

# *The Table Research Branch*

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by Audrey O'Brien

*In the fall of 1980, the Table Research Branch was established by the late Dr. C.B. Koester, then Clerk of the House, with the support and encouragement of Speaker Jeanne Sauvé. A visionary in his conception of a professional procedural cadre, Dr. Koester hoped that the creation of the Branch might lead, in time, to the production of an original, comprehensive manual of procedure and practice in the House of Commons. This hope was realized in 2000. Today, the Table Research Branch continues to provide the House with a focal point for procedural expertise, research, advice, archiving, training, professional development, and outreach. It has become the House's institutional memory, the creator and maintainer of key reference works on Canadian parliamentary procedure and a valuable resource for Members of Parliament seeking accurate procedural information and impartial advice. Technological advances have transformed its modus operandi over the years, and the Branch's original mandate has expanded to meet the increasing demands for providing training and information about how Parliament works to a wider audience including visiting officials from other legislatures.*

The first detailed proposal for establishment of a specialized procedural research office dates back to the fall of 1973 and was put forward by a respected senior manager and procedural clerk, the late Michael B. Kirby. The limitations of primary reference works was generally acknowledged by the procedural community as was the habit of consulting British authorities, despite their inadequacy in view of the marked divergence in organization and practice between the Canadian and British institutions.

Following the 1980 report of the Auditor General of Canada requested by Speaker Jeanne Sauvé, the House of Commons underwent a major reorganization which included the procedural sector. Procedural activities were concentrated in three offices, one of them a new Table Research Branch.

At its inception, the Branch was placed under the direction of a Principal Clerk and its resources were limited to two researchers and a secretary. Its mandate was narrow – to provide accurate, timely information to the Speaker, to the Clerk and the Table, to House Leaders and to Members of Parliament.

The years that followed saw a gradual broadening of the Branch's mandate as resources were allocated to the task of consolidating sets of frequently overlapping, incomplete and conflicting files from other Branches in the procedural sector.

By 1986, Table Research Staff was comprised of a Principal Clerk and a Deputy Principal Clerk, eleven procedural clerks, and three support staff. With satellite units in the Journals Branch and in the Committees Directorate, the mandate of Table Research had also broadened considerably:

- to compile, catalogue, analyse and synthesize information relating to the procedures, precedents and practices of the House of Commons and its committees;

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- to provide information and advice on parliamentary procedure to the Speaker, to the Table, to the Members and their staff, and to various other interested parties (public servants, academics, procedural officers in other jurisdictions in Canada and abroad, and the general public);
- to develop and direct the procedural training and development of staff of the House of Commons and to co-ordinate procedural briefings and orientation sessions for Members and staff, for senior public servants and for officers from legislatures in other jurisdictions.

This broader mandate has since evolved into several distinct areas of information and knowledge management.

### Evolution of the Table Research Branch

Under the general rubric of “Procedural Information”, the procedural clerks at the Branch, by the mid 1980’s, already had built an extensive library and comprehensive research files. They had published several volumes of selected decisions of past Speakers, and were at work on others. They had produced a widely-consulted *Précis of Procedure* and were compiling databases of procedural events at the House, chief among them the *Procedural Review*, which captures all events of procedural significance in the House. The most ambitious creative projects were being undertaken by a special semi-autonomous office within TRB known as the Bourinot Project.

The primary goal and accomplishment of the Bourinot team of senior procedural researchers was the writing and publication of an original and comprehensive reference text on parliamentary procedure and practice in the Canadian House of Commons, reflecting its entire history and contemporary usage.

Before the Bourinot researchers could begin work on this project it was necessary for them to establish and maintain a single database consolidating all procedural information and precedents accumulated during the life of Canada’s Parliament. The centralising of procedural research at the House, and new advances in computer technology were essential to this (ongoing) task – indeed that task itself moved the concept of “centralization” to a new and unprecedented level.

The *Annotated Standing Orders*, published in 1989, represented a second key prerequisite before work could begin on *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*. By tracing the historical evolution of each Standing Order and providing a commentary on the practical operation in each case, the reading of the Standing Orders was made more informative and contextual. Largely as a result of the work accomplished, the House saw fit to renumber and regroup the Standing Orders to their present configuration. A second edition reflecting the continuing evolu-

tion of the Standing Orders is currently being prepared and is eagerly anticipated.

The creation of procedural databases, together with the publication of the *Annotated Standing Orders* set the stage for work to begin in earnest on a comprehensive procedural manual. After years of effort by a large team of researchers and writers, *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, edited by Robert Marleau, the former Clerk of the House, and Camille Montpetit, the former Deputy Clerk, was published in June of 2000. It has become the primary reference book on Canadian parliamentary procedure, and is in constant use, not only in Ottawa, but in many of the provincial legislatures across Canada. It was (and is) the crowning achievement of the Bourinot researchers and of the Table Research Branch. Table Research staff are currently compiling information for a second edition.

Another project was the creation of the SWATT team. SWATT is an acronym usually associated with crisis intervention in law enforcement. In 1987, a procedural “SWATT team”, a special sub-group of procedural clerks operating within the Table Research Branch, was established to respond to urgent requests from the Table and the Chair on procedural issues. The SWATT clerks follow events in the Chamber very closely and stand ready to respond, at the request of the Clerk, to situations as they arise. They prepare draft rulings for the Speaker on questions of privilege, points of order and other procedural issues and provide background research on matters arising in the Chamber and in committees.

The Table Research Branch also provides new Members of Parliament and their staff with a comprehensive orientation and introduction to parliamentary procedure organized by the Branch and also holds information sessions and *ad hoc* briefings for Members, their staff, government departments, students, scholars and visiting parliamentarians and parliamentary officials.

The Branch produces a practical guide for each incoming Speaker and the other Chair occupants on the essentials of House of Commons procedure. The Table Research Branch is also charged with the design and implementation of a training program for new procedural clerks and with in-house procedural training sessions for all procedural and non-procedural staff.

Staff of the Table Research Branch draft replies for the Speaker and the Clerk to correspondence on procedural matters. They respond to written, electronic and telephone enquiries from Members of Parliament and their staff, from other legislatures and from the public. They prepare articles and replies to questionnaires for professional and parliamentary publications and conduct re-

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search on matters under consideration by or of potential concern to the House or its committees.

In addition to the publications already discussed, the Branch also produces a glossary of parliamentary terms and fact sheets on procedure which are available on the parliamentary website. The *Précis of Procedure*, a guide for the lay person, is also on the website (an expanded and more comprehensive replacement, the *Compendium of Procedure*, is currently being developed), as is an electronic version of *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*.

A close relationship with the Canadian Study of Parliament Group and with the Parliamentary Interns allows the Table Research Branch to keep abreast of topical academic and research issues at the national level and across the country.

### **Table Research Today**

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The Table Research Branch has become the custodian of the information assets of Procedural Services, including publications, books, files, binders, and electronic databases. As a centre of procedural expertise, its success is greatly derived from the knowledge and experience of its staff.

Parliamentarians and many organisations and individuals have come to rely upon the Table Research Branch for the consistent production of authoritative, useful and timely products. As the Branch increasingly directs information and publications to the Web, greater effort is being devoted to maintaining current material in electronic format. State of the art systems (including a powerful in-house system called PRISM) have been developed to meet this objective.<sup>1</sup>

From tentative beginnings 25 years ago, the Table Research Branch of the House of Commons has become an indispensable resource to all who serve Parliament – one that continues to pursue innovative approaches to the meeting of its important mandate. The appetite of parliamentarians for historical background and precedents for various initiatives, as well as insights arising from developments in other jurisdictions will continue to engage us. We are confident that 25 years hence, the Branch, adapted as necessary to changing circumstances, will still be welcoming new challenges.

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1. See Audrey O'Brien, "Prism: The House of Commons Integrated Technology Project", *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, vol. 25, Summer 2002.