

Reporting the Spoken Word: The Ontario Experience

Peter Brannan

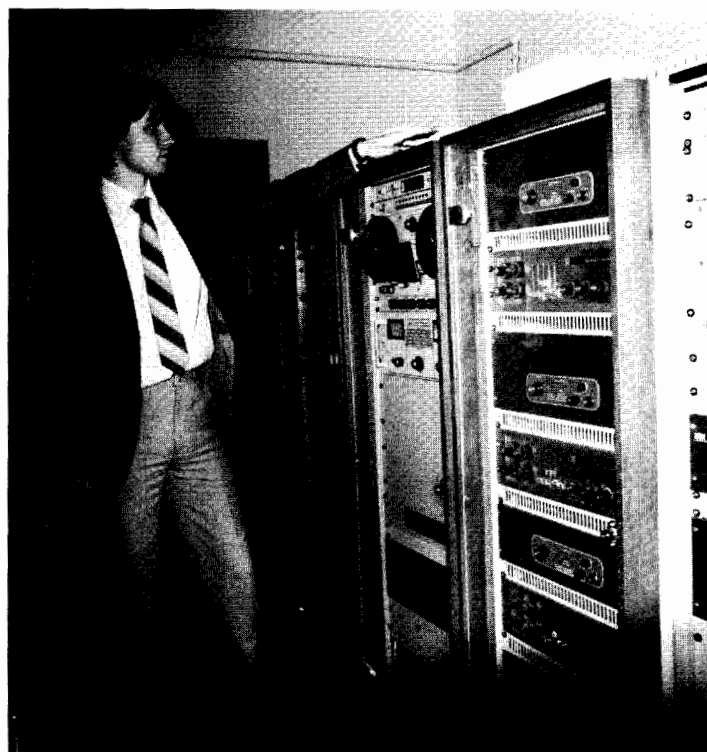
Hansard operations across Canada vary greatly in size and complexity, primarily because of differences in the length of sessions in various jurisdictions and the degree of priority required to produce transcripts. Where legislatures or councils sit for only two or three months a year it is hardly feasible to assemble full-time salaried staffs. Other factors, such as the requirements for bilingual reporting and the desired sophistication of the finished product, also affect the size and complexity of operations. This article outlines the evolution of Hansard reporting in Ontario and some of the problems that face Hansard staffs everywhere.

There are a number of different ways to report parliamentary proceedings, including the time-honoured manual shorthand method utilized in Ottawa and Westminster. This requires the minimum of installed plant, such as sound recording and reproduction equipment, and has the advantage of the flexibility of the human ear and the ability of the individual to interpret the voices and sounds heard. Any difficulty encountered with this method increases with the size of the Chamber (unless an adequate sound pickup and amplification system is utilized) and with the volume of interruptions or duplication of voices. Manual shorthand reporting is also dependent upon the availability of the exceptional skills needed. The skills have become increasingly scarce over the years. There has been some resurgence in the training of manual shorthand skills in recent times and the Westminster Hansard organization has undertaken the training of its own shorthand writers, having recruited people with the other requisite skills and knowledge.

Following on from manual shorthand is the *stenorette* machine, which employs a form of shorthand requiring less dexterity from the operator and enabling high shorthand speeds with relatively less training. This is currently used in several parliaments and to cover court proceedings.

Yet another reporting method is the *stenomask*. It probably requires the least resources of any recording system, but is suitable for only relatively small meeting rooms. The operator repeats all that he hears into a microphone contained in a mask so that this output is recorded on tape either remotely or at the operator's position. This system enables one operator to work for several hours at a stretch, with the output being handled by several transcribers in a remote location.

A skilled stenomask operator can do a certain amount of editing at the source, but cannot give the same consideration to this as a shorthand writer when dictating to the amanuensis. The steno-



Recording Operator Eriks Leperis sets up the 14-track archiving recorder on which an entire day's proceedings of the Ontario House and its committees are logged for long-term reference. Equipment is capable of simultaneous recording of proceedings in the legislative chamber and four permanently wired committee rooms.

mask operator's task becomes increasingly difficult as the size of the meeting and the volume of interruptions or interjections increases.

Finally there is *tape recording*, which has evolved as the major reporting method in legislatures around the world. It has been used to record the debates of the Ontario Legislature since 1957.

Development of Ontario Hansard

Hansard-style reporting of a full session actually began in Ontario in 1944 when a 2,613-page verbatim report of the twenty-first parliament was prepared by four Hansard reporters. It was typewritten and 20 onion skin carbon copies were made for distribution to the premier, cabinet ministers and party leaders. The final page bears the signatures of the reporters, testifying before a notary public "that the foregoing is a true and accurate record of what has been said in the session."

Peter Brannan is Chief of Hansard and Editor of Debates for the Ontario Legislative Assembly.

The first session of 1945 appeared in mimeographed form following a request by Agnes MacPhail, CCF member for York East, who suggested that each member should receive a copy. Premier George Drew also expressed dissatisfaction with the previous arrangement of onion skin paper copies.

A formally printed Hansard was produced in 1947 by Garden City Press of Toronto and in 1948–1949 by Ryerson Press. There was a return to mimeographed production from 1950–1953 following the remark of Premier Leslie Frost that for the price of printing Hansard he could pave nine miles of Ontario highways!

In 1954 Hansard was again printed. At the beginning of the session the Premier moved a resolution authorizing Mr. Speaker to "employ an editor of debates and the necessary stenographers at such rates of compensation as may be agreed to by him." This procedure was followed during the 1950's and 60's. Difficulty in obtaining highly skilled shorthand writers prompted the move to tape recording in 1957. The 1/4-inch reel-to-reel tape was transcribed using regular stenographic dictating machines by the same typists who had served in conjunction with the shorthand writers. The chief Hansard reporter, Mr. R.C. Sturgeon, though near death, worked on editing the debates from his hospital bed in that year.

Hansard production continued as a part-time operation when Edward Burrows took over the contract in 1958. There was an emergency in 1960 as a result of the illness of Mr. Burrows, and the Speaker, the Hon. William Murdoch, initiated enquiries at the nearby offices of Maclean-Hunter Publishing Company for someone to take over the editing and operation of Hansard.

It was at this point that some members of the current full-time Hansard team became involved with the production of the report of debates. Several Maclean-Hunter editors including Ernest Hemphill, Don Cameron and the author worked in their spare time with the existing team of typists led by Mrs. Eileen McFadden. At that time the legislature sat for only three or four months each year. The editors were employed by various publishing houses during the day and arrived at Queen's Park at 6 p.m. to work until 10 or 11 p.m., and often later. This part-time contract operation lasted a further ten years. By 1970, with the steady growth of the legislative year and the extension of Hansard to the reporting of estimates committees outside the Chamber, the part-time operation became impracticable.

The Hansard Reporting Service became a full-time branch of the Office of the Speaker in February, 1970, with considerable autonomy, the staff being responsible only to the Speaker of the legislature for prompt and accurate reproduction of the debates and subject only to his directives. This degree of autonomy was maintained, in terms of the legislative or political independence of Hansard, when the operation became part of the Office of the Legislative Assembly on its formation in 1975. For administrative and budgetary purposes, however, the Editor of Debates (Chief of Hansard) now reports to the Director of Administration and is under the jurisdiction of the Board of Internal Economy.

When Ryerson Press went out of business several years ago a number of staff members and much of Ryerson's equipment were taken over by The Carswell Company, which is still printing Hansard.

Production of Hansard from Tapes

Any tape recording system requires an appropriate number of microphones, controlled by a sound console and console operator. The design of the system and the acoustics in the meeting place will determine how many microphones can be activated at one time but it

is not good practice to have more than one or two microphones "live" simultaneously.

The console operator can also control the volume of the recording system and of any sound reproduction system. The identity of speakers can be provided by the console operator speaking into a small microphone connected to an auxiliary recording track. The same operator, if he is sufficiently skilled, may also repeat the more significant interjections on to the auxiliary track along with the identity of the member making them. This individual's contribution is vital to the reporting process, and in the coverage of a large chamber or gathering it can be an extremely skilled and demanding job.

The reel-to-reel tape system used in the Ontario Legislature was changed to Philips-type cassettes in 1975, thus making up two four tracks available for different recording functions. The two additional tracks were initially used to facilitate the recording of interjections but these tracks were subsequently disconnected to prevent the possibility of electronic eavesdropping. The additional tracks are now used only when instantaneous translation is provided in the legislative chamber or committee rooms.

In order to expedite the transcription process the debate is normally reduced to five-minute tape segments with a 15-second overlap to ensure continuity of reporting. Depending upon the complexity of debate and difficulty in dealing with different speakers, transcription of a five-minute segment can take anything from 20 to 45 minutes.

Innovations in the Ontario Hansard service in recent years include the use of a terminal and computer to produce the cumulative index, which is updated in monthly printouts, and the introduction of word processing equipment for the transcribers and editors.

The conversion to word processing has truly revolutionized the Hansard operation at Queen's Park. The work of the transcriber particularly, has been eased greatly by the elimination of typewriter noise and the ability to make corrections easily and cleanly. Other aspects of the word processing system have helped to speed production and generally to provide a more comfortable and attractive work place.

Word processing provided something more of a chore and a challenge to the editors. They are also working directly on the VDT screens rather than on the traditional "hard copy" manuscript. After working with pen or pencil for upwards of twenty years, editors had to learn to "massage" and "manipulate" the words and sentences of the debate by the use of a typewriter style keyboard.

Initially, this slowed down the editorial task and, depending upon the facility of the individual, word processing may have permanently slowed down the editing aspect of the job, but the pace has picked up noticeably with experience. Meantime, any disadvantage has been more than offset by the production of clean corrected transcripts for the committees and the general improvement in the production process.

In effect, Hansard staffers have replaced the former manual typesetters, the output from their terminals being revised and stored in a small central computer for transmission directly, via telephone data link, to the commercial printer's typesetting computer. The resulting cold-type/offset printing process has considerably streamlined the whole operation.

In addition to some cost saving, the new system also provides many working advantages, such as rapid reference to glossaire of names, titles and other frequently used material. Suspected mis-



House Editor Wendy Mills-Descheneau, left, and Research Editor Pat Tolmie staff the listening post, where copy is given subject matter headings and potential queries are headed off during the Ontario House's sometimes volatile question period.

spellings recurring in any batch of copy can be easily detected and corrected by a "search and replace" function.

Looking to the future, some foresee the "automatic" production of the printed word from the audio tape, through the medium of a cunningly programmed computer. Certainly this is not beyond the bounds of possibility but it seems to be a long way off. Others see the day when shelves full of dust-gathering volumes will be completely obsolete, to be replaced by video/sound viewers linked to computer banks with search and retrieval capability.

The latter route is easier to swallow than the suggested automatic transcription from audio tape capability, from the point of view of Hansard staff members who have exerted every fibre of their joint human capabilities in endeavouring to decipher the contents of some of the more boisterous or difficult recordings of debated.

It may be that the computer and its screen or printer could utilize a phonetic code that would be acceptable to the user and this would overcome the obvious difficulties of trying to program the distinction between "bow" and "bough", or "to", "two" and "too"! Another problem to confront any computer trying to convert the

spoken word to the printed form is the whole question of interjections.

The Great Interjection Controversy

The reporting of interjections has been a fairly controversial matter over the years. Ontario was one of the more "gung-ho" provincial services in that we prided ourselves on recording and reporting as many interjections as possible, utilizing both tape and shorthand writers (termed "interjectionists").

Despite our best efforts we still received complaints of uneven coverage, since we tended to pick up more of the interjections made by members seated closer to our interjectionists. With the installation of a new sound system in 1975, we largely overcame this problem by installing a four-track recording system and devoting two of those tracks to picking up interjections.

This plan seemed to work very well except that we were reporting more and more interjections, including a liberal sprinkling of such remarks as: "Right on", "Great stuff", "Good government", "Nonsense", "Terrible" and "Wonderful", together with the occasion-

al "Hear, hear" and just plain "Interjection". This sort of coverage made for a very cluttered report of the debate and the impact of the interjections was actually exaggerated by their inclusion in Hansard. The main speaker may not have been deterred in his progress by any of these remarks, but his speech appeared to have been thoroughly disrupted when one looked at Hansard.

A policy of retrenchment began with the blessing of successive Speakers of the House, but accompanied by continuing and persistent debate in the editors' room. Some editors applauded the reduction in coverage of the interjections while others felt we were not doing our job properly by leaving them out.

Finally, in 1979, we felt we had progressed to the point, both in the reduction of the volume of interjections reported and our improved electronic pickup, that we could afford to remove our interjectionists from the floor of the House and employ them on other duties. This was done with the permission of the Speaker of the day and we proceeded on, blissfully unaware of the gathering storm.

As soon as the members realized we had dispensed with the interjectionists' services there were a number of questions to be answered: Without them, how could Hansard pick up interjections? What would happen if the recording system failed? Would the interjectionists be laid off? And even: How could we produce any record of the remarks of members without the Hansard reports in the chamber?

Some MPPs expressed concern that this decision had been made without consultation and the Hansard chief was invited to appear before the Members' Services Committee to explain the situation. On learning that the interjectionists were deemed no longer necessary because of the introduction of the interjection recording tracks, some members expressed concern that such an installation could conceivably be used for electronic eavesdropping. As a result of these meetings, and to quell the growing fears, the interjection recording tracks were disconnected and the shorthand reporters were reinstated to their location in the chamber.

At the same time there was a great deal of discussion about the desirability of reporting more, or fewer, interjections. The clerk of the Members' Services Committee was instructed to contact Hansard organizations in other jurisdictions across Canada to find out how they handled them but, even with this information on hand, the committee members could reach no clear consensus as to their wishes regarding Ontario Hansard's reporting of interjections.

In the absence of any clear recommendation, and after further consultation with Mr. Speaker, the author presented his own recommendations for consideration by the all-party Board of Internal Economy. The guideline that emerged, and which was given the blessing of the Board, stipulated the following:

Interjections have no place in the official report of debates apart from certain well defined exceptions. The exceptions are (a) those interjections which evoke a response from the member who has the floor, and (b) any unparliamentary

remarks that result either in a rebuke from the presiding officer or a formal complaint to the presiding officer by any other members.

These guidelines were adopted gladly by some Hansard editors and with some reservation by others. In practice we have not been too stringent in our interpretation. Where it has appeared desirable to include interjections to indicate a boisterous period in the debate, or when interjections have resulted in persistent calls for order from Mr. Speaker or the chairman, we have reported those remarks.

This interjection policy has helped us to meet the increased work load in the Ontario Legislature and its committees in recent years. Under the old rules a transcriber had been known to struggle for an hour or more deciphering a five-minute tape and inserting the interjections. Then the editor would spend a great deal more time deciding which interjections were eligible and which should be excluded from the report. With the establishment of reasonably firm guidelines, the process has speeded up considerably.

This is not to say the controversy is finished. On the opening day of the fall 1981 session an opposition member expressed the view that all comments made in the legislature, which are able to be taken down accurately by the interjectionists, should be included as part of the Hansard record:

You must surely be aware (Mr. Speaker), having sat in this House for a good number of years, that an interjection could be just as important as a question, or just as important as a lengthy speech, depending on what the interjection is. I want to say to you that I do not believe it is right or proper for the proceedings of this House to be edited by a civil servant after he has, by himself, decided that the Hansard should look like a magazine instead of looking as it should, with all the interjections included. My point is that some interjections are recorded, others are not. This is entirely unfair because we leave this matter in the hands of a civil servant. We leave this matter in the hands of a bureaucrat to decide how Hansard shall look.

The same member raised the matter again on November 24th, 1981, and Mr. Speaker replied as follows:

The policy of the Hansard Reporting Service, with regard to recording interjections, is similar to that of most other major jurisdictions and is based upon guidelines approved by Mr. Speaker and the Board of Internal Economy. The difficulty of recording and reporting the growing number of interjections has escalated in recent years and, after consultation with successive Speakers of the House and Hansard staffs in other jurisdictions, the policy was adopted of recording only those interjections that evoked some response from the member who has the floor and which, as a consequence, form part of the debate.