



HANSARD SOCIETY BRIEFING

Enhancing Parliament's Ability to Communicate with Members of the Public

House of Lords Debate on Thursday 18 December 2008

The Hansard Society is the UK's leading independent, non-partisan political research and education charity.

We aim to strengthen parliamentary democracy and encourage greater public involvement in politics.

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Executive Summary

In order to enhance Parliament's ability to communicate with members of the public, the Hansard Society recommends that:

- A Communications Service should be established for Parliament;
- Parliament's communications strategy should be subject to regular consultation, review and evaluation in relation to optimum principles of accessibility and transparency, participation and responsiveness, accountability and inclusiveness;
- A single joint committee of both Houses should be established with responsibility for communication and engagement matters;
- There should be a comprehensive review of the language, terminology and procedures that Parliament uses in accordance with clear communication principles, as set out, for example, by the Puttnam Commission;
- Parliamentary officials should be encouraged to do more to draw the media's attention explicitly to matters of public interest;
- The authorities in Parliament, as they appoint staff, should recognise the need for greater diversity if Parliament is to function well;
- The parliamentary website needs further improvement to make it more accessible and intuitive in relation to users' interests;
- The deliberations of committees, particularly select committees, should be posted on the website and made more accessible, timely, and searchable;
- Subject-specialist journalists should be allowed easier access to cover parliamentary business relevant to their specialism;
- BBC Parliament should be allowed greater access to cover activities taking place in the Palace of Westminster.

Background

In 2005 the Hansard Society established a Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy, chaired by Lord Puttnam, which looked at the issue of how Parliament communicates with the public. The Commission report, *Members Only? Parliament in the Public Eye*, made **39 recommendations** detailing how Parliament might improve its communications. A subsequent follow-up report was published in 2006, *Parliament in the Public Eye 2006: Coming Into Focus*, detailing the response to these recommendations and what measures, if any, were being taken to implement them.

In the intervening years, the Hansard Society has conducted a number of research projects that relate to and augment the findings of the Puttnam Commission.

This briefing provides an update on some of the progress that has been made since 2005 and sets out where the Hansard Society believes more progress is still needed.

Why does Parliament's ability to communicate with members of the public matter?

- Parliament exists to represent the public – to be their voice. People have a right to know what is happening in Parliament, when, why and how.
- Parliament needs to re-establish its identity as an institution.
- Better communication will help to renew representative democracy in an era when representative politics is haemorrhaging support. Electoral turnout in general elections is low – 61% in 2005, 59% in 2001; turnout of voters under the age of 24 was around just 37% in 2005; membership of political parties is in significant decline. The *Audit of Political Engagement 5* published by the Hansard Society in March showed that last year 62% of people – or roughly three in five – said that the system of government in Britain could be improved either 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal'.
- Familiarity breeds trust which in turn contributes to greater levels of public and personal satisfaction – this is essential to improving the relationship between politicians and the public. Communication is crucial to developing such familiarity, thereby enhancing engagement in the future.

What do the public currently think about Parliament?

The Hansard Society report, *Parliament and the Public: Knowledge, interest and perceptions*, published earlier this month, shows that:

- Just 32% of people agree that they 'have a good understanding of the way Parliament works';
- Only one in two members of the public are confident that Parliament is not the same thing as government;
- Only 19% of people agree that Parliament is 'working for them';
- Only 26% of the public feel that they have at least a fair amount of knowledge about the House of Lords, whilst just 42% say the same about the House of Commons.

BUT:

- Just over half of people (53%) do have an interest in Parliament;
- Younger people (aged 18-34) and women are more likely to want to know more about Parliament.

What are the challenges to improving Parliament's communication with the public?

Ease of access

- Hansard Society research suggests that most people are not willing to pro-actively seek information about Parliament and are almost totally reliant on what they see on television or read in the newspapers for information. The Hansard Society therefore stresses the importance of making information about Parliament easily accessible to the public.
- The language, terminology and rules that govern how Parliament works are often complex and anachronistic, reinforcing the impression that Parliament is an exclusive institution, separate from the public. Indeed, many members of the public regard the language and rules as a tool by which politicians seek to exclude the public from their deliberations and thus limit their accountability.
- Asking a member of the public to travel to London to give 'evidence' to a select committee can be costly and daunting, constraining the extent to which the institution is truly open to public voices, particularly when a range of media now exists to provide alternative routes to such engagement.
- If Parliament is to really engage with the public, e.g. through select committees, it must ensure that the public is aware of the consultations and provide proper means to facilitate dialogue with them. The Hansard Society pilot project, *Citizen Calling*, conducted with the Home Affairs Select Committee in 2006, demonstrated that members of the public are unlikely to be aware that an inquiry is taking place unless it is promoted; that the sort of people a parliamentary committee might wish to hear from may not be politically aware and know of the inquiry or how to respond; that the target group may be less willing or able to express their ideas on paper; and that potential witnesses are often unsure about what Parliament can do about a particular issue.

Institutional culture and ethos

- Parliament as an institution is often too risk averse in relation to both the concept of change and to communicating about potentially 'political' or controversial issues.

Responsiveness

- There is a danger that strategies for implementing further methods of public engagement (e.g. e-Petitions) will offer a 'thin' form of democracy – potentially building up (and then frustrating) public expectations rather than providing a platform that delivers ongoing democratic participation. They need to be accompanied by a concerted form of deliberation, with clarity in the processes and outcomes.
- The lessons learnt from previous initiatives are yet to be applied consistently. The Hansard Society's *Tell Parliament* report (2005) suggests that any measures taken to develop online communication strategies need to be supported by adequate staff

and time resources; participants need to be kept informed of the ways in which their contributions to the debate are being fed into the policy process (and if not, why not); and that they should incorporate outreach to deepen and broaden participation on a sustained basis.

Medium and message

- Parliament has to compete with other changing patterns of cultural consumption, an ever-expanding media base, particularly online, and with other institutions that people look to first as exercising more influence on their lives (e.g. local councils; the media; business). People will only switch on to those issues that interest them – so Parliament also needs to be seen to be addressing relevant and topical issues.
- The more commonplace online engagement becomes in other spheres the more anachronistic Parliament will look, unless it provides better access. This means, tackling the communications deficit, which leaves some 40% of the population digitally excluded.

Resource investment

- Democracy does not come cheap. But in the report *Enhancing Engagement: What People Think, Know and Expect of Parliament* (2005), the Hansard Society found that the public did not think that initiatives to improve communication would be a waste of public money.

Progress so far

- Some peers have led the way in developing new and innovative forms of engagement with the public – e.g. the ‘Lords of the Blog’ online initiative piloted with the Hansard Society. The Lord Speaker has also prioritized outreach work to improve public understanding of the work of the House of Lords and to involve groups not normally engaged in the political process. For example, 400 young people submitted evidence to a Lords Committee.
- Parliament’s internal organisation has been re-structured, particularly the communications and information departments, and there is now an embryonic communications strategy.
- The Parliamentary Education Unit has been expanded, outreach officers are working to build links with communities in the regions including involving young people in the work of select committees, and new educational facilities for school groups in the Palace of Westminster are in development.
- An educational publication, *Your Parliament* was produced by the Hansard Society following an evaluation of the *Connecting Communities with Parliament* project on behalf of the House of Commons Commission. It explains the basics of the British political system in a straightforward and accessible way.

- The Parliamentary website has been upgraded and redesigned.
- The House of Commons has amended procedures to allow for topical questions and debates.
- Media coverage of select committees has improved with the expansion of the select committees media service.
- There have been some improvements (albeit limited) to the rules and practices governing television coverage of Parliament.

What changes are still needed?

- A Communications Service should be established for Parliament, bringing together within its departmental remit the various communication activities essential to a contemporary democratic institution.
- The communications strategy should be subject to regular consultation with parliamentarians, the media, the public and other interested bodies. It should also be reviewed and evaluated in relation to optimum principles of accessibility and transparency, participation and responsiveness, accountability and inclusiveness.
- There should be a single joint committee of both Houses, responsible for communication and engagement matters, though peers and MPs should be able to consider separately matters solely relevant to their respective Houses.
- There should be a comprehensive review of the language, terminology and procedures that Parliament uses in accordance with clear communication principles, as set out, for example, by the Puttnam Commission.
- Parliamentary officials should be encouraged to do more to draw the media's attention explicitly to matters of public interest.
- The Speaker's Conference is considering, and will make recommendations for rectifying, the disparity between the representation of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people in the House of Commons and their representation in the UK population at large. As a corollary to this, the authorities in Parliament, as they appoint staff, should recognise the need for greater diversity if Parliament is to function well.
- The website needs further improvement to make it more accessible and intuitive in relation to users' interests.
- The deliberations of committees, particularly select committees, should be posted (perhaps in video format) on the website with visitors encouraged to respond /

debate and evidence gathering sessions could be faster, more convenient, and better aligned if they make use of the full range of media that citizens use today. Evidence processing should also allow for public access to submissions online and in searchable form.

- Radical reform of parliamentary communications and presentation should provide opportunities for the media to enhance their coverage of parliamentary business. In particular, subject-specialist journalists should be allowed easier access to cover parliamentary business relevant to their specialism. BBC Parliament should also be allowed greater access to cover activities taking place in the Palace of Westminster.