



Factsheet G5 General Series

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House of Commons Information Office

Broadcasting Proceedings of the House

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Although sound broadcasting had begun in 1978, the House of Commons took many years to agree to the idea that its proceedings should be televised. The aim of this **Factsheet** is to trace the background to, and developments since, the decision of the House on 9 February 1988 "that this House approves in principle the holding of an experiment in the public broadcasting of its proceedings by television"

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Background

The possibility of broadcasting the proceedings of Parliament was first raised during the early days of radio in the 1920s. In 1923, John Reith (the first General Manager of the BBC) had sought to broadcast the King's Speech at the State Opening of Parliament, but permission was refused. He continued his campaign for daily coverage of the proceedings of Parliament over the following years. During the 1920s Members also began asking parliamentary questions about the possibilities of broadcasting specific speeches, such as the Budget. Stanley Baldwin had considered the possibility of setting up a select committee to consider the matter, but, after consultation with other party leaders, concluded that there was a "greatly preponderating body of opinion against broadcasting the proceedings of the House" (HC Deb, 22 March 1926, c866).

Although the subject was raised periodically over the next few decades, it was not until the 1960s that pressure grew in favour of broadcasting the proceedings of the House. The Select Committee on Publications and Debates Reports recommended in 1966 that a closed-circuit experiment in sound and vision should be made, but a motion to approve this was defeated by one vote on 24 November of that year.

The first experiment in sound broadcasting took place in April and May 1968 (on a closed circuit network). However, although the House of Commons Services Committee recommended in its review that sound broadcasting should be permitted, it was later announced that the necessary financial support would not be made available. A further experiment of live non-continuous sound broadcasting was held for four weeks during June and July 1975, but again no permanent scheme was agreed.

By July 1977 it was agreed in principle to authorise the BBC and Independent Broadcasting Authority to record sound proceedings in both the Chamber and the Committees. Detailed arrangements were then discussed with the House authorities. By February 1978 both the House of Commons and the House of Lords agreed to allow the BBC to undertake to provide a sound signal from the Chambers and the Committee Rooms to the BBC and IBA editorial areas of the newly established Parliamentary Broadcasting Units.

On Monday 3 April 1978, the permanent sound broadcasting system was inaugurated. BBC Radio began live daily broadcasts of Question Time, including Prime Minister's questions on Tuesdays and Thursdays. However, live radio coverage of Prime Minister's Question Time was discontinued by the BBC in June 1980.

The Television Experiment

In the 1980s the arguments for and against televising the proceedings of the House were discussed during the various debates on the subject (see Appendix B for dates). Members against the idea expressed concerns that the traditional character of the Chamber might be altered, with some Members being tempted to speak to the public at large, and that the nature of debating would not be understood. Reservations were also expressed about the material to be chosen for broadcast, with worries about over-emphasis on short periods of drama, such as question time, whilst other worthwhile but not particularly exciting debates might be ignored. Members were also concerned about various technical matters, such as the discomfort produced by extra lighting, or simply of the intrusion of cameras in the Chamber.

Those in favour considered that the House did not have the right to deny access to its proceedings to the millions of people unable to attend the public gallery. Some Members argued that a large proportion of the general public relied exclusively on television for information about politics and that the televising of the proceedings of the House of Commons would lead to a better understanding of issues and the political process.

Although the House had agreed on 9 February 1988 to the idea of holding an experiment in televising its proceedings (by a vote of 318 to 264), it was to be over eighteen months later before viewers were actually able to watch the House at work.

Difficulties arose in agreeing the membership of the select committee to be appointed to consider the practical arrangements, necessitating a further debate on 29 March 1988 to nominate specific Members to the Committee. During the course of its enquiry, the Committee took evidence from the broadcasting organisations and from Members and Officers of the House; it saw demonstrations of lighting, cameras and remote control equipment; it visited the Canadian Parliament to study its televising arrangements; and saw videotapes of televised proceedings of a number of other legislatures. The Report of the Committee, published in May 1989, was approved by the House on 12 June 1989.

As a result, the experiment in televising the proceedings of the House of Commons began with the State Opening of Parliament on 21 November 1989, initially to continue until the end of July 1990. A subsidiary company, called the House of Commons Broadcasting Unit Ltd (HOCBUL), was formed by the BBC and Independent Television, in order to make the necessary administrative and financial arrangements, and a Supervisor of Broadcasting was appointed as an Officer of the House with co-ordinating and managerial responsibilities. The Unit selected, by tender, an independent operator, Broadcast Communications plc, to supply it with a continuous signal from the Chamber, which was then sold to the broadcasters. The televising of select and standing committee meetings was handled by another operator, Commons Committee Television.

Rules of coverage

In its Report, the Select Committee on Televising of Proceedings made detailed recommendations concerning the rules of coverage (guidelines as to the types of shot which might or might not be used), pointing out that directors of programmes should have regard to the dignity of the House and its function as a working body rather than a place of entertainment. The main restrictions, which caused particular concern amongst the broadcasters, related to their inability to use reaction shots and the requirement to focus on the occupant of the Chair during times of 'grave disorder'. Some two months after the start of the experiment however, the Select Committee agreed to certain experimental modifications to the rules, which permitted reaction shots of members referred to during debate. Initially these reaction shots remained banned during question time and ministerial statements, but the rules here have now also been relaxed. The Committee also agreed to the use of group shots, midway between the standard head and shoulders shot and the wide-angle shot, as well as to zoom shots to show a Member in relation to colleagues in his or her vicinity.

In its report of July 2000 on the Development of Broadcasting, the select committee exercised its authority to lift the restriction on the use of reaction shots of named or identifiable members during Question Time, Ministerial Statements and Private Notice Questions, with effect from the start of the 2000-01 session. The most recent report on the rules of coverage (from June 2003) introduced some more minor changes.

The permanent arrangements

The Select Committee on Televising the Proceedings of the House conducted a review of the experiment; in approving its report on 19 July 1990, the House effectively confirmed the principle of permanent televising of its proceedings. The financial and administrative arrangements in place for the experimental period were extended until the end of July 1991. Permanent arrangements were recommended by the Broadcasting Etc Select Committee (as the Committee was re-named) and approved by the House on 1 May 1991.

The Committee recommended that an integrated televising operation, covering both Houses as well as committees, should form the basic structure of the permanent arrangements. It considered the possibility of establishing a broadcasting unit as a Department of the House, but eventually favoured the selection of an outside operator to be selected by public tender. The Committee drew on the experiences of the experimental period and concluded that this would be the most cost effective and efficient method; it was content that the necessary parliamentary control would be retained through the Supervisor of Broadcasting (since 2001 known as the Director of Parliamentary Broadcasting), who is answerable to the Select Committee. The costs of the experiment had been borne between the broadcasters, who paid for the equipment and running costs; the Parliamentary Works Office, who had responsibility for changes to the fabric of the building; and the House itself, which funded the staffing of the Select Committee and of the Office of the Director of Broadcasting. It was found that the burden of cost fell roughly equally between the broadcasters and the public purse; this distribution of costs was to continue under the permanent arrangements.

A new company to succeed the House of Commons Broadcasting Unit Ltd, established for the experimental period, was formed. This is known as the Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit Ltd, or PARBUL, and reflects the integrated operation. PARBUL is owned by the major broadcasters. Its board consists of 18 directors—nine representing the broadcaster shareholders and nine representing the two Houses of Parliament including the Chairman (the Chairman of Ways and Means), who also holds a casting vote. The company finances the operating and maintenance costs of televising both Houses on the basis of the shareholdings taken by the participating broadcasting organisations and any revenue from the sale of the signal. The first five-year contract to operate the signal under the permanent arrangements was awarded to CCT Productions Ltd; this company had been responsible for providing coverage of Select and Standing Committees during the experimental period. This was renewed in 1996. When the contract came up for renewal again in 2001 a new contractor was appointed. Bowtie Television Ltd now operates and maintains all equipment used to televise proceedings, whether leased or owned by PARBUL or by Parliament.

Parliamentary Recording Unit

The Parliamentary Sound Archive Unit was established in 1978 as part of the House of Lords Record Office, following the decisions of both Houses to begin sound broadcasting of their proceedings on a permanent basis. Its basic task was to preserve and make available to Members and other authorised users the tapes of the 'clean sound feed' from both Houses. A co-operative agreement was made with the National Sound Archive, part of the British Library, where pre-1985 audio tapes have been transferred for permanent preservation. A rolling programme for archiving video material once it becomes 3 years old has been established with the National Film Archive, part of the British Film Institute.

In April 1992, responsibility for the Unit was transferred to the House of Commons, in reflection

of the balance of its work, and it was renamed the Parliamentary Recording Unit. It provides MPs, peers and broadcasters with both video and audio material from the Chamber and Committee Rooms of the House of Commons. From October 1992, this service was extended to coverage of the House of Lords Chamber and Committees. The material is made available to other users, including domestic and foreign broadcasters as well as MPs, Government Departments, educational organisations, charities etc., subject to Broadcasting Select Committee guidelines

Radio and Television Coverage

The BBC is required by its Licence and Agreement to "broadcast an impartial account day by day, prepared by professional reporters, of the proceedings of both Houses of Parliament". This requirement has been met by its Today in Parliament programme, which has been broadcast since 9 October 1945, conducted in reported speech until 1978 and since by actual extracts. BBC Parliament offers live unedited coverage of the House of Commons on cable, digital satellite and Freeview. It also offers recorded as live coverage of the House of Lords; extensive coverage of select and standing committees and full live coverage of the main political party conferences as well as proceedings in devolved assemblies.

BBC 2, BBC News 24 and Sky News take Prime Minister's questions live, along with some Ministerial statements and committee evidence, extending coverage at their discretion to other important debates such as the Budget. In addition to the main domestic broadcasters (BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and BSkyB), most broadcasters use brief extracts of Parliamentary material in news bulletins and current affairs programmes. Parliamentary material is also broadcast regularly by regional companies and, internationally, by WTN, Reuters and Associated Press.

The American cable television network, C-Span, which provides coverage of the United States Congress, also has regular programmes on the proceedings of the United Kingdom Parliament. These appear to have quite a dedicated following and have generated much interest in British parliamentary matters.

In its various reports the Select Committee had addressed itself to the desirability of having a dedicated channel providing continuous unedited coverage of the House. It considered proposals from three sources, eventually favouring that from United Artists. On 13 January 1992 United Artists Programming launched the Parliamentary Channel as a non-profit venture on behalf of its owners, a group of UK cable operators. The Channel was available to subscribers via the cable network (the signal is delivered by satellite) and began broadcasting on 13 January 1992. In September 1998, the BBC took control of the Parliamentary Channel and renamed it BBC Parliament. A new five-year contract for BBC Parliament was awarded in 2001.

The Future of Broadcasting

In July 2000 the Broadcasting Select Committee looked into the development of parliamentary broadcasting and made a number of recommendations.

- If Westminster Hall sittings are made permanent all the proceedings must be televised so all necessary facilities should be provided. Although 'Sittings in Westminster Hall' remain experimental, a permanent digital televising system was installed to the Grand Committee Room in summer 2001. It has been designed in such a way that should the experimental sittings cease the equipment can be used elsewhere in the House.

- Select Committee proceedings in Portcullis House (the new parliamentary building) are also televised. Two TV control rooms with robotic cameras have been provided in the new building. The cameras provided have widescreen capability, but they will be operated in the 4x3 format until widescreen pictures are required. The signals from each control room are digital video together with analogue sound jointly fed to the Central Technical Area (CTA) in 7 Millbank on fibre optic circuits. In CTA the digital video will be converted to a composite PAL signal with separate analogue audio for feeding on to authorised users.
- The ten-year-old analogue mobile units used to televise select and standing committees on the main Committee Corridor were replaced with digital systems in February 2002. This marks the start of a major refurbishment programme. The robotic camera systems in the main chambers of both Houses will be replaced with high specification, widescreen capable digital systems in summer 2002 and 2003.
- Two Members' Interview Studios are available adjacent to one of the Committee Rooms, each of which has two vision and sound circuits to the CTA. Although these rooms are being cabled to allow broadcasters to interview and report 'live', they will have to bring in their own equipment. There will be six further circuits to carry analogue sound from the Committee/Conference rooms for use by radio broadcasters.
- Following an experiment between Easter and Summer 2000, broadcasters have been given a permanent TV access point in the Palace itself from which brief interviews with Members may be recorded or broadcast live. This interview point is in the small vestibule situated off Central Lobby.¹
- The restrictions on filming in Members' own offices have also been lifted.

Internet Broadcasting

Webcasting of Parliament began on an experimental basis on 8 January 2002, with the return of the House after the Christmas recess. The pilot project was assessed at the end of 2002 and was made permanent. Proceedings of both Houses of Parliament, debates in Westminster Hall and in some select and standing committees will be available over the Internet on <http://www.parliamentlive.tv>. This is not the first time that Parliamentary proceedings have been made available over the Internet - the BBC, Press Association, ITN and Westminster Digital also have PARBUL (Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit Ltd) licences to use Parliamentary material on their websites - it is the first attempt by the UK Parliament itself to make its proceedings continuously available in this form. Initially, the debates in select and standing committee will be available in audio form only.

A press release from the House of Commons on 8 January 2002 gave more details:

The site has been designed and built by TwoFourTV.com. It is a pilot project designed to last one year, after which its effectiveness will be considered and a decision as to whether to proceed with the project will be taken. The project is being jointly funded by the House of Commons and House of Lords.

The technology has been chosen to achieve the widest possible reach. The webcasts are being encoded at multiple bit rates so that they are accessible to the full range of PC users from a home viewer with a 56k modem to people with access to broadband and ISDN connections. All four channels are being delivered across the internet on the two most

¹ Administration Committee, Minutes of Proceedings 1999-2000 session, HC 769 1999-2000

widely used PC player technologies, Windows Media and Real Player, on a system that can support up to a million individual viewers at a time

In their 2000 report (HC 642 1999-2000) the Broadcasting Committee recommended:

that the relevant officials of both Houses actively pursue webcast potential, and to seek those areas where both Houses can act together in order to ensure that "access to Parliament" is available to all. The ideal would be for this access to include sound feed and, at least, limited vision coverage, of all public sessions of Committees of the House to be available via the internet

The webcast is not available on the Parliamentary Intranet, as it largely duplicates the coverage available on the television feeds on the internal Annunciator system.

Appendix A

Radio and television coverage of Parliamentary proceedings

(Regular programmes while Parliament is in session)

Television

BBC 2

- **Despatch Box:** Monday to Friday after midnight.
- **Westminster:** on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 2 to 4pm. Includes live coverage of Prime Ministers Question Time on Wednesdays (formerly Westminster Live)
- **Around Westminster:** regional reviews of the week on Sunday afternoon (before 12 noon)

BBC Parliament (replaced the Parliamentary Channel)

Continuous unedited coverage of Parliament available on Cable and Digital Satellite.

Sound Feed only is available on digital terrestrial televisions 5.30am - 12.00 midnight

Radio

BBC Radio 4

- **Today in Parliament:** (LW only) - Daily account of proceedings at 11.30 - 12.00 midnight on Mondays to Fridays (this programme has been in existence since 9 October 1945).
- **Yesterday in Parliament:** (LW only) - Edited version of the above the next morning at 6.45 am on Tuesdays to Saturdays.
- **The Week in Westminster** - Weekly account of events in Parliament on Thursday at 8.30 pm (a programme which continued throughout the Second World War years and since).

BBC Radio 5 Live

Prime Minister's Questions

Includes Prime Minister's Question live each week.

Appendix B

Main Debates

28 May 1965 Televising of parliamentary proceedings: motion by T L Iremonger MP: general debate on wide issues. Withdrawn as time made available to debate the Select Committee Report on Broadcasting.

24 November 1966 Motion by Richard Crossman MP to approve for an experimental period the broadcasting of the proceedings of the House on closed circuit.

Defeated Noes 131; Ayes 130

11 December 1967 Motion by Richard Crossman MP to approve the making of sound recordings of its proceedings for an experimental period.

Agreed

31 January 1968 *Broadcasting of the proceedings of the House of Lords: statement by Lord Shackleton*

1968 House of Commons experiment for 4 weeks for sound broadcasting only took place on 23 April - 17 May 1968

20 March 1969 *Broadcasting of the proceedings of the House of Lords: general debate*

19 October 1972 Debate on an experiment for the public broadcasting of proceedings by sound and TV.

Defeated Noes 191; Ayes 165

24 February 1975 Motion by Edward Short, Leader of the House, to authorise an experiment in sound broadcasting.

Agreed Sound Ayes 354; Noes 182

Defeated TV Noes 275; Ayes 263

1975 Experimental sound broadcasting enacted during the Summer 1975

26 July 1977 Resolutions and recommendations on Sound Broadcasting and Sound Archives (Joint Committee Second Report ... re resolution of 16 March 1976)

6 February 1978 Motion by William Price MP to set up a Select Committee to monitor sound broadcasting in accordance with the provisions of the Resolution of the House of 26 July 1977.

Agreed

8 December 1983 *Endorsement of decision of 15 June 1966 for public televising of Lords proceedings for an experimental period on closed TV circuit.*

27 November 1984 *Televising of the House of Lords: agreement to a TV six months' experimental period January - June 1985.*

22 July 1985 *Approval of the continuation of the experimental televising of the proceedings of the House of Lords.*

20 November 1985 Televising of the House of Commons: motion moved by Miss Janet Fookes MP

Defeated Noes 275; Ayes 263

12 May 1986 Authorisation of continuation of the televising of proceedings of the House of Lords on an indefinite basis.

9 February 1988 Motion by Anthony Nelson MP approving the principle of an experiment in televising proceedings of the Commons and calling for establishment of a Select Committee to consider the matter.

12 June 1989 Motion to approve the report of the Select Committee on Televising the Proceedings of the House.

19 July 1990 Motion agreeing with the Report by the Select Committee on Televising Proceedings of the House that televising should continue on a permanent basis.

1 May 1991 Motion approving the Select Committee on Broadcasting Etc report on the permanent arrangements for televising the proceedings of the House

Archive Copy

Appendix C

Select list of reports

- 1965 Publications & Debates Reports Select Committee
Second Special Report, HC 357 1964-65
Possibility of broadcasting the proceedings of the House of Commons - a memorandum. (Inquiry not completed)
- 1966 Broadcasting Etc of Proceedings in the House of Commons Select Committee
First Report, HC 146 1966-67
That continuous live broadcasting was impracticable ... but to make available to the broadcasting organisations a "feed" of the proceedings of the House.
- 1968 House of Commons (Services) Select Committee
Second Report, HC 152 1967-68
The experiment in radio broadcasting.
- 1968 House Of Commons (Services) Select Committee
First Report, HC 48 1968-69
Broadcasting of the Proceedings of the House
Experiment held between 23 April - 17 May 1968
- 1969 Publications of Proceedings in Parliament Joint Committee
First Report, HC 48 1968-69; Second Report, HC 261 1969-70
These are the only two reports issued by the Joint Committee, mainly on legal matters.
- 1971 House of Commons (Services) Select Committee
Seventh Report, HC 510 1970-71
Broadcasting debates of Great Britain and the EEC
- 1972 Expenditure Select Committee
Second Special Report, HC 61 1972-73
Broadcasting of proceedings.
- 1976 House Of Commons (Services) Select Committee
Broadcasting Sub-Committee
First Report, HC 142 1975-76
The experiment in public sound broadcasting - four weeks in June and July 1975.
- 1976 Sound Broadcasting Joint Select Committee
First Report, HC 494 1975-76; Second Special Report, HC 723 1975-76
Report approved on 3 August 1976 (HC Deb c1634); and the question of costs on 6 August 1976 (HC Deb c1086).
- 1977 Sound Broadcasting Joint Select Committee
First Report, HC 136 1976-77; Second Report, HC 284 1976-77
Reviews the situation since 1964, with proposals and listing of previous reports. Paragraphs 33-41 include Sound Archives facilities.

- 1982 Sound Broadcasting Select Committee
First Report, HC 376 1981-82
Review of the progress of sound broadcasting since 1978, includes recommendations regarding copyright and defamation.
- 1983 Sound Broadcasting Select Committee
First Report, HC 270 1982-83
On copyright, defamation and privilege
- 1984 House of Lords Sound Broadcasting Select Committee
First Report, HL 299 1983-84
Televising the House of Lords.
- 1986 House of Lords Sound Broadcasting Select Committee
Report, HL 102 1985-86
Review of the experimental period, arrangements for permanent televising of the House.
- 1987 Sound Broadcasting Select Committee
Second Report, HC 282 1986-87
Permanent preservation of the sound archive.
- 1989 Procedure Select Committee
First Report, HC 705 1987-88
Implications for procedure of the experiment in televising the proceedings of the House.
- 1989 Televising of Proceedings of the House Select Committee
First Report, HC 141 1988-89
- 1990 Televising of Proceedings of the House Select Committee
1st Report, HC 265 1989-90
Review of the experiment
- 1991 Broadcasting etc Select Committee
First Report, HC 11 1990-91
Arrangements for the permanent televising of proceedings of the House
- 1993 Broadcasting Select Committee
First Report, HC 112 1993-94
Developing the Parliamentary Broadcasting Archives
- 1995 Broadcasting the Judicial Business of the House Select Committee
First Report, HL 20 1994-95
- 2000 Broadcasting Select Committee
First Report, HC 642 1999-2000
The development of Parliamentary Broadcasting
- 2003 Broadcasting Select Committee
First Report, HC 786 2002-03
The Rules of Coverage

Further reading

Cameras in the Commons
Hetherington A et al
Hansard Society 1990

Expense of glory: a life of John Reith
Mcintyre I
Harper Collins 1993

References:

www.millbankstudios.co.uk/textparliament.html

www.bbc.co.uk/info.editorial/prodgl/chapter33/shtml

www.bbc.co.uk/info/news/news177.html

www.scottishparliamentlive.com

www.itc.org.uk/itc_publication/itc_notes/view_note.asp?itc_note_id=25

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