

Unit 9: Parliament, its record keeping and the Media

Learning Objectives The Back End of Parliamentary Work

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- Describe the broad aspects of the administration of parliament;
- Appreciate the problems of record keeping;
- Understand what sorts of research and information services are required by Members of Parliament;
- Discuss the relationship parliament maintains with the media.

Organization and Structure

While there are broad similarities in the administrative frameworks of Commonwealth parliaments, each shows individual characteristics in its details. The authority that is responsible for the administration of the various areas or precincts of each parliament could, for instance, be a committee or an individual. Similarly there are variations in the number of departments or divisions that make up the administrative structure that the services provided to Members.

In most parliaments the Clerk or Secretary General oversees the whole operation of parliamentary administration under the guidance of the Speaker or a House committee and with the security assistance of the Sergeant at Arms. The Clerk is also the Accounting Officer for the legislature and is responsible for assuring that the budget is spent in the manner determined by parliamentary vote.

The appointment of these permanent officials of parliament may be effected in various ways according to constitutional requirements or practice. The Clerk usually holds a protected position under the constitution to permit him or her to advise and operate as an independent and impartial official. Other positions may have varying degrees of protection and, in some cases, may not even be Members of the parliamentary service but public servants serving on secondment to parliament and returning to their own service at the end of a fixed term of office.

The responsibility of the Clerk for the spending of parliamentary funds implies that in some form or another he or she becomes involved in the preparation of budgets for parliamentary expenditure. Again this may occur under the guidance of a House committee or the Speaker. Issues relating to the salaries of Members and their superannuation arrangements are resolved by parliament, though it has been suggested that legislatures should accept a self-denying ordinance whereby they make rules for the salaries and pensions of successor parliaments rather than for themselves.

The budget of parliament will also cover salaries payable to MP's assistants and allowances, such as travel. These vary hugely in the Commonwealth in regard to their amounts as well as in the practice associated with their usage.

Records of Parliament

All parliaments are justifiably and understandably careful of the arrangements made for the keeping of records. In fact it is not uncommon to find that the primary duty of the Clerk (as implied by the very name) is to keep a faithful record of the proceedings in the House and its committees, including the names of those attending and the decisions taken, and to circulate those records to all Members as soon as possible.

One of the issues in many parliaments in the Commonwealth has been the resolution of the question of the language or languages in which Members may address the House. If business is permitted in two or more languages, arrangements have to be made for simultaneous translation. Decisions are then necessary regarding the language or languages of record.

Parliament typically permits the press and public to attend its sessions in an effort to maintain a link with the public. Parliament can therefore decide at any time to hold a closed or secret session. The proceedings in such a session will still be recorded but the report will not be made public until it is so agreed by parliament.

On occasion the Speaker may rule that certain words should be expunged, or removed, from the record or ask the press not to report some section of the proceedings. It would be a breach of privilege if such an order or request were not observed.

Research and Information Services

One of the services that Members need from parliament but often lack is sound research and information. Their first recourse will be the library of parliament, which has to be serviced by knowledgeable staff and be a repository of books and other publications through which Members can bring themselves up to date on current events and research.

The library staff should have the ability to contact other libraries and colleagues around the nation and the world to collect information where it is not immediately available in the parliamentary collections. Good press clipping services and copying facilities are taken as granted. Through the access to the Internet that is now available in all Commonwealth parliaments, library staff should be able to put together at suitable notice, a well-researched brief for a Member attending a conference or wanting to state his or her position in their own legislature.

Unfortunately many Commonwealth parliaments have weak library systems. Parliamentary institutes with a mandate to provide information and training may be able to assist with problems of research and information. These are sometimes part of the parliamentary structure, as with the Legislative Information Centre (LIC) in Bangladesh or the Bureau of Parliamentary Studies and Training (BPST) in India, or they may be independent bodies as in the case of the Parliamentary Centre in Canada.

The Press, Radio and TV

Parliament and its Members rely on the print, audio-visual and electronic media to provide some of their strongest links with the community at large. In order to be effective and accurate, parliament must facilitate the work of the media and the media must present their reports in a fair and unbiased manner.

Many parliaments make arrangements for continuous liaison with the media, and the media are made familiar with the rules of coverage in parliament. Parliamentary or lobby correspondents are given access to the press gallery and to Members whom they wish to interview or who may wish to see them. In many parliaments, special relationships based on mutual trust have grown between Members and correspondents. This kind of understanding may even extend to briefings by officials.

Radio and television broadcasts of proceedings in parliament are now common in many countries (see example in Box 1). Parliament will always be careful to see that its Members' interests are suitably protected in these processes and rules are therefore laid down about the manner in which recordings may be transmitted or used later.

Box 1

Televising the Government and Parliament in the USA

In the United States the cable television industry provides coverage of public affairs events through a private, nonprofit television channel called C-SPAN. Its mission is to provide public access to the political process, but it receives no government funding, and is, rather, paid through fees by cable and satellite affiliates who carry its programming. C-SPAN provides coverage of a variety of public affairs events. When they are in session, the networks are committed to televising the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S.

One
common
problem
in
political

reporting often commented upon is that while journalists are often good political reporters, they have not sufficiently studied the way parliament works. The setting up of a parliamentary committee to supervise arrangements for the media and for their reporting is therefore not uncommon, but as a result disputes often arise regarding the extent of editorial control being exercised.

Relations between Parliament and the Media

Parliaments and the media have often come together nationally and internationally to try to determine the best ways to meet their common objective of keeping society better informed of the work of the legislature and the government.

The media are keen to be accepted by the legislature and government as a legitimate vehicle for communicating legislative and policy initiatives and for the reflection of public opinion. They are not willing to subordinate their watchdog role in reporting the work of parliaments and governments. In fact, they would like to have access to information and documentation produced by parliaments including those held in parliamentary libraries and quicker release of speeches after delivery in the House.

Parliament hopes for fair and unbiased coverage without the media putting a slant on proceedings according to the politics of the journalist, editor or proprietor. While everyone has a right to his or her opinion, parliamentary and political news coverage and analysis should be separated from these opinions. However politicians themselves have not been averse to finding ways to suppress the views of their opponents.

Both parliament and the media, not to mention society in general, have been concerned with the recognition of every person's right to information and the right to express opinions. These have to be balanced against every person's right to privacy and the protection of their reputation. Each society has to come to its own conclusions about the principles that should be applied and the policies that should be created for the good of all Members of that society.

The current trend is for the regulation of media to be given to independent bodies so that the need for transparency and accountability on the part of government may be more fairly viewed against the need for honest and factual, though rapid, reporting on the part of the media.

Parallel with this has been a tendency to reduce the impact of criminal defamation laws that subject the media to punitive controls.

Much of the resolution of these questions may be found in better training opportunities for both sides. The need for higher levels of reporting in the media is as great as the need for levels of

debate in parliaments. Many Commonwealth countries have yet to utilize the advantages of the newer information technologies, which have the potential to relieve some of the issues that cause friction between parliaments and the media.

In the future parliamentarians will be faced with a broad array of groups such as the media who are armed with technological capabilities and who make greater demands for increased accountability and transparency. This will mean that they too must maintain better systems of communication with the media and with constituents. They must be willing to become lifelong learners to fulfill their changing roles as new technologies present them with new challenges.

Unit 9 Questions

Please answer each of the following questions. If you are taking this course in a group you may then meet to discuss your answers.

1. How does the management and administration of parliament differ from that of a regular government department?
2. Is the reporting of parliamentary proceedings in the media in your country considered satisfactory by the average person?
3. List the ways in which the new technologies, as available in your country, may help MPs with their research and information needs.

Relevant Abbreviations

| | |
|--------|---|
| CHRI | Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative |
| ComSec | Commonwealth Secretariat |
| CPA | Commonwealth Parliamentary Association |
| IFLA | International Federation of Library Institutions and Associations |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Program |
| WBI | World Bank Institute |

Relevant Internet Resources

CSPAN
www.cspan.org

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