

FEEDBACK REPORT ON THE PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME OF THE
HOUSE OF COMMONS, PARLIAMENT OF
UNITED KINGDOM, LONDON

(Monday, 23rd April to Thursday, 3rd May, 2012)



We were nominated to the Professional Development Programme of the House of Commons, Parliament of United Kingdom. The Programme took the form of a two week attachment (Monday, 23rd April – Thursday, 3rd May, 2012) to the Department of Chamber and Committee Services in the House of Commons. It was designed to give an understanding of the working of the House of Commons and included a brief visit to the House of Lords and discussion on the working of the House of Lords.

2. The programme included topics like working of Committees, Journal Office, Bills, Legislative Process, Parliamentary Ethics and Standards, Broadcast Material and matters of Privilege, Copyright and other related issues, Security System, House Management and Budget, Work of the Vote Office, Parliament's Education Services etc. and involved visiting a range of offices such as Table Office, Committee Office and Legislative Services, Office of the CPA, the National Audit Office and the City Hall where experienced staff discussed their work and shared experiences.

3. **Working of Committees** : The programme included an introduction to the working of Committees. The Committees in the U.K. Parliament are called Select Committees. Committees in the House of Commons are more like Departmental Committees. In the House of Lords, these are more subject based Committees. The main work of the Committees is inquiry and scrutiny. Unlike in Commons, all reports are debated in the House of Lords. In the Commons, Select Committees usually focus on scrutinizing the work of individual government departments while in the Lords, the Select Committees focus on subjects such as the European Union, Science and Technology, Economic Affairs, Communications and the Constitution. Also public are allowed to view the proceedings of the Committee meetings which are also telecast on TV.

4. **Journal Office** : Liam Laurence Smyth, Clerk of the **Journals**, gave an introduction to the Journal Office along with discussion on Parliamentary Reform. The Journal Office keeps the proceedings of the House and is a repository for precedents. It gives advice on precedents, procedures and standing orders. In the House of Commons, the Votes and Proceedings are consolidated into the Journals on a sessional basis and these form the authoritative record of the decisions of the House. In the House of Lords, the Journals are compiled from the Minutes of Proceedings by the Clerk of the Journals office. It deals with public petitions and also assists the Committee on Standards and Privileges in investigating complaints against Members. Regarding **Parliamentary Reforms**, we were informed that there was a fundamental problem with the way the U.K. democratic system currently works as the political institutions command so little benefits of de-centralisation of power from central government to local government. Upcoming reforms included the commitment to the full removal of hereditary peers from

the House of Lords, pointing out that having a wholly appointed House of Lords was unsustainable for a modern democracy.

5. **Bills** : As regards bills, before introduction of Bills in Parliament, draft Bills are issued to the interested parties to get attention as well as discussion outside parliament before its introduction in Parliament. Pre-legislative scrutiny of some draft bills can be done by both Houses of Parliament. It is often done by a Select Committee in the House of Commons or by a Joint Committee of Lords and Commons. The intention is to produce a better law and save time in the House by identifying problems at an earlier stage.

6. **Broadcast material and matters of privilege, copyright and other related issues** : The meeting with the Parliamentary Recording Unit, was based on a discussion about broadcast material and matters of privilege, copyright and other related issues. The speakers talked about the relationship between MPs and copyright law and impact of the law of parliamentary privilege upon it which was categorized as the 'governmental', 'parliamentary' and 'private' .□□Under the 'governmental' category, when in government and acting in a ministerial capacity, an MP can claim the immunities granted to the Crown under the *Copyright Act 1968*.□Under the 'parliamentary' category, an MP will also be able to claim the immunities which flow from parliamentary privilege, but only in relation to those activities which come under the umbrella of 'proceedings in parliament' .□Under the 'private' category, an MP can be taken to be a private individual and therefore subject to the normal application of the copyright law. A potential fourth category was also discussed. This referred to the exemptions under the *Copyright Act 1968* for copying by parliamentary libraries for MPs.

7. **The House of Lords and Lord Speaker** : Most of the Members of the House of Lords are peer, appointed for their lifetime by the Queen on the advice of the Prime Minister. A distinctive feature of the Lords is its 'Crossbench' Members. These Members are independent and not members of the main party groups. Any eligible UK citizen can apply or be nominated to become a Member via the independent House of Lords appointments Commission. Members only get daily allowances and no salary. The House of Lords has a Speaker, but he has almost no powers. The House works on self regulation. Members are permanent. They are Lords for life. A Draft Bill on Parliament Reforms is likely to be presented next year. Everyone can watch the chamber at work. Entry is free and one can even watch online.

8. **Security System** : The Serjeant of the House of Commons and the Black Rod of the House of Lords are responsible for the security of Parliament. The Serjeant is accountable to the Speaker of the

House while Black Rod is accountable to the Lord Speaker. Both are assisted by the Metropolitan police for overall security of Parliament. 90% of the security personnel is contracted to the police.

9. Parliament's Education Services : We also had a meeting with Dr. Emma Jane Watchorn, Education Services Manager, Department of Information Services to discuss U.K. Parliament's Education services. Now, a separate Department, earlier it was part of the Library. It is a bicameral department, working for both Houses. House of Commons sponsors 70% of the Budget while House of Lords Sponsors 30% of the budget. Main aim is to educate the public. The department is focused on three fields: (i) Informal learning, (ii) adult education; and (iii) empowering and informing young people. Parliaments Education Service aims to inform, engage and empower young people to understand and get involved in Parliament, politics and democracy. The Department works with schools, teachers and Members of Parliament from both Houses. Services are free and designed to support the teaching and learning of political literacy across the UK curricula.

10. Social Media and Electronic Consultation : Mr Matt Instone, Head of Digital Engagement spoke about social media and electronic consultation. We were informed that since 2005, the Parliament of U.K. has extensively adopted the use of social media to increase public awareness of and interest in ongoing parliamentary events and activities, and to provide education about the institution itself. The UK Parliament uses social media to communicate its activities as they happen. For example, visitors to the House of Commons website will find links to a dedicated UK Parliament page on Twitter that provides announcements of parliamentary and committee reports being released and outreach experiments being undertaken. The UK Parliament has also made extensive use of podcasts to promote off-line efforts, provide information about the history of Parliament, and present major policy questions and issues being considered by Parliament and its committees. A combination of technologies is used in another outreach initiative of the UK Parliament- the game "MP for a Week" on the Parliament website and is targeted to young people. The game allows "players," participating individually, to determine how they would spend their time during a week as a parliamentarian and to assess their progress in the context of their performance with constituents, the media and their own parties as they make decisions. Another notable use of social media by the UK Parliament is podcasting from the official websites of the Office of the Prime Minister, the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The Parliamentary Committees in the House of Commons had begun experimenting with online consultation as a means of evidence-gathering as early as 1999 and began using social media in 2006.

11. National Audit Office : In the United Kingdom, the National Audit Office (NAO) scrutinises public spending on behalf of Parliament. The Audit and inspection rights are vested in the head of the

National Audit Office, the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG). The Comptroller and Auditor General, is an Officer of the House of Commons. Both he and his staff at the NAO are totally independent of government. They are not civil servants and do not report to any Minister. Oversight of the NAO is carried out by a Parliamentary Committee, the Public Accounts Commission, which appoints external auditors and scrutinises its performance. The NAO focuses its output on (i) **informed government**, to encourage government to do more to base its decision-making on reliable, comprehensive and comparable information; (ii) **financial management and reporting**, to improve management of activities and to encourage the finance function in departments to make its full contribution; and (iii) **cost-effective delivery**, to encourage departments to understand better the key elements in the delivery cycle and what they cost. However, the NAO does not audit local government spending, publish statistical information or audit the spending of the devolved governments in the rest of the UK. Public Accounts Commission is headed by Auditor General who is nominated by P.M. and appointed by Queen. He is appointed for a period of 7 years and can be dismissed only by address in both Houses of Parliament.

12. Work of the Vote Office : Mr Owen Sweeney, Deputy Deliverer of the Vote, gave a briefing on the work of the Vote Office, including distribution of parliamentary documents and emergency production, plus tour of the Print Unit. The Vote Office is responsible for the provision and distribution of all Parliamentary, some non-Parliamentary and European Union papers required by Members and officers of the House. The majority of the documents can be accessed on the web by the links provided. Alternatively, paper copies can be requested from the Vote Office which has issue points situated at various places like parliament Street, Main Office of Westminster palace, Members' Lobby, Porticullis House etc.

13. The Training Programme was extremely informative and interactive alongwith being very enlightening.

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