

Indexing legislative text: *Alberta Hansard*

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An account of how the proceedings of the Alberta Assembly are compiled and indexed, including a discussion of some of the problems encountered, especially those related to terminology. [?author - OK?]

Alberta Hansard

Canada has a federal system of government, consisting of a national parliament and provincial and territorial legislatures for each of ten provinces and three territories. All levels produce official reports of the debates held while the legislature or parliament is in session. The unofficial title for such reports is 'Hansard', from which Alberta derives its publication's title, *Alberta Hansard*. Though the title varies in other jurisdictions, it commonly includes the word 'Debates' or 'Official Report'. The name Hansard itself comes from the Hansard family, the printers first authorized to print the official record of the British parliamentary debates in the 19th century. The Canadian federal government adopted a Hansard report in 1880; Alberta adopted one more recently, in 1972.

The *Alberta Hansard* report provides gavel-to-gavel coverage of the proceedings, or debates, of the Alberta Legislative Assembly. It records every word spoken from the beginning to the end of each day the legislature is in session, forming an historical record that outlines why decisions were made and what policies were adopted and legislation passed.

The process of capturing the words spoken involves recording the entire day in five- or ten-minute segments, then transcribing each segment into a partially edited unofficial document called the 'Blues'. The term comes from the printing tool known as a blueline, a blue-toned print used to check the layout of elements on a page. The Blues are distributed around the Assembly to allow members a chance to correct any glaring errors, though it should be noted that they are not allowed to change what was said in any way. Following the initial transcript, the five- and ten-minute segments are combined into half-hour segments and given a more in-depth edit, after which they are combined to form the entire record of that day. The final transcript, or report, is then sent to a commercial printer for overnight printing and is delivered to the Hansard office first thing the next morning, for delivery to each member's office.

Indexing processes and problems

It is from this final published report that the index is created. Indexing commences as soon as the printed *Hansard* is received. Each item of business in that day's report is indexed according to policies that prescribe the indexing treatment for each. For example, proposed Bills (laws) are indexed under their title, their number, and one or two

subject headings reflecting their purpose. Index data are input daily, with a weekly printout that is distributed to various officers of the Assembly, as well as to the Legislature Library and each caucus office. At the end of a session, the index is revised and proofed, then published in the bound volumes for that session's text. A separate softbound copy of the index goes to each subscriber to the daily issues of *Hansard*. In the Hansard office, the index is used to answer questions received from members, their research staff, officers of the Assembly, and the general public.

From a subject-heading point of view, indexing legislative text poses some unique challenges at times. Differences in political philosophies can sometimes lead to some headscratching when trying to choose a suitable heading. Some years ago, there was a debate around the topic of doctors being allowed to bill their patients for amounts over and above the agreed-upon schedule of fees under the provincial health plan. The majority party in the House at the time referred to the practice as 'balance billing', meaning they considered the service rendered to be worth a certain amount, of which the provincial health plan paid part and the patient paid the balance. The opposing political party referred to the practice as 'extra billing', meaning that they considered the service to be worth what the health plan called for and that the patient would pay for an extra amount. Then there were those who simply referred to the practice as 'second billing'. Which term is an indexer to choose? In this case, the term 'balance billing (Medical fees)' was chosen, since the majority of the members speaking on the topic used that term. Most of those members belonged to the majority party, showing that sometimes the index mirrors the political mix in the Legislature. To facilitate retrieval of information, though, *see* references were made from the other two terms.

Even without differing political philosophies, there can be quite a bit of variation in the terms used to refer to a given topic. A project to widen a series of highways through the province to better facilitate trade with the USA and Mexico under the North American Free Trade Agreement has been referred to since it started by several terms, including 'free trade highway', 'north-south highway', 'export highway' and the 'Canamex corridor'. At the beginning of the project, the term of choice for most members was 'export highway'; currently the term most used is 'north-south highway', so the index has had to adjust main headings and *see* references accordingly as the debate evolves. When indexing evolving debate, this process of adjustment is constant.

In a legislative index, there are also headings that require a procedural filing sequence for subheadings rather than an alphabetical one. For example, legislation that is being considered follows five steps before becoming law: first reading, second reading, committee study, third reading and Royal Assent. A regular alphabetical sequence would see the committee stage, for example, filed in first position instead of third, so the filing needs to be manipulated to file 'f' before 'c' to make it 'look' right in a legislative context.

In addition to the proceedings of the legislature, there are all-party legislative committees that meet separately. Transcripts for the meetings of each committee are produced in the same way as for the full legislature sessions and are indexed as soon after as possible. From an indexing point of view, the topics covered by these committees are far more narrowly focused than those covered by the full legislature, so subject headings tend to be narrower as well; what might be a subheading in the *Hansard* report index becomes a main heading in a committee index.

To meet the challenges of indexing both sessional and committee documents, for the past four years, Cindex™ software has been used to produce all of our indexes. Before that time, a customized software package was used for about 11 years. The switch to Cindex was made partly because the

customized software was showing signs of aging and was becoming unstable. In addition, it was a DOS-based, main-frame system, and the Assembly was setting up its own network of personal computers based on the Windows environment, so a change was necessary. After investigating several commercially available index software packages, Cindex was selected as having the best features for our needs.

Indexing legislative text is an intensive exercise while sessions are in progress, with daily deadlines and sometimes frantic requests to locate something that was said. In between sessions, catch-up indexing is more leisurely, but it is always an interesting environment in which to work. The key to success in indexing legislative text is flexibility and a willingness to adapt indexing practices to changing needs. Even more important, of course, is accuracy in dealing with evolving debate and attributing comments to the correct member. It doesn't do to have the wrong member say the wrong thing!

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