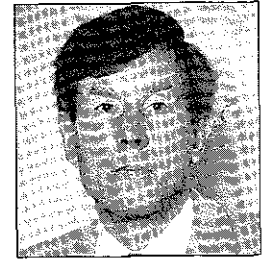# Canberra Rules: Online

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Since early 1981, some librarians have been holding their breath, waiting for online access to the Commonwealth Parliament Hansards. Now, take another deep breath and read on

First, we will make you drool at what is in the system; then shatter your joy (Typical of Canberra - Fantasyland meets Frontierland!)

What Is Online

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Hansards started to be stored online in 1981, with a pilot system developed by ICL.

As might be expected, the Parliament expanded its Parliamentary Data Base System (PDBS) at a remarkable rate, once the pilot system was up and running As internal users came to appreciate the potential of the system, and as technology added capabilities, demands grew

In addition to all the databases which one might expect to find in a Parliament - Hansards, Votes, Journals, Notice Papers, committee material, Standing Orders, etc - a great deal of the library information services, so essential to maintaining informed Parliamentary debate, are now on the system When that externally sourced material can be correlated with the internal material, it makes a very powerful political tool

The external material which is now online includes: selected journal articles, current affairs media (using indexed words), some full text transcripts of those current affairs programs, Parliamentary research papers, and the Parliamentary Library catalogue

Daily Hansards, Votes and Journals, and the Notice Papers are available very early each morning, just a few hours after the last speaker has sat down This, of course, is made possible because the Hansards, etc, are now transcribed straight into computer format; loading onto the PDBS is therefore technically easy

Getting It To The Users

Access to the system spread rapidly when the new Parliament House, with its improved communications, was opened in 1988. The process was helped by the standardisation of computer systems used in members' and senators' offices

The use of the system came to political prominence in the late-1980s Someone provided demonstration access to the ABC and Richard Carleton used it, online, on-air to catch out a minister during an interview. The ABC lost its access soon after that, but the usefulness of the system had not been lost on the politicians, who became avid users.

Access via ISDN and the telephone system was called the Extended Parliamentary Network and became available to politicians from their electoral offices in 1992 Obviously, that was an essential prerequisite for any public access system

In late 1993 a pilot scheme was established to extend access to some 13 local (Canberra) departments and government agencies, as well as some State Parliamentary Departments and libraries. An aim of that pilot scheme was to examine issues like the best method of distribution of the data, copyright (particularly of the media material), cost-recovery, training, etc. The pilot scheme finishes in late 1994.

The current pilot public access scheme uses AUSTPAC for agencies outside Canberra, and is presently experimenting with direct dialling from agencies within the ACT

Training in the use of the system, which employs STATUS with a front menu, takes two days It is backed up by a help desk service

Where To, Now?

It is hoped that the current pilot scheme will produce answers to questions like:

*   What mix of online retrieval v CD-ROM distribution is optimal?

*   Should access be provided via AARNet or Internet?

*   How should copyright be protected for database and media providers?

*   Can the system be integrated with the AGPS/Attorney-General's project to provide online legal publishing?

By late 1994 it is hoped to present to the Presiding Officers of the Parliament a proposal for a public access system. Included in those proposals will be a strategy for marketing the system.

A major consideration will be establishing the charging objectives Parliament has a general objective of making access as cheap as possible to as wide a range of citizens as possible; any commercial database provider has a much simpler objective - maximise profits

Subject to approval by the Parliament, the Parliamentary Information Systems Office (PISO) then has to make the system available

My guess is that these processes cannot be achieved before mid 1995, at the earliest Noting the prevalence of complex computer systems to develop unexpected delays, it could easily be late 1995 before installation of the access system starts After that, training will be needed and then you will probably be able to pay your money and log on

What Will You Get?

Well, obviously you will get access to all those lovely words The problem is likely to be, however, that inexpert users will not achieve anything like the results expected It could be a little like computer searches of the ASC databases - you may need specialists or, at least, not your average lawyer

In the parliamentary context, "expert" will mean not only someone who can use STATUS, but someone who also knows the difference between a committee stage and reference to a committee, etc, i e someone who is familiar with parliamentary processes How many of you are, or ever will be, sufficiently familiar with the new House legislative processes to be able to say, authoritatively, where a bill is in its legislative progress just by looking at the results of a computer search?

Then again, the searcher may need to be familiar with the policy issues, as well An in-out, 45 second online search using boolean parameters does not give you much of a chance to pick up the political nuances of the Hansard records

Try this It will be quite easy to search for the *Triticale Levy Collection Amendment Bill*, and see how far it has progressed since the lawyer last told you to, but if you were searching to see if it was likely to be delayed, would you think to search also for: "coarse grains", "statutory marketing authorities", or, even more broadly, "rural economy", etc The point is: some politician might be saying something in a debate on the rural economy which indicates what he or she might do about the *Triticale Levy Collection Amendment Bill*, and never once say "triticale" That does not sound like a job for a junior member of the library staff, does it?

Anyone spot openings for information brokers?