

**Professional Development Programme at the House of Commons , Parliament of U.K.**

**20<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> January, 2014**

**Feed Back report**

I was sent to the House of Commons Parliament of United Kingdom on attachment to the Professional Development Programme from 20<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> January, 2014. There were other participants in the programme also, namely Ms. Naiangkhanem Guite, Assistant Director, Rajya Sabha Secretariat, Mr. Jean Phillippe Brochu, Principal Deputy Clerk, Parliament of Canada, Mrs. Aaisha Ali Kotoko, Administrative Officer and Mr. Ibrahim Maaruf, Legislative Officer, both from, National Assembly of Nigeria.

**Day 1 - 20<sup>th</sup> January, 2014**

1. We reached Portcullis House, the reception office of the Westminster at 9:45 a.m. After collecting photographic security passes for the Westminster and allied offices, Ms. Camilla Brace, Public Relations Officer, Overseas Office, House of Commons escorted us to go for a tour of Westminster estate through a Tour Coordinator. We were shown all the important places in the Westminster complex which comprised chambers of House of Lords and Commons, Westminster Hall, Committees Rooms, Central Lobbies, etc. Thereafter, we met Mr. Cryspin Poyser, Clerk of the Overseas Office who briefed us about the programme. This followed a lunch with Mr. Martyn Atkins, Clerk of the Health Committee.
2. **Meeting with Mark Hutton, Principal Clerk of Select Committee:**
  - Select Committees include the Department- related Committees, General Committees viz. Public Bill Committee and Internal Committees viz. Procedure Committee, Liaison Committee, Committee on Privilege, etc.
  - The departmental committees were set up in 1979.
  - There are 33 such Committee in all.
  - They consist of 11-13 Members.
  - The Chairman of the Select Committees is elected by the whole House by secret ballot.
  - The Front Bench Members, Ministers do not become members of these Committees.
  - The Memoranda received by the Committees are made public by putting them on the relevant link of the Committee on the website of House of Commons.
  - Evidence before a select committee is taken in public.
  - Committees have power to appoint specialist advisors.
  - The schedule of meeting and agenda of each Committee is published in advance on monthly basis.

3. **Meeting with Liam Laurance Smith, Journal Office**
  - Journal – is votes/ Minutes of Proceedings of the House and by law, the facts of Proceedings.
  - Hansard – is complete debate of the House. Hansard is preserved since about 260 years.
  - Journals also contain announcements regarding Committee meetings.
  
4. **Visited public gallery of House of Commons to observe proceedings of the House from 5:30 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.**

### **Day 2 – 21<sup>st</sup> January, 2014**

1. **Meeting with Ms. Alda Barry, Clerk, Department of Chamber and Committee Services** to discuss Parliamentary procedure and Erskine May.
  - There is a trust which has the sole right of publication of May's Parliamentary Practice and Procedure. The House does not have a copyright of the publication.
  - There is no role of House of Commons/Lords officers in editing or bringing out a new edition of the publication.
  - It is used both as a treatise and a manual on procedure of the Houses of Parliament.
  - There are about 150 days in a year (from November to November – next year) when the House is in Session.
  - 20 days for opposition to choose its business.
  - 27 days for Backbench Members.
  - 13 Fridays for Private Members' Bills.
  - Besides, in the Westminster Hall, the debates on issues of public importance are held on which the Government has no say. The debates in the Westminster Hall are scheduled on the recommendations of the Backbench Business Committee.
  
2. **Meeting with Maria Prew, Manager, Member's Center:**
  - Member's center works as a reception office for Members to facilitate their working as Members of the House of Commons.
  - Committee meetings schedule, agenda pamphlets, Order Paper of the day, articles of interest, etc., are provided by the Members' center to the Members on demand.

### **3. Committee Meetings**

- Proceedings of the meetings of the following Committees were observed by us while we sat on the chairs meant for public in the respective Committee Meeting rooms:-  
(i) Health Committee (ii) Public Bill Committee (iii) Backbench Business Committee (iv) Defence Committee, and (v) Home Affairs Committee.
- Chairman of the Committee briefs the witnesses about the agenda of the meeting and the reasons for which they have been invited to give evidence.
- The proceedings of the meetings are webcast live on the website of the House of Commons.
- No refreshment is served during the meeting. Only water may be given on request by a Member.

### **Day 3 – 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2014**

#### **1. Meeting with Mark Etherton, Clerk, Table Office, for an Introduction to Table Office, including Parliamentary Questions.**

- Table Office prepares the set of agenda papers which *inter-alia*, includes the Questions for oral and written answers, Bill(s), for consideration, and Committee meetings.
- There is prayers everyday for 3 minutes before the House resumes its business.
- There is no notice period of Questions, generally, within 3-4 days the question has to be answered.
- Questions are taken up for one Hour from 2:30 p.m. on Monday and Tuesday, from 11:30 a.m. pm Wednesday (30 minutes for Prime Minister Questions included) and from 10:30 a.m. on Thursday.
- A maximum of ten Questions may be put by Members (Names selected by ballot) to ask questions on topical issues of which no notice has been given.
- Question Hour is followed by urgent questions, if any, and statements by Ministers.
- There is no limit to number of oral or written questions, generally 10-15 questions for oral answer and 20 – 25 questions for written answer are listed in the order paper.
- There is a Procedures Committee of the House which looks into the matters of delay in answering questions, giving wrong/evasive answers, or not answering the questions at all by the concerned Departments.
- There is also a mechanism of e-tabling of questions by the Members.

#### **2. Speaker's Procession (11:15 – 11:30 a.m.)**

We observed Speaker's Procession, a daily ritual wherein the Speaker, escorted by the Sergeants at Arms', one of the Sergeant holding the Queen's Mace, goes to occupy his

seat in the Chamber. Thereafter, we observed Questions time (on International Development) and Prime Minister's Question time (for 30 minutes).

### **3. Meeting with Bob Twigger, Secretary, House of Commons Commission**

- The Commission deals with the affairs of the House precincts, the Secretariat, budget, etc., its Chairman is the Speaker of the House of Commons.
- Formed by an Act of Parliament, the House of Commons Administration Act, 1978.
- Personal staff of speaker is appointed by the Speaker himself.
- Clerk of the House is the Chief Executive Officer of the Management Board which supervises the various services of the House.
- Commission prepares Administration estimates and Members' estimates.
- The Budget is laid on the Table of the House.

### **4. Meeting with Robin James, Deputy Head, Table Office, to discuss Backbench Business Committee**

- About 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the Members of House of Commons are Backbenchers (Front Benches are occupied by Treasury, Leaders of Parties, Opposition, etc.).
- The Chairman of the Committee is from opposition party.
- It considers admissibility of general debates and substantive Motions given notice of by the Backbench Members to be discussed in the Second Chamber (Westminster Hall).
- The Members of backbenches giving notices of debates have to appear before the Committee to justify the need for a debate on the issue.
- The Committee, after hearing the Member, allots day and time for the debate.

## **Day 4 – 23<sup>rd</sup> January, 2014**

### **1. Meeting with Methew Hamlyn, Clerk of Bills**

- Bills introduced in the House are invariably referred to the Public Bill Committee.
- There is no provision of a joint sitting of the two Houses, the Bill will ping-pong between the two Houses if one House amends the Bill passed by the other.
- The Lords have no power to disagree or amend a Bill passed by the Commons. They can only give suggestions which the Commons may consider, if necessary.
- The Queen does not have power to return or withhold a Bill as passed by the two Houses of Parliament.

2. **Meeting with Secretary – General, Commonwealth Parliaments Association(CPA).**

At 11:00 a.m., we were welcomed, by Dr. William F. Shija, Secretary – General, CPA, in CPA Headquarters situated at 7<sup>th</sup> Floor, 7 Millbank, London. The Secretary – General informed about the work of CPA, Annual Conferences, WTO Conferences, etc. He informed that CPA is mainly involved in holding conferences on subjects viz. youth development, women activities, global financial crisis, cyber security, climate change, etc. CPA's other activities, as informed by Dr. Shija, are organizing Youth Parliament and providing technical assistance to Commonwealth Parliaments.

3. **Tour of Parliamentary Archives:-** A record of original copies of the Acts passed by the Houses of Parliament are kept since the year 1497, Journals of House of Lords since 1547, papers laid before Parliament from 1531 and Plans of roads, railways, canals and other public works from 1794. Bills were originally drafted on parchment sheets which have been kept in rolled bundles in the archives. It was a unique experience. We also happened to see the original copy of the Indian Independence Act, 1947.

4. **Vote Office:-**

- It is like our Distribution Branch with exception that the vote office has a large print unit equipped with modern printing and binding machines.
- It publishes 400-500 copies of Hansard everyday, besides other Parliamentary documents.
- It was informed that a lot of Members still prefer hard copies of the documents.
- The printing Unit has machines like Book Maker, Folder Machine, Spiral Binders, Thick Book Stapler Machines, etc.
- The Government documents are not supplied by the Government for circulation to Members. The Vote Office downloads the documents from the relevant website of the Government and prints the same in required number of copies for distributing to Members on demand.
- The hard copies of parliamentary documents are supplied to members on demand/request, to be submitted on a prescribed form.

5. **Committees and Media:- Meeting with Ms Jessica Palmer Bridges, Media Officer**

There are Media Officers attached to each Select Committee. They keep close contact with the activities of the Committee and the Media. They give press briefing to the Media and also to the Chair about the proceedings and report of the Committees.

## **Day 5- 24<sup>th</sup> January 2014**

### **1. Meeting with Lorraine Southerland, Editor, Official report.**

- There is outsourcing of making transcripts of about 70 per cent of Committees proceedings.
- Digital Audio tapes of the proceedings of the House as well as Committees are preserved.
- Even unprinted debate is also priced at 5 pound per copy.
- There is a proposal to exclude the Questions/Answers part from the Hansard. The Ministries are being persuaded to submit the answers electronically.

### **2. Scrutiny Unit: Meeting with Alexander Horne, Legal and Senior Policy Advisor**

- The Scrutiny Unit was established in 2002 by a Resolution of the House of Commons.
- It consists of Lawyers, Accountants, Economists, and other specialists, etc.
- It conducts Legislative and Financial scrutiny of the draft Bills proposed to be brought before the House.
- It supports the Public Bill Committees, rather than looking into the subject matter of the Bills.
- The Scrutiny Unit expertises in expenditure, estimates, social policy and performance measurements. It also aids the select committees in their working.

## **Day 6- 27<sup>th</sup> January, 2014**

### **1. A Tour of the House of Lords**

Ms. Zana Paul, Visits Coordinator, Overseas Office of the House of Lords guided us to a Tour of the precincts of the House of Lords, its various offices. We also watched the Lord Speaker's procession and the proceedings of the House of Lords from 2:20 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.

- House of Lords is a self regulating House. There is no point of order, list of speakers, etc. The Lord Speaker is only a ceremonial post. She has no discretionary power in regulating the proceedings of the House.
- There are around 778 active Members, as on 07.01.2014, out of which 182 are women.
- 92 Members are hereditary peers.
- There is a practice of laying on the Table a Journal of the proceeding of the last session on the first day of the new session. The Journal is laid by the Clerk of the House.

- The Journal also contain attendance record of Members.
- Division is done manually, by paper slips distributed to Members.
- There is a plan to put record of Division on the website.
- The quorum for a sitting of the House is 4 (four) only for a debate and 30 (thirty) for legislation.
- The Prime Minister recommends names of persons to be nominated to the Lords Chamber. He gets advice from a Commission which comprises Bishops, Arch Bishops, retired Army Officers, Civil Servants, etc.
- House of Lords can suggest amendments to a Bill passed by Commons, they cannot disagree to a Bill passed by House of Commons.

## 2. **Register of Members' Interests:-**

- A register is maintained, for both financial and non-financial Interests of Members of House of Lords. The Register is regularly updated.
- A Commission of standards was appointed by the Lords in 2010 to look into the matters of Conduct of Members in public life.

## 3. **Table office of Lords:-**

- Members may ask only 7 questions.
- The question shall not exceed 75 words.
- No questions seeking information of statistical nature.
- Each Member may ask 6 questions for written answer.
- Bills have precedence over a general debate except on Thursday when the order is reversed.
- The Ministers who are Members of the House of Commons do not enter into the Lords Chamber. A Minister from House of Lords only will answer the questions in Lords.

## 4. **Committees in Lords:-**

The House of Lords have some Select Committees viz. Science & Technology, Communications, European Union Affairs, Economic Affairs, Constitution Committee and Joint Committee on Human Rights. Besides, they also have some *ad hoc* Committees and Joint Committees on Pre Legislative and Post Legislative Scrutiny. They supplement the Commons Committees. The Membership of the Committee is on rotational basis. After 4 Sessions in a Committee, a Member goes to other Committee.

## 5. **Communications and Information Technology in House of Lords:-**

- Civil servants head the Communications Unit.
- They liase with the Media and the Public.

- They respond to the enquiries from general public.
- They are available on the social media *viz.* Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, etc.
- They also conduct programmes on Parliament education.

**Day 7- 28<sup>th</sup> January, 2014**

**1. Visit to Parliament Library: Meeting with Chris Sear, Reference Service Manager:-**

The Reference Service of the Library has Specialists on a host of topics, including the Kashmir issue. They have a booklet containing names of specialists, their area of specialization and telephone numbers. Articles on Important issues are prepared by the reference service, printed and given to Members.

**2. Meeting with Harun Musho'd, HR and Project Manager**

- There is mid-year appraisal of the staff.
- There is basic induction programme for the new recruits.
- The new staff is given 9 month's probation period.
- House of Commons Commission is the employer of the Staff.
- Clerk of the House is the Chief Executive of the Organization.

**3. Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit:- Meeting with John Angeli, Director.**

- We watched proceedings of Parliament from TV Gallery.
- Since 1989, proceedings of the House are telecast live.
- There is no TV Channel of the House. The BBC Parliament has been given the right to telecast parliamentary proceedings.
- The Broadcaster bears the cost of operation of the programme.
- The Parliament bears the cost of equipments
- They have definite rules of coverage for telecasting the proceedings.
- Online Video Service are also there on the Parliamentary website.
- For Live coverage of Committees' Meeting, TV Channels are permitted on payment basis which is about 455 Pounds + tax per meeting.
- Almost all Committee rooms are equipped with automated camera and mike system.

**4. Papers and Petitions: Meetings with Margaret Mackinnon and Dannielle Nash, Clerk of Papers and Clerk of Petitions respectively.**



- There is a separate section for keeping the procedural research tools which keeps records of statistical nature viz. number of questions asked, the time taken on each item of business, etc.
- A separate record of precedents is also maintained by going through the daily votes of proceeding.
- Petitions can be given by general public endorsed by a Member of the House of Commons.
- There is no Committee on Petitions, the concerned Section looks into the petition, sends it to the concerned government department and the concerned Minister lays a statement in the House in respect of the points mentioned in the petition.
- The Petition is printed in the Hansard and recorded in that day's Votes of proceedings.
- A Member may read out the petition in the House formally or just place it in the green bag behind the Speaker's Chair.
- There were 146 public petitions presented in 2013-2014. In 2013-2014 so far, about 145 petitions have been presented in the House of Commons.

### **Day 8-29<sup>th</sup> January, 2014.**

#### **1. Visit to the Westminster Hall:**

It is a Chamber parallel to the House Commons main Chamber.

- It is a kind of big Committee Room, intended to take the pressure off the main Chamber.
- Set up in 1999, the Westminster Hall organizes debates on issues of public importance on which Members have tabled notices.
- Generally, debates are held on Tuesday and Thursday.
- The Members tabling the notice speaks on the issue. Other members may also speak. The Minister replies at the end of the debate. There is no division in the Westminster Hall debates.
- A panel of Chair presides over the proceedings of Westminster Hall.

#### **2. Department of Information Services:-**

- It caters to the Parliament outreach, having its various branch offices located in U.K.
- It spreads information about the working of the parliament among the general public, organizes programmes on parliamentary education.

#### **3. Management of Parliamentary Committees' Budget:** The House of Commons have a separate office to manage the budget of all Committees. It has given instructions to committee officials to observe austerity measures in order to reduce the expenditure incurred on Committee meetings and tours. When a Committee decides to travel overseas, it has to justify the Liaison Committee of the House of Commons the value for

money involved. There is also entertainment budget for Committees in which the Committees can organize parties on special occasions e.g. New Year's day or inviting dignitaries to Lunch/Dinner, etc. Now, oral evidence tendered before Committees is not printed, it is put online, this has reduced the budget of Committees to a considerable extent.

### **Day 9- 30<sup>th</sup> January, 2014**

1. Speaker's Committee for Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA); meeting with Eve Samson, Clerk of the Committee.
  - The IPSA has recommended 74000 Pound Annual as the pay for Members of the House of Commons.
  - As per Parliamentary Standards Act, 2010, the Business Cost and expenses relating to Members shall be published and laid before the House of Commons.
2. Meeting with officials of CPA, U.K. and British Group of Inter Parliamentary Union (BGIPU)
3. Meeting with Lawrence Ward, Sergeant at Arms.
4. Presentation of Certificates and conclusion of attachment.

### **General Observations**

1. The House of Commons is in Session for about 150 days in a year for which a Calendar is prepared at the beginning of a session.
2. The Committee System in House of Commons is very effective and with ample infrastructural facilities.
3. The evidence before a Committees is taken in public.
4. Before every meeting, the general public is informed through printed pamphlets and electronic means about the meetings, agenda and the work of the Committees.
5. The Committees generally meet at least once in a week.
6. There is neither forced adjournment of the proceedings nor any disruption or interruption in the proceedings of the House on the part of the Members.

7. The oral Questions are precise and sharp, the replies thereto are also crisp and precise. The proceedings in Questions Hour very fast so that all the oral questions (generally 15-20) are taken up in the stipulated time.
8. There is no procedure like Zero Hour, Special Mention, Calling Attention, Short Duration Discussion, etc. Instead, they have a procedure for debates on issues of public importance which may be short debates (30 minutes to 1 hour) or long debates (1½ to 2 ½ hours), adjournment debates on issues of public importance are generally taken just before the House rises for the day (for about 30 minutes).
9. Every Bill introduced is considered by the Public Bill Committee and the Committee submits its report in a short time, say within one month.
10. Trivial matters like misbehaviour by officials, Police personnel, etc., are not given much importance by the Members and they do not invoke their parliamentary privileges in such matters. Due to changes in the society and culture, there are very less cases of privilege of late. Privilege of freedom from arrest in civil cases has been proposed to be abolished.
11. During the last 15 years, the Committee of Privileges of House of Commons has considered/reported only 5 cases of breach of privilege/contempt involving witnesses/individual Members.

### **Suggestions for implementation in Rajya Sabha**

1. The Committees infrastructure needs to be widened to a greater extent, by providing more rooms for Committee meetings, all equipped with Audio-Visual Machinery. For conducting research work for Committee, a research team may be engaged with all Committees, particularly the Department-related Committees.
2. The evidence sessions of Committee meetings may be opened for public, in order to enhance people's participation in parliamentary activities and to bring more transparency in working of Committees.
3. The Committees may be empowered to appoint specialists as advisors. For this purpose, a modest budget may be earmarked.
4. The Memoranda received and evidence tendered before the Committees may be put online on the relevant link of the concerned Committee on Rajya Sabha's website. Printing or making copies of the memoranda and evidences may be avoided to save expenditure on this count.
5. Instead of conducting on-the-spot study tours by the Committees, the arrangements may be made for video conferencing of the people/officials at distant places.

6. In order to transact more Government legislative business and Private Members' business, minimum number of days, at least 120 days, may be fixed for which the House should be in session in a year.
7. The Committees should meet more frequently during Session days to ensure availability of Members and their attendance in meetings. If there is a division in the House during a Committee meeting, the meeting may be adjourned for 15 minutes, as is done in the House of Commons.
8. If possible, a comprehensive pre-legislative scrutiny and post-Legislative scrutiny of all legislations brought before the House and passed by it may be conducted. For this, a separate scrutiny unit may be opened or the job may be taken up by the concerned Committee to which the Bill has/had been referred.
9. The questions and supplementaries asked by members should be precise and sharp, likewise, the replies thereto should also be sharp and precise by the Ministers.
10. The Role of Media Unit needs to be widened to a much greater extent so as to give daily briefing on the activities of the House and its Committees to the media and engage more participation of the general public in the parliamentary activities. Opening a separate unit of Parliamentary information in for people's involvement in Parliamentary business and to spread awareness about its role in country's development and polity may also be considered.

**About the Programme:** The Professional Development Programme in the House of Commons, United Kingdom is a really excellent Informative Training. The Module is optimal. One gets a thorough knowledge of the working of the Westminster model of Democracy. During winters, however, the people from our country face difficulty in coping with the extremes of low temperatures in United Kingdom. It would be better if such a wonderful training programme is organized during March-June or September-October.

**(Saket Kumar)**  
**Assistant Director,**  
**Rajya Sabha Secretariat**

**Training Cell**

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