REPORT OF THE INAUGURAL ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE BRITISH-IRISH PARLIAMENTARY REPORTING ASSOCIATION (BIPRA)

Held at Westminster on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday 4,5,6 September 2002.

Following the establishment of BIPRA in November 2001, one of the key items written into the constitution concerned the holding of an annual conference:

"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."

It was against this background that 38 delegates from parliamentary reporting organisations throughout the UK and Ireland attended all or part of the inaugural BIPRA conference (a full list of delegates is shown at the end of this report) in Portcullis House, Westminster, London from 4 to 6 September 2002.

Wednesday 4 September

Registration/Introductions

The conference programme started on the evening of Wednesday 4 September with a session for registration and introductions followed by a reception on the Terrace of the House of Commons.

Thursday 5 September

Opening

Bill Garland, Editor designate at the Commons Hansard, chaired the opening session and introduced former MP and Cabinet Minister, Tony Benn.
Mr Benn opened the conference with robust and sincere remarks on the value of Hansard and its importance to democracy.   He followed this by taking questions from the floor before departing to spontaneous applause from all the delegates, testimony in itself to a hugely enjoyable and informative contribution.

Session 1 – Performance Management (Chaired by Simon Burrowes, Northern Ireland Assembly)

Simon Burrowes opened the discussion by suggesting that performance management means different things to different people. Hansard in the NI Assembly has a unit business plan that links into the Assembly's corporate plan. In addition, each member of staff has a forward job plan linked to these business plans.   The Assembly uses a Civil Service system of performance appraisal, although this system is now under review as it is felt to be inappropriate. There are no objective qualitative measurement or management systems in place, but this matter is to be addressed in the

current financial year. Mr Burrowes highlighted one area he was keen to explore, namely the development of a system to measure "good" reporting to set alongside the more traditional measurement systems which concentrate on errors.

Andy Philip (Scottish Parliament) explained that the Scottish Parliament is in the process of developing a new competency-based system of performance appraisal. The intention of the new system is that staff will strive to meet their own targets.

Mr John Emyr (Welsh Assembly) said that the Welsh Assembly's performance management system has recently undergone significant change and that performance is measured against unit plans. Managers and staff meet regularly to discuss staff performance.

On a similar theme, Anne Robinson (Oireachtas) noted that staff in Dublin have three meetings with their line managers each year. Progress is measured against an analysis of the job and specific targets.

Jackie Bradshaw (House of Lords) explained that the focus in the House of Lords is on the positive rather than the negative aspects of reportering work. The philosophy is to acknowledge strengths and to improve on weaknesses. Jackie added that that the Lords Hansard is about to adopt a more formal, but not bureaucratic, monthly audit of reporters' work.

Describing the practice in the Commons as similar to that intended for the Lords, Bill Garland said that a properly organised "feedback system" was undoubtedly worthwhile.

There followed a round table discussion, in which delegates from the Isle of Man and Alderney also participated. At the close of the session it was clear that performance measurement is very important in terms of staff development, but that no common system as yet exists which would suit the needs of all the individual organisations represented. It was agreed that this was an area to which BIPRA should return.

Tour of Parliament/BIPRA Executive meeting

The Executive Committee of BIPRA held its fifth meeting while other delegates had a guided tour of the Palace of Westminster.

Session 2 – Language Policy (Chaired by Stephen Hutchinson, Scottish Parliament)

Stephen Hutchinson opened the discussion with a brief summary of Scotland's draft language policy and the background to its development. He explained that a language policy group had been set up to examine the position in the Parliament of languages other than English and further possible usage of non-English languages. English is the normal working language of the Scottish Parliament but members may speak in any language

with the permission of the Presiding Officer. Where languages other than English are spoken, simultaneous interpretation into English is provided but only the English interpretation is published in the *Official Report.* Motions and questions must be in English, and existing technology restricts the use of text in non-standard character sets. Mindful of the Parliament's principles of openness, accessibility and participation, and its duty to offer equal opportunities to all, the group recommended that public information material should be provided in six of the most widely used community languages in Scotland. Where it is felt that a report exclusively in English might exclude anyone from understanding the report, a translation in any language can be arranged.

Robert Arnott and Andy Philip explained the differences between reporting Scots Gaelic and Scots. When a member speaks in Gaelic, simultaneous interpretation into English is provided, and both the Gaelic version and the English interpretation are published in the *Official Report.* Unlike Gaelic, Scots is not a standardised language and tends to be used only occasionally, often for effect. Where a member includes a Scots word or phrase intentionally, it is reported as said; however, where usage appears not to be intentional or where it might seem out of context to the reader, it is more often treated as English.

In an interesting round-table discussion, delegates exchanged details of their own working practices. It was noted that several of the Parliaments permit members to use languages other than English, but that only Wales routinely publishes in two languages. Interpretation is used to varying degrees, and a common problem is quality control and delays when using interpreters. Work is ongoing in addressing social exclusion and accessibility issues; Wales and Scotland provide signing facilities and public information in other languages.

Session 3 – Heroes and Horrors (Chaired by Lorraine Sutherland, House of Commons Hansard)

This session allowed delegates from each of the reporting organisations represented to describe their own nightmares and/or finest hours.

Steve Hutchinson (Scottish Parliament) explained how admirably the linguistic skills of his staff had enabled the Scottish Official Report to cope with "European languages day", on which SMPs were allowed to make speeches in any European language of their choice. Despite Hansard's generous offer to compose Members' speeches for them in advance, most still chose to plough their own furrow. One speech – in Basque – turned out, after intensive research among reporters' multi-skilled friends and relatives, to have been composed by the simple method of looking up all the words in the Basque dictionary and reading them out.

Simon Burrowes (Northern Ireland Assembly) disarmingly revealed that Northern Ireland's Official Report had occasionally "left bits out and put other

bits in twice", and had once perpetrated, on a front page intended to read "Public Petitions", a typo whose exact nature he left to delegates' imagination.

Tape-related nightmares included the TD who helpfully listened to the recording of his speech, but then had no more idea of what he had been trying to say than the perplexed reporter had, and the Tynwald recording that was discovered to be entirely blank just as the member of the public involved turned up to listen to it.

Delegates also heard about the scanned amendments that took the subs six hours to sort out after the House rose, and the sub who fastidiously changed every reference to "mongols" to "children with Down's syndrome", only to find that members of the Down's Syndrome Association who had been in the gallery were eagerly awaiting the publication of the report so that they could find out who the offending Members were and point out to them the error of their ways.

Amongst the other "gems" drawn out in discussion were:

- "Teachers work hard to prepare students for the afterlife"

- "As we all know, my Lords, incontinence falls between two stools"

- "Dementia in one of its many forms has undoubtedly touched many Members in the Chamber today"

Finally, Lorraine Sutherland looked back over last year's House of Commons horrors and heroes (written answers and the people who had to deal with them, in that order) and forward to next year.

Conference Dinner

The day's programme ended with an enjoyable dinner in Porters restaurant, Covent Garden. Delegates were joined by some "family and friends" for an informal yet hugely informative evening.

Friday 6 September

Session 1 – Digital Audio (Chaired by Jackie Bradshaw, House of Lords Hansard)

Graham Boswell of Prism Sound made a short presentation of the company's product and their experience of installing it in the Houses of Parliament. He highlighted the principal advantages of using digital audio as being:

- Greater speed of access;

- Multiple accessibility;

- Audio can be controlled within Microsoft Word;

- Storage and transmission is lossless;

- Greater storage/archive space.

Graham went on to give a technical explanation of digital audio and its application to Hansard needs, particularly with regard to the Lords. He explained that that system was devised to meet a variety of reporter and sub-editor needs, namely **automatic retrieval** (audio located automatically ready to play when a Turn document is created); **integrated player control** (foot pedal operation—play, search back and search forward—and automatic wind-back on stop); **special audio location features** (locate to Turn start, locate to time and locate to word—after it has been typed!); and **special audio location features**, useful for sub-editors (locate to word and locate to time).

After questions, delegates then moved to the Hansard offices of the House of Lords for a demonstration of the digital audio system. A day's proceedings from July had been loaded onto the system and delegates were able to create Turns as reporters and use digital audio sound to transcribe proceedings. All delegates had "hands-on" experience of the system, with Hansard staff and suppliers on hand to assist users and answer questions.

Presentation

Before the commencement of the afternoon session, Simon Burrowes, on behalf of BIPRA, presented Ian Church, Editor of the House of Commons Hansard, with some special mementoes to mark Ian's impending retirement.

Session 2 – Editorial Decisions (or "Why are we here?") (Chaired by Bill Garland, House of Commons)

Ian Church, Editor of Hansard in the Commons, delivered a marvellously entertaining yet thought provoking presentation on this theme.   Using a number of excellent and often humorous examples, Ian traced the history of Hansard's terms of reference and examined the raison d'etre of modern-day editing staff. Borrowing a phrase from a Matthew Parris sketch, Ian described Hansard staff as "cosmetic surgeons in English prose" and vividly demonstrated why Hansard should be considered the most important working document in a parliament or assembly.

At the end of the presentation delegates took full advantage of Ian's thirty plus years experience in Hansard to question him on a wide variety of issues relating to parliamentary reporting.

Session 3 - Review

Delegates were unanimous in the view that the conference had been a great success. Only one problem was highlighted, namely that by holding a

conference in September, the organisational arrangements were more awkward to put in place as people were invariably in recess and thus not at their desks for long periods. It was agreed that this issue should be looked at by the BIPRA Executive.

Simon Burrowes extended BIPRA's thanks to all those who had made it possible for the event to be held at Westminster, and Bill Garland drew the conference to a close by thanking all who had been involved in organising the events and all delegates for their time and effort.

LIST OF DELEGATES

House of Commons	Ian Church
	Bill Garland
	Lorraine Sutherland
	Catherine Fogarty
	Vivian Widgery
	Annie Browne
	Jill Davies
	David Weir
House of Lords	Jackie Bradshaw
	Jim Donoghue
	Simon Nicholls
	Glenice Hoffmann
	Helen Edwards
	Segun Johnston
	Siu Lee
Oireachtas	Anne Robinson
	Ellen Britton
	Marguerite Conway
	Dave O'Donoghue
	Edward Mooney
Scottish Parliament	Steve Hutchinson
	Catherine Johnstone
	Andy Philip
	Polly Mackenzie
	Robert Arnott
Welsh Assembly	John Emyr
	Nia Rhiannon Thomas
	Claire Collett
	Siân Eleri Richards
Northern Ireland Assembly	Simon Burrowes

	Muriel Chalmers
	Bronagh Allison
	Shauna McCloskey
	Carina Rourke
	Aoibhinn Treanor
Tynwald	Adrian Pilgrim
	Louise Arbuckle
States of Alderney	David Jenkins