
Extending the Table in the House of Commons Chamber

by Eric Janse

Modern technology has led to many changes in the way Parliament works. This article outlines how the introduction of computers in the Chamber led to a four foot extension to the Table that sits directly in front of the Speaker's Chair and is used by the Clerk and other Table Officers who give procedural advice to the Speaker.

The Table used by the Clerks in the Chamber (hence the term "Table Officers") has been a longstanding fixture at the House of Commons. After the fire of 1916, J.A. Pearson, the main architect of the reconstructed Centre Block, produced drawings for a new table. A model was made by the carpenters rebuilding Parliament and was submitted along with a formal recommendation to the Joint Committee on Reconstruction of Parliament Buildings. The committee gave its approval on June 23, 1920, and a tendering process ensued, eventually won by Henry Morgan & Co. of Montreal with its winning bid of \$1621. For the elaborately carved base, clay models cast in plaster of Paris were provided for the manufacturer and during construction, changes were made to allow for extra ebony inlay work for an additional \$125. The final product was an impressive long oak table of Gothic revival style.

For years Clerks sat at this Table, equipped with little more than pens, paper and reference books, took notes (which in turn were used to produce the official documents of the House) and provided advice to the Speaker and Members on the rules of the House.

In 1952 a sound reinforcement system was installed in the Chamber and in 1958 a simultaneous interpretation system was implemented. With the introduction of television broadcasting of the House proceedings in the late

1970's came the first appearance of "technology at the Table". Specifically, an addition was built on the top of the Table that housed microphones, speakers and interpretation devices for the Clerks. In 1992 the addition was replaced by a larger unit (nicknamed the "garage") that included two television monitors for the Clerk (one a view of the Speaker, the second the feed being broadcast to the public). Practical as it was, these additions took a heavy toll on the original table due to the holes that were drilled for wires, cables, etc.

In 1996 laptop computers were introduced to automate the production of the Time Book (a minute-by-minute recording of the proceedings of the House). With the subsequent installation of a monitor at the foot of the Speaker's Chair, new tools were implemented: a rotation list of Members desiring to speak, a countdown clock indicating how much time remains for the Member speaking and finally a system by which the Table can send messages to the Chair.

Later, the laptops were replaced by more stable PCs, linked to the network to give access to e-mail, the internet and eventually various procedural databases. Finally, the macro-driven system was replaced by a custom-designed "Table dashboard" application that no longer restricted the Clerk on one side of the Table from performing certain tasks. Now tasks could be handed off from one side to the other.

As impressive and handy as this all was, it had its drawbacks. Mr. Pearson, the architect of the Table had never envisioned that CPUs would be stored under his creation meaning that many a time a Table Officer who

Eric Janse is Deputy Principal Clerk of the Journals Branch, House of Commons.

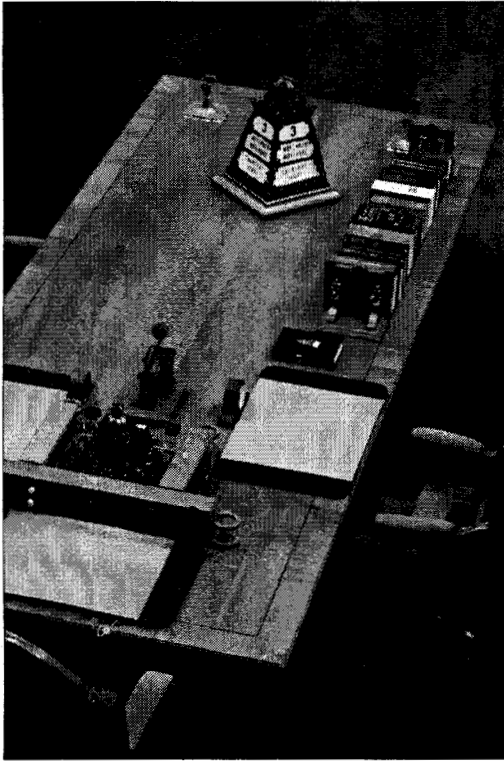


Table in the 1980s

(Photo courtesy of the Library of Parliament)

stretched his or her legs would end up giving a good kick to one of the units. Furthermore, if technical problems were encountered, our resident computer expert had to crawl under the Table on his hands and knees (disguised as a Page supervisor when the House was in session) in order to trouble shoot.

This obviously less than ideal situation combined with the desire to do further upgrades to the system, led, amongst other things, to the necessity for larger computer monitors. A complication arose in that the Clerk at the head of the Table already had the two small television screens which would then have been blocked by a monitor. The solution called for the installation of a special monitor that could incorporate a digital t.v. feed as well as act as computer monitor. The problem being that, due to the monitor's size, this would have required a new addition on the top of the Table to house this new screen, an addition that would have been so high as to dwarf the Clerk and obscure his or her view.

A proposal was made to sink the monitors into the Table by cutting enough of the wood to do so. The Curator's Office, exercising its important role as guardian of the heritage status of the Chamber (there are strict rules as to what and how renovations are to be done) recommended against this plan, citing the already significant

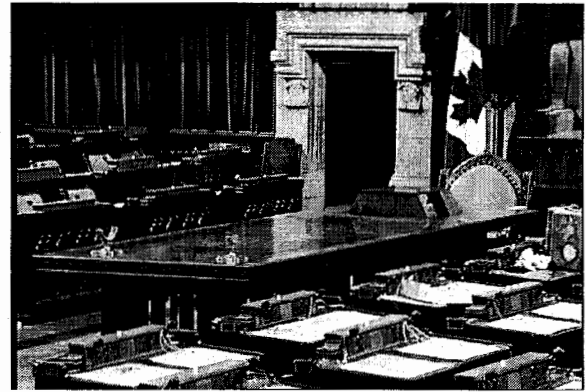


Table extension completed in 2001

(Photo courtesy of Curator's Office, House of Commons)

damage to the Table. It appeared that things were headed to an impasse until it was suggested that an extension be built where anything could be done. Great idea! Easier said than done.

The intricate wood carving at the base of the Table posed a serious challenge to the woodworkers who were tasked with building a perfectly fitting addition. Plans were made that also had to incorporate the computer, audio and video equipment required. It was decided to house the servers in a room one floor below the Chamber to facilitate maintenance work but this naturally required construction in that area. In March of 2000 a fiber-board mock-up was presented to senior management and approval was given to proceed with the extension.

Over the next ten months a flurry of activity ensued. The woodworkers constructed the new Table (no mean feat as they had to match the wood, grain and varnish of the existing Table) and refurbished the existing Table, including filling the sizeable holes. Information Services staff selected, ordered and tested new equipment, individuals from the Curator's Office provided design advice and Procedural Services personnel were consulted as to the specific needs of the Table Officers and the Chair Occupants.

Ironically, this was not the first time that an extension to the Table had been considered. In 1939, then Clerk of the House, Arthur Beauchesne, requested that the Department of Public Works construct a new Table, similar to the present one, but six feet six inches longer. In early 1940, for time and cost saving reasons, the proposal for a new Table was replaced by one for a simple extension. In a memorandum to then Prime Minister MacKenzie King, Beauchesne offered the following justification for the extension:

The Clerk's Table in the House of Commons should be nearer the Speaker's chair because the Speaker often has to consult the Clerk during the sittings of the House.....The Speaker who has to follow the debate very closely has to be assisted in finding the Standing Order or citation required to settle points of order; and it is very awkward for the Clerk ostensibly to walk to the chair and show him the rule. It does not add to the Speaker's prestige.

The table is also used by the Chairman of Committees of the Whole, Supply, or Ways and Means, and when he is presiding from the Clerk's chair, there are three tiers of seats behind him. This is an inconvenience both to the Chairman and to the members who occupy these seats, as they cannot "catch his eye" when they want to address the House and he cannot see them during debate.¹

Further correspondence indicates that the Prime Minister approved the recommendation as drawings, specifications and photographs were prepared for a tendering process. In September of 1940 however, much to the his annoyance, the Clerk was informed by the Department of Public Works that the Table should remain as is "for the time being". Despite his continued lobbying efforts as late as September of 1941, he was told that the Table would not be extended until after the war. For reasons unknown, it never was.

It was only some 60 years later the extension became a reality. The existing table had to be moved towards the centre of the Chamber to permit the installation of the extension. It now includes state of the art digital monitors, wireless keyboards, mice and microphones (for vote callers during recorded divisions) and a top that opens much like the hood of a car to allow easy access for maintenance. Drawers house equipment when not in use and footrests have been incorporated to reduce damage to the Table.

The installation and testing of the extension was completed by mid-January 2001 and first used for the Speaker's election on January 29th, the first sitting of the 37th Parliament. It is of interest to note that despite the fact

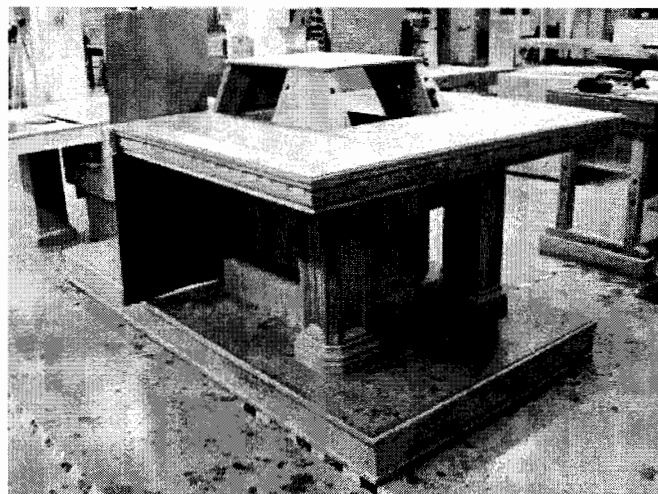


Table extension under construction

(Photo courtesy of Patrick Dondlinger, House of Commons)

that the voting booths are placed on the Table, many Members did not notice the difference in the Table. For the countless individuals from various departments who worked on this project, this was a great compliment. To enhance the service provided to the Speaker and the Members without inconveniencing them in any way is always the ultimate goal. We are now well placed to continue to improve and adapt as procedure and technology evolve.

Notes

-
1. National Archives Record Group 14 80-81/134, F900.