

Factsheet G17
General Series
Revised August 2010

House of Commons Information Office

The Official Report

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Contents

Introduction	2
History and Development	2
Reporting the House	2
<i>The Official Report</i>	2
<i>Verbatim reporting</i>	3
Availability of Hansard	3
<i>Committee Hansard</i>	3
<i>Public access to Hansard</i>	4
Column Numbering, Series and Citation	4
<i>Column numbering</i>	4
<i>Series</i>	4
<i>Citation</i>	5
Size of the Report	5
Further reading	6
Contact information	6
Feedback form	7

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The development of the Official Report can be traced back to 1803 when newspapers were first allocated seats in the Public Gallery of the House of Commons. This **Factsheet** describes the development of Hansard and its current use.

This Factsheet and any links mentioned within it are available on the internet at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/factsheets>

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Introduction

Today, Hansard provides a clear and independent record of proceedings in the Chamber of the House of Commons, the sub-chamber in Westminster Hall and House of Commons General Committees. Hansard is a full report in the first person of all speakers although it does not always report every word said by a Member.

The origins of today's Hansard can be traced back to the early years of the nineteenth century. However, it has only been considered a truly authoritative account of Parliament's proceedings since the latter part of the nineteenth century.

History and Development

The first real advance towards an impartial account of the proceedings of Parliament occurred during the Napoleonic wars, when William Cobbett followed his *History of Parliament 1066 – 1802* with the printing of parliamentary debates as a supplement to his *Political Register*. *Debates* was the first structured attempt to record the proceedings of the British Parliament, though it was much less comprehensive and accurate than today's Official Report.

In 1811, Cobbett sold his interest to Thomas Curson Hansard, the son of Luke Hansard, who was the printer to the House of Commons. Under Thomas's proprietorship, the business flourished. The publication was initially based on reprints of reports of speeches culled from the press, but checked with a Member. Subsequently, however, it became the original work of Hansard's own reporters. The report went on to command respect as the most authentic and accurate account of parliamentary proceedings. In 1889 Thomas Curson decided that the title page should bear his name. Thus the Official report became known as *Hansard*, and the name was even adopted for the Official Reports of a number of legislatures throughout the world.

During the 19th century, Hansard faced a number of financial problems, and was subsidised by the Government. In 1909 a Select Committee was established to examine the arrangements for reporting the House's proceedings. The committee recommended the creation of a report with terms of reference which stated that it should be a full report, in the first person, of all speakers alike. The Official Report was thus born, though the name *Hansard* continued to be used. As a result of the Select Committee's recommendations, the operation was taken over by the House of Commons, which appointed its own staff.

Reporting the House

The Official Report

The Official Report (also known as Hansard) is responsible for producing the reports. Hansard reporters sit in the Press Gallery to take their report. The typical reporters' rota consists of about 16 men and women taking five-minute and ten-minute turns. Three main means of reporting are used: some reporters use written shorthand - the minimum speed required is 180 words a minute - and dictate to high-speed typists; some use machine shorthand, written on Stenograph machines, which can be linked to computers to translate turns instantaneously into conventional written English; and others transcribe from tapes on to PCs. A computer network connects the Hansard offices throughout the Palace of Westminster.

Reporters check their turns and send them to managing editors, who compile them into sections,

ready for sending electronically to the printer, The Stationery Office Parliamentary Data Centre, and to the in-House Pagination Unit. The report of one day's sitting in the House up to 1.00am, and sometimes beyond, is available in hard copy from 7.30am the next day. It is worth noting that, on one occasion, all the day's proceedings until the rise of the House at 2.45am were available in print form by 7.30am. In advance of printing, speeches made in the main Chamber are made publicly available on the Parliamentary website three hours after delivery (four hours in the case of Westminster Hall).

The reporting of Westminster Hall and General Committees is an increasingly important part of the work of the Official Report. The Committees are reported using tape recordings. A sub-editor sitting in the Committee room operates microphones that are linked to the tape system. He or she also writes a log of the proceedings, which provides guidance to a team of transcribers who compile the report from the digital audio recording, which they access directly from their PCs. The sub-editor subsequently reads the copy produced by transcribers for accuracy and consistency, and sends the report in electronic format to The Stationery Office and the HPU. WH proceedings are reported by a team of reporters and sub-editors, as in the main Chamber.

Verbatim reporting

The definition of a full report was adopted in 1907 by the Select Committee on Parliamentary Debates (HC 239 1907) as being one "which, though not strictly verbatim, is substantially the verbatim report, with repetitions and redundancies omitted and with obvious mistakes corrected, but which on the other hand leaves out nothing that adds to the meaning of the speech or illustrates the argument". Members are not allowed to make alterations of substance to their speeches, and all alterations must conform with the terms of reference set out in Erskine May. Neither may Members subsequently add anything to their speeches, or 'write in' material to the record, as is allowed in some other legislatures. This has applied only since 1909; before that, reports were often much less full, and indeed in the earlier part of the century were often cobbled together from press reports. The non-appearance of a particular item in 19th century reports of proceedings cannot be taken as evidence that nothing was said about it in the House.

Availability of Hansard

Hansard produces a variety of versions of their reports.

Daily Part - This is the best known and tends to be the most widely used. It appears each morning and carries an account of the previous day's proceedings.

Weekly Hansard - This is an uncorrected binding together of a week's daily parts, and it is made available on the Monday of the following week.

Bound Volume - The final, definitive version is the fortnightly green bound volume. This is scheduled to appear 92 working days after the event. The bound volumes are the archive set and incorporate corrections from the daily part (no corrections are made in the weekly edition). A cumulative index to the whole Session is published as the last bound volume of each Session. Occasionally, if there have been exceptionally long sittings or large numbers of written answers, a daily part has to be split and a part II or part III issued.

Committee Hansard

Hansard produces three versions of the reports of Committees. The first is the equivalent of the daily part. Later, a soft-bound collation of all the daily part reports on an entire Bill is produced. Eventually, a case bound volume of the reports is published in a brown cover. No Hansard is

produced for Select Committees, although Hansard currently covers two Select Committees, the reports of which are published by the Committees.

Public access to Hansard

A rolling version of Hansard appears on the Parliament website throughout the day. Electronically, proceedings are available from October 1988 for Commons debates, and Standing Committee debates are available since November 1997. The bound volume is also available on CD-Rom. There is also a website (still in development) that contains electronic Hansards going back to the early Eighteenth Century at <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/>.

The Official Report is sold to the public by The Stationery Office and the Parliamentary Bookshop in Parliament Street. At the time of writing, Commons Hansard costs £5.00 per day. Most large public libraries (which receive a 50% subsidy on the cover price of Hansard and other official publications) stock Hansard, and the House of Commons Information Office can advise in which libraries in Britain and Ireland it can be consulted.

Column Numbering, Series and Citation

Column numbering

There are six sets of column numbering in Hansard. The columns are numbered in roman type for the Chamber. The suffix WH indicates debates in Westminster Hall. Since the beginning of session 2002-03 Ministers have issued Written Statements which have been included in Hansard with the suffix WS. The suffix W indicates written answers. The suffix P is for Petitions presented formally and those with ministerial observations, if any. Ministerial Corrections have the suffix C. Written answers always come in a separate sequence at the end of the daily part or bound volume. The computer typesetting method used may mean that shunting up of columns occurs and this causes variation between the daily/weekly part and the bound volume.

Series

There have been six series of The Official Report:-

- 1st **Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates:** Vol 1 (1803) to 22 (Mar/May 1812) continued by **The Parliamentary Debates**, Vol 23 (May/June 1812) to Vol 41 (Feb 1820). Some sets were reissued with the title of Vols 1 to 22 as The Parliamentary Debates.
- 2nd **The Parliamentary Debates, New Series** Vol 1 (April 1820) to Vol 25 (July 1830).
- 3rd **Hansard's Parliamentary Debates (3rd Series)** Vol 1 (Oct 1830) to Vol 356 (August 1891).
- 4th **The Parliamentary Debates (4th Series)** Vol 1 (February 1892) to Vol 199 (December 1908).
- 5th **The Official Report, House of Commons (5th Series)** Vol 1 (Jan 1909) to Vol 1000 (March 1981). The name Hansard was officially restituted in 1941.
- 6th **The Official Report, House of Commons (6th Series)** Vol 1 (March 1981)

Citation

References to Hansard should be given in the following form:

HC Deb 13 November 2001 c345; or cc345-6 or c134W or c101WH or c1WS or c6P or 99C.

Note that Hansard on the internet also gives column numbers and these should be used in quotations. If quoting any Hansard for a year or more ago it is helpful to quote the volume number:

HC Deb 3 February 1977 vol 389 c973

HC Deb 17 December 1996 vol 596 cc18-19

HC Deb 4 July 1996 vol 280 c505W

If quoting very old Hansards it is usual, although optional, to include the series number:

HC Deb (4th series) 26 August 1907 vol 169 cc179-180

The old Standing Committee Hansard should be cited as follows:

SC Deb (A) 13 May 1998 c345

The new Public Bill Committees that replaced the Standing Committees should be cited as follows:

Health Bill Deb 30 January 2007 c12-15

unless the Bill title is so long that this becomes ridiculous. In this case use:

PBC Deb (Bill 99) 30 January 2007 c12-15

or, where the context makes the Bill obvious,

PBC Deb 30 January 2007 c12-15

In Hansard itself, citations are given in the form [*Official Report*, 17 December 1979; Vol. 976, c. 37].

Size of the Report

Up to 1980, Hansard had been in octavo size from the earliest times. From 12 January 1981, it changed to A4. This was a decision of the House, arrived at only after three not inconsiderable debates on the subject. The bound volumes for November and December 1980 were also subsequently issued in A4.

Further reading

House of Commons Official Report website
<http://www.hansard-westminster.co.uk/>

Gives more detailed information on the history and the production of the House of Commons Official Report.

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House of Lords Record Office
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For your purposes, did you find this Factsheet

- | | | | | | |
|----------------|--------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Very useful | <input type="checkbox"/> | Fairly useful | <input type="checkbox"/> | Not much use | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Too long | <input type="checkbox"/> | The right length | <input type="checkbox"/> | Too short | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Clear | <input type="checkbox"/> | Not always clear | <input type="checkbox"/> | Rather unclear | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Any comments?

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