Computers to Revolutionize the Hill

Jack Ellis MP

Since 1981, the members of the sub-committee on Telephone and Computer Services, Robert Daudlin (Liberal-Essex Kent), Laverne Lewycky (NDP, Dauphin), and myself have been concentrating on the initiation of an Office Automation Systems and Information Services project, known as OASIS.

The OASIS project is intended as a support system for Members of Parliament and uses Local Area Network (LAN) technology. The project would not have been possible without the co-operation and very able guidance of the Administrator of the House of Commons, Arthur Silverman, and his Director of Support Services, Robert Desrameaux. However since the administration does not have and would not likely have in the future, experts in this particular area, two staff were seconded from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Juris Mazutis and Jim Phillips. With their total concentration on this project we have achieved the accomplishment to date.

The beginning of the project coincided with the availability of, and the formal implementation of word processing facilities for Members of Parliament and administrative support staff. The word processors themselves have been a tremendous boon to members and over one hundred are now in operation in the various parliamentary buildings. The OASIS project goes much further addressing itself to the areas of word-processing, electronic data processing and retrieval, electronic mail, access to regular communications networks such as telex, access to publicly available and governmental data bases and television services, including those generated within the House of Commons. In addition, in the administrative area, it will provide management information, financial control, payroll, Hansard production, committee reporting; all of which, will enhance the role of the Member of Parliament.

During March of 1983 a full service demonstration facility was brought on stream and by 1985 we hope to make available a full range of services to those Members of Parliament who wish to benefit from it. All of the parliamentary buildings will be wired so that every office will have the service availability, but only those members who request the service will receive it. It is completely optional. In addition, as members move from office to office, either at election time or for any other reason, the only necessity will be to change the code name within the soft-ware of the system to allow messages to travel to the member's new office.

Those members who opt for the service will have access to and receive a wide variety of information provided to them in their offices on their television set as well as their word processor and its' printer. The member will have on his desk for his personal use a display phone manufactured by Northern Telecom which will be able to access the same data as the word processor and the television set. It is important to note that while the technology for this project is new, the equipment to provide the services are all off-the-shelf items; the majority of them manufactured in Canada. By way of example, a member will have direct electronic access to all or specific Members of Parliament, his or her particular party research bureau, their riding office, the Library of Parliament, governmental departments, Hansard, oral and written questions, in fact, access and retrieval of information from any commercial information source in North America.

Furthermore, a member may call up and see on a television screen in his own office, any speech, question or intervention made in the House of Commons since proceedings were first televised. Actual, live proceedings may be selected for viewing with French or English translation or in the floor language. If television coverage of committees is made available in the future, they too will be subject to similar type of office viewing. Until video coverage of committees is sanctioned, we anticipate that members will be provided the right to monitor the audio portion of such proceedings. The usual complement of commercial cable programmes will also be made available on the network for members.

Government departments, such as Statistics Canada, are prepared to provide statistical information directly to each member's office to the word processor, through the electronic mail facility and to the television set via a Telidon inter-connection. Statistics such as unemployment, the GNP, and the Consumer Price Indices, will be provided directly to members. A similar process will be available for the Hansard and any information or statistics may be printed at the request of the member. Part of the reason for doing this is obvious. There will be far less paper delivered to every member and the ability to obtain this information quickly and economically will be greatly enhanced.

A great deal of this information is now sent to all members and a considerable majority of them immediately discard it because there is no way you can cope with the amount of paper coming to your office each and every day. Because members are not provided with selected information, many suffer from an information over-load.
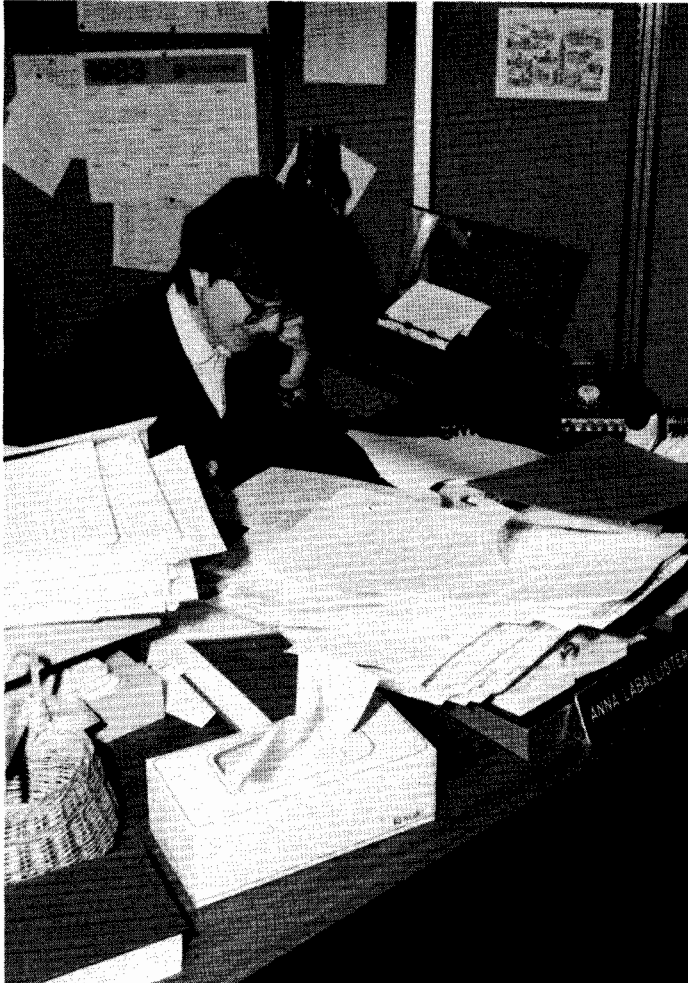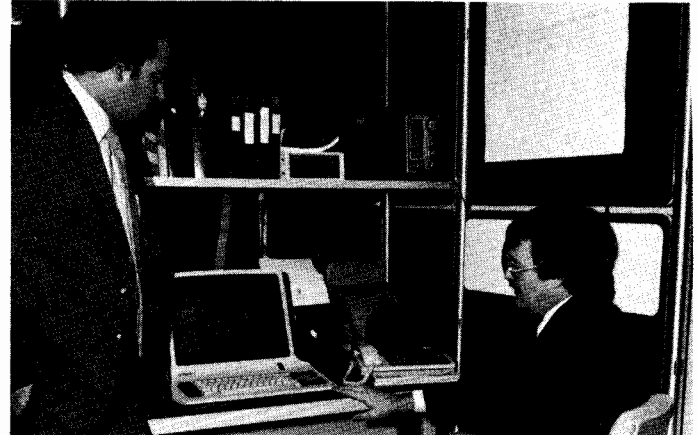
Jack Ellis is the Member of Parliament for Prince Edward-Hastings. For the past four years he has chaired the sub-committee on Telephone and Computer Services of the Management and Members' Services Committee.

Parliamentary offices are sinking in a sea of paper *(Martine Bresson)*

One of the more attractive features will be the ability of any member or his staff to access telex facilities and connect with telex receiving stations anywhere in the world. Another helpful feature will be the availability of a continuous television display of committee schedules, official bulletins, together with access to training films.

The OASIS project will also make available clips from all of the preceding evening's television news reports. Just as each member receives clipping services from the print media, they will be able to check a channel on their television set and find repeated, over and over, during a specific time slot, a digest of the previous days television news. Finally, in this context, any press conferences in the National Press Building will be available to members in their individual offices. A number of these latter facilities will also be available in the lounges off the House of Commons, so that members on House duty will also be able to slip out and view certain items.

The electronic mail capacity means that if a document or letter comes to the riding office that our staff feels is particularly important, we will retype its contents and electronically forward it to our Ottawa office for viewing/printing almost immediately. Routine
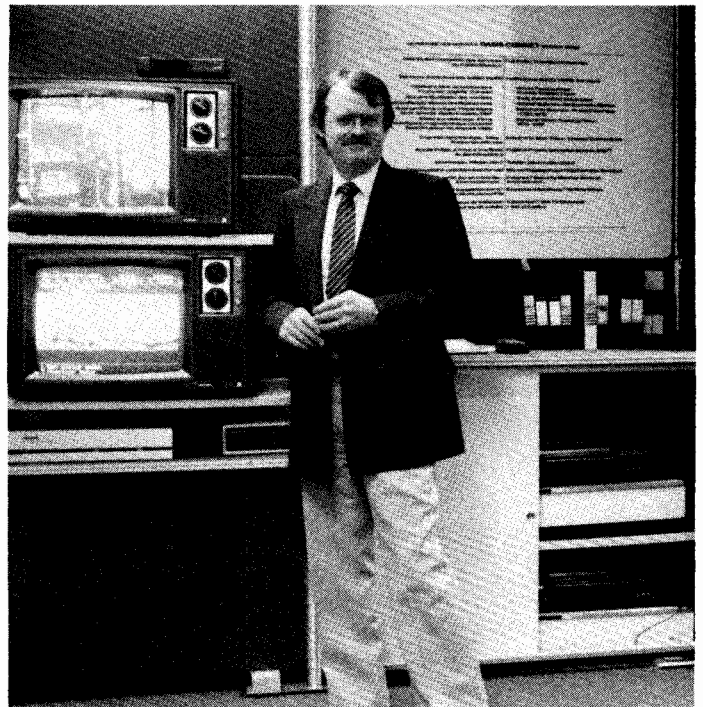
type letters may be originated at either end and printed at the opposite end, depending on where the member is working from on that particular day. With few exceptions, regardless of our location, we can keep in touch with our riding offices and our Ottawa offices in the same fashion. Should a Party Whip wish to contact any or all

Jim Phillips (right) of OASIS demonstrating electronic mail function and display telephone to incredulous editor. *(Martine Bresson)*

members of his party, he has but to forward such messages or information, regardless of time zones, to our electronic mail boxes for a recall and acknowledgement without having an established voice contact.

This is but a very brief look at something some of us on the Hill are very excited about.

OASIS will give members instantaneous access to Telidon, House of Commons television broadcasts and a host of other information. *(Martine Bresson)*

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