

REVIEWS



The History of Hansard

By John Vice and Stephen Farrell
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Lord Lexden finds much to enjoy about this concise account of the battle to publish parliamentary debates – and the sometimes violent confrontations that ensued

In March 1771 magistrates in the City of London refused to execute warrants issued by the Speaker for the arrest of three printers who had published information about parliamentary debates without authorisation and ignored summonses to appear at the Bar of the House. The Commons, in a state of fury, committed one of the magistrates who was an MP to the Tower on 26 March. The following day the Lord Mayor, who was also an MP, went down to Westminster, ready (indeed keen) to receive the same punishment. Like many other radicals, he relished the prospect of political martyrdom.

A large crowd of riotous supporters gathered in Old Palace Yard intent on trouble. According to one account of the event, every carriage conveying an MP was stopped. “The coachman was compelled to give the name of his master; and the master was cheered if he were on the side of the Lord Mayor or mobbed if he were on the side of the House. The constables were powerless. Their staves were wrested from them, and used in the furtherance of violence. The prime minister [Lord North] was pulled out of his carriage. He was struck on the head by a constable’s baton, and was otherwise roughly handled. His coach was demolished. His hat also fell into the hands of the mob, and was torn into small pieces, which were distributed as mementoes of the occasion”.

MPs refused to be intimidated, voting by 202 to 39 to send the Lord Mayor to the Tower. However, the widespread adulation this popular hero received

convinced both Commons and Lords that it was pointless to continue the struggle to try and keep their proceedings out of the press. The prisoner was released six weeks later at the end of the parliamentary session amidst wild celebrations. In the years that followed, reporters and printers became increasingly bold, but no further efforts were made to suppress their work, even though technically it remained in breach of parliamentary privilege.

This concise, well-written and carefully researched history of Hansard, embellished by many handsome illustrations, is the more valuable because it gives a vivid account of the historical circumstances out of which the world famous publication emerged. The two authors, long-serving senior officials in reporting debates in the two

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Houses, show that throughout recorded history politicians have been very reluctant to concede unfettered freedom to those who record their spoken words. In the Roman Empire errant scribes were apt to have the tendons in their wrists severed.

After losing the fiercely fought battle against the press in the 1770s, parliament did not exactly make its representatives feel welcome. Note-taking was forbidden in the Lords until the early nineteenth century. One man with a prodigious memory provided the record of proceedings. A future Lord Chancellor recalled that “immediately after prayers he took his post at the bar, leaning over it, and there he remained till the House adjourned. He then went home and wrote his report, which he sent to the printing-office”. The Lords were the losers: they “were punished for their absurd regulations by a very vapid and pointless account of their speeches”.

The Hansard family came on the

scene in 1808 as printers of the records of parliamentary debates begun by a famous radical firebrand, William Cobbett. Constantly harried by the government, Cobbett went bankrupt; Thomas Curson Hansard, the second of a distinguished line, took over.

The two authors explain how the Hansard family went about their work during the nineteenth century: “They had no regular staff to speak of... With painstaking care and attention to detail, they devoted themselves to providing the fullest and most accurate versions of newspaper reports, supplemented by other information, including notes and corrections sent in by Members”. TC Hansard was once asked whether he sometimes “put into a Member’s mouth what he ought to have said, rather than what he said”. He replied, “That would not be a very great evil”.

The Hansards could not make ends meet, even with the help of government grants from 1855 onwards. Hansard passed into other commercial hands in 1888 and finally, after much discussion skilfully summarised here, both Houses established their own reporting staffs in 1909. The last two chapters record the success with which the two teams have adapted to changes in parliamentary life and the arrival of modern technology. Day by day 84 dedicated people in the Commons and 35 in the Lords ensure that we have “a full, accurate and authoritative report of everything that is said and done in Parliament”.

There has long been a need for a succinct, yet comprehensive account of the ways in which parliamentary debates have been reported over the centuries. This beautifully designed publication fits the bill perfectly. 🏰



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