Feedback Report on Training Programme on "Parliamentary Reporting" in the Hansard, U.K. Parliament & Parliament of Scotland

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(11th to 22nd June, 2012)

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PREFACE

It is a matter of great honour for us to be nominated to a two-week Training Programme on "Parliamentary Reporting" in UK Parliament and Parliament of Scotland from 11th to 22nd June, 2012 by Dr. V. K. Agnihotri, Secretary-General, Rajya Sabha Secretariat. We are personally indebted to the Secretary-General and our senior officers for nominating us and helping us to undertake this training programme.

We would also like to thank Shri Narmadeshwar Prasad, Dy. Director, Smt. Oindrilla Roy, Assistant Director, Training Unit and Shri Rakesh Anand, Dy. Director, Conference & Protocol Section who had been very kind in extending a helping hand before our departure and during our stay abroad.

REPORT ON PARLIAMENTARY REPORTING IN HANSARAD, U.K. PARLIAMENT AND SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

We, Vimal Kumar, Meena Pandey, Sunita Batheja and Sangita Sharma, a team of four Joint Directors of the Rajya Sabha Secretariat, were nominated to undergo a training programme in the Hansard, the U.K. Parliament and the Scottish Parliament from 11th June to 22nd June, 2012 to study the system of reporting Parliamentary proceedings in those institutions.   The primary focus of the training programme was on the preparation of verbatim proceedings of the respective Houses and the various Committees of the Parliaments of U.K. and Scotland.

During the Training Programme, we had the following activities:

- Presentation on the History and Purpose of Hansard;
- Attended debate in the House of Commons Chamber
- Attended debate in the Public Bill Committee
- Shadowed a House Reporter & a Committee Reporter
- Had an interaction with Sub-Editors of the Committee Section
- Witnessed evidence of the Select Committee, House of Commons
- Witnessed Prime Minister's Question Time, House of Commons
- Attended a Westminster Hall debate
- Attended a workshop on editing, reference sources, procedure, style, etc.

- Had a discussion on reporting methods (computer aided transcription, electronic logging and voice recognition)
- Meeting with Mr. Kelvin Hopkins, MP, House of Commons
- Visited the House of Lords and attended the debate
- Presentation on Recruitment and Training
- Presentation on health and wellbeing in the workplace
- Presentation on managing performance through quality control

Our team was welcomed by Mr. Jonathan Hoare, Coordinator and Mr. Richard Purnell. Mr. Tony Minichiello was our Course Director.

Our training programme started with a presentation on the History and Purpose of Hansard and how Hansard prepares the report. The Definition of Hansard reporting is: "A full report, in the first person, of all speakers alike, a full report being defined as one which, though not strictly verbatim, is substantially the verbatim report, with repetitions and redundancies omitted and with obvious mistakes corrected, but which on the other hand leaves out nothing that adds to the meaning of the speech or illustrates the argument."

This is how reporting is done in the Parliament of UK.

During the course of our training programme, we were taken to the House of Commons Chamber along with the reporters of House of Commons to observe the proceedings. After observing the proceedings of the House of Commons for about half an hour we were taken back to the Reporters' room to see how they prepare the verbatim report.

Reporting verbatim proceedings of the House of Commons

The Methodology:

Whether it is the proceedings of the House of Commons, the Westminster Hall or the various Parliamentary Committees, the Hansard reporters don't take down proceedings in shorthand, the primary reason being they do not have, any more, high-speed shorthand writers capable of taking down Parliamentary proceedings. In fact, we were informed in the presentations that the world over, shorthand writers were not going beyond achieving the skills that were required for becoming an office steno. Hence, an acute dearth *al biet* a total absence of high-speed shorthand writers and verbatim reporters.

What they do is, each reporter in his Turn of five minutes, as the case may be, prepares a log based on the House Clock, merely noting down the names of speakers and a few initial words that they spoke, etc., but not taking down proceedings in shorthand as such. The sub-editor, who is his supervisor and a senior reporter, sits in the Gallery of the House of Commons Chamber and prepares a similar log.

The individual reporter, then, comes back from the Chamber to his room after his turn is over along with the logs prepared by him and by the sub-editor and prepares the verbatim report of the proceedings with the help of digital recording that is made available in the LAN, exactly as it is done here in our Secretariat. The verbatim report prepared by the reporter is, then, checked on-line by the sub-editor

for accuracy and for adherence to a uniform procedure. Once complete, the verbatim report for the day is put on the web.

For reporting the verbatim proceedings of the House of Commons Chamber, they have 16 reporters and six sub-editors/supervisors. Each reporter gets a maximum of six to seven turns of five minutes duration on each day of the Sitting. The House reporters don't cover the Committees. For Committees, there is a separate team of Committee Reporters.

Reporting Verbatim Proceedings of Committee Meetings

For preparation of proceedings of the various Parliamentary Committees, there is a separate team of reporters known as Committee Reporters.

It is quite surprising and, of course, different from what we do here in both the Secretariats of Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha, that Committee Reporters are not supposed to go and cover the proceedings of Committees in person. What happens is, proceedings of all the Committee meetings are recorded digitally and made available to the Reporters via the intranet/LAN. It is actually the Sub-Editors, who are senior reporters having been given the job of supervisors, who go to the Committee meetings and prepare logs, noting down the time, names of speakers and a few initial expressions made by them. The Sub-Editor, who has a half-an-hour Turn, makes available his Logs to each individual reporter of his team through the LAN. The Committee Reporter accesses the digitised recording of the proceedings and with the help of the Logs prepared by the Sub-Editor, prepares the verbatim report of the proceedings. There is a separate roster of Committee Reporters. The

duration of a Committee Turn is 10 minutes; whereas a House Turn is that of five minutes duration.

Recommendation:

By adopting this method of reporting through digital recording especially of Committees, we can save a lot of time of the reporters. As you are aware, there are so many posts of reporters lying vacant for the last 10 years and the workload is increasing day by day. If we adopt this method of digital recording in committees, then individual reporters wouldn't have to go to the committee meetings which are mostly held in the Parliament House Annexe, thus saving a lot of time of the reporters. When there are two, three or four meetings in a day, which happens regularly, all the reporters have to remain in the meetings the whole day, thus are not able to prepare the report on that day. From a long term perspective, we, Vimal Kumar & Meena Pandey would strongly recommend that we should gradually shift to the digital recording system of committee meetings keeping in view the fact that there is an acute dearth *al biet* a total absence of high-speed shorthand writers and verbatim reporters.

The Scottish Parliament

In the Scottish Parliament we were welcomed by Ms. Liz White and Mr. David Cullum.

We participated in the following activities in the Scottish Parliament:
- Attended First Minister's Question time
- Shadowed a reporter doing a plenary turn

- Had a talk with Mr. Fergus Cochrance on the Finance Committee
- Shadowed a reporter doing a committee turn
- Talk on Official Report by Mr. Ian Methven
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Reporting verbatim proceedings of the House as well as Committees in the Scottish Parliament

In the Scottish Parliament, we witnessed the debate in the Chamber. We also attended the First Minister's Question Time. We shadowed a reporter doing a plenary turn. We also shadowed a reporter doing committee turn. In the Scottish Parliament, we found that they were following the same system of reporting verbatim proceedings of the House debate as well as the Committee meetings as was being done in the Parliament of UK. There were no shorthand writers in the Scottish Parliament also. They also do reporting through digital recording.

The House of Lords

During the second week of our training programme, we visited the House of Lords, where we were welcomed by Mr. Havar Ellingsen, Reporter and Mr. John Vice, Editor.

We witnessed the debate in the House of Lords Chamber. There also, we shadowed a reporter doing a plenary turn. We also shadowed a reporter doing committee turn.

The reason why in the Parliament of UK they have switched over to the system of digital recording and voice recognition system:

The reason for shifting to digital recording, according to them, was that there was an acute dearth or a total absence of high-speed shorthand writers. They also experienced that giving training to shorthand writers was more time consuming and expensive as compared to giving training to those who do the reporting through digital recording. Therefore, over the years, they have completely shifted to the recording system of the proceedings and then getting it transcribed. The reporters of the Parliament of UK are reporting the proceedings of the respective Houses and different Committees through digital recording very successfully for the last so many years.

We may mention here that we have also been facing the same scenario here back at home since in the last seven-eight years we have conducted many examinations but haven't got any reporter for our recruitment.

Use of Voice Recognition System

In both the Parliaments, the Parliament of UK and the Scottish Parliament, the reporters have also been doing their turns through voice recognition system very successfully. There is a software called Dragon Voice Recognition System, which they are using. This kind of voice recognition system can be of great help to the Reporters' Section.

The other highlights:

Outsourcing

As the UK Parliament could not find enough verbatim reporters, they are outsourcing 80 per cent of the committee work.
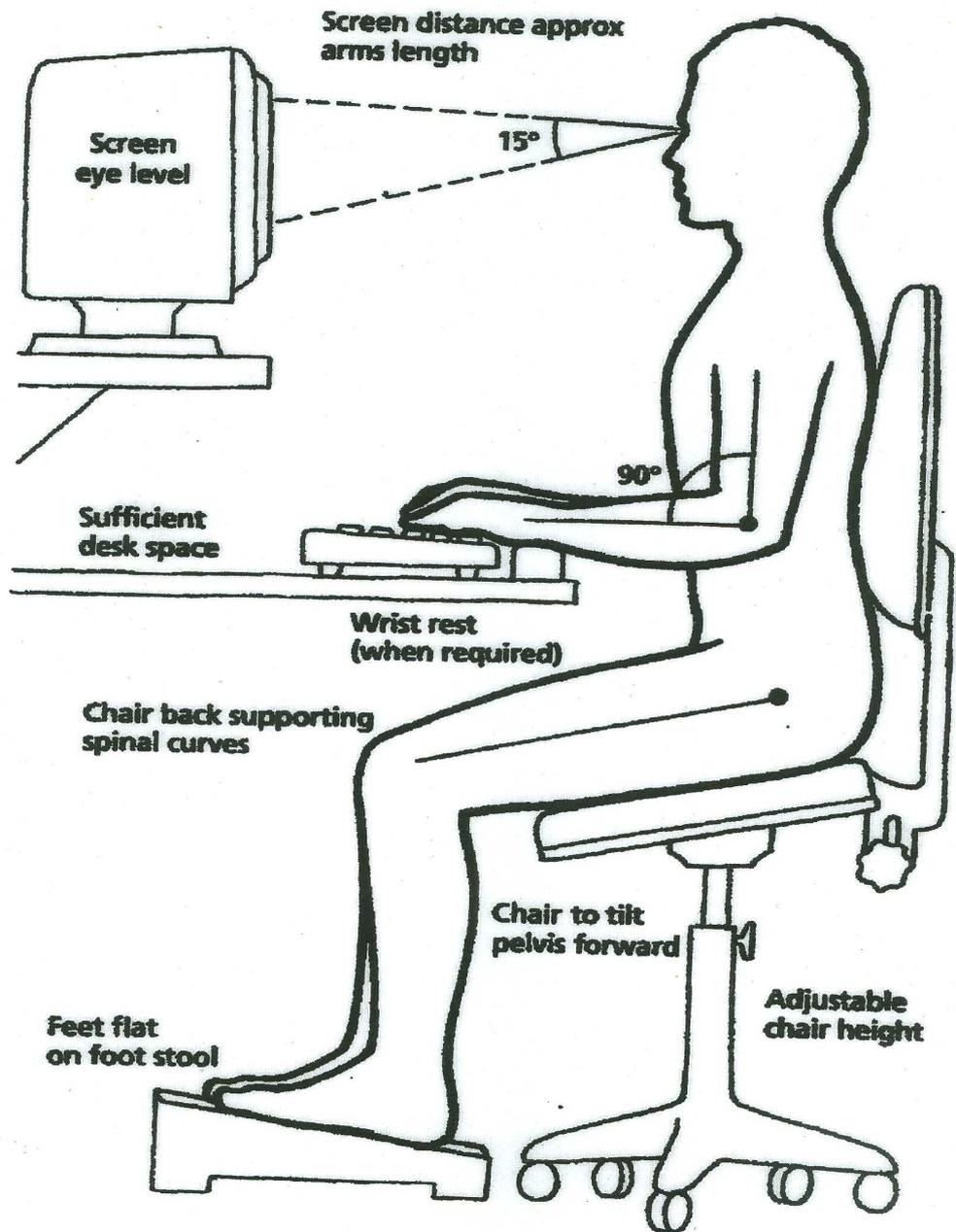
Style Guide for Accuracy

For accuracy and consistency, they use Style Guide which they keep on updating from time to time. Style Guide promotes consistency, readability and understanding of reports of debates. It also functions as a reliable source for correct names of organisations and commonly misspelt words. It is used to report correctly the titles of organisations, names of people mentioned in debates.

For accuracy and consistency, we should also develop such kind of Style Guide for reference during preparation of verbatim reports.

Health & Safety Measures

In the Reporters' Section of the House of Commons, they have one Personal Assistant-cum-Health and Safety Manager to take care of the working staff. The Manager ensures that the computers are installed properly and the tables and chairs provided to the reporters are of prescribed standard. Placed below is a copy of the Workstation set up for the DSE users and Workstation Checklist in the Parliament of UK, which they follow strictly.

WORKSTATION SET UP FOR THE DSE U

Screen distance approx
arms length

15°

Screen
eye level

90°

Sufficient
desk space

Wrist rest
(when required)

Chair back supporting
spinal curves

Chair to tilt
pelvis forward

Adjustable
chair height

Feet flat
on foot stool

WORKSTATION CHECKLIST

Desk
- Is the work surface sufficiently large with a low-reflective surface?

Keyboard
- Is your chair adjusted to allow the correct keyboard position?
- When you are keying, are your wrists straight and your elbows at right angles?
- If you use a mouse frequently, do you need a number pad that is separate from your keyboard?
- Is there a 2"- 4" space in front of the keyboard on which to rest your wrist when you are **not** typing?

Mouse
- Is the mouse positioned so that your upper arm is relaxed and close to your side, and your elbow directly under your shoulder?
- Is your wrist straight?
- Are you operating the mouse with your whole arm rather than just your wrist?

Screen
- Is the screen directly in front of you and at eye level?
- Is the screen clean?
- Have you adjusted the brightness and contrast?
- Is the screen positioned to avoid glare and reflection?
- Do you need to use window blinds?
- Do you need to use a copy holder?

Chair
- Have you adjusted the chair fully?
- Is your lower back well supported?
- Are your feet flat on the floor or footstool?
- Are the backs of your legs free from pressure?

PHYSICAL CHECKLIST

- Do not hammer the keyboard.
- Do not rest your wrists when you are typing.
- Relax - especially your neck and shoulders/rest forearms when not typing.
- Take occasional deep breaths.

Frequently:
- Stand up.
- Stretch.
- Walk around.
- Look at distant objects.

Our nature of job is such that we have to sit continuously in front of the computer for eight to ten hours especially during Sessions. Most of the reporters, nearly 90 per cent, are either suffering from cervical or spondylitis as the tables and chairs provided to the Reporters' are not of prescribed standard. Therefore, the Reporters' Section should be provided with tables and chairs which are of prescribed standard as shown above.

Training Certificates:

On the last day of the Training Programme we were given Certificates on 'The Hansard Parliamentary Reporting Course' by Ms. Lorraine Sutherland, Editor, Official Report, House of Commons.

Problems faced:

As this was the first training programme of its kind, we came across certain problems.

(1) There was no booking of our stay on 12th June, so we had to come back from the training centre, that is the Parliament of UK, as soon as we reached there, for checking out and be shifted to other hotel.

(2) During the first week of our training programme, there was no arrangement for tea and refreshment.

(3) When we reached Scotland, nobody from the Indian Consulate was there to receive our team.

(4) During our stay in Sheraton Hotel, Scotland, we were not provided breakfast for three days; whereas nearly 10 per

cent amount was deducted from our DA towards breakfast.

(5)   Then during our stay in Sheraton Hotel, Scotland, the Sheraton Hotel had debited nearly Rs.36,000 through the credit card of Smt. Sunita Batheja without informing us, in spite of the fact that while checking out of the Hotel, we had asked for the final clearance and they had told us that there was nothing due against four of us.

(**Note**: The purpose of mentioning these problems here is just to make sure that the team which goes next time does not face such problems.)

Observations and usefulness of the Training Programme

The training programme was a well organized one. All the faculty members were very well informed and had command over their subjects. They also had rich practical experience in the field of reporting. The sessions were crisp, interactive, participative, comprehensive and educative. The training programme was, therefore, very useful for all of us.

SUGGESTIONS

(1) Since such kind of training programme on 'Parliamentary Reporting' by Hansard, UK has been started for the first time,

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therefore, more and more reporters, at least four, may be sent to this job‑specific training programme in future.

(II) Rajya Sabha Secretariat also organises many other overseas Exchange Programmes and study visits to different Parliaments like Australia, South Africa, European Union, Canada, etc. At least, one Reporter may also be made part of these programmes so that their way of reporting is also known to us and we can also learn and adopt their skills in the art of verbatim reporting to make our reporting system the best in the world.

(Vimal Kumar)   (Meena Pandey)   (Sunita Batheja)   (Sangita Sharma)
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