

## Hansard History



*Hansard* is the name given throughout the Commonwealth to the daily printed record of the debates of parliament. Political reformer William Cobbett introduced Britain's first record of parliamentary debates in 1810 but later sold his interest in the debates to the Hansard family, printers to the British House of Commons. Although the Hansard family only produced the record of debates from 1812 to 1888, the report retained the Hansard name by which it is known today.

Hansard has been a part of Canada's parliamentary heritage since 1880 and a part of Alberta's legislative history since 1972.

### *Hansard* in Canada

Canada adopted a *Hansard* in 1880, and the publication quickly earned a reputation for its excellent quality. In fact, Canada's style of *Hansard* reporting was used as a model in several other countries. The doors of the House of Commons hadn't opened easily, though. The struggle for a permanent, publicly funded record of debates had dragged on for almost six decades.

### A family matter

Beginning in the 1820s Upper Canada's debates were recorded in newspapers, though the press in those days was anything but free. Most newspapers remained under the thumb of the Family Compact, the small, powerful group of English aristocrats who dominated the government of Upper Canada. Parliamentary reporters crafted their stories carefully since any reporter who portrayed the Family Compact in an unflattering way could be fined or even imprisoned.

The Family Compact kept its hold on the press until the Act of Union of 1840 united Upper and Lower Canada and created a more responsible form of government. The Assembly of the new province of Canada was still reluctant to allow for a complete parliamentary record. Some members didn't want their speeches to be taken down and published; others just weren't prepared to pick up the tab. Newspapers continued to report selected speeches, but this arrangement was problematic since several newspaper editors were themselves Members of the Assembly.

## United but not agreed

As Canada moved toward confederation, it became obvious that a more comprehensive record of debates was needed. But what form should it take? Newspaper editors understandably liked the idea of a scrapbook *Hansard*, a collection of hand-picked newspaper clippings containing selected members' speeches. John A. Macdonald, still a decade away from being Prime Minister, objected to the scrapbook *Hansard*. He complained that it told an incomplete story and that citizens would have to read the contents of several newspapers in order to understand both sides of a debate.

In the 1860s legislators managed to agree on one thing: the Confederation debates were far too important not to be taken down. The reporting work was done on a contract basis with inconsistent and expensive results. The high cost and poor quality of the reports gave fuel to those who were against publishing a complete record of debates.

Resistance to a *Hansard* continued, even after Canada became a country in 1867. In 1874 the *Daily Globe* ran an editorial against the publication of a full-length *Hansard*. The editor suggested that if Members of Parliament knew they were being recorded in full, the parliamentary report would become a platform for members' egos. He also insisted that a *Hansard* could never be produced as quickly as a newspaper's report of debates. He would eventually be proven wrong.

## Canada gets a *Hansard*

Canada finally adopted *Hansard*, a complete record of parliamentary debates, in May of 1880. A select committee oversaw the reporting of the debates, and it recommended hiring a permanent staff of reporters who would be recognized as Officers of the House. The reporters would also receive competitive salaries to reduce turnover and improve continuity. The result was an accurate and consistent publication.

## A Prime Minister's plea

Not everyone supported the new *Hansard*: a few stale traces of Family Compact strictures remained. Just one year after the adoption of *Hansard*, a Member of Parliament moved that the *Hansard* be discontinued. He argued that parliamentary debates shouldn't be recorded at all. Prime Minister John A. Macdonald responded with an impassioned speech in which he argued that without a *Hansard*

*... we have no means of tracing out the very groundwork of all our legislation -- the motives and impulses of those petty municipal questions which were the chief subjects of interest in the early days and which have expanded into the larger subjects which are now engaging the attention of the people and the Legislature of Canada.*

Prime Minister Macdonald's speech was a success, and the motion to do away with Canada's new *Hansard* was overturned. Although technology has changed production methods, Canada's *Hansard* still adheres to the same high standards of accuracy established back in the 19th century.