



HANSARD  
SOCIETY

## ***Parliament in the Public Eye 2006: Coming into Focus?***

Last year's Puttnam Commission Report concluded that Parliament is failing in its democratic duty to communicate with the electorate and urged a fundamental overhaul of its communication structure. The report called on the media to rise to the challenge and examine how they could play their part in improving the communication of Parliament.

A follow-up report *Parliament in the Public Eye 2006: Coming into Focus?* reviews the progress of the Commission's findings and considers next steps. *Parliament in the Public Eye 2006: Coming into Focus?* was launched at a half-day conference at Westminster on Thursday November 2, 2006.

### **Conference Notes**

(Welcome by Lord Holme, Hansard Society)

**Lord Puttnam** opened the conference by saying that Parliament has made quite a lot of progress since the first report of the Puttnam Commission 18 months ago. He stressed that in his opinion democracy is fragile and needs to be taken seriously. 99.9% of the activity in Parliament is serious work by hard working people and this work must be taken seriously. He referred particularly to the parliamentary website which has made progress and stressed the importance of introducing a search facility for issues so that people could easily navigate to find relevant information.

**Baroness Hayman, Lord Speaker** described her role as a 'silent speakership' unlike that of the Commons. Public engagement is a vital part of her role – to represent the House externally and to address the disconnection between the public and Parliament. She said she was trying to take on some of the myths about membership of the Lords: 50% of members have come in in the past 10 years and they are more diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, disability and religion than the Commons.

### **First Session: Parliament: Getting the message out?**

(Chaired by Clare Ettinghausen, Hansard Society)

**Lord Baker (Chair, House of Lords Information Committee)** stressed that the House of Lords was pushing the boundaries more than the House of Commons when it comes to opening up Parliament – for example, the Lords Chamber will be used by young people in a special session chaired by the Lord Speaker.

**Greg Hurst** (*The Times*) said he recognised the Puttnam report to be a very serious and interesting piece of work, and agreed with many recommendations such as extending access to regional and specialist journalists and calling on the press to correct mistakes. His reservations were that the report could be ‘over-prescriptive’ as MPs don’t like being told by outsiders how to run their affairs.

**John Pullinger** (Librarian, House of Commons) stressed that the communications strategy was not just about *telling*, but also about *listening*. We have to convince the public that this place is valuable – it’s a job that will take at least 18 months, but the key is taking Parliament to where people are rather than expecting them to come to us. He outlined various projects from the new Visitor Centre to new outreach programmes.

**Gisela Stuart MP** said that Parliament is a battle of ideas and what we do here and how we are perceived by the public is key. Increasingly, the way legislation is made is removed from the Palace of Westminster – for example, the implementation of EU directives is never debated in the House of Commons. Politicians have a huge duty to make sure that this place remains politically relevant.

**Second Session: Parliament: Media reporting of Parliament: Rights and responsibilities**  
(Chaired by Peter Riddell, *The Times*)

**Angela Eagle MP** said that in the 14 years since she was first elected as an MP there have been massive changes in the way that Parliament is reported. Lots of journalists do a very good job, but generally we have moved away from factual reporting and the public do not get an accurate assessment of coverage of Parliament and debate. The broadcast media have moved towards having pre-scripted confrontations between MPs – but personality and confrontation is not all that politics is about.

**Julie Kirkbride MP** said that when she joined *The Telegraph* in 1992, it had full parliamentary reports. Today that seems like the time of the dinosaurs. She stressed that she didn’t see any way in which newspapers were going to change their reporting. They are commercial organisations and editors are looking to see how they can sell their papers. People in public life have to develop a thick skin. As far as broadcasting was concerned, it seemed a depressing forecast for ITV as the ITN news agenda was not really one for serious politics. BBC coverage was good and imaginative, but could be improved.

**Kevin Maguire** (*The Mirror*) agreed that the decline of ITV news was a disgrace and that the BBC was a great British institution that should be treasured. He said that the recent publication of the Stern Report was covered across the media, but when the Environment Secretary got up to speak about it in the Commons on the same day, there were very few MPs present. When politicians take Parliament seriously, the media will take Parliament seriously. He criticised the fact that backbenchers can only ask one question at PMQs and said that the Executive was not being held to account. He got more information by going along to the 11 o’clock briefing from the PM’s spokesman than in the Chamber.

## Closing session

**Jackie Ashley (The Guardian and Vice-chair, Puttnam Commission)** said that the report stressed that the *culture* of Parliament had to change. A lot has happened in the past 18 months but there is still a long way to go before the culture changes. The latest report *Parliament in the Public Eye 2006: Coming into Focus?* awarded a 'B' to Parliament and a 'C-minus' to the media. Jackie then introduced Nick Robinson to give the conference closing speech.

**Nick Robinson (BBC Political Editor)** asked who wakes up in the morning and wonders what is being discussed in Parliament today? The importance that MPs have in people's lives is very over-estimated. The media and the politicians are in a conspiracy to make people think they are more important. We should stop having a fight with each other. We all want politics to matter because it matters to us.

He said that over the past 20 years, coverage of politics has changed. It used to be about content – now it's worrying about audience. This is the context and we must accept it in a fiercely competitive world. We won't move on until we realise that we are in it together. There is a lot of coverage of Parliament going on, but the answer to the question 'Is Parliament at the centre of national debate?' is 'Sometimes yes, often no.' When Parliament is discussing the important stuff, it gets covered by the media.

He listed several practical reasons why covering Parliament can be difficult for TV – ranging from the fact that there is only one location for live interviews in Central Lobby which has been shared across all channels, to the fact that TV journalists couldn't film members of the public taking part in the recent NHS lobby actually lobbying their MPs – they had to take them all outside and ask them to re-enact it for the cameras.

He stressed that the only way to reinsert Parliament into the national conversation was to inject Parliament's debates into the debates that people are having all the time – for example, by linking the parliamentary web site to other sites.

Above all, he emphasised, change on this subject has been and will continue to be 'glacial'.