

**REPORT OF THE FIFTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE
BRITISH-IRISH PARLIAMENTARY REPORTING
ASSOCIATION**

**ADRODDIAD PUMED CYNHADLEDD FLYNYDDOL
CYMDEITHAS GOFNODI SENEDDOL PRYDAIN-IWERDDON**

Held in the National Assembly for Wales on Sunday 10,
Monday 11 and Tuesday 12 September 2006

Cynhaliwyd yng Nghynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru ar ddydd Sul 10,
dydd Llun 11 a dydd Mawrth 12 Medi 2006

The BIPRA constitution states:

'The association shall endeavour to hold an annual conference which will be attended by delegations...of the member organisations...representative of all sections of the staff of those organisations.'

DELEGATES

Scottish Parliament (SP)

Stuart Dixon
Carol-Anne Frame
Henrietta Hales
Simon McCartin

Houses of the Oireachtas (OIR)

Colin Fleming
Carl Lombard
Aisling Maguire
Cliona McGovern

States of Jersey (Jers)

Peter Monamy

House of Commons (HoC)

Cara Clark
Joanna Dodd
Alasdair Mackenzie
Caroline Rowlands
Pauline Simpson
Fiona Stevenson
Vivian Widgery

House of Lords (HoL)

Belinda Franzmann
Patrick Marsh
Simon Page
Brian Tottle
Liz Watterson
Gareth Wigmore
Ben Woodhams

Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA)

Simon Burrowes
Brendan Doherty

Tynwald (Tyn)

Clive Alford

National Assembly for Wales (NAfW)

Ffion Emyr Bourton
Meinir Harris
Mair Parry-Jones
Meleri Perkins
Iolo Roberts
Sarita Thompson
Iona Warmington
Shôn Williams

Sunday 10 September

Reception

The conference opened with an evening reception at the Senedd. The Presiding Officer of the National Assembly for Wales, Lord Dafydd Elis-Thomas, welcomed delegates and spoke of the importance of the official report. Entertainment was provided by Iona Warmington on the harp. Delegates were given a tour of the new building by NAFW staff.

Monday 11 September

Opening of Conference

The conference was officially opened by Paul Silk, Clerk to the National Assembly for Wales.

Session 1—A Year in the Life

The first session was chaired by Gwen Parry, Director of Assembly Communications Service, NAFW. It consisted of a series of presentations by the representative bodies on the main challenges and developments they had faced during the past year.

National Assembly for Wales

Iolo Roberts said the past year had been an extremely busy and exciting one for the staff of the Assembly and that the opening of the new building had had the greatest influence on the work of the staff, who had quickly settled in. The Senedd was officially opened by HM The Queen on 1 March, although staff had been using its facilities since the start of the year, initially in the committee rooms and later in the Chamber. It is a superb building and delegate packs included some information on different aspects of it. However, there were some minor technical problems which took time to solve. Technology housed in undercrofts was affecting the sound systems in the committee rooms. That led to problems in hearing proceedings and for the first time the word ‘inaudible’ appeared in the record. This never happened in the old building. However, the problems have now been solved, following the establishment of new systems during the summer. Matters will improve in the new term.

Due to the distance between the Chamber and offices there has been a change in work practices. Various options for logging in the Chamber and committee rooms have been tried in coming up with new ideas to suit everyone. Logs of 10 minutes rather than five are now taken in the Chamber and minor amendments were made as the year progressed.

The other side of the coin has been the thrill of working in such a fabulous new building as the Senedd. It is an iconic building and it is a privilege to work in it.

On work levels, output has increased in the past year following the establishment of ad hoc committees to deal with such matters as the ‘Better Governance for Wales’ White Paper, school funding, and rail infrastructure and improved passenger services. While some deadlines were missed, staff still managed to publish the records for which they were responsible by the end of the first week of the recess, despite the increase in workload. Over the summer term they produced 60 records, of 2,255,046 words, with a team of only 15. This worked out at 150,000 words each during the period.

To meet the increased workload, more staff will be recruited. Iolo said they had always complained that they were not able to fill vacant posts. They had only looked for people who could work in Welsh and English, which meant they were working from a very small pool. Usually there were no more than about six applicants for these posts. Recently a decision was taken to recruit staff to work in English only. On this occasion there were 106 applicants for two such posts, of whom 19 were tested. Iolo said they hoped to fill the two posts and form a reserve list following this process.

This was the year of the babies. Whereas Iolo had previously been the only parent on the team, three members of staff have either given birth or are expecting babies this year, thus ensuring the next generation of reporters.

There was a by-election during the year following the untimely passing of Peter Law whose widow, Trish, was elected as an Independent Member. Iolo said it had been good practice for the general election to be held next May.

House of Commons

Vivian Widgery said it had been a long session. Life has been interesting in the new Parliament since the general election held in May 2005. The Labour Government has had a slow start in its third term; perhaps it is running out of ideas. The first year of a new Parliament is usually busy, but this quiet start has been a help to Hansard staff. There have been many developments, of which the most important is that Hansard staff are taking on select committee work. After a long period of testing, it had been agreed with the Clerks Department that Hansard would initially report two select committees, examining the work of departments. Hansard hopes that, eventually, its staff will report all of them, which will be good for Reporters as it will offer more opportunities to do different work.

There is a new grade of reporter, the Westminster Hall reporter, who reports parallel chamber debates. This has been a great success and Vivian said they were pleased with how well things had worked out.

A new unit, the Hansard pagination unit, had been set up. This took all the copy from all the different aspects of Hansard work—Chamber, Westminster Hall, Committees and Written Answers—and made it camera ready before sending it to the printer. Once fully operational, this would bring huge savings, as it greatly reduced the amount of work that the printers had to do before printing. It would also help with indexing.

Another development was the move to more hybrid committees—partly select committee and partly standing committee—which first examined and took evidence on the purposes of a Bill, and then examined the details of it in the normal, standing-committee way. As it is pleased with the results of an experiment earlier in the year, it is probable that the House will recommend that more Bills be subject to this procedure. That, again, would mean more but varied work for Hansard staff.

On other parts of the change programme in place, there are now only two deputy editors, instead of three.

There have been interesting developments within the House of Commons. For the first time ever there is a particular department which crosses all departments, not only of the House of Commons, but also of the House of Lords—shock horror. IT services are now provided by one central body. We cannot do our job these days without IT systems, and we are very dependent on those who provide such services. All in Hansard had had a good working relationship with the dedicated IT staff who worked within the department. They have now all moved to the new PICT Department, which provides IT services throughout Parliament. It is a bit of a faceless monolith, but Vivian hopes matters will work out. All in all, it has been an interesting year.

House of Lords

Patrick Marsh said the House of Lords was an institution ‘synonymous with radical change and innovation’. He had lots of things to report for the year. Lords reform is a work in progress and represents unfinished business. It is difficult to know where it is going to go next or what the shape of the House will be.

In the time remaining, Prime Minister Blair would like to bring about more change, unless of course it gives him some trouble, as it has in recent years on such issues as hunting and anti-terror legislation. The constitution and composition of the House may change in the not-too-distant future, with perhaps some or all Members being elected.

One decision the House made was to appoint a Speaker—the new office of Lord Speaker. The Lord Chancellor used to preside over debates, although he was an adornment in the House with seventeenth century customs. However, he had very little or no power over proceedings in the House. Reporters thought that when the new office was created, things might change and debates would be more concise. In fact, the Lords who decided on the powers of the new Speaker have created an office with all the pomp and circumstance of the Commons Speaker. However, there is no power to intervene and control debates. As a consequence, the creation of the new office may well make little difference to the work of reporters in the Chamber.

In autumn 2005 there was a series of staff changes. There is a new editor, Simon Nicholls, and a new deputy editor. A new grade of managing editor has also been created. With appointments at reporter level, the staffing level is now up to complement. The new post of managing editor was created by merging the existing posts of assistant editor and chief reporter. It is a very interesting position and the seven holders of the new post have a varied range of duties, being responsible on a rotation basis for subbing, the training of new and freelance staff, leading Grand Committee reporter teams and the line management of reporters. There are now 16 reporters, with three being appointed this year to fill vacancies.

There are also 5 administrative and IT staff. On IT, there is now a central support body. The viability of voice recognition software continues to be researched, not just for use by staff with RSI problems but also for use by all staff. Where work demands allow, all members of staff are being given the opportunity to try out the Dragon voice recognition software. Such software may be the future for Hansard and there are advantages and disadvantages. Five members of staff use it all the time because of worries about RSI. This gives rise to staff management issues, including the quality of software used and the requirement for extra space to cope with interruptions and background noise.

This year there is a new in-house pagination unit. Prior to this, the task was done by the Stationery Office but it is now completed by staff who work for Hansard. As a result, the process is more flexible. In identifying problems it is a help if a person is part of the team rather than across the river in another building.

There was a number of very successful staff exchanges with the House of Commons, the Tynwald, the States of Jersey and the Oireachtas. However, more flexibility may be needed.

There is an increased committee workload with more Bills being referred to Grand Committees. While this reduces pressure in the Chamber, it creates staffing difficulties in the sense that there is a heavy reliance on freelance staff on certain sitting days.

Scottish Parliament

Henrietta Hales used a CD ROM in making her presentation. On staffing matters, a sub-editor, Will Humphreys-Jones, left for the House of Lords this year. Simon McCartin was promoted to sub-editor, while Rob Littlejohn joined the Scottish Parliament from the House of Commons. A new IT liaison officer was also recruited. Two reporters from the Northern Ireland Assembly worked with the Scottish Parliament—Tom Clarke and Bronagh Allison. There was also a successful exchange with the Oireachtas. Finín O'Driscoll travelled to Scotland, while James Galbraith went to Dublin. Henrietta said they were now up to their complement.

There were a couple of away days at the end of the summer recess to North Berwick in 2005 and Tynninghame village hall this year, which was a bargain at £60. There were working sessions, followed by activities in the afternoon. Subjects discussed included: the office environment; working practices; audience and accessibility; communication and decision-making; election planning and the next session. There was also a question and answer session with Henrietta and Stephen.

Henrietta said it had been a very busy year. There were 484 public committee meetings, including 55 Private Bill committee meetings. The year was dominated by Private Bills. There were 11 remote committee meetings in places such as Stornoway, Dundee, Paisley, Airdrie, Galashiels, Inverness (twice) and Motherwell.

Proceedings were reported on a major inquiry on the Scottish Criminal Office. This entailed detailed discussion of slides of fingerprints, which made it a nightmare to report, as can be seen from the following extract:

'If we follow lines here, we end up at this point; if we follow this other line, we end up here. As you can see, on the way, two lines stop - that is very clear.'

The average number of working days was 4.1, while the number of hours of proceedings reported was 895:31. Target 1 is to publish 90 per cent of reports of committees that meet weekly or less frequently at least one working day before their next meeting. Some 380 reports—78.5 per cent—were published at least one working day before the committee's next meeting; 70 reports—18.6 per cent—were published on the day of the committee's next meeting; 25 reports—5.1 per cent—were published the day after the committee's next meeting, while nine reports—1.8 per cent—were published more than one day after the committee's next meeting. Target 2 is to publish all reports within seven working days. Some 450 reports—92.8 per cent—were published within this deadline.

Henrietta referred to the Chamber roof and read the following extract from the contribution of the Deputy Presiding Officer:

'There is some conflicting intelligence on what we should do at this point about the problem that occurred earlier with the chamber roof. In order for the situation to be resolved, there will be a suspension.'

The incident with the strut occurred on 2 March. Members carried on talking but then suspended. Parliamentary proceedings in plenary session relocated first to the Hub for a couple of weeks and then to one of the committee rooms. This presented many challenges for reporters who were now more visible but it was good from the point of view of raising profile. The roof has now been repaired and business resumed in the Chamber on Wednesday, 6 September.

Henrietta said their chief source of entertainment over the summer recess had been Tommy Sheridan, MSP, who had won his defamation case against the News of the World which had claimed that he was a serial adulterer and swinger who had used drugs. Sheridan represented himself and said his victory was the equivalent of Gretna FC beating Real Madrid on penalties. The tabloid was ordered to pay £200,000 in damages. The fall-out from the case continues. Sheridan accused fellow socialists who had given evidence against him in the trial of being scabs and has set up his own party, the Solidarity Group.

Henrietta said Edinburgh had hosted CowParade this year; Parliament's was called Salty the Saltire. The auction of cows was held on Thursday, 7 September and Salty's expected price was £5,000 to £6,000. It was bought by Vladimir Romanov, the owner of Hearts Football

Club, for £15,000, the highest price paid for a CowParade cow. He plans to present it to George Reid.

A Saltier that usually has its place flying at Holyrood is set to go on a unique journey as part of a space shuttle mission. The flag will be carried into space by British born NASA astronaut Nick Patrick in recognition of his support for the Careers Scotland Space School. It will be flown during a mission scheduled for December and will be officially presented back to the Scottish Parliament upon Mr. Patrick's return.

Henrietta said the second Festival of Politics had been held during the summer at the end of the recess and had been a huge success. There were over 9,000 visitors and Official Report staff helped out—Carol-Anne was one of the events managers. The festival was held over four days and there were 43 events, including 'Understanding the Middle East'; Lung Ha Theatre Company—a group of disabled actors; Sangeet Mala—Scotland's first Asian language musical group; The Road to the Union, Whose Climate is it Anyway—café politique. Big names at the festival included Tam Dalyell, Rachel Elnaugh of Dragon's Den, Sir Menzies Campbell, Armando Iannucci, Dr. Tommie Steward, Dan Snow and George Alagiah.

Henrietta ended on an amusing note. The Public Petitions Committee met in Jedburgh on Monday, 26 June. As there was no ISDN link, the recordings were placed in a van and transported to Edinburgh and left overnight outside someone's house. They were never seen again. A press release was issued—no records, no Official Report—and various newspapers reported the story: *Thieves snatch Holyrood records; MSPs lost for words in stolen recording, Record break-in*. The parliamentary sketchwriter commented that it might reappear somewhere as a bootleg and fetch a fortune from collectors of occult ephemera. The message on the web was: *publication delayed due to loss of sound recording*.

Houses of the Oireachtas

Carl Lombard said staff in the Debates Office were entering an election year. By the time the next conference is held, an election will have been called, probably in April or May 2007 but there is no certainty about this.

On sittings, it had been another busy year. In 2005 the Dáil sat for 744 hours, the Seanad for 469 and the committees for 950 approximately. The figures for 2004 were 840, 540 and 900 approximately.

On staff exchanges, it was a case of the two O'Donoghues in respect of the House of Lords, with Jim coming to Dublin and Dave going to London. Finín O'Driscoll travelled to the Scottish Parliament, while James Galbraith came to Dublin.

The staff complement remains unchanged. There are still 40 reporters, seven assistant editors, 3 deputy editors and one editor. Contact is being made with the Public Appointments Service to call more candidates for test and interview.

Carl said that in May staff in the Debates Office had lost one of their colleagues, Breda Courtney, who died unexpectedly during the session. She had been a Parliamentary Reporter since 1996 but staff in the office had to keep the show on the road. There were expressions of sympathy in both Houses and the daily books were given to the family. She was a great colleague and a great loss to all.

On IT, Carl said the Debates Office was working towards the creation of a common XML platform. An XML authoring tool specification is being drafted. This is a very difficult task. It is expected that the new system will be tested in the intermission following the general election next summer.

On written answers, there has been a change in approach. Replies from departments are no longer being edited. In 2005, 33,600 questions tabled for written reply were answered. The figure for 2003 was 26,000. Therefore, the number is increasing exponentially. Written answers are contained in daily books and bound volumes with the following disclaimer:

The following are questions tabled by Members for written response and the ministerial replies as received on the day from the Departments [Unrevised].

Various options are being considered such as posting to a different part of the website and publication in a separate volume. Resources saved are used in reporting committee proceedings. The transcripts of proceedings of committees which meet on Tuesday and Wednesday are almost always on the web by Friday.

On the business continuity plan, there is a need to identify and prioritise key areas of operations such as sound recording, draft Official Report and the editing of takes. There is a need to identify a sustainable outage period, for example, nothing, one hour or one day. There is a need to identify key internal and third party staff in case of emergency. Different scenarios were envisaged, such as moving to an alternative site. Critical staff numbers required would be 1.8 sound recording staff, 22 reporters, four editors and three editorial support staff. There is a need to identify the equipment that would be required such as PCs, telephones, printers, chairs and tables. Under the heading of emergency planning, consideration was given to bird flu.

Under section 14(4)(b) of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Act 2003, the Secretary General is required to be in a position to give evidence in committee on ‘the economy and efficiency of the Commission in the use of its resources’. To meet this obligation, an efficiency programme was initiated in the office in later 2004, resulting in an initial report being approved by the management committee on 27 June 2005.

The Oireachtas was compared with the House of Commons, the House of Lords, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, the Australian House of Commons and Senate, the assemblies in Queensland and New South Wales, as well the New Zealand Parliament. The following ratios were used: staff numbers/number of sitting days; staff numbers/number of written answers; staff numbers/number of Members and staff numbers/hours of debate. The Oireachtas measured up quite well, with the proviso that parliaments operate to different objectives. Data for the Debates Office will continue to be collected to develop a more advanced method of analysis, recognising that the office is reactive to workload determined by the length of debates and the number of written answers. The overall outcome must also be viewed against past performance. There is, therefore, a need to measure output year on year. This may be the best indicator of performance, rather than measuring against other parliaments, as everybody does things differently.

Eight recommendations were listed in the efficiency audit published in August. These included examining web use—according to the Pareto principle, 80 per cent of people look at 20 per cent of material—identifying the most popular areas and concentrating on their early publication; identifying ways of using savings made on written answers to improve efficiency in respect of committee proceedings output; and developing a more advanced system for collating and analysing data to identify efficiencies.

Carl referred to the latest national agreement, Towards 2016, under which there will be phased pay increases in return for the implementation of action plans. Certain productivity targets have to be met by specific dates. The action plan for the first phase—3 per cent—has been drawn up. This includes improvements in the sound system in the Chamber—a backup system, sound mixing system and replacement of sound servers; the publication of an

information leaflet for Members and others on services provided by the Debates Office; the implementation and development of the XML platform; identification of efficiencies and savings to be made in dealing with written answers, and the development of atypical working arrangements for reporting staff in the light of the requirements of the Houses. The five staff in question work a three day week and work mainly on committees. The plan is that they will do one day each week in the Houses to keep up to speed.

On the XML common platform, the plan is that every section in the Oireachtas will work on the same platform; it will be a matter of write once, read many times. In this way, the same information will be used by the Bills Office, the Journal Office and the Debates Office. The aim is to test the system during the intermission next year. A colour coding system will be used. In this way, if an amendment is created, the Debates Office will be able to take it directly from the Bills Office as if using a colour card. One will know whether one is dealing with a piece of text from a debate or an amendment, a subsection, or a paragraph, etc. The system will also be used in translating Bills into Irish.

On written answers, Carl reiterated the decision to stop editing. The Debates Office is telling departments that they are now responsible for content. As a consequence, if they wish to change a reply, they must issue a new one, rather than ask the Debates Office to change the record.

Carl mentioned that a sum equal to 1 per cent of the total salaries of Debates Office staff was allocated to certain members of staff of the Debates Office who performed specific extra tasks. Those translating into Irish and inputting changes in XML, as well as the training officer and two other Assistant editors, now receive an extra allowance. In this way, those translating work into Irish receive some remuneration in return.

The Tynwald

Clive Alford said one should not ask for a written version of Hansard, as it would not be ready for two weeks. There are lots of exciting things happening in other jurisdictions, but he could not say the same. There are no constitutional changes, but not for the want of trying. Neither were there any away days, nor wonderful ideas. While this sounds frightful, mercifully there were no audits. Those are the negative points.

There will be an election on 23 November. As a consequence, Members are making sure they are heard and on the record in Hansard with excessive verbiage. Mercifully, there is a long summer break to catch up and Hansard staff are doing so rapidly. There is potential for quite a few new Members, as 40 candidates are standing for election for the 24 seats in the House of Keys, which should make for an interesting election, Clive's first since taking up the job.

There is a new electoral roll and many have found that they are not included in the Tynwald MHKs, thus reducing the size of the electorate for the election. Some 10,000 names have disappeared off the roll because people did not send back the form with the right name. Thankfully, Clive and his wife are included. Much legislation is adapted straight from the United Kingdom. There was a Bill about the electoral roll and on this occasion there was a slight error. A copy of the roll is placed in the British Library. A copy also went to the Manx museum library; it should have been placed in the Tynwald library. An amendment to the Bill is awaited.

With the general election focusing attention, there has been an increase in the number of select committees this year, with sessions throughout August.

Hansard staff moved into their new offices in July—the refurbished old ones. For the most part, they are very comfortable, apart from those of the editor who has complained about

‘nasty things on the wall’. However, there has been a lack of activity in solving the problem. It is hoped something will happen eventually and that Ian will get a new office.

There are only five members of staff, but Clive said they had a good team at the moment. The services of the office team of typists are still used in transcribing. There were 15 at one point, but three have left for full-time positions.

Clive said the use of voice recognition technology was being looked at in producing Hansard. As a result, he was interested in the session due to take place the following day on the subject. He said he would provide an update on progress made, if relevant, at that time.

States of Jersey

Peter Monamy said it was great to be in Cardiff—Iolo had told him so—especially as it appeared to be five hours and five minutes ahead of the rest of Wales, according to the clocks on the Chamber wall. He knew that the National Assembly of Wales was ahead of its time, but he did not realise by just how much.

In Jersey it has been a year of two halves. The old and tried system of last year has been replaced by a system of scrutiny which, in theory, is more transparent.

Peter is one of the staff in Jersey dealing with the Official Report (Hansard), but only on the parliamentary side. The scrutiny function is separate. Transcription is undertaken in New Zealand through a London-based firm. Audio is uploaded onto the web and text is e-mailed back. Editing is not extensive. Colleagues would prefer much more, but there is a view on the scrutiny side that transcription should be ‘warts and all’. Recording is made using four channels.

There is a new ministerial system, with effect from December 2005 following the elections. It is all very new and Peter did not know how it will work out. Material is being produced within timescale—within a fortnight. There are no dedicated staff for the Official Report. The autumn session started on 11 September, with the first business plan produced by Ministers. The Parliament normally meets one day a week, but extra sittings, possibly on Fridays, are planned. Peter said they were still learning and would learn even more.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Brendan Doherty delivered the following presentation:

If I’d been informed in March of this year that I’d be responsible for delivering the Northern Ireland Assembly Hansard’s contribution to ‘A Year in the Life’ at BIPRA, I’d have thought, ‘Great—I can get away with simply saying, ‘In case you hadn’t gathered from the 2003, 2004 and 2005 conferences, WE. ARE. STILL. STILL. SUSPENDED. PEOPLE. DON’T. YOU. GET. IT? NOTHING’S HAPPENED.’” And promptly sat down again. To rapturous applause, of course. Or at least stunned silence, and a frosty stare from Simon.

If I’d wanted to be really diligent and conscientious, I could’ve simply dusted off contributions from the aforementioned past three years, tweaked a few dates, massaged a figure—or two or three—and none of you here present would’ve been any the wiser. I could even have updated and reprised my very own ‘A year in the Life’ presentation that I almost remember giving in the Isle of Man in 2004. I could’ve turned up here resembling one of our MLAs—more than prepared to avail myself of opulent surroundings without having to do a tap of work to justify my stay. Although, that said, Big Ian would undoubtedly look better in trunks in the spa. But, no, it wasn’t to be. Peter Hain preferred to mock me—I had to prepare a presentation from scratch, and, to add insult to injury, he expected me to deliver it in his other bailiwick/personal fiefdom.

So what happened? We went from this (SLIDE 1: The Assembly is currently suspended) to this (SLIDE 2: Order Paper for 15 May 2006). Folks, I am glad all of you are sitting down, because this may come as a shock to some of you: Northern Ireland Assembly Hansard has actually had some real work to do since BIPRA 2005. Only since May, mind! The year was progressing in much the same vein as before—this time last year, we were covering hearings for the Northern Ireland Boundary Commission in Belfast, Ballymena and Newcastle. That's Newcastle, Co Down, by the way, for those of you who may be confused or simply geographically challenged. No, Tyneside isn't about to become our nineteenth constituency.

2005 also saw a number of our staff, myself included, travelling to other legislatures—the House of Commons, the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament in particular—to improve our rusty skills, pick the brains of our gainfully employed colleagues, steal the designs for 4G digital-audio technology, that sort of thing. On a personal note, among my favourite moments on secondment to the House of Commons were the occasions on which I was called on by Fiona Stephenson to decipher what one of Northern Ireland's finest had just said in Committee. It got to the stage where Fiona would just ring, say my name, and I'd hotfoot it to the Turret team's room to help spell 'Magherafelt', or whatever. I also spent a lovely, albeit way too brief, two weeks in Wales assisting with training.

Other colleagues' experiences could've come straight out of 'Tom Brown's Schooldays'. One Edinburgh exile—let's call him Tom Clarke—penned this tender epistle to Simon while away:

Simon,

Just a few words to let you know that I am all right and that you can take a short break from the ceaseless prayer vigil that you are keeping for me. I have spent the past few days shadowing Stuart Dixon's turns. Fiona then goes through them with me. Later this afternoon I do a turn in the House, a real one I think.

Everyone has been very kind and endlessly patient; they're a nice bunch. The new parliament is fantastic; it's spacious and clean and light floods in from every angle. The only thing that kind of daunts me (one of the many things that kind of daunt me, to be honest) is the software. It's very advanced. We were doing a committee yesterday, and everything, and I mean everything—witness statements, committee reports, evidence accounts—was kept in a folder for that committee. No chasing after members or committee staff pleading with them to give you statements or speeches; it's all there at your fingertips. I am, as you may know, Simon, no technology buff, but even I can appreciate the advantages of using a computer that works when it's supposed to and is really fast into the bargain.

The flat in St Stephen Street is fantastic. It has acres of space and brilliant views over the city, and it is in an up-and-coming part of the town. I'm quids in.

Try to struggle on without me. I have forgotten shitloads about editing in the past three years. If and when we ever get back up and running there is going to be a mountain of rust to be scraped off our editing abilities.

Tom.

I'm not sure whether 'shitloads' is a technical term.

Those who got away were the lucky ones. Many of our other staff remained seconded to Civil Service Departments, while the rest had to come up with valid excuses for turning down such exciting and life-affirming career opportunities as giving tours of the Maze Prison site and transcribing work in the coroner's office. There was stiff competition for that post, let me tell you.

January 2006 brought fresh hope. Would this be our year? So it seemed. Within a week of coming back from the Christmas recess, Stormont was filled with competent, erudite,

moderate and accommodating politicians. Unfortunately, most of their voices had yet to break—yes, we were covering a sitting of the Youth Assembly. Incidentally, their turns required less editing.

The past two months have entailed a workload that few of us who work in Stormont Hansard had experienced before, even pre-suspension. In the period up until 1 September, we covered 35 meetings of the Preparation for Government Committee and its economic subgroup. I'd like to thank our colleagues at the Scottish Parliament for helping us out on one occasion on which the workload stretched our resources to breaking point. In total, all those meetings lasted for approximately 136 hours and contained just shy of one million words. If we were a car, we could advertise ourselves as being able to go from nought to 975,000 in 60 days. Despite covering all those meetings, however, it is difficult to know what progress has been made. The ambience definitely got better as the summer went on, but I guess we'll have to wait until the autumn to see how everything plays out.

So what does the future hold? Well, the present holds this (SLIDE 3: Order Paper for 11 September 2006), but neither Simon nor I want to think about that right now. After that? Talks—and no doubt a few rounds of golf and a trip to the nineteenth hole—await in St Andrews; the next IMC report; and more brinkmanship right up until 24 November. I hope that that will result in full restoration of our Assembly, but if not, and if Peter Hain's to be believed, BIPRA in Belfast may not take place until 2009 at the earliest.

Session 2—Historic Hansards

The session was presented by Professor Paul Ell from Queen's University, Belfast (QUB) with the assistance of Alastair Dunning from the Arts and Humanities Data Service (AHDS).

Prof Ell provided a brief background to the 'Stormont Papers' project, which has been running for over two years and which essentially involves digitising all the House of Commons Hansards from the Northern Ireland Parliament 1921-72. The end product will be a website—due to go live in November 2006—on which all the Hansards can be viewed and searched.

Prof Ell explained that the Hansards represent a hugely valuable historical archive and resource, but he noted that they are not widely available. As a result, he and his team in the Centre for Data Digitisation and Analysis sought and were awarded a grant from AHDS to ensure that the resource could become widely available.

The Hansards from the Northern Ireland Parliament 1921-72 comprise 84 volumes with nearly 100,000 pages. Over the past two years, each of these pages has been image scanned with an accompanying full machine-readable text captured using advanced optical character recognition (OCR) techniques.

Prof Ell provided some insight into similar projects that he has undertaken in the past and Alastair Dunning then gave delegates a demonstration of the proposed new website (a 'beta' version of the site can be accessed at ahds.ac.uk/Stormont/).

Mr Dunning explained that, since the texts will be available in machine-readable form, there will be free-text searching, thus making it easier to locate relevant debates and important individuals. In addition, tabular statistical data will be formatted to allow easy import into spreadsheet and statistical software.

After the demonstration, Prof Ell and Mr Dunning sought the views of delegates on the functionality of the proposed website and there was a lengthy discussion on the project and indeed wider issues surrounding the accessibility of Hansards and other parliamentary papers.

Session 3—Practising Editorial Practice

This session was presented by Sarita Thompson and Iona Warmington (NAfW)

Delegates spent time in groups editing three speeches taken from NAfW proceedings. The pieces were introduced as video clips and verbatim transcripts. Following the group discussions, delegates returned to plenary to discuss editorial decisions and judgments.

Session 4—Marketing the Official Report

The session was presented by Alasdair Mackenzie (HoC).

Alasdair started by asking why we should be addressing this issue. One reason was that, of the three main aims set out by the Official Report in its business plan—supporting the work of Parliament, supporting the work of MPs and their staff, and promoting the role of Parliament to the public—we were good on the first two, but not so good on the third. Another was that we were proud of our work, and felt that it deserved a wider audience.

In his opening address, Paul Silk had spoken about the diminishing of respect for Parliament, and Alasdair felt that we could help to prevent that by showing what really does happen in Parliament. All too often, Prime Minister's Question Time was given the most attention by the media, especially on television, and that was not a good advertisement for Parliament.

While those interested in politics would always make an effort to find out what was going on, that was not satisfactory, especially when the internet could make it easier for the public to find out more about Parliament.

There was also competition. TheyWorkforYou.com had been discussed at last year's conference, and it was still doing things that Official Reports were not doing, but could do better, especially as we were proud of our product and knew how and why it worked. TW4U took raw material content from the UK Parliament website and re-presented it, but some of the information that it put out was inaccurate, as was to be expected, given that it was run not by professionals but by those with an interest in politics.

Alasdair next asked how we could promote the work of Parliament. The internet was the best way to reach a wide range of people and enhance interest. It was an extraordinary tool, which reached into the homes of people who would never dream of buying a hard copy of the Report. It was an accessible format, which allowed people to pursue their interests. However, while the Westminster Parliament website was not bad, it was still not great—unfriendly and not easy to use. To get the best out of it, those logging on needed to know what the words and phrases used in the website meant. The Scottish Parliament website was better and more straightforward. The Westminster website was undergoing a redesign that would make it easier to navigate—for example, it would be split into categories, with the Official Report in the publications category—but it still had to be made more accessible. The search engine should be improved so that people could search by the subject in which they were interested. Hotlinks could be provided; cross-referencing could be used. There should be an internet centre co-ordinator.

Promoting the work of Parliament could be done in other ways as well, such as by reaching out to the Law Society and universities.

Alasdair suggested three ways in which we could make information more accessible:

- There could be a link to the most recent PMQs.
- There could be a 'pick of the day' or 'pick of the week' for interesting exchanges and information.

- It was important that there was a topic or category list, so that a lay person, interested in a subject and wanting to know what his own MP, the Government or Parliament as a whole thought of it, would easily be able to find that information.

Alasdair then asked others to share their experiences of how they had dealt with official internet sites either as users or providers of information and their ideas of how to improve their content.

Simon Burrowes (NIA) said that the content of NIA website was good, but it should also be developed. There was also a need for a marketing exercise to bring people to connect with it. NIA had not been promoting its work, and that should be done alongside the development of the website.

Alasdair suggested an awareness campaign.

Simon Burrowes suggested a weekly press release showing what was on, and giving more information. For example, many people did not know that they could come to Stormont to hear debates. Brendan Docherty (NIA) said that the former Speaker of the Assembly had not wanted that to be advertised, but that the new Speaker might have a different view. Simon Burrowes agreed and said that NIA had a good education unit, catering to a well-defined audience.

Liz Watterson (HoL) said that there was no need to spend a great deal of money on publicity. Sending information to universities was a good way to spread the work. Web addresses could be bookmarked.

Belinda Franzmann (HoL) said that a couple of times recently, peers had said that they were quoting from the Official Report, but in fact they were quoting from TW4U.com, and sometimes not accurately. The point about the promotion of services was a good one, but she questioned whether all MPS and peers wanted to be held accountable. She hoped that everyone was singing from the same song sheet. Aisling Maguire (OIR) said that that was an interesting point, and agreed that some MPs thought like that. However, with corporate changes and the desire to put the business plan into effect, more could be done.

Vivian Widgery (HoC) mentioned the Group on Information for the Public, a Parliament-wide group, chaired by John Pullinger, of which she was a member. Its aim was to promote the work of Parliament, and it worked both on its own and in partnership with the Hansard Society to achieve that aim. Alasdair said that he was more concerned with promoting the Official Report. The prevailing 'soundbite culture' meant that speeches were cherry-picked. Official Reports produced the only reports of politics that included everything, and it was important that people knew about those reports and could access them easily.

Simon Page (HoL) said that newspapers no longer had as many pages devoted to parliamentary proceedings. The nature of media had changed, and Official Reports should also make the press aware of what they did. The public did not feel that politicians were debating what was important to them. However, there never had been a golden era when the public liked politicians. Official Reports could contribute to the internet and promoting the work of both Houses. Everyone was interested in something, and just needed to know how to connect with it. The media was the key to spreading the message.

Carl Lombard (OIR) said that OIR was governed by an 11-man commission, 10 of whose members were politicians. It had a three-year budget, and was reviewing key objectives. It was strong on internal matters. There was a strong feeling that a new objective should be increasing public accessibility to the work of politicians. This suggestion had come from staff, so he did not know how it would be received.

It was agreed that the Official Reports could play a key role in promoting Parliament to the public.

Conference Dinner

The conference dinner was held at the St David's Hotel and Spa, with a traditional Welsh folk-dancing *twmpath* led by Dawnsywyr Nantgarw.

Tuesday 12 September

Session 5—Training and Development

Simon McCartin introduced the session by explaining the quality improvement discussion—QUID—process used in SP, which enables sub-editors to provide feedback and guidance on turns to reporters.

Training and development for editorial support staff

The group looked at the varied roles carried out by editorial support staff. While there were some similarities in their roles, there were also lots of differences. It was agreed that on-the-job training was the main source of training. However, there was the opportunity for general courses to be taken, such as IT training and minute taking. It was agreed that there were limited opportunities for promotion in the offices and that staff would have to move outwith the official report if they wished to progress in their career. Colin Fleming noted that several years ago in OIR, audio typists were given the opportunity to apply for reporter roles. That proved to be successful as audio typists who had worked with reporters for several years had a good grasp of the requirements of the post. It was agreed that staff were motivated by the wide variety of tasks carried out and the challenges the role brought.

Initial training for new editorial staff

It was noted that the legislatures have different approaches to initial training and devote varying amounts of time to it, from two weeks to six months. Striking the right balance between classroom training and on-the-job training was identified as a common concern; often, pressure of work meant that there was little or no classroom training. It was agreed that the timing of training was important. Some staff were trained before the summer recess and things were forgotten by the time 'real' work came along. Most legislatures have a mentoring system. It was agreed that mentoring is a useful tool, but that it is more advantageous for the trainee than for the trainer. At times, pulling reporters out of the list to mentor new reporters could be problematic.

Secondments and exchanges are a useful training tool because we can learn from each other. That was particularly noted by colleagues from NIA—some of the new reporters spent time in other legislatures honing their skills while NIA was suspended. When staff are recruited from other legislatures, initial training often amounts to familiarisation with style, procedure and so on.

It was agreed that BIPRA could play a role in the training and development of staff. It was suggested that style guides and other resources be added to the BIPRA website. Several delegates had found useful resources on the Commonwealth Hansard Reporters Forum website, including detailed instructions on grammar.

It was agreed that using software to track changes to turns plays an important part in training and development. SP has a macro that allows reporters easily to check their original turns against the subbed versions. In some legislatures, trainers provide new members of staff with written comment and explanation on changes made to their turns.

The group agreed that it is useful for the new reporter to compile their own notes on editing issues, style and procedure, based on their practice turns. The notes might include core rules, tips and tricks and ‘golden rules’. If these were compiled into a crib sheet, it might be interesting and worth while to share that information via the BIPRA website.

‘Editing to order’ to suit particular sub-editors was regarded as bad practice!

The group did not identify recommendations because the legislatures have different approaches to initial training, but it was agreed that the sharing of training resources via the BIPRA website should be encouraged.

Continuous professional development

It was agreed that there was a need for continuous professional development—the perfect reporter is a myth! It was noted that there tended to be a concentration of effort on initial training but that thereafter reporters were often left to their own devices and could pick up bad habits. That was where CPD came in. Performance management systems were in place in all legislatures, and job-specific CPD was a top-up to those systems.

Examples of job-specific CPD included initiatives such as QUIDs in SP and quality control discussions in HoC, which should contain positive elements—praise as well as feedback on mistakes—to ensure that staff motivation remained high.

Pressure on time was cited as one of the reasons why CPD fell by the wayside, but it was agreed that time should be made available for important discussions such as QUIDs as it was vital to invest in staff and keep them motivated; positive results were also reflected in the quality of work produced.

CPD could also include coaching, office away days, shadowing colleagues in other departments as well as in other legislatures and personal development. Shadowing was valuable to both parties: the process of being shadowed meant that people had to explain their job to others and perhaps justify certain decisions; it was also an opportunity to raise the profile of the office.

Group training as opposed to one-to-one training had its advantages and disadvantages and could be used as appropriate; it was important that staff came in with a willingness to learn. It was agreed that in a group there should be a strong leader to ensure that everyone had their say.

The group briefly discussed a diploma for reporting, but agreed that the difficulties in setting up such a diploma outweighed any potential benefits. The current informal system of ascertaining the skills of the people involved in exchanges was working, as editors could simply speak to each other on the phone.

CPD’s role when staff were looking for skills to aid promotion was discussed—developing management skills was an obvious example.

Information technology skills were particularly important when changes were being introduced, as in the Houses of Parliament. Training should be structured. There could be peer training in IT skills, with ‘superusers’ training others, or similar arrangements involving liaison with IT departments in other institutions.

Secondments/exchanges

It was agreed that there were benefits in secondments and exchanges, both to the host and supplying organisations and to those individuals undertaking the secondment/exchange. Benefits included meeting colleagues from other legislatures; exchanging ideas on systems

and practices; finding solutions to problems; and personal development, especially for those who have been working in the same office for a long time.

It was noted that it is important to differentiate between secondments and exchanges. During the suspension of NIA, secondments were a useful tool for ensuring that reporters maintained their skills and for giving those who had recently completed their training the opportunity to get a feel for the work. In addition, secondments fulfilled a public relations role by showing that NIA staff were actually working. For the receiving organisations, such as NAFW and SP, these secondments were useful in filling staffing gaps.

It was noted that there is no formal feedback process for secondments and exchanges, although staff in OIR and SP, for example, have written reports on their experiences. One idea raised was the possibility of using staff at (sub-)editor level as trainers in other legislatures. It was noted that HoC had been asked to provide training for staff from African states.

The different language requirements of the various offices could make secondments/exchanges more difficult to organise, although it was noted, for example, that recent changes to the recruitment policies of NAFW record of proceedings might enable more secondments/exchanges to take place.

International secondments and exchanges can be particularly difficult to organise as there is no formal set-up, although secondments on a freelance basis can be easier to organise.

The two main problems with secondments and exchanges are finance and security. The sending office has a duty of care to its staff members and must find a way to smooth the differential in pay and conditions between its office and the receiving office. There is also the additional expense of travel and accommodation. Security clearance has proved to be a significant problem. In some cases, clearance has not been obtained in time for visiting staff, which has required them to be escorted everywhere by passholders.

The group made the following recommendations:

- Devise a formal structure for exchanges and secondments, possibly through BIPRA. For international exchanges, BIPRA could liaise with the Commonwealth Hansard Reporters Forum.
- Retain an element of flexibility in that structure.
- While mutually beneficial, secondments and exchanges should not be mandatory.

Session 6—Voice Recognition

The session was introduced by Liz Watterson (HoL). Two systems, ViaVoice and Dragon, have been tested by reporters and subs.

Brian Tottle (HoL) is the department's principal VR user. Its strengths are that it is a viable alternative to typing for those with WRAWL issues; a flexible system open to a high degree of user customisation, including importing macros and web access; in the future, a possible way of reducing the time needed to produce a high quality turn. He said that an experienced user can produce a turn in less time than that needed by typists. Its weaknesses are that to work properly, the software must be customised to recognise the user's voice profile and is vulnerable to mishearing short connecting words and to picking up background noise. This raises problems in that users must be isolated by working in individual rooms/cubicles or perhaps using soundproof masks, although the Darth Vader mask experiment was not a success. Current VR systems are memory hungry, requiring vast processing power. This has caused problems at Westminster – the Thursday Evening Syndrome – the computer system has a hard time meeting the demands of VR alongside everything else.

Future possibilities for VR are that text may be generated instantly from any voice, eliminating the need to type turns before subbing and creating wider opportunities for distance online working etc. NAFW is currently trialling Dragon.

Ben Woodhams (HoL) described a one-day experiment using dedicated dictators and subs. The results were mixed: good quality work was produced, but problems arose over stress and isolation; it felt like working in a hamster factory.

The Canberra Parliament has all 12 reporters using VR and distance working. Policy requires a very verbatim report. For similar reasons, the British Columbia Parliament transmits a video link to distance typists. Vivian Widgery (HoC) said that the system demands a high proportion of editors to reporters. Alasdair Mackenzie (HoC) said that staff were being rearranged to accommodate VR users. Simon Burrowes (NIA) asked how VR works when used live, and whether the time saved by not typing is not then used up by more time editing. Brian Tottle (HoL) said that using VR live is vulnerable to generating mistakes and that systems that are not yet sufficiently advanced, even using a customised voice input. An experienced VR practitioner can save some time generating a turn, but the system can learn so much and no more – there is a ceiling on customisation. General questions were raised about staffing implications and changes in work practices with the new technology. It was felt that VR makes a contribution to current methods, but that more work needs to be done to evaluate its effectiveness. Time saved has to be weighed against space requirements and inefficiencies/demoralisation due to isolation. Reporters value easy communication.

It was concluded that VR has a place in the toolbox for reporting Hansard well, but that further improvements are needed in the technology and careful evaluation should continue to be made of its implications in terms of staffing levels and the quality of the working environment.

Session 7—Guest Presentation

The guest speaker was John Pullinger, House of Commons Librarian, and the session was chaired by Simon Burrowes (NIA).

John Pullinger opened his presentation by reflecting on the service provided by reporters and concluded that, for an outsider, Parliament is the voice of the people and reporting is the voice of Parliament. However, people do not seem to recognise that reporting is the cornerstone of understanding Parliament. He also referred to the fact that British Parliamentary reporting is seen as a beacon by the rest of the world and that people appreciate how well it is done in Britain. Reporting is a different language as reporters interpret what people are saying, and this is something that has been worked upon in Britain over the years.

The two main topics that he covered in his presentation were ‘The Voice of the People’ and ‘The Paradox of Change’. Under the former, he discussed the fact that it is shocking how little reporting there is of what Parliament is doing. People only hear about the sleaze and there is no recognition of what the institution does. He referred to the fact that he decided to apply for the job of librarian because he saw it as a good way of getting the public to understand better what Parliament does. A scathing report ‘Connecting Parliament with the Public’, published in 2004, led to a debate in Parliament, and the vote there reflected the fact that the vast majority of Members were ashamed of the current situation and wanted to do something about it.

He referred to the fact that the general election should be a good test of public feeling. In the 2005 general election, the number of first-time voters fell—only a third bothered to vote, which is a worrying development. He decided to form a strategy to tackle this problem by telling people what Parliament does, actively promoting it and listening to any feedback that

he received. His goals, to be reached by 2010, are to have a website that works, to work with schools to increase knowledge about Parliament, to establish an outreach programme and to work with the media.

Other suggestions were that politicians need to become more media friendly and that the Parliament building needs to be more of an asset, so that visitors are given a proper welcome and exhibitions are set up to show what Parliament does. Information needs to be reported in ways that make it easier to find and information needs to be provided quickly. The official report needs to be the authentic report of Parliament and it needs to be the first in as news moves quickly. Information also needs to be presented in mixed and integrated ways.

Under his second theme of 'Change is a paradox', John said that everyone would be required to change. When he started his job, he held a meeting with staff and found contrasting information. He found that library staff are proud to work for Parliament, they have expertise and good resources, and they provide great customer care to Members. On the other hand, they have no idea what is going on as there are no managerial levers; they are delivering despite management. They get on with the work but they are not systematically planning to make it better. In order to maintain traditions, he saw that they needed to change radically. He said that he rejected the Matthew Parris model of disengagement with the public being a good thing and a mark of Parliament's success, and the Frank Dobson model that no change will happen because Members, including himself, have not done enough to change the view of Parliament. His conclusion therefore was that the more successful we are in making the voice of Parliament heard, the more people will be proud of what we have.

There followed a lively question and answer session to close what was an interesting and valuable presentation.

Session 8—The Official Report and the Media

Simon Page (HoL) began with the impressive statistic that on any sitting day there could be 173 representatives of the media in the Commons and Lords. He then took us on a journey through history, explaining that early parliaments sat in private and no reporting of proceedings was allowed, as it was considered that it would be 'demeaning'. Nowadays we accept that a free press is vital and it follows that Hansard is vital and he assured us that journalists rely on it.

Public rights of accessibility to parliament were achieved only gradually. Eighteenth century journalists reported the proceedings of parliament by disguising them as the conversations of members of an invented club. Another way of getting the news out to the public was the use of 'memory men' who, because note-taking was forbidden, would commit proceedings to memory and write them down afterwards. From the 1780s note-taking was allowed and the invention of shorthand later improved accuracy.

Around 1803 William Cobbett began publishing political debates and it was Thomas C Hansard who helped him. As a result they were both imprisoned, but it was through Hansard's persistence that the first documentary proceedings of parliament were produced and became known as Hansard.

During the nineteenth-century, S T Coleridge and Charles Dickens (having taught himself shorthand) both worked as parliamentary reporters. In 1881 a press gallery was instituted, but telephones followed much later and typewriters not until 1930. The first radio broadcasts were in 1978 and the first tv in 1988, despite Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher's fears. Tape recording of sittings for Hansard began only in 1990.

Hansard has now been 'nationalised' ie taken in house, for almost 100 years and if liberties are to be maintained, its high standards must also be maintained. After the struggle to

establish the right to publish, the regular and accurate reporting of Hansard should never be taken for granted and as long as it is an accurate report, it is protected against libel claims.

Close

Iolo Roberts (NAfW) thanked delegates for attending the conference, and said how much the Record of Proceedings team had enjoyed meeting colleagues from all parts of Britain and Ireland. He then drew proceedings to a close.