

The English and American Precedents

Blanchet's motion nonetheless caught the mood of the emerging democracies of western Europe and North America. The erosion of royal privilege and broadening democratic inclusion since the late eighteenth century had emboldened the English Commons and the American Congress to assert their rights. Each increasingly saw itself as a prism of national political sentiment and, as such, entitled to project its deliberations to the voters who sent their members to Westminster or Washington. Published, officially sanctioned records of their debates offered such a medium.

The English House of Commons had long guarded the sanctity of its deliberations. Wary of the King's pretensions, the Commons traditionally asserted its right to debate behind closed doors and "to exclude strangers" from its midst. Any attempt to convey the nature of its debates to wider audiences was seen as an indignity on the House's privileges.⁴ But in the late eighteenth century that insistence began to weaken. Empowered by its success in asserting its privileges against King George III, the Commons saw purpose in spreading knowledge of its debates. If Britain was to have a more responsible government, parliamentary debate must be connected to public attitudes. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, newspaper reporters were allowed to sit in the Strangers Gallery, where they hastily scribbled down accounts of the debates below. These then surfaced in the press. The historian T.B. Macaulay would soon dub these early political journalists the "fourth estate," implying their active pens served the broader interests of democracy.

Reporting from the Strangers Gallery had distinct limits. Reporters had to vie with other spectators for seating. At moments of high political drama, the press was sometimes squeezed from the gallery by the crush; William Pitt's famous 1803 speech on war with France had to be pieced together from hearsay collected in the corridor. Sessions lasting as long as twelve hours strained the reporters' endurance; food was sent up from Bellamy's parliamentary eating house to sustain the Fourth Estate.⁵ In 1803, an enterprising pamphleteer William Cobbett (1762–1835) attempted to provide a more reliable account of the debates when he started editing *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*. For a shilling, readers were given a weekly compendium of what had taken place in the Commons. At the same time, Cobbett began publishing a 36-volume account of reconstructed parliamentary debates since the Conquest.

Always more of a polemicist than a publisher, Cobbett allowed publisher Thomas Curson Hansard (1776–1833) to assume the publication of his Weekly in 1809. Hansard had ink in his veins; his father Luke had served as printer to the Commons. Sensing the potential of having a reliable and regular rendering of their debates, the Commons anointed Hansard as its official reporter. The name stuck. To this day, the published debates on the English Commons are known as *Hansard*. Later in the nineteenth century, Her Majesty's Stationery Office took over Hansard's role and made the publication a fully public affair.

The young American democracy took another seventy years to emulate the English precedent. As early as 1789, shorthand renditions of Congressional debates began circulating. Newspapers

4. See: J.P. Joseph Maingot, Q.C. *Parliamentary Privilege in Canada*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2nd edition, 1997, pp. 40–41.

5. See: J.C. Trewin and E.M. King. *Printer to the House: the Story of Hansard*. London: Methuen, 1952, p. 80.