

**REPORT OF THE 2007 ANNUAL CONFERENCE
OF THE BRITISH-IRISH PARLIAMENTARY
REPORTING ASSOCIATION**

Held in

**The Northern Ireland Assembly, Parliament Buildings,
Stormont, Belfast.**

Sunday 5 August to Wednesday 8 August 2007.

Delegates and guests in attendance (for all or part of proceedings)

House of Commons

Ms Portia Dadley
Ms Susannah Gill (and partner, Christopher Neale)
Mr Jack Homer
Mr Alasdair Mackenzie
Mr Neil Palmer
Ms Judi Sheffrin
Ms Lorraine Sutherland (and husband, Robert)
Ms Fiona Stevenson
Ms Vivien Wilson

House of Lords

Ms Sue Delaney
Mr Will Humphreys-Jones
Mr John Nesbitt
Mr Simon Nicholls
Ms Irene Stringer
Mr Gareth Wigmore

Houses of the Oireachtas

Miss Onora Brassil
Mr Colm Breen
Mr Paul Brooks
Dr Adrian Kelly

National Assembly for Wales

Dr Meinir Harris
Mr Owain Roberts
Miss Buddug Saer
Ms Sarita Thompson

Northern Ireland Assembly

Dr Bronagh Allison
Mr Simon Burrowes
Mr Brendan Doherty
Mr Phil Girvan
Mr David Johnston
Miss Shauna McCloskey
Miss Roisin Mooney
Miss Aoibhinn Treanor

Scottish Parliament

Mr James Darwin
Ms Janet Foster
Mr Stephen Hutchinson
Mr Rob Littlejohn
Mr Ian Methven

States of Jersey

Mr Peter Monamy

Tynwald

Mr Clive Alford

Guests

Mr William Hay MLA, Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley, First Minister of Northern Ireland.

Mr Arthur Moir, Clerk to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Mr Joe Reynolds, Deputy Clerk to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Mr Alex Elder, former Editor of Debates in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Session 1: Speaker's Welcome and Official Opening

(The following is a substantially verbatim transcript of the session)

The Secretary of BIPRA and Editor of Debates, Northern Ireland Assembly (Mr Simon Burrowes): I welcome everyone to the sixth annual British-Irish Parliamentary Reporting Association (BIPRA) conference. There are 38 delegates present; there were to be 40 in total, but, unfortunately, there have been two late cry-offs due to illness — we wish Neil and Ffion well.

The first item of business on the agenda is the Speaker's welcome, and I am delighted to introduce Mr William Hay, who was unanimously elected as Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly upon the restoration of devolution on 8 May 2007.

Willie Hay — if he does not mind my calling him that — is probably best known for being a respected politician in the north-west of the Province. He was elected to Derry City Council in 1981, and he became mayor of Northern Ireland's second city in 1992. He was elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998 and, as I said, on 8 May this year, was unanimously elected as Speaker.

As a point of interest, I had someone from Hansard conduct a spot of research, and we reckon, Mr Speaker, that you are only the twelfth person to have occupied the position of Speaker, or presiding officer or chairman, of the various Parliaments and Assemblies that have been in place during the 85 years of Northern Ireland's existence. You are therefore part of a small and select band, Mr Speaker, and we are very pleased that you can be with us this morning to welcome us. *[Applause.]*

The Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly (Mr William Hay): I hardly knew myself from Simon's description of me.

First Minister, ladies and gentlemen of the British-Irish Parliamentary Reporting Association, and guests, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to Northern Ireland for the British-Irish Parliamentary Reporting Association's sixth annual conference and, more particularly, to the home of the Northern Ireland Assembly, Parliament Buildings at Stormont. A few of you have visited before, and we are delighted to see you again. For those of you on your first visit, I hope that you will enjoy your time with us.

In a way, this conference is like the association's homecoming. BIPRA was founded at a meeting in Parliament Buildings in November 2001. Of course, we would have been delighted to host your annual conference long before now, but, as everyone knows, the Assembly was suspended for over four years.

I am delighted to be here this morning, because I want to express the Northern Ireland Assembly's thanks to the association for its help over the past four years. Members of the Hansard team were able to maintain and

develop their skills through helping their colleagues in just about every other institution on these islands. That was very important to us in the Assembly — it was essential that we retained our parliamentary reporting capabilities in order to help the Assembly to get back up and running when power was restored. Without the help of colleagues elsewhere, that task would have been made much more difficult.

As you can imagine, the Assembly is still in its infancy. However, one thing that I am determined to do during my time as Speaker is to help the Assembly to attain its vision of being recognised as a customer-focused parliamentary service that is committed to excellence in all its activities. To do that, we will have to learn with, and from, colleagues in other institutions. Indeed, the Assembly's business plan for the current mandate includes provisions to benchmark our services against those in other legislative institutions.

No one has a monopoly on experience. The biggest and the oldest can always teach and influence the smallest and the youngest, but they can also learn something from them. It strikes me that that is exactly what the association has helped us all to do since its foundation. It has helped us in the Assembly in the past, and I hope that it will continue to help us as we move forward and aspire to achieve our aims and objectives.

I know that you have a busy conference programme, so I will not take up much more of your time. I have asked Simon to let me have a report of the conference, and I hope that I will be able to meet and chat with you at your dinner tomorrow evening.

In finishing, I welcome you to Parliament Buildings and to the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is our pleasure to have you, and I extend my best wishes for a successful conference. *[Applause.]*

Mr Burrowes: Many thanks for the welcome, Mr Speaker, and, on behalf of BIPRA, I thank the Assembly for agreeing to host the conference. Having been officially welcomed, we now need to officially open the conference.

A few months ago, when it became apparent that the Assembly was likely to be restored, I wrote to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to ask whether they might be able to do us the honour of opening the conference. I wrote that letter more in hope than expectation, because not only are the diaries of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister busy and committed but we are in the middle of the leave season. However, we folk in Ulster know how to work hard, and it seems that we do not take much leave, because my hopes were exceeded when I received a letter from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister saying that the First Minister would be delighted to open the conference.

I suspect that introductions are almost pointless, but it is worth saying something by way of introduction. The First Minister of Northern Ireland, the Rt Hon Rev Dr Ian Paisley, will be a familiar face to most of you, but I am not sure how many of you realise that it was back in 1970 that he was first elected

to the Northern Ireland Parliament — as was — and Westminster, and he was also a MEP for 25 years from 1979 to 2004. As such, he brings almost 40 years of unrivalled and unbroken parliamentary experience from which he can draw on in opening our conference this morning.

As we did with the Speaker, we conducted some research on the First Minister. I wonder whether he can remember his maiden speech in the old Northern Ireland Parliament. Of course, this will be of professional interest to the Hansard team. I will read a few lines from the Hansard report of the Northern Ireland House of Commons for Wednesday 22 April 1970:

“4.09 p.m.

Rev. Dr. Paisley (Bann Side) (*who was received with cheers*): I understand it is the custom for a new Member making his first speech to crave the indulgence of hon. Members, and I do so today. I will make my speech as non-controversial as I possibly can.

Mr. Fitt: That will be difficult.

Rev. Dr. Paisley: It will be most difficult for me, coming from a constituency which for 20 years has suffered terrible neglect and which needs a hard-working M.P.”

Dr Paisley referred to and quoted from a copy of Hansard from 1966 in his opening speech, and it is worth quoting the last line of his maiden speech:

“... so I will make my first sermon short, but the next one will be sharp. [*Hon. Members: Hear, hear.*]”

Ladies and gentlemen, the First Minister will do us the honour of opening the conference.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): It is a great delight for me to declare this conference open. The invitation that I received from Mr Burrowes was the first that I received to any public engagement after I took the position of First Minister. Therefore the reporters were on the job, and they got me on time. I am delighted that they did, and it gives me great pleasure to be with you today.

I am also delighted that the sun is shining. You will not need any canoes to pass Carson’s monument, and it is good that you will be able to get around dry-shod. I understand that you are going to have a tour of Belfast — murals and all — this evening, and I hope that you will have a most interesting time. I greatly regret that, due to another engagement, I cannot join you at your conference dinner, but I know that you will be well fed and that you will enjoy your stay in Northern Ireland. Do come back and see us. I trust that there will be good relationships between your conferences, as they take place, and the folks of Northern Ireland — a very hearty welcome to you all. The greatest constituency is North Antrim — do not miss it. Make sure that that you go to the land of the giants to see the Giant’s Causeway and enjoy the people there.

Although I know that not all the official reports that you produce at your various Parliaments and Assemblies are officially known as Hansard, I will use that name, not only because I have become accustomed to it during nearly 40 years in Parliament but because it is recognised internationally and

it appears in the Oxford English Dictionary, which I know some of you use from time to time.

It strikes me that it is most appropriate for you to have your conference in Northern Ireland and at Parliament Buildings at this time. I am sure that you are aware that the past few weeks and months have been hugely significant and historic for Northern Ireland and for people throughout these islands. Hansards in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Dublin and Westminster have a vital role to play in recording and reporting the events that take place. Hansard is important, not just as an enduring historical record for future generations but for people today to learn about what exactly goes on in the parliamentary institutions that make legislation and decisions that affect the daily lives of us all and shape the future. At such a crucial time in the development of Ulster, it is vital to have a record of what happens at Stormont.

If we do not have good reporting of parliamentary meetings, what other way can people learn about exactly what goes on in our Parliaments, especially what our Parliaments are planning for the future? However, newspapers do not give much space to the detailed reporting of Parliament. I have made good speeches that received only one line of coverage in the press, and I told the press: "Thank you very much, I will depress you the next time I see you."

From time to time, I read the old Hansard reports with great interest. When I made my first speech in the Northern Ireland Parliament, I can remember some of the remarks that Members made that were not reported. It was reported that Members cheered my maiden speech — I thought that they had jeered. The Prime Minister of the day told me in the Dining Room afterwards that he would shake hands with me but was sorry that I was ever elected. I replied that he would hear more from me in times to come. He has gone and I am still about. I have endured affliction, as a good soldier does in battle.

Broadcasters show what goes on in the Assembly, but only in a limited way. The only real way in which people can know what is happening in Parliament is to read the full reports that you make with such diligence. I am sure that you are often disappointed that the press give such a scant recording of some of the great debates. As such, Hansard is one of the foundation stones of our parliamentary democracy. It provides the people of today and of tomorrow with access to the proceedings of the institutions that govern their lives. By doing so, Hansard is helping to ensure that elected representatives are held to account, as they should be in any democracy.

It is appropriate that your conference is in Stormont, because it was in this building, almost six years ago, with a good deal of prompting from the Assembly's Editor of Debates, that your association was established. Welcome back to your birthplace. I trust that you are off the milk bottle and on to strong meat.

It is good that the conference is being hosted in the place where things started in 2001. It is also good because, during suspension, the association played a

significant role in providing staff with work and opportunities to maintain and develop their skills in order to be ready for the restoration of devolved government. Thankfully, that has now happened.

I am sure that you all know that Hansard has a long and distinguished history that covers 200 years and dates back to the early part of the nineteenth century when the reporting of parliamentary debates at Westminster became acceptable. At that time, Thomas Curson Hansard began to commercially print records of debates. In 2009, we will celebrate the centenary of the establishment of the in-house Hansard service at Westminster.

I am delighted that your 2007 conference is in Parliament Buildings, and I thank you again for inviting me to perform the official opening, which I do now with the wish that you will have an interesting, informative and enjoyable time and that you will come back to see us often. I wish you well with your pencils, because, with those, you have the life of every politician in your hands. Take care that those pencils do not break. Thank you. *[Applause.]*

Mr Burrowes: Thank you very much, First Minister. The association is not a cash-rich organisation — gifts are not our thing. However, before we finish this part of the proceedings, we could not allow the occasion to go by without presenting you with something. I have a small lapel pin for both of you. Dr Paisley mentioned a pencil. Way back, people used quills, and we thought that it would be appropriate to present you both with the Hansard tools of yesteryear. *[Applause.]*

The First Minister: Thank you very much indeed.

Mr Burrowes: Before you go, First Minister, we are curious to know what speech has been the most memorable that you ever made or heard.

The First Minister: The greatest speeches that I have heard in Parliament were made by people who, at the end of the day, lost the vote.

One of the most amazing feats of oratory that I ever listened to was from Michael Foot. There was a vote that would determine whether the Labour Government could endure to the end of its term or whether there would be an election that might allow Margaret Thatcher to take over. Michael Foot made a most interesting speech, which was full of humour and barbed arrows. Those must have pierced the hide of the Conservative Party like a quill feather.

It was a really good time. I remember that he looked over at Margaret Thatcher and said: “Queen Margaret, you have foolishly put your hand into the hand of the boy David.” David Steele was the leader of the Liberal Party, and it had joined up with her. Michael Foot said: “You are going to learn a lesson.” He continued: “Behold, Queen Margaret rides with her hand in the hand of the boy David.” Well, she rode to victory, and the boy David killed the Goliath that day. It is wonderful how things change. That speech was made by one who lost the debate in the House of Commons.

Another great speech was made by Margaret Thatcher, when she had a last fling at defending herself before she resigned. She made an amazing speech. She carried the House with her, completely. I was sitting on the Conservative Benches when a Conservative said to me: "Ian, we were fools to put a leader like that out to grass." I replied: "You Conservatives never had any brains anyway, so it is no wonder that that happened." He did not appreciate my remarks. I did not get any cheers for them. Nevertheless, Margaret Thatcher had made an amazing speech that day.

The best speech that I ever made in the House of Commons was on the death of the Queen Mother. The Queen Mother and I knew each other very well. I never went to any of her receptions at which she did not pick me out, specially, to have a word with me. I thought that I paid a very good tribute to the Queen Mother; however, not a line of it was reported in the press. The only person who gave me a little praise was Andrew Marr, who said that my speech was superb. I did not want to see that. I wanted to see the speech printed, but it was never printed — it died. Perhaps after today it will have a resurrection. We can always look forward to that. Thank you. *[Applause.]*

Mr Burrowes: That brings us to a close. Thanks again, Mr Speaker and First Minister, for being with us today.

Session 2: A Year in the Life

This session of the conference was chaired by Adrian Kelly. Each delegation gave a presentation on the developments and problems encountered over the last year.

Houses of the Oireachtas

Onora Brassil (OIR) covered procedures dealing with reporting/editing of the debates office as well as ongoing and current events:

- Written answers – house style v. style used in Departments.
- General election – held on 24 May. Issues arising included familiarity with new members, production of first Daily Book, new members of Government
- Seanad elections followed the general election
- Style changes - all members of the Dáil and Seanad will be styled Deputy or Senator and forename and surname throughout the Official Report. This will distinguish between Members of both houses with the same name.
- Website- new Debates Office intranet site with links with the Oireachtas home page.

- XML Authoring – this project continues, with issues arising such as staff training etc
- Environmental Changes - changes were made to committee rooms such as, adding glass panels in response to typists' noise.

Scottish Parliament

Stephen Hutchinson (SP) said it was a year of two halves, busy running up to the election and quiet since. The van holding all their sound equipment and dvd/cd recordings of the Public Petitions Committee was broken into and everything was stolen, therefore, they could not produce the Official Report.

Rob Littlejohn joined their staff and two reporters were sent to the Northern Ireland Assembly on secondment.

Stephen then talked about the election resulting in the SNP having one more seat than Labour and forming a minority government. He said in the election there was a total of 12.9% spoilt papers and a total of 85,643 constituency votes lost. FOI enquiries from investigative reporters almost paralysed e-mail systems.

House of Commons

Lorraine Sutherland (HoC) also commented on the unusually quiet period in the House of Commons. She said it felt like a change of government with Gordon Brown becoming Prime Minister. However they have been warned to expect a high level of activity next session with many Bills in the offing. This has prompted them to advertise for freelance staff for the first time. They received 200 applications for the 10-15 positions on offer.

The Hansard office held a survey of Members and their staff. Lorraine was pleased to announce the Official Report scored very highly in terms of Member satisfaction, higher than any other department in the House of Commons.

Lorraine said this was their first year for reporting Select Committees. It went very well with customer satisfaction high. They will be taking on one new committee per week after the summer recess.

The library is digitising back copies of Hansard.

Another issue is the review of the governance and management of the House of Commons by Sir Kevin Tebbit. He recommended composition of the Board of Management change to reflect three "functional lines": facilities and catering; Chamber and committee services; and information including IT. This would result, according to Lorraine, in three current members of the Board of Management, including herself, being removed, leaving Hansard's interests being represented by a senior clerk. No firm decisions have yet been taken, but Lorraine said that obviously she has an overriding interest in defending

the status of Hansard as an independent department on a par with all the other departments in the House of Commons administration.

Finally Lorraine said they were planning for next year's CHEA conference and after 28 years of service Annie Browne has retired.

House of Lords

Gareth Wigmore (HoL) said so far this has been a quiet summer and the Grand Committee is not sitting. Unlike the House of Commons they will not be hiring freelance staff for the next session, which is expected to be busy unless there is an election.

Gareth said their office has a new computer system, which has teething problems. He also said they are discussing staffing models based on the House of Commons. They will also be encouraging more feedback sessions.

States of Jersey

Peter Monamy (JERS) related that after 200 years under a committee system, a new Standing Order brought in just prior to the implementation of the Ministerial system of government on 5th December 2005, requires the Greffier of the States (Clerk to the Parliament) to introduce a full Official Report (Hansard). From that date to the end of 2006, States Assembly and Scrutiny Panel/Public Accounts Committee proceedings have been transcribed and uploaded to the States Assembly websites. Peter said the States have agreed that substantially verbatim reporting of proceedings would be appropriate for Jersey, to maintain the 'flavour' of the speech. Audio files are uploaded to a secure website and transcribed in New Zealand then returned by e-mail. A 'first draft' is available in 5 working days which is then edited and uploaded to the website.

Peter then quoted statistics for sittings of the States Assembly, oral questions with notice and written questions all of which have increased.

This is the States first year of producing a full Official Report for States meetings and Scrutiny hearings.

National Assembly for Wales

Buddug Saer and **Sarita Thompson** (both **NAW**) gave a joint presentation for Wales.

Buddug said a new website has been created. The business unit were trained to publish transcripts and documents, and in turn trained the rest of the reporting team. The business unit is currently recruiting for the new post of translation and reporting co-ordinator due to workload increases.

Sarita reported they have just taken on their first two non-Welsh speaking staff. This is causing some minor problems, but nothing that cannot be overcome. They are, however, learning Welsh at the moment.

Sarita also said that due to maternity leave of other staff members they were short staffed and could not afford to take on temporary staff because an editor would be required to train them, but would not have the time to do so. Tips on covering maternity leave would be gratefully received.

Three staff now work from home on a full and part-time basis. Due to the Assembly elections it was quiet between March and May which gave Sian Richards and Sarita the opportunity to go on secondment to the Commons and Lords in April, an experience they enjoyed.

The elections on 3 May saw Labour and Plaid Cymru form a new government with the historic inclusion to the new Cabinet of 3 Plaid Cymru Members.

Sarita explained that the new Government of Wales Act created the legal separation between the National Assembly for Wales and the Welsh Assembly Government meaning the reporting staff were now employed by the Assembly Commission and were no longer civil servants.

In conclusion Buddug said it was very quiet due to the election. Some of the staff elected to do voluntary work. The National Assembly allows 5 days special leave a year to do voluntary work. Some of the staff chose to do some conservation work in the grounds of a local castle while others worked in charity shops.

Tynwald

Clive Alford (IoM) began by saying they too have had an election and this resulted in 6 new members out of 24 being elected to the House of Keys.

Clive reported on implementing a full-scale trial of voice recognition technology which will be fully operational by the end of the year.

Finally Clive reported that two of the five Hansard staff will be sixty next year, nearing retirement. This will leave 3 staff members aged 46, 45 and 31 years.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Aoibhinn Treanor (NIA) said it had been an eventful year, beginning with the establishment of the Assembly on 15 May 2006. All staff were recalled and given refresher training before returning to their core activity of reporting Assembly and Committee proceedings.

Plenary meetings were held without all-party participation and the atmosphere in Committee rooms was tense, but progress was made. Aoibhinn said that

reporting work was particularly intensive during the July/August 2006 recess due to a demanding schedule of meetings.

As a result of the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006 a Transitional Assembly was established on 22 November. Aoibhinn related that, after a few traumatic days around 24 November following a security alert, work resumed with the Official Report recording the plenary meetings of the new Transitional Assembly and thematic inquiries by six subgroups of the newly established Programme for Government Committee. In addition, the following few weeks were used in training temporary staff and in the creation of indexes for the bound volumes.

Throughout the year the Official Report produced reports of 98 meetings. These were made accessible on the Assembly and Transitional Assembly website. The office also produced three bound volumes and continued to provide the Speaker with simultaneous interpretation services in plenary session.

As well as the core parliamentary reporting work Hansard performed other work during the year such as:

- The secondment of a staff member to the National Assembly for Wales to assist with training.
- Assisting BIPRA in the production of the official reports of the 32nd, 33rd and 34th plenary sessions of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body.
- Producing a transcript for a conference on women in politics.
- Producing transcripts for three youth parliament meetings organised by the Assembly Education Service.
- Producing transcripts for public meetings that formed part of a consultation exercise by the Department of the Environment on a review of environmental governance.
- Producing a transcript for a conference on domestic violence.
- Using the shorthand expertise of two AEs to assist the Department for Regional Development in note-taking during a High Court judgement.
- Hosting a number of visits by work-experience students.

Aoibhinn reported that the team had expanded with the arrival of two new babies and eight new parliamentary reporters. There are competitions afoot for the positions of parliamentary reporters and deputy editors, although these are subject to a delay as a review of Secretariat services commissioned by the Speaker is conducted.

Session 3: Practising Editorial Practice

This session was chaired by **Sarita Thompson (NAW)**.

Brendan Doherty (NIA) opened the session by outlining some of the difficulties that editors experience on a daily basis. He noted that mistakes have appeared in every Official Report and are an inevitable part of editorial life. He then gave some examples of corrigenda to the NIA Official Report, some of which arose from mishears or editorial misjudgements on the part of reporting staff, while others were as a result of mistakes made by Members.

Current practice in the Northern Ireland Assembly is to allow a period from two hours after a speech is made until two weeks after it is made for corrections to be submitted by Members. Current advice to Members is that they have the right to examine the Hansard report of what they said before it is published, and that they can suggest corrections.

The discussion centred on how Members' suggested amendments are dealt with in other legislatures; the mechanisms in place to deal with any changes; what amendments would be considered acceptable; the implications of allowing any changes; and examples from the reports of other legislatures.

Brendan provided the delegates with a range of different editorial examples, and the ensuing discussion threw up many of the difficulties encountered when editing speeches.

1) “Start-up costs have been estimated at £67,000, and the Department has the funding for that.”

The Minister should have said £670,000. Do you permit the change? What factors may influence your decision? If you decide not to amend the figure, what advice do you provide in order that the error may be corrected?

Opinions varied on the most appropriate approach in this case. Some delegates felt that if it was clear that a genuine slip of the tongue had been made — and if no other Member had picked up on the mistake during the debate — amending it to the correct figure would be acceptable.

Jack Homer (HoC) felt that the figure of £67,000 should be reported as said and that the mistake could be pointed out to the Minister to allow him or her to correct it by some other means; for example, in a ministerial statement, or in the Chamber at the next sitting. Others agreed that there were risks involved in changing such a mistake.

Stephen Hutchinson (SP) mentioned that leaving the figure uncorrected would mean that the archive would be wrong, and there was some discussion on how that problem could be dealt with.

Lorraine Sutherland (HoC) mentioned that at Westminster a new section of Hansard has been created for corrections, although it is currently limited to corrections from Ministers.

There was also discussion about cross-referencing daily reports with bound volumes and the possibility of inserting hyperlinks to corrections on the web version of reports.

2) “Monday is a difficult day, as the Secretary of State is giving evidence and all sorts of crap to the PFG Committee.”

Do you print such language, which is so unbecoming of a Member?

The consensus was that the language should be reported.

Alasdair Mackenzie (HoC) said it was for the Speaker to rule on the appropriateness of language. It was also mentioned that the press and other Members would be likely to pick up on such language.

Simon Nicholls highlighted the importance of making absolutely sure that it was what the Members said.

Brendan Doherty mentioned the number of debates that are now televised and that that would make it very difficult to change or leave out any such language.

There was discussion about whether asterisks would be appropriate and whether some words were considered more offensive than others.

3) “I support the motion. The situation is that some Northern Ireland Housing Executive estates, whether republican or loyalist, are bedecked with flags and pictures of gunmen, which I find grossly inoffensive. It does not matter whether they are republican or loyalist gunmen. There are problems in my town of Larne.

Do you assume that the Member meant to say “offensive”?

The general feeling was that the text would be changed, unless another Member referred to the mistake. Delegates felt that editorial staff should use their judgement in such cases.

4) “The terrorists who carried out the Teebane massacre, killing workmen who were travelling home after an honest day's work, will be free to do what they want and to go where they like. The same applies to the Enniskillen bombers and to the terrorists responsible for the attack on the Darkley Mission Hall, and for the Kingsmill massacre, La Mon and Bloody Sunday — to name but a few.”

Those words were said by a unionist Member. As you will know, the killings outlined above, with the exception of Bloody Sunday, were committed by republicans. Was this a slip of the tongue on the Member's part? If so, what did she intend to say, and should any change be sanctioned? Should any other factors be taken into consideration before any change is made?

This example prompted some debate about difficulties with changing politically sensitive speeches.

Colm Breen (OIR) felt that the words should be reported as said.

Simon Nicholls said that editorial staff at the House of Lords were generally reluctant to change anything to do with Northern Ireland. He mentioned an occasion when Gerry Fitt, in referring to the murder of Robert McCartney, had described it as the “murder of a young IRA man”, when he had meant to say the murder of a young man by the IRA. He later returned to the Chamber to amend his remark.

Aoibhinn Treanor (NIA) said that in such instances account might be taken of whether the Member had intended to mislead.

Delegates mentioned how sensitive language can be in the context of Northern Ireland politics.

Brendan Doherty mentioned how Sinn Féin Members would generally not use the term “Northern Ireland” and that NIA editorial practice was to report their words as spoken — for example, if a Sinn Féin Member refers to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 as the Act, contrary to standard editorial practice, the legislation would not be given its full title.

6) DUP Member: “I support the amendment.”

The motion stood in the name of a DUP colleague and an amendment was selected that had been tabled by an SDLP Member. It is clear from the rest of the DUP Member’s speech that it is the motion, not the amendment, that he is supporting — he is not in trouble with the Whips! Do you allow the text of his speech to be motioned ... I mean, amended?

There was general agreement that such changes would be made as a matter of course as Members often get confused about the correct terminology, and it is unlikely that their intention is to mislead.

7) “Secondly, he is a political coward.”

The then First Minister’s actual words were:

“Secondly, he is a coward — he is a political coward.”

He requested that the words “he is a coward —” be reinserted. Do you agree, or do you feel it is merely repetition?

Sue Delaney (HoL) pointed out that the original version is more inflammatory, while **Brendan Doherty** pointed out the emphatic use of language.

Alasdair Mackenzie pointed out that there was no defence for changing words in this case; if a Member wants the words he spoke to remain, there could be no argument for changing them.

Simon Burrowes asked whether calling someone a “coward” would be considered unparliamentary, and there was some discussion about what constitutes unparliamentary language.

Lorraine Sutherland said that, as far as she was aware, the only word that was considered unparliamentary was “liar”.

8) “I welcome the Minister for Education’s initiatives and ask that she liaise with the Department of Learning and Employment on the proposals.”

The Member should have said “Minister of Education” and “Department for Employment and Learning”. Do you make those changes automatically?

The consensus was that the mistakes would be changed, and that correcting such mistakes is part of a reporter’s job. The only exception would be if the choice of words was deliberate — for example, **Simon Nicholls** mentioned a Member of the House of Lords who refers to the Scots Parliament rather than the Scottish Parliament.

Stephen Hutchinson talked about the convention in the United States and Strasbourg whereby Members who have not been called to speak can have their speech included in the printed report.

There was mention of Members plagiarising other speeches, or quoting extensively from text, eg explanatory notes, without mentioning the original source, and **Neil Palmer (HoC)** asked whether inverted commas would be necessary in such instances.

Lorraine Sutherland said that Members are responsible for their own words and that it is not the responsibility of editorial staff to source the material.

Simon Burrowes (NIA) talked about the need to be conscious of press coverage of debates, and how that might influence any editorial changes. He asked whether there was a case for adopting a lighter approach in general.

Jack Homer felt that reporters have a duty of care to the readers, who, not being present for the debate, are at a disadvantage. He felt that, where possible, editorial staff should communicate meaning to the readers. The context of the debate should be considered, and caution taken in very technical discussions. Other delegates mentioned similar problems when editing very technical discussions and how difficulties can arise when editorial staff think that they know better than Members. **Sue Delaney (HoL)** talked about the danger of second-guessing a Member.

There was also mention of how witnesses at Committee meetings can sometimes suggest that their words be changed to reflect what they would have liked to have said rather than what they actually said.

Session 4: Reporting the Public (or non-Members)

Stephen Hutchinson introduced the item by referring to a comment made at the Edinburgh conference in 2005: “It is not our place to edit the public”. Although as Official Reports our main relationship is with members, in Scotland the work extends more widely, and the OR does report and edit the public. With increasing use of witnesses in different legislatures and public engagement being high on the agenda, the Scottish Parliament thought it might be worth exploring which ORs have to deal with the public and how they do so.

Ian Methven then detailed the first questions to be answered during the session:

- How many of the other bodies report non-members?
- What proportion of their work does it account for?
- Does approach to members and non-members differ? If so, in what respects?

Scottish Parliament: Non-members basically came in two groups: professional witnesses and non-professional witnesses. The first category included witnesses from the Executive, academics and representatives of interest groups and professional bodies, while the second could involve members of campaigning or pressure groups, individual members of the public, schoolchildren and Gypsy/Travellers.

Some of the witnesses in both categories may be expert witnesses, with a broad range of knowledge of their subject, and might, if anything, require a gentler touch than some members. Other witnesses may be nervous or extremely emotional—there have been instances of witnesses breaking down in tears. They may require a firmer editorial hand.

House of Commons: Hansard has been doing some Select Committee work for a year now, covering the Public Accounts Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee. There had been no children witnesses, but they had had to deal with speakers whose first language wasn't English. Also, Standing Committees had changed into Public Bill Committees, complete with evidence-taking sessions on the legislation. They had taken a light-touch approach. They had found that there were different types of conversation—grilling as well as information giving—and that one challenge, for logging in particular, was that there were shorter pauses between speakers.

Houses of the Oireachtas: The editorial style was the same as for members. Committee work had increased, and a flexible approach was taken to witnesses as the occasions were less formal than normal. Editing witnesses

could cause problems, and for sensitive committees or subjects, the report was more verbatim—an example was the DIRT inquiry.

National Assembly for Wales: They could top everyone else's experience of having witnesses that might be tricky, eg, Gypsy/Travellers or children, as they had had Gypsy/Traveller children witnesses, but they were not that difficult to report. They also had children with special needs, but they used prepared answers, which made things easier.

Northern Ireland Assembly: Non-members were always in committee as the Committee system is a hybrid similar to that in the Scottish Parliament. Generally, the approach was to treat everyone the same, with one style across the different types of book. However, it was noted that civil servants choose their language very carefully, while visual aids to presentations, such as PowerPoint, can make things awkward to report. Should a PowerPoint presentation be included with the report, for example?

Janet Foster then asked the next question, before giving the Scottish Parliament's experience:

- What challenges are thrown up, if any, by reporting non-members?

SP: One of the biggest challenges was reporting the evidence given by a Dutch fingerprint expert to a committee investigating the Shirley McKie case. Arie Zeelenberg referred in detail to some slides of fingerprints, which was hard to report. As the case was so high profile, the report was almost verbatim. However, it raised questions of whether the Report should provide a link to the slides in question, or whether that would be making a rod for the Report's back.

NAW: The committee pages provide links to slides, while on one occasion a committee watched a DVD, which was reported with a procedure line.

NIA: Information was sent to witnesses to tell them that it was a print record.

SP: The OR has limitations as a print record, which could be shown up at certain times, for example with video conferences — these are popular in Wales too. Words are often put in people's mouths to explain what they are referring to, but the McKie case was so high profile that normal rules could not apply. It was thought that more and more pressure would be applied to include maps, sound files, photographs etc.

HoO: In the Irish standing orders, the official report is defined as a written report—and legally it is the bound volume rather than the printed version from the internet.

This led to a wide-ranging discussion of what the Official Report is, and what it could become. Including hyperlinks into the internet version might give away ownership of the report, and it could see Hansard jobs changing to become collators and marshals of evidence. Would web editing skills be needed?

Should we expand the OR so that information on each debate is channelled through it? After all, the OR is the most useful record of what actually happened. The world has changed, so can we hold out on just words? This might mean needing new skills, while there would be questions of accuracy and legitimacy of other documents—perhaps as if the OR approved of external material.

Back on topic, the SP ran through a few challenges that it had faced—and mistakes it had made—in reporting non-members. That included underestimating the strength of feeling of one witness and changing her terminology, while there were often problems in register and accent when people used Scots terms or dialect.

NAW said that they standardised the Welsh used, while HoO said that they left any Irish as it was spoken, in order to keep the flavour. In Northern Ireland, they found that Ulster Scots was difficult to check, while contributions in Irish had to be repeated in English.

It was agreed that context was key, and that the use of different languages and dialects was in some ways an extension of flavour — we should avoid aggressive predictive subbing, or “sabotage”, and making everyone sound the same.

The final question was asked by James Darwin:

- How do the different institutions deal with non-members?

SP: Witnesses are told before they appear that there will be an Official Report, and they are supposed to be given our terms of reference, although it appears that that sometimes does not happen.

The HoO said witnesses do not contact them directly but go through the clerks, as was the case elsewhere. The HoC said that in London witnesses are often more interested in making their points to MPs rather than on the record. In Northern Ireland, witnesses may send suggested amendments, to which Hansard replies with its decisions on whether or not to make the changes and the reasons why. The House of Lords said that its only similar contact was with newly made Lords — those who went from being normal people one day to peers of the realm the next. However, they tend to get used to it quickly.

Conclusions

The main conclusion on reporting non-members was that, as always, context is vital. It could be summed up with the phrase “it depends” — it depends on who is speaking, to whom and about what.

Session 5: Suspension and Beyond — A Briefing on the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Role of Hansard by the Deputy Clerk to the Assembly, Joe Reynolds

Simon Burrowes introduced Joe Reynolds, the Deputy Clerk of the Northern Ireland Assembly. He noted that Joe had been with the Assembly since its inception, highlighted his procedural expertise and explained that Hansard was part of Joe's management responsibilities. He added that Joe had previously met some of those attending and indeed had previously briefed BIPRA members at an engagement in Stormont a couple of years ago.

Joe started his briefing by thanking BIPRA for the invitation to address conference and wished delegates well for the remainder of the programme. He explained that he would try to give delegates a picture of where the Assembly had been, where it is going and how it conducts its business.

After an overview of what had happened from the suspension of the Assembly in October 2002 until the St Andrews Agreement in November 2006, Joe went over the more recent developments, such as the Michael Stone incident, Assembly elections and finally the restoration of devolved powers and the election of a Speaker, Ministers, Chairpersons of Committees, etc. In short, it was back to business.

Joe looked more closely at what had transpired in the period from the restoration of devolution on 8 May 2007 to the start of the summer recess, noting amongst other things, the likelihood of legislation being brought forward by the Executive more quickly than in previous mandates, although he suggested that the hoped for progress and actuality may not quite match one another.

Looking ahead, Joe mentioned a number of challenges, including the possibility of internal party tensions, the obvious question of how a mandatory coalition would operate, intensified scrutiny by media and the public, the changing face of administration in Northern Ireland and a myriad of local issues such as a national sports stadium, an Irish language act, water rates, etc.

Turning to Hansard's role, Joe underlined the importance of the Official Report. He noted that it would be facing its own challenges and spoke about a number of issues, such as the use of other languages in the Assembly, simultaneous translation, improving skills and technology, developing links with customers and Hansard's role in helping to widen access to Assembly business and parliamentary affairs in general.

After his presentation, Joe took a number of general questions from delegates, before Simon drew the session to a close by thanking him for accepting the invitation and providing conference with a hugely informative, interesting and enjoyable talk.

Session 6: The Role of the Official Report in Promoting the Work of Parliament

Simon Nicholls opened the session by referring to what had been said earlier during conference about customer focus, and he asked whether the newer institutions had different approaches from those of the older institutions.

National Assembly for Wales

Sarita Thompson updated the conference on the NAW's customer relationships management database, which had been designed to alert potential users of Assembly business that would be of interest. She described the difficulties of keeping the database up to date — a time-consuming job, particularly given the continually changing committee remits.

Owain talked about the alternative possibilities offered by the Assembly's new website, on which members of the public can register so as to be sent e-mails about matters of interest to them. He also described how the Assembly promotes itself at shows and eisteddfodau.

House of Commons

Lorraine Sutherland pointed out that the most obvious way in which Hansard promotes the work of Parliament is by providing a timely and accurate report of debates. She talked about the new emphasis on outreach, particularly following Lord Puttnam's report for the Modernisation Committee. Activities will be co-ordinated by the House-wide Group on Information for the Public. Regional outposts are envisaged, with Westminster as the hub, drawing on local infrastructure and using local Members as an asset. There will be engagement with local authorities, schools, NGOs, media and businesses through visits, speeches, meetings and perhaps even a parliamentary road show. A parliamentary liaison team is being set up for two pilot regions, with subsequent extension to all 12 regions.

The parliamentary website will be redesigned in order better to reach out to young people and non-specialist users, with improvements to content, functionality and navigability. Also, the Library education unit is looking at funding school visits, particularly for those schools outside London and the south-east that find it too expensive to bring pupils to Westminster. However, the costs of these projects are likely to be high, which will obviously have a bearing on how much goes ahead.

House of Lords

Simon Nicholls added to Lorraine's comments by referring to TSO's 'Have Your Say' website, which is a further attempt to engage with the public by flagging up any new or interesting parliamentary or government papers and offering immediate notification of any new publications in any areas of interest that you want to register.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Aoibhinn Treanor talked about the role of the education, press and events offices in promoting the Assembly's work and profile and echoed what had

been said about the importance of the internet. The Assembly's Hansard is to start publishing written ministerial statements. She also mentioned the office's leaflet, which explains the role of Hansard in the Assembly and details how to access reports.

Oireachtas

Adrian Kelly told the conference that the Oireachtas Commission, owing to its concern that much media coverage had been negative, had set up a Communications Unit to "address the lack of understanding of and respect for the work" of the Oireachtas, through commissioning surveys and drawing up a communications strategy. The strategy involves the appointment of new staff to be more proactive in dealing with the press and the public, including through outreach work with teachers and schools. Other changes are: a focus on information and marketing; more user-friendly web pages; the National Oireachtas Week, drawing on other European countries' festivals of democracy; a focus on merchandising and brand image; and engagement and communication with citizens.

Adrian stressed the importance of the role of ORs in this work, especially in promoting qualifications and professionalism. He suggested that Official Reporting organisations must ask themselves how they deal with inquiries from the public and how accessible their material is.

Scottish Parliament

Rob Littlejohn talked about the Parliament's annual Festival of Politics, in which Official Report staff participate as ushers. OR staff are also working on setting up a common parliamentary database, the information management system. Rob described the Parliament's website review, which has led to an increased number of OR links. An on-line forum relating to members' business debates had been discontinued; it was found not to be particularly useful, as only the usual suspects were writing entries. Simpler tools for facilitating access had included generating a list of debate headings for visitor services and giving presentations on the role of the OR to visitor services and new members of staff. The OR also regularly produces reports of conferences held at the Parliament, such as Business in the Chamber and the Microsoft Government Leaders Forum.

General Discussion

Delegates discussed the potential usefulness of blogs and on-line forums, both independent and official, in promoting parliamentary activity and reproducing parliamentary debates. The conference heard about the institutions' experiences of petitions and e-petitions. It was agreed that the ORs' primary role in promoting the work of our institutions lies in making the report as good and as accessible as possible, especially through our websites.

Session 7: The Way it Used to Be — by the Former Editor of Debates in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Alex Elder

(The following is a substantially verbatim transcript of the session)

Lorraine Sutherland (Editor, Official Report, House of Commons): It is a very great pleasure to have been asked to chair this part of our proceedings, because it involves an old friend and colleague, Alex Elder.

I have a few biographical details about Alex. He started work as a reporter in the Stormont Parliament in 1964. In 1972, that Parliament was prorogued, never to return, so Alex must have thought that his career had been a little short-lived.

Alex Elder: You've taken half my speech already.

Lorraine Sutherland: During that very long prorogation, Alex did various jobs. He worked as a teacher in Malawi, and he worked as a reporter at the United Nations. I remember him very well as a freelance reporter who used occasionally to ride to our aid in the 1980s in the House of Commons; and I think he worked occasionally in the House of Lords as well. We were extremely short staffed at the time; we had seven or eight reporters, as opposed to the 14 who were usually in our list, so it was a great relief to see Alex and the Northern Ireland posse, Marie Ferguson included, turning up to help us out in our reporting activities. I remember him well from those days, and we even used to share a glass or two in the Press Bar after work—

Alex Elder: Or three or four.

Lorraine Sutherland: Occasionally, yes.

Alex came back to Belfast in 1982, when the Prior Assembly got up and running, but that sat on and off for about three years. It was not until 1996 that he came back to head up the Official Report, which supported a body which was called the Forum for Political Dialogue in those days. That was followed by the establishment of another assembly in 1998. Alex was one of the original 17 members of the secretariat that Joe Reynolds mentioned.

Alex retired, ostensibly, in 2001, and handed over to Simon Burrowes, but he never really went away. He was only the second person ever to be given an honorary lifetime pass to Parliament Buildings, which he has made some use of officially, and some occasionally unofficially. As Simon describes it, he pops up at times when you least expect it.

I cannot resist the temptation to use the obvious pun, but I think that after 43 years in parliamentary reporting and editing, Alex is entitled to be described as the elder statesman of reporting our islands. I am looking forward very much to hearing what he has to say; I know that he has some stories to tell us. I do not have to tell him to speak slowly, clearly and loudly, and to give us his notes at the end.

Alex Elder: Folks, you have just heard my speech, so I can go home. Lorraine has given you a great deal of the information that I was going to give.

I started my professional working life as a teacher many decades ago; I do not talk any more in years; I talk in decades—and it is getting to the stage where I talk in half centuries. I started my working life as a teacher of business studies, and spent five years doing something that I enjoyed quite a lot; in fact, in the early days, I enjoyed it very much. It would not be right to say that it began after a time to feel stale, but after three or four years, it was not quite as scintillating as it had been, and I started to wonder whether it might be worth doing something else. At a kind of subconscious level, I had my eye on the employment columns of the *Belfast Telegraph*. On one occasion, there appeared the job of a parliamentary reporter in the new Stormont Parliament. I wrote shorthand, although not exceedingly well, and I was interested in political and parliamentary affairs, and I thought that the job might be interesting, but I had no experience whatsoever, and the idea of my being appointed as a parliamentary reporter was ridiculous. I applied for the job anyway, just to see what would happen.

What happened was that the then Editor of Debates, a fellow called Fred Burns, who had worked in the Commons before that, wrote to me and said, “Well, clearly we cannot offer you a job as a parliamentary reporter, but if you would be interested in becoming a trainee, give me a call.” I did that and I went up to see him, and I was offered the job as a trainee reporter. I was to be a trainee for three years, earning nearly 20% more than I was earning as a teacher with five years’ experience. You do not leave a profession lightly, but in those days teaching jobs were falling off the trees. There would not have been any problem getting back into teaching if I had decided that reporting was not for me.

On that basis, I went to Stormont, but from the very beginning I loved it. I liked the political buzz, and I liked the parliamentary buzz. Perhaps above all, I liked the reporting and editorial buzz. So I stayed there and became a reporter, not after three years but after two, because somebody from the BBC who had no parliamentary experience had been appointed as a reporter and it was certainly felt that it was not decent that he should be a reporter while I was a trainee reporter. So my promotion to reporter was accelerated.

Then, of course, things started to go a bit odd. In about 1968 or 1969, the troubles started, and it became obvious that things were not going well at Stormont. Eventually, as you know, it fell. We did not know what was going to happen. There is nothing more pathetic than a parliamentary reporter without a Parliament; it is sort of the reverse of a pub without beer. We hung around there for some time, and then the Assembly got going in about 1973, with the first attempt at power sharing. Brian Faulkner was the Chief Executive, and Gerry Fitt was the Deputy to the Chief Executive. Things looked as though they might do quite well, but then the question of the Council of Ireland arose, although it was not the only thing that caused the demise. However, that and various other things made it clear that the whole operation was not going to work. Then we had something that some of you will remember—the Ulster council workers’ strike, when the whole Province came to a standstill, with a view to toppling the Executive and therefore the

Assembly. Indeed, that is what happened. Goodness knows what course events might have taken if that had not taken place, but it did, and so we were left with the residue.

Just before the fall of the old Parliament—a bicameral Parliament for a population of a million and a half, with God knows how many county councils, district councils, rural councils and city councils; the place was over-governed anyway—Terence O’Neill, the then Prime Minister, called an election. He kept talking about Ulster being at a crossroads, and he called an election in mid-February, in the middle of the winter. Paisley said, “Who but a snowman would call an election in the middle of February? And we all know what happens to snowmen come the spring.” That, indeed, was what happened, and the whole thing fell apart.

It was not long before Willie Whitelaw came in as Secretary of State. Among the *Hansard* staff, three or four were on the point of retirement anyway and disappeared, but the rest of us were sent out to do utterly ridiculous jobs. There was court reporting, and covering police disciplinary hearings. You just cannot imagine how awful it was. You may remember what used to be called internment, but that was regarded as a very nasty word, so it was changed to detention. People were interned or detained in a place called Long Kesh, but Long Kesh began to have very nasty connotations too, so that name was changed to the Maze. We were sent out to report hearings at the Maze involving people who had been detained. They were mostly IRA or alleged IRA, but there would also have been some from the UDA and UVF and all those other terrorist organisations. Various people were brought over, including judges and sheriffs from England and Scotland, and they had to decide, having heard these people’s cases, whether they should continue to be detained.

Those in the Special Branch were probably the principal witnesses for “the prosecution”, and they used to give evidence from behind a screen, because obviously they wanted to prevent their identity from getting out. I remember one guy, an inspector in the RUC, whose name was Harry something, and another who was a red hot—or green hot—IRA man. The IRA man was giving evidence to the Commissioner with a view to being released. At one point, Harry, the Special Branch man, was giving evidence from behind the screen, and those of us reporting were also sitting behind it. The detainee said, “Mr. Commissioner, as Harry here can tell you...” The Commissioner said, “Do you think there is much point in our having this screen?” With that, the screen was removed, revealing not just Harry, but me. That was relevant only because we had been told previously, on good authority, that somebody had been noting the registration numbers of cars, including ours, coming into the compound. That was just a wee bit worrying, because things were pretty hot at that time. We talked to the Special Branch about this, and we were offered re-registration of our cars. One guy even suggested that we should wear wigs. Nobody took up either option, but it is an indication of just how fraught things were at that time. As to the infamous Harry, he said something while the screen was in place which made his source blindingly obvious. My jaw dropped; I looked at him and he gave me a wink. In the coffee bar

afterwards, I said to him, “You’ve just signed that guy’s death warrant.” He said, “Yes, I know, but it’ll save us the bother later.” That is how some things were done in those days.

That is what happened after the fall of that Assembly. Between that time and the late 70s came the constitutional convention, which was designed to come up with some kind of solution. It was chaired by the Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland, a fellow called Lowry, who afterwards became a Law Lord. He was a really good guy. I never came across anybody who was able to bring two sides together to such a successful extent. The convention came close to a reasonable solution, but just missed it.

In the meantime, we *Hansard* staff had been given a redundancy offer. A few people accepted the offer and left, including Marie Ferguson. Some of us decided to hang on just to see what would happen; if something was resurrected that would really work, we would like to be part of it. But that did not happen, and the redundancy offer was renewed. I decided that it was time to go. I decided to look for teaching jobs, as that was my other profession. I did not want just to teach at home. I wanted to have another dimension to the profession, so I started looking for jobs overseas. I subscribed to the *Times Educational Supplement*, which in those days was full of overseas jobs. I applied for a job at the Hong Kong Polytechnic. I got a letter from the organisation that looked after such appointments saying that the job in Hong Kong had gone, but that there was a very similar one going in Malawi, and I was asked whether I would like to be a candidate. I had to look at the atlas to find out where Malawi was. It had been Nyassaland, of course. I thought, “Yes, why not?” So I found myself in Malawi for three years, working as a teacher again. It was nice to be back in teaching, especially when dealing with students whom I had no difficulty teaching; it was so easy it was like throwing buns to an elephant. Malawi was a lovely place to live — it was a marvellous area and a marvellous era.

I kept my eye on the news about what was happening in Northern Ireland, and in the early 80s there was word that the Assembly might be resurrected in some kind of limited form, not as a full legislative and administrative Assembly, but as a kind of advisory body. That body operated under James Prior, who was then the Secretary of State. I happened to be at home on leave that summer, and I came up here to Stormont to see John Kennedy, the then Clerk, to find out what was happening. My time in Malawi was coming to an end; I would have had one more year there, but no more, because all the people subsidised by the British Government were to be phased out, for two reasons. One reason was that quite a lot of local indigenous people were coming back, and they were well trained. Most came from the United Kingdom, but some came from the United States and other places. The other reason was that Margaret Thatcher had just come into power, and the Government were squeezing overseas aid, so there was no way that I was going to have another two years.

At the end of my third year — in other words, in the middle of my second two-year term — I started to think about whether I should be looking for something

else. That just happened to coincide with the apparent resurrection of the Assembly in its limited form. I talked to John Kennedy, and within a week, I was appointed Editor of Debates. Things were done that way in those days. There was nobody else — there really was nobody else. I went back to Africa for two weeks to wind up my affairs so I could then come home. It was a job that I could not refuse. If you are a parliamentary person and you have been involved in *Hansard*, and if you like the work, to be offered the job of Editor of Debates is to be offered something that you just cannot refuse. Some people in the press were giving that Assembly a lifetime of four or five weeks; it lasted until 1985 or 1986, when events killed it. I was given a year with a very small staff of new word-processing people and sub-editors to polish off the daily parts for the bound volume. There was a big question about whether the Department of Finance would make that possible, but it worked. We got the bound volume, so I was there for another year after the fall of the Assembly.

Then I was again without work. I had worked for the United Nations on a freelance basis about 10 years previously. In those hiatus days — this is going back 10 years — I sat down one day and wrote three letters: one to the House of Representatives, one to the Senate and one to the United Nations, asking whether they had any work that might interest me. To this day I have not had a reply from either the House of Representatives or the Senate, and I am not expecting one! I did have a reply from the United Nations. It said, “We are enclosing a personal history form” — it was really an application form — “and we are not looking for permanent staff members at the moment, but we do appoint people on a freelance basis to supplement our permanent staff for General Assembly periods.” Those periods normally ran from late September to late December. The letter continued, “If you are interested in this work and any other General Assembly work that may come along, fill in the form and return it.” I received the form, but I promptly forgot about it. About two months later, I had another letter saying, “We sent you a personal history form, are you interested or are you not? There is a special session on disarmament coming up in May and June, lasting about six weeks, and if you are interested will you please return the form?” On the foot of that, I managed to arrange all my annual leave from Stormont and went off to the United Nations.

Although I knew that I was going to do much the same kind of work, I did not know anything of the details. Some of my colleagues at Stormont said, “You are absolutely mad. What on earth do you think you are doing?” I enjoyed it immensely; we were doing exactly the same kind of work. At the UN, there are six official languages, and everything in each language is simultaneously interpreted into all the others. That did not prove to be a problem. In those days, the UN still had a full shorthand-writing reporting system, as we had always had at Stormont. I say that it was a shorthand writing system, but quite a lot of the shorthand writers used machine shorthand. There were a few pen writers as well, of whom I was one. Initially, I had worked for a very short period, including a special session — I think it was on Namibia — which was the point at which the Assembly fell apart and I went to Malawi.

After my period at Stormont, and after Malawi, came the void. I did not know what was going to happen. Going back into teaching was just a remote possibility. I phoned the United Nations, which I had not worked with for a decade and asked whether it still employed freelancers. I spoke to a guy whom I had never met; he was the new head of the overall reporting section, which consisted of six language units: English, French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic and Chinese. He said, "I'll tell you what: I'll send you a personal history form" — here we go with the personal history forms again — "so you can fill it out. Send it back to us and we'll take it from there." The next day I had a phone call from the guy who was just under the one I had spoken to. He was the head of the English reporting unit, and was offering me a contract for that year. Personal circumstances made it impossible for me to go ahead with that contract, and so — you are not going to believe this — I went into teaching again for another year.

The year after that, I phoned the United Nations and said, "I am definitely available this year." The head of the unit said, "We definitely want you, but after last year I am worried that the recruitment people will think of you as a bad risk. Anyway, here is the form again. In the section that deals with proficiency in language, make sure that you say in respect of French 'very proficient'." My French was not too bad, but it was a bit rusty, and it certainly was not very proficient. On his advice, however, I decided to make myself "very proficient". I got a contract for that year, and did so for every year afterwards for eight years. I spent a long time at the United Nations; over eight years, I spent an average of four months a year there. It was a marvellous place to be and a wonderful place to work. The organisation was wonderful, but so was New York: it is an absolutely fantastic city, and I enjoyed every minute of my time there. The work could be excruciatingly busy, and at times it was very slack, but it was never uninteresting.

I worked at the United Nations until 1995, at which point Stormont raised its ugly head again. In a sense it was not Stormont; it was the Forum for Political Dialogue, and it was looking for an Editor. I was contacted and asked whether I would be interested. And, of course, I was. In any case, the United Nations job was coming to an end. People were beginning to report from remote locations. For instance, one of my colleagues, who used to work for the House of Lords on a freelance basis, did a kind of circuit. She came from Wellington, she worked in the Lords for a while, after which she went over to New York to work in the UN, and then she went back to Wellington. She kept doing that for years. She was one of the people who would be able to work remotely. The stuff would be sent down the line and edited in Wellington, Belfast, London, Cullybackey or wherever, and then sent back. The era of going to the UN and spending several months in New York was finishing anyway, so it was fortuitous that the Forum for Political Dialogue, which was part of the political process at that time whereby Adams, the DUP and Sinn Fein and all the others were coming together, was to be set up as a kind of semi-parliamentary body, and it needed a report. I was looking after that. Ultimately, with the Agreement, that body led to the setting up of the last or current Assembly, which has had so many suspensions.

That is what led to my being Editor of Debates, as the first Editor in the new Assembly. I have the very doubtful distinction of being the only person who has worked for every Northern Ireland parliamentary institution. When I said that to somebody one day, he said to me, "If I were you, I wouldn't admit that, for you might get the blame." That is how I came to be Editor in the most recent Assembly, and how I came to hand over to my colleague, Simon.

[Applause.]

Lorraine Sutherland: Alex will take some questions if anyone wants to ask him anything.

Neil Palmer (House of Commons): Did you ever meet Harry again?

Alex Elder: Harry who?

Neil Palmer: The Special Branch man.

Alex Elder: No. I think that Harry is long since dead.

Simon Burrowes (Northern Ireland Assembly): Could you give us a brief run down of a typical day back in the sixties?

Alex Elder: Of course, it was a shorthand writing system in those days, as were all Parliaments that I knew of. I worked for a short time at the Australian Parliament during the hiatus. Were you, Lorraine, one of the ones who went to Australia? Which one did you go to?

Lorraine Sutherland: Canberra.

Alex Elder: I went to Canberra. Somebody went to south Australia.

Lorraine Sutherland: Steve.

Alex Elder: And somebody went to Sydney.

Simon Burrowes: If my question was boring — *[Laughter.]*

Alex Elder: The point was that all parliaments in those days — all the ones that I knew of — had shorthand-writing *Hansards*. I joined the staff at Stormont as a poor shorthand writer. I wrote good shorthand, but it was slow, and what was needed was high-speed shorthand. At that stage, in the era of high-speed shorthand-writing press men, they had to bring in trainees. I think that there were probably two trainees before me, including Marie Ferguson. After that, virtually nobody was brought in who was fully qualified in shorthand writing. With the drying up of that source, there simply were no shorthand writing reporters, and if parliaments wanted to continue to have a shorthand system, they had to make the shorthand-writing reporters. We did it at Stormont and you did it in the Commons. I do not know to what extent it was done in the Lords, but other people did it, and then it became obvious that it

was not going to work and people went into other areas. The Commons went into machine shorthand and CAT — computer-aided transcription — and all that, while Stormont went completely into recording. I think that it was a very good system. We were no longer looking for people with two exceptional skills — good shorthand writers who were also good editorially. I think that that was a very good thing. Does that answer the question?

Lorraine Sutherland: What was a typical day, he asked!

Alex Elder: A typical day would have been much the same as your typical day in the House of Commons. In this place, it would have started at 2.30 in the afternoon, when there was only one House sitting. We had a staff of nine reporters — sometimes eight or 10 — and an editor, a deputy editor and an assistant editor, who did the second read. We would sit three days a week. The Commons, down the corridor, would sit three days a week, and this place, the Senate, usually sat one day a week, and sometimes two days. We had nine people to cover either one House from 2.30 until 6 or 7 o'clock or two Houses — that one, plus this one, for maybe two and a half or three hours. When two Houses were sitting, we got seriously behind with the editing and we would not finish until perhaps 11 o'clock at night.

Simon Burrowes: And the report was still printed the next day?

Alex Elder: Absolutely. It was always produced the next morning.

Stephen Hutchinson (Scottish Parliament): Did you ever miss a page of shorthand for economy?

Alex Elder: Don't ask embarrassing questions. *[Laughter.]* Yes I did. If you ever hear a *Hansard* person say that he has never made a gloriously monumental mistake, watch him — because he will tell you others. Some of them I would not tell you about.

Because of the situation here in the North, there was a fairly sharp political division. I remember the days of Cardinal Tomas Ó Fiaich, who was head of the Catholic Church here and Archbishop of Armagh. He was from South Armagh, from Crossmaglen. He was known locally at Tom Fiaich, but he became known as Tomas Ó Fiaich. He had been mentioned in a debate by the Reverend Ivan Foster, who was a minister in the Free Presbyterian Church, which is Ian Paisley's Church, so he was a member of the DUP. Of course, we recorded his reference with this spelling: Tomas Ó Fiaich. Ivan phoned me the next day, after the name had appeared in the report, and said, "There's no way I would spell his name that way, as that is the Irish way, and I am thinking of raising this matter with the Speaker today." Well, I said, "I hope you do, as it may well get us a ruling." In the meantime, although I was perfectly happy with what we had done, I thought that it might not do any harm to phone Ken Morgan to see what they did in the Commons. I said, "Ken, how do you spell Tomas Ó Fiaich's name?" He said, "God, it's funny that you should ask me that question, for I had four Northern Ireland Members in my office yesterday arguing about the very same point!" So I said, "How do

you spell it?" He said, "We spell it his way, which is the Gaelic way." I said, "That is good enough." The matter was raised in the House by Ivan Foster, and the Speaker ruled that how *Hansard* did it was the way it should be done. So we were in the clear.

There are those occasions when we wonder whether things should be reported verbatim. When I say "verbatim", I do not mean that we should report people as having said exactly what they said, because that would be nonsensical. In the knowledge that I was coming here today, a few days ago I listened to the BBC News with the kind of ear that you use when you are looking for things. In the space of about five minutes, there were at least five absolutely gross errors, including at least one example of somebody saying exactly the opposite of what they meant. But that was not noticed; everybody knew what the person meant. It was a bit like the occasion when Ian Paisley claimed and was granted a special Adjournment debate following some terrible incident in which several members of the UDR were blown up. There was repeated reference to the UDR and the IRA, and as his punchline, Paisley said, "Mr. Speaker, Sir, these three gallant members of the IRA..." Whatever reporter got the line came to me and said, "What the hell do we do with this one?" Nobody in the House even noticed the slip, because they knew what he meant, so we put him in print as having said what we knew and everyone else knew he meant.

There are other circumstances that those present will know only too well in which we cannot make such changes, but that was a fairly bold example of when it was safe to report the man as having said what we knew he meant.

Patrick Marsh (House of Lords): I am sure that all of us here can give examples of terrible speeches.

Alex Elder: I don't believe that.

Patrick Marsh: I would like to ask you which speeches stick in your mind as having been particularly good speeches.

Alex Elder: In the Commons here, we had an old guy — he wasn't that old — who was a GP member for North Down. He was an Ulster Unionist, but he was one of three or four rebellious Unionists. He was a thorn in the side of his own party. In the days when they were considering setting up a new University of Ulster, they had to decide where it would be. There were three or four possibilities. One was Derry, which already had Magee College, which was associated with Trinity in Dublin. That would have been an ideal place, but there was no way in which the Unionists were going to set up a new university in Derry. Another possibility was Armagh, the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland, and a very fine small city. There was also the possibility of Craigavon, that ridiculous new city concept, and then there was Coleraine. Coleraine is a lovely town; it has the air of a small city, but not really of the site of a new university. But that is ultimately where it went. After that, of course, it was combined with the then Northern Ireland polytechnic, and that all changed. One of the loveliest mixed metaphors that I ever heard came from

Dr. Robert Nixon in respect of the location of the new university. The matter had been debated umpteen times, and this was positively the last time before the big decision. Robert Nixon got to his feet and said, “Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the last dying kick of many honourable Members who want to get their oar in and have a last flight of their imagination.” I do not remember how it was reported, but that is what he said.

Clive Alford (Tynwald): You said that you were instructed to fill in your personal application form with proficiency in French. Were you ever tested?

Alex Elder: No, not as a freelancer. If I had been, I would never have worked there.

Loraine Sutherland: I think that that brings us to a close.

Simon Burrowes: I know that you felt some trepidation about doing this today, Alex, but we are delighted that you came along and gave us the benefit of some of your personal history. I certainly could not have taken over here without the help that Alex gave us. He retired in February, but did not actually leave the building until some time in July — and that was partly at my behest, it has to be said. I think that we have all enjoyed it, and as a small token of our esteem, we would like to present you with a small gift.

Alex Elder: Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

Session 8: BIPRA — the way ahead

This session was chaired by Clive Alford. There was a general discussion on the work that BIPRA has done to date followed by some “stargazing”.

There was overwhelming consensus that BIPRA to date had been highly successful in bringing the reporting organisations together and opening up an invaluable network of support and advice for staff at all levels. Delegates felt that this had been highly successful and that it should continue to be pursued.

Discussion touched on training and possible exchanges, advertising of jobs, learning events and seminars, professional qualifications, all of which were areas that it was felt would benefit from further development.

No formal action points were agreed, but conference encouraged the BIPRA executive committee to continue with its work and to seek to spread its membership.

Session 9: Feedback and Close

The final session was chaired by Simon Burrowes, who encouraged everyone present to complete formal evaluation/feedback sheets.

He reviewed the events that had taken place during conference and, on behalf of BIPRA, thanked the NI Assembly for hosting the conference and all the delegates for coming and contributing so well.

On behalf of the delegates, Clive Alford extended thanks to all those who had helped organise what everyone considered to have been a fantastic conference and he too expressed thanks to the NI Assembly for hosting the event.

Finally, Simon reminded delegates that the BIPRA conference for 2008 would be subsumed by the CHEA triennial conference being held in London and Edinburgh.

There being no further business, Simon drew the 2007 BIPRA annual conference to a close, and wished all present a safe journey home.