long experience, for example the editors of *Hansard* in the House of Lords, claim that no electronic system yet devised can replace the judgment of an experienced reporter. On the other hand, editors of Canadian provincial *Hansards* point with pride to their electronically-generated records produced on the basis of advanced electronic equipment. And no-one suggests that these are not satisfactory to all concerned. It depends, one must suppose, upon the nature of the record which is demanded (or "deemed" to be demanded) by the legislators concerned.

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In this area of electronic aids generally, the methods pioneered and successfully established by the provinces, especially in Quebec and Ontario where increasingly heavy workloads are now being handled, seem bound before long to influence the practice elsewhere. Despite the traditional conservatism of national parliaments it is hard to believe that transcription and editing "on screen", computer storage of information, direct transmission of text to printing machinery via interface and, indeed, the whole parcel of "informatics" will not become a commonplace of reporting office procedures during the eighties. Though this is not the situation at the present time, one cannot imagine a busy and vital service remaining as a Dickensian enclave while elsewhere people are pouring words like beads from one column to another, editing, inserting and aligning at the touch of a few buttons. We all remember what happened to Widow Partington.



The new equipment will make the work easier; it may also make production less expensive, particularly at the printing end. But all this (for the writer, at least) is incidental to the more interesting question which arises when the record is founded directly on what is heard from a cassette rather than on a reporter's transcript? It is: what kind of *Hansard* will be acceptable, say in the next 20 years or so, to members of Parliament and the

public generally, bearing in mind our changing perceptions of both the spoken and the written word? The question is far from academic. For one thing, it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit people who combine a good knowledge of parliamentary procedure with a feeling for language, a great deal of general knowledge and the ability to write shorthand under stress at a speed of 250 words a minute on occasion. In an age in which the oratory of a Burke or a Lloyd George is only a memory and may even seem out of place, would not the strictly verbatim record, perhaps with minimal editing, be sufficient for all reasonable purposes?

It is not hard to see the assumption upon which the scientists are proceeding. Pressed to predict when voice-driven typewriters will appear, an IBM speech-processing consultant writing for a widely read scientific journal said: "If funding is maintained at a fairly high level, we can reasonably expect to have usable continuous-speech-recognition systems and large vocabularies in fifteen or twenty years."

Finally, in case some might think this IBM prophecy ushers in the millenium metaphorically as well as literally, here is part of the verbatim report of a speech made recently before a body which, although sufficiently august, need not be identified; it will illustrate the dilemma in which *Hansard* editors all over the world so often find themselves and perhaps it will suggest the shape of things to come.

Now Sir, in conclusion, I humbly submit that the dilemma for the resolution of the conscience outlook is the only remedy. It is said that abhorrence for the learned in his infidelities and the inept in his devotions — our times are impatient of both especially of the last. Let us not be pestered with assertions and half-truths, with emotion and scuffle. In closing decades of 20th century, these cannot conceivably solve any problem and indeed it is the source of positive danger to mankind — or words to that effect.

It declares that this community of interest, in interests makes all men, otherwise differently interested partners in the great enterprise of replacing evil with good and good with better, so as to achieve best possible. It is a proverb that to cut the cackles is never conducive to the mankind. Also it is not humanitarian to be with faraggo of twisted facts. God save us from the sprangles of cataclysm... And the scuttles of this ship should be repaired expeditiously by this august body. It is said that one man's mickle is another's muckle.

Sir, I greatly appreciate and express my warm gratitude to you by giving me the floor of this august house. Well, whatever happens we can all say amen to that!