

Televising Parliament

1. Introduction

The broadcasting of Parliamentary debates in both the House of Commons and Lords as well the proceedings of many Committees is still a comparatively new phenomenon in the United Kingdom.

But since the first radio broadcasts in 1978 and television experiments in 1989 the process has done much to stimulate knowledge of the workings of Parliament. And since 2003 the proceedings have additionally been webcast on the internet with an archive available for public access.

In addition, the carefully preserved tapes of former broadcasts are building a fascinating archive for future historians as well as providing a contemporary record for those who wish to study a particular debate or speech.

2. Background

Britain's broadcasters were swift to recognise the audience potential of Parliamentary proceedings. In 1923, the BBC's first General Manager, John Reith sought to broadcast the King's Speech at the State Opening of Parliament.

The request was turned down and it was only in 1978 that the first live radio broadcasts of Question Time began. Two years later these were discontinued and throughout the 1980s the debate on televising Parliament raged.

The House of Lords took a more relaxed view, authorising a televising experiment in 1985. The success of this helped to swing the argument in the House of Commons. In November 1989 televising was given the go-ahead on an experimental basis and subject to strict restrictions and in July 1990, the televising of Parliament became a permanent feature of UK political life.

The restrictions on the broadcasters were laid down after much deliberation by a Select Committee on Broadcasting, chaired by the Leader of the House of Commons. This Committee established three main principles:

- the House would at all times have the final and principal say in any matter concerning television in the House
- broadcasters should pay the main cost of television coverage
- the dignity of the House was to be protected at all times.

The Committee laid down Rules of Coverage which remained largely unaltered until late 2006, when the Speaker agreed to allow a more relaxed style of televising (although still within some restrictions). It also decided that an independent production company should carry out the televising operation not a Department of the House; Select Committee coverage should be subsidised by the House and a Supervisor of Parliamentary Broadcasting (now known as the Director of Parliamentary Broadcasting) should be appointed with executive powers to act on the Select Committee's behalf.

Through the Rules of Coverage Parliament has absolute control over the format of the pictures broadcasters receive but its control over the use of the material is less clear cut and can cause difficulties.

3. The Format

The pictures (known in the technical jargon as the 'clean feed' or 'signals') supplied to the broadcasters are chosen by television directors in the Parliamentary control room. They are bound by detailed Rules of Coverage laid down by the House. These rules are designed to protect the dignity of the House and ensure that coverage focuses on what is being said. The director is required to give 'a full, balanced and accurate account of proceedings, with the aim of informing viewers about the work of the House'.

The camera mainly concentrates on a single shot of the Member speaking but wide angle shots of the Chamber may be used from time to time when the director is seeking a closer shot of a Member who has just been called to speak or to give viewers a global view of the chamber. Directors may now also show appropriate reaction shots of Members when this helps to convey the mood of the House.

The cameras are not allowed to focus on the press and public galleries, the Speaker receiving advice or on any public disturbance. Directors must feature the chair whenever its occupant rises or in the case of a disturbance or altercation between the chair and Members.

The Select Committee has the power to amend these rules and relies for day to day enforcement on the Director of Parliamentary Broadcasting, an Officer of both Houses who reports to the Administration Committee in the Commons and the Information Committee in the Lords.

4. The Use

Guidelines on the use of the pictures are less prescriptive. They do specify that no extracts from Parliamentary proceedings may be used in comedy shows or other light entertainment such as political satire. But broadcasters are allowed to include Parliamentary items in magazine programmes containing musical or humorous features, provided the reports are kept separate.

No extracts from Parliamentary proceedings may be used in any form of advertising, promotion or publicity except for programmes which cover Parliamentary topics within the framework of the Rules.

The ban used to include the use of Parliamentary material in Party Political broadcasts – but this was changed in 1993 to allow the use of an extract from a speech made by a Member of the party in question.

However, any MP or Peer featured must give his/her explicit permission and 'wide shots' or material featuring exchanges between parties are still banned.

Policing the use of Parliamentary pictures is potentially difficult. Technically, recommendations such as these contained in a Select Committee Report have the same status as an Order of the House, disregard of which can constitute a contempt.

But there are gradations of action open to the Committee which fall short of contempt which have proved effective in the past. These include informal reminders of the rules, formal letter of admonition and summoning named persons before the Committee (this last action has never been needed).

5. "PARBUL"

Parliament and the major broadcasters set up the Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit Limited (PARBUL) as the forum for organising the televising of Parliamentary proceedings.

PARBUL is wholly funded by its broadcaster shareholders (BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and BskyB) but the Board includes an equal number of directors from the two Houses. It is chaired by the Chairman of Ways and Means, whose casting vote ensures Parliament retains control over the broadcasting of its own proceedings.

The Director of Parliamentary Broadcasting is also an Executive Director of PARBUL, representing Parliament's interests day to day.

PARBUL employs an independent production company to operate the camera systems, which are provided by Parliament and holds licences from the Speaker in the Commons and the Clerk of Parliaments in the House of Lords. These allow PARBUL to exploit the signals from the main Chambers commercially for the first 14 days in return for funding. (Both copyright and the right to exploit the use of signals for non-broadcasting purposes remain with Parliament throughout.) All other broadcasters with access to the television feed in Westminster pay a fee for the service.

Further money is raised through the sale of one-off recordings to appropriate organisations such as education organisations, Departments of State or individual Parliamentarians.

6. Coverage

Proceedings in both Commons and Lords are covered 'gavel to gavel' by remote control cameras in each Chamber operated from control rooms at 7 Millbank – eight cameras in the Commons and five in the Lords. Sittings of the House in Westminster Hall are also covered 'gavel to gavel' by five remote controlled cameras operated from a control room in the Palace of Westminster.

Any Committee meeting in public may be televised at the request of broadcasters, who pay the camera operating costs involved. Two mobile televising units are in use on the main committee corridor where four Select Committee rooms and rooms 10 and 14, designed for Standing Committees, are equipped for broadcast coverage. The House of Lords has a fixed television control room from which cameras may be operated in any one of four committee rooms.

At the same time a further two committees can be televised simultaneously from Portcullis House, the new building opened across the road from the Palace of Westminster in 2000. Here four Select Committee rooms and two multi purpose rooms are wired for camera coverage, linked through two permanent control rooms.

The opening of Portcullis House brought digital televising to Parliament for the first time. And a permanent digital system was installed in the Grand Committee Room, where Sittings of the House in Westminster Hall had previously been covered by the use of mobile equipment.

But the rolling programme of development did not stop there. By September 2002 all parliamentary televising was fully digital, with two new mobile units for committee coverage in the main Palace on stream, and the camera systems and control rooms in

both Chambers replaced - and Parliament had gone 'widescreen'.

7. Webcasting

In January 2002 the two Houses started to harness the potential of the internet. launched an experimental service transmitting audio and audio-visual coverage of Proceedings via "webcasts"

In September 2003 www.parliamentlive.tv was made permanent carrying coverage of debates in both Chambers and debates in Westminster Hall, some explanatory captioning, an on-demand 14 day archive and live audio or audio-visual coverage of every committee which is meeting in public. The archive duration was increased to 28 days, and this will become a full year archive in the near future.

In 2006 a project was initiated to start a rolling programme to introduce unattended web cameras into committee rooms to allow wider visual coverage of sessions than those undertaken by the broadcasters. In 2007 this programme meant that 11 committee rooms were available for viewing via the www.parliamentlive.tv web site

A maximum of 18 simultaneous channels can be webcast - eight in full broadcast quality a/v, an additional six in web camera quality and the others in audio. Some weeks as many as 60 public committee meetings are carried on the web, in addition to the coverage of the Chambers and Westminster Hall. There are also informational videos about Parliament and its Committees.

The site now offers full broadband quality video and audio at bitrates which equate to the quality of FM radio. The service is believed to be the most complex and comprehensive of any legislature in the world.

8. Outlets

BBC Parliament, the digital television channel, carries live coverage of the House of Commons Chamber, “timeshifted” coverage of the House of Lords and unedited coverage of several committees a week.

BBC2, BBC 24, and Sky News take Prime Minister’s Questions live along with some Ministerial statements and Committee evidence. In addition, most broadcasters use brief extracts of Parliamentary material in news bulletins and current events programmes. This includes the UK’s main domestic broadcasters (BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and BSkyB) as well as regional companies and international organisations such as WTN, Reuters and Associated Press.

A number of broadcasters and news organisations now have licences from the Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit Limited (PARBUL) to use Parliamentary material on their websites.

Members of the two Houses are allowed to carry their contributions to debates and Minister’s answers on their personal websites, too.

All material is archived by the Parliamentary Recording Unit. This provides video and audio material of all recorded Parliamentary proceedings to domestic and foreign broadcasters as well as to MPs, Peers, Government departments, educational and commercial organisations, charities and individuals. The material can be supplied in all current formats, including on line. Ratecards are available on request.

9. Addresses

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