ELECTRONIC MEDIA, PARLIAMENT AND THE PEOPLE
Making Democracy Visible

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PARLIAMENT AND THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA:
FROM BROADCASTING TO THE DIGITAL AGE

The coverage of politics, and especially of Parliament, is skewed and inadequate. Current trends in reporting are especially worrying for the functioning of our democracy. Peter Riddell, Politics and the Media: Harlots and Prerogatives at the Turn of the Millennium, The Political Quarterly, 1998

An impoverishing way of addressing citizens about political issues has been gaining an institutionally rooted hold that seems inherently difficult to resist or shake off ... the political communication process now tends to strain against, rather than with the grain of citizenship. While politicians often behave as if planting ever more clever messages in the media could be a miracle cure for their power predicaments, journalists often deploy disdain, scorn and shock-horror exposure as ripostes to their threatened autonomy. Meanwhile, the voter is left gasping for 'civic-ly nourishing air' - not expecting to be given it and surprised when it is offered. Our civic arteries are hardening. Jay G Blumler & Michael Gurevitch, The Crisis of Public Communication, Routledge, 1995

The Hansard Society's Parliament and the Electronic Media programme is a response to widespread concerns about the extent and quality of parliamentary coverage. From the Speaker of the House of Commons, the Select Committee on Media, Culture and Sport, the floor of the House of Commons, journalists and political commentators, have come a range of criticisms of the media's failure to bring the life of Parliament to public attention in a thoughtful or thorough way. Some journalists have responded by suggesting that it is Parliament that needs to become more relevant or newsworthy. For citizens in a parliamentary democracy, only harm can come from the tendency to marginalise parliamentary activity - to report it only in sensational, theatrical or mocking terms.

As the electronic media enters a new digital era, in which traditional broadcasting meets with interactive, multi-channel, multimedia communications, fresh opportunities exist to connect citizens to the democratic institutions which serve them. The purpose of this programme of study is to highlight these opportunities, bringing together parliamentarians, broadcasters and citizens in a common effort to improve the channels of political communication.

THE HANSARD SOCIETY FOR PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNMENT

An effective parliamentary system is central to the success of our democracy. When Parliament fails, or is perceived to fail, to carry out its key roles, especially in making effective laws and in scrutinizing the actions and words of the Executive, this has an impact on the lives of ordinary people.

The Hansard Society promotes effective parliamentary democracy. A non-party organisation, it is supported by Madam Speaker, Party leaders, MPs, Peers, journalists and academics. The Society's activities range from Mock Elections in schools to research, on-line debates, conferences, study days and publications. For 1999 the Society is launching two important new programmes: Parliament and the Electronic Media and Parliamentary Reform.

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**ELECTRONIC MEDIA, PARLIAMENT AND THE PEOPLE**

Making Democracy Visible

**CONTENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPENING THE COMMONS TO THE CAMERAS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHAT IS THE PUBLIC WATCHING?</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIRST PERCEPTIONS: MPs, BROADCASTERS AND THE PUBLIC</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE AUDIENCE RESPONSE</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARLIAMENT AND THE PUBLIC: CONFUSION AND DISENCHANTMENT</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE FUTURE OF PARLIAMENTARY BROADCASTING</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i) THE DEDICATED CHANNEL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii) MEDIA EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii) NEW MEDIA: CONNECTING PARLIAMENT TO THE PEOPLE</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TWO STUDIES ON PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF PARLIAMENT</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE BRITISH PARLIAMENT IN BBC AND ITV EVENING NEWS, JANUARY-MARCH 1999</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA, PARLIAMENT AND THE PEOPLE
Making Democracy Visible

Introduction

Ten years after the arrival of cameras in the Commons, it is time to ask some questions about what the public sees of Parliament and how they perceive it. What image does Parliament convey to those who watch and listen to it? If Parliament’s image is sometimes less than positive, is that the fault of the message or the broadcasting messengers? What does the public want to find out? How newsworthy is Parliament? Are there new ways of showing and explaining Parliament that can be developed in the next decade? Can any of this contribute to the overall health of parliamentary democracy?

The advent of televised coverage of the elected chamber inspired high expectations and the degree to which they have been met needs to be measured. Some MPs feared that television would have an adverse effect upon behaviour in the chamber, that cameras and television lighting would be intrusive and disruptive, and that television coverage might favour one party over another. These fears were outweighed (and eventually outvoted) by the hopes of MPs that television coverage would create a more knowledgeable and interested electorate, that it would allow less mediated contact between parliamentarians and the people and that, in time, it would enhance the reputation of Parliament.

In a BBC poll on public attitudes to the 1989 experiment of televising the Commons, 82% of the public agreed that people would begin to understand more about how Parliament worked, 70% agreed that people would feel more involved in what was going on in Parliament and 68% agreed that people would become more interested in what happens in Parliament. In an ITC survey of MPs 74% concluded, after the three-month experiment, that ‘The public probably now know more about how Parliament works.’ Austin Mitchell MP, a longstanding advocate of televising the Commons, argued that ‘Parliament is at last reaching the people, however imperfectly. As a result it can begin to move back to the centre of national interest. It belongs to the people. They must have access to it, even if they do not use that right obsessively.’ For Mitchell, the principal function of the House of Commons is to promote public education: ‘the open window of government where all must be displayed, the stage for the dialectic which puts over the arguments by dramatisation. Those roles are basic to mass democracy. They can be performed only on television.’ (Mitchell in Franklin: 89-90) These were high hopes. After ten years of television coverage of the Commons, how justified have they been?

Just as parliamentary broadcasting is transcending its infancy, the nature of parliamentary democracy in the UK is changing. In 1989 there was one national Parliament within a centralised unitary state. In 1999 there is still a unitary state, but devolved power to the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh and Northern Irish Assemblies, the European Parliament in Strasbourg and more consultative local authorities and Regional Development Agencies have changed the constitutional shape of UK governance. As Philip Schlesinger, an expert on media and national identity, who is currently researching coverage of the new Scottish Parliament, has written, ‘We can less and less sensibly think
of the UK as a sovereign political or communicative space.' (Schlesinger, 1998) At the same time, there is talk of 'joined-up government' and a modernised legislature, spurred on both by the Commons Select Committee on Modernisation and the radical reform of the second chamber. These changes present a new political landscape within which television must provide access to a broad range of representative structures and make sense of the complexity of political debate. How prepared are the broadcasters to do this?

The quality of political communication must be assessed within the context of a new and rapidly changing media environment. There has been a huge expansion in the availability of satellite and terrestrial services on offer to UK television viewers. Digital TV, as it comes on stream, will increase choice further. Increased choice means greater competition and that puts an inevitable strain upon services provided in the public interest. Whether one considers News At Ten on ITV or Yesterday In Parliament on BBC Radio Four, there has been a manifest pressure upon network controllers to reschedule less popular programmes, often pushing parliamentary coverage into the ghetto of late-night programming or towards a dedicated parliamentary channel. In a democracy, there is a duty to provide political news that is accessible to a mass audience. New information and communication technologies (ICTs) may offer some scope for building stronger connections between representatives and the represented. (see Coleman, 1999a/b) If digital technologies are not only to impinge upon broadcasting in terms of teleshopping and interactive soap opera plots, serious thought needs to be given now to the possibilities for utilising the new media to enhance the democratic process.

In examining the effects of televised coverage of Parliament, the research for this report has examined what the public has been able to see and hear, what clear perceptions emerge from this, and the degree to which such perceptions enhance or diminish parliamentary democracy. The report examines how much of Parliament people can see on TV or hear on the radio, how much they choose to watch or listen to and how much parliamentary content is included in prime-time television coverage. We sought the public's views, principally by running two opinion polls: one conducted by MORI among a nationally-representative sample of 1065 adults across 157 constituency-based sampling points; the other conducted by the BBC as part of their weekly Television Opinion Panel (TOP) in which viewers were asked to fill in answers to a range of questions. These surveys of public perceptions were supported by qualitative research, including a focus group comprising broadsheet newspaper readers, and an analysis of calls and emails received by BBC Parliament in response to its screen invitation for viewers to communicate their views. Several of the BBC Parliament callers and emailers were called back and questioned. 14 MPs were interviewed to find out how they thought that Parliament was received by the viewing and listening public and how that affected their roles as political representatives. These comprised one Minister, one shadow spokesman on film and television, two members of the Media Culture and Sport Select Committee, two members of the Broadcasting Committee, three were members of All-Party committees concerned with broadcasting. Of the MPs, nine were Labour, three Conservative, one Liberal Democrat and one Independent. Their names are listed in the acknowledgements for this report. Five parliamentary broadcasters were also interviewed (four from the BBC and one from C4), as was the Supervisor of Parliamentary Broadcasting.
Opening the Commons to the Cameras

The Speaker explained that he had obtained the views of the Prime Minister and others, and it was decided unanimously that it was undesirable to have an account of proceedings in the House broadcast daily by a BBC representative in the Press Gallery. (September 1932)

Yesterday in Parliament performs an invaluable function in bringing Parliament closer to the people. That is a proper function for a public service broadcasting organisation to perform and I hope that you can give me an assurance to pass on to the House that Yesterday in Parliament will not be affected by the programme changes that I understand are under consideration. (11 December 1998)

Times change. In 1932 the Speaker denied permission for a BBC reporter to enter the House of Commons Press Gallery, which was reserved for the more important newspaper journalists. In 1998 the Speaker urged the BBC to remember its commitment to reporting Parliament. In the sixty-six years between these two statements the electronic media grew from being new sources of communication, competing with the primacy of the press, to the dominant political forum in Britain. Political legitimacy is now dependent upon transparency via the television screen. The television cameras have entered the Commons, as they have assumed an entitlement to enter every area of civic life, from the football board room to the activities of the police. Public judgements about civic institutions emerge largely (though not exclusively) on the basis of information presented on television. How such information about Parliament is presented, how it is received by the public and how it might be presented in the future are the principal concerns of this report.

Although today’s parliamentarians are eager to urge upon journalists their duty to report parliament, and are particularly concerned to remind the BBC of its public-service obligation, it was not always so. Parliamentarians were for a long time recalcitrant subjects for the glare of the cameras. As early as 1923 Reith sought permission to broadcast the King’s Speech at the State Opening of Parliament, but this was refused. In the same year Ben Tillett MP pressed the Prime Minister to agree to the broadcasting of parliamentary debates, but Bonar Law’s response was that this was ‘undesirable’. In a Radio Times article entitled ‘Should Parliament Be Broadcast?’, the BBC’s Chief Engineer elaborated a detailed proposal for parliamentary coverage. In March 1925 Sir Ian Fraser MP asked the Prime Minister to let the House of Commons consider the question of broadcasting its proceedings; Baldwin expressed opposition to such a move, but proposed the establishment of a joint Lords and Commons select committee. Maynard Keynes argued in 1928 for the Budget to be broadcast and there was much press comment on the potential value of broadcasting parliamentary proceedings. But Baldwin, after discussion with the other party leaders, rejected the proposal outright and the proposed select committee never met.

On 6 November 1929 the first edition of The Week in Westminster (for a brief time called The Week in Parliament) was broadcast. It was suspended at the outbreak of war in 1939, but revived in May 1941 at the request of the Ministry of Information, which saw the
programme as significant evidence of Britain's democratic system of government. In November 1937 Ellis Smith MP asked the Prime Minister to arrange for parliamentary broadcasting, but Chamberlain responded that this would be unpopular with MPs. In April 1940 the BBC was allowed two seats in the Press Gallery (before then the Speaker had refused such a privilege, as quoted above) and the following September the broadcasters were given their own Gallery. In 1944 Leo Amery, the Secretary of State for India, tried to convince a committee of the War Cabinet that broadcasting the proceedings of Parliament would enhance its place in national life. According to its minutes, however, the committee concluded that 'the proceedings of Parliament were too technical to be understood by the ordinary listener who would be liable to get a quite false impression of the business transacted.' Instead, emphasis was placed upon reporting the affairs of Parliament. On 9 October 1945 Today In Parliament, a fifteen-minute daily summary of parliamentary proceedings, was first broadcast. At the same time the BBC's Licence and Agreement was amended to include a commitment to provide 'an impartial account day by day by professional reporters of the proceedings in both Houses of the UK Parliament.' In June 1947 the BBC began to broadcast Yesterday in Parliament.

In October 1958 TV cameras were for the first time allowed in to the House of Lords, to record the State Opening of Parliament. In November 1959 Aneuran Bevan MP called for 'a serious investigation ... into the technical possibilities of televising parliamentary proceedings.' This, he argued, would help to establish 'intelligent communication between the House of Commons and the electorate as a whole', for he was concerned that parliament was being inadequately covered by the press as well as radio and TV. Bevan's initiative raised the question of televised parliamentary coverage, and this was taken up by the political broadcaster Robin Day, who in 1963 produced a Hansard Society pamphlet entitled The Case for Televising Parliament. It was not until May 1965 that the question was finally put to the House, when T.L. Iremonger MP moved a Private Member's Bill stating that '...this House would more worthily fulfil its role as the supreme forum of the nation if its actual proceedings could, after appropriate experiments and by methods calculated not to impair its unique atmosphere, be projected directly into the homes of the people on their television screens.' The motion was withdrawn when the Leader of the House proposed that MPs wait for a report from the Select Committee on Broadcasting of Proceedings - which had taken over an investigation of the subject from the Select Committee on Publications and Debates. In August 1966 the Committee recommended that there be an experiment of closed-circuit televising of Parliament, after which MPs could vote on whether to establish a permanent arrangement. On 24 November 1966 MPs debated the proposal for several hours, but it was lost by one vote on a division of 131-130. In June of that year the House of Lords had been less cautious and voted by 56 votes to 31 for their proceedings to be recorded by closed-circuit cameras. This experiment began in February 1968, but did not lead to permanent broadcasting of the Lords. In April and May 1968 the Commons permitted a closed-circuit experiment with sound only. Neither of these experiments led immediately to permanent arrangements for television or radio coverage.

In June and July 1975 the Commons agreed to an experiment in public sound broadcasting. The First Report of the Select Committee on House of Commons (Services), which was asked to evaluate the experiment, found that on the whole 'the
attempt to put the people more closely in touch with Parliament was welcomed.' On 3 April 1978 radio broadcasting of Parliament began.

The House of Lords allowed cameras to enter for an experimental period, beginning on 23 January 1985 and this became permanent in May 1986. After protracted consideration and debate, television cameras were permitted to enter the House of Commons on 21 November 1989.

What Is The Public Watching?

From the outset of televising the Commons, a number of concerns were expressed about how rounded a picture the public would receive. Would Commons actuality be used regularly by broadcasters? Would all aspects of the work of the House be shown? Would all MPs receive a fair share of air time? A report was presented to the Select Committee on Televising the Proceedings of the House in May 1990, based upon a thorough academic study of television output over a 15-week period between 21 November 1989 and 18 March 1990. (Blumler et al, 1990) The report concluded that 'British television has responded impressively to the challenge presented by its long-awaited entry to the House of Commons.' During the period of the study 'Westminster appeared remarkably frequently and prominently in both national and regional television news service.' So, out of the 15 sampled days in which researchers looked at the BBC1 9 O’Clock News there were 51 parliamentary stories, 3.4 per day, and on the ITN News at Ten there were 44 parliamentary stories, 2.9 per day. A broad view of Commons activities appeared to be shown, with approximately 10% of parliamentary News stories featuring Commons committees, mainly select committees. There appears to have been a reasonable balance between leading and backbench MPs, with the latter featured as the main actors in approximately a quarter of all the parliamentary stories on the News broadcasts. A broadly similar conclusion was reached in the 1990 Hansard Society report, Cameras in the Commons, which declared that ‘The experiment has been a greater success than seemed possible beforehand.’ (Hetherington et al)

Even in 1990, Blumler et al sounded a note of caution in their reporting of the experiment’s success. They warned that ‘the experiment phase may be judged as a time for creating “favourable impressions” by more extensive use of Parliamentary materials in programming than is envisaged subsequently.’ In the future, the report suggested, broadcasters may be less ready to use as much parliamentary material, and the timing of programmes featuring parliament may not be appropriate for attracting sizeable audiences.

The study conducted for this research by Media Monitor International looked at each of the four nightly News broadcasts on BBC1 and ITN from January to March 1999, a total of 63 days and 252 separate broadcasts. An account of the research methodology and more details of the research findings are contained in Appendix II. This is the most extensive content-analysis of main UK News broadcasts conducted since cameras entered the Commons. This study suggests that there has been a major reduction in the coverage of parliamentary stories over the decade since cameras entered the Commons. Over the whole period, 0.7% items featured Parliament compared with 3.5% featuring
non-parliamentary governmental institutions, 7.8% featuring star celebrities and 4.6% featuring criminals. From 3.4 per day on BBC1 in 1989-90, the figure for stories featuring Parliament has fallen to less than 1% per day in 1999. In 1989-90 the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, featured in 268 actuality excerpts, more than any other MP, but still less frequently than her own Government backbenchers (770 contributions) and less than 20% of the 1,392 occasions in which backbenchers from the two main parties were featured. In 1999 frontbenchers predominated overwhelmingly. Tony Blair featured in 53 stories, more than all backbenchers added together.

The major reduction in the use of parliamentary actuality suggests that Parliament is regarded as being less newsworthy than both broadcasters and MPs predicted ten years ago. The concentration upon leading Government or shadow-government figures suggests that Parliament is frequently used more as a scenic backdrop for the coverage of the executive than as a means of reporting the activities of the legislature.

Two statements can be made about public viewing of Parliament on television: firstly, there is less parliamentary actuality shown on universally available television now than there was ten years ago; secondly, fewer people choose to watch parliamentary programmes now than ten years ago.

ITV broadcasts no regular national coverage of Parliament, although regional channels do run coverage relating to their own areas. ITN produces the Channel 4 News, which carries more parliamentary actuality than the main BBC and ITV News broadcasts (Negrine, 1998), as well as 5 News (which carries very little parliamentary actuality), Channel 4’s Big Breakfast News (which carries none at all) and Channel 4’s political series, Powerhouse, broadcast four weekday mornings each week from the restaurant at 4 Millbank. Whereas in 1992 A Week In Politics was attracting audiences of over 600,000 and the Parliament Programme was attracting well over 200,000 viewers, in 1999 the Powerhouse audience hovers around 100,000. Sky News a satellite channel, provides educational parliamentary coverage, including Prime Minister’s Questions.

There is more television coverage of Parliament on the BBC today than there was in 1989, though most of this is scheduled outside prime time or on less accessible channels. The BBC, as the principal network covering Parliament, and with its statutory requirement to provide daily reports of parliamentary proceedings, has been accused of meeting its formally obligation to ‘show the green benches’ of the House of Commons, rather than seeking to promote such coverage to a mass audience. BBC TV coverage amounts to 255 minutes per week of regular programming on BBC2 (increased to 295 minutes on weeks when Scrutiny is shown) and no regular programming on BBC1, although Parliament is occasionally shown on News reports or other current affairs programmes. Regular parliamentary coverage comprises Despatch Box, from midnight to 12.30 am on Mondays to Thursdays and Westminster Live, from 2.45 to 3.30 pm on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Westminster Live is the most popular slot for coverage, including live coverage of PM’s Questions each Wednesday; its audience has declined from 815,000 in 1992 to 630,000 in 1999. Despatch Box receives an average audience of 270,000 (figures for April 1999) and the average audience for Scrutiny is 1.1 million. BBC Parliament shows over 100 hours of live or recorded parliamentary
coverage each week and News 24 also shows some, but these channels are only available to cable, satellite or digital subscribers. A good example of the decline in parliamentary coverage since Blumler et al reported in 1990 is BBC’s Breakfast News: in 1990 there were 32 Commons events covered during the 15-week period; in 1999, over an 8-week period (April and May) there were only 3 uses of Commons actuality, all concerned with the Welfare Reform Bill over which the Government risked facing a backbench rebellion.

On BBC Radio 4 there is a regular 358 minutes of parliamentary coverage, although 278 minutes of that are now available only on long-wave. Radio 5 Live broadcasts a weekly average of 120 minutes of live parliamentary coverage, including Prime Minister’s Questions and Ministerial Statements, and sometimes covers Parliament for as much as 290 minutes in a week. The decision to move Yesterday in Parliament from FM and long wave to long wave only resulted in vocal protest from MPs. Three Commons debates were devoted to this scheduling change (11 March 1998, 11 December 1998 and 14 April 1999) as well as a session of the Commons Select Committee on Culture Media and Sport (26 February 1998)

Denis MacShane MP suggested that the ‘BBC is taking steps that will lead to its decoupling not so much from Parliament as from the people...We are not talking about politicians being kept off the airwaves; the loud, the powerful and those who represent Government will always get a hearing. However, beyond those people are the myriad voices and views of Members of Parliament working in the House and in its Select Committees, raising all sorts of issues and reflecting all sorts of perspectives.’ (HC Deb cc 488-9) Nicholas Winterton MP claimed that the BBC executives were ‘trivialising and making peripheral what goes on in Parliament’ (HC Deb c 495) David Davis MP declared that ‘The highest priority in public service broadcasting and in the public service remit is to support an informed democracy; that is paramount. The arguments that we have heard from the BBC are arguments of choice and market. That is not what I want from public service broadcasting. The whole point about the core values is that they should provide what the market does not provide.’ (HC Deb, c 150) Paul Tyler MP pointed out that ‘If Ministers are prepared to go on the Today programme and state in detail what they will later in the day tell the House of Commons, then later in the day no reporter, journalist or broadcaster will cover the matter in the same detail.’ (HC Deb, c 153) Stephen Pound MP asserted that ‘It is a question of democratic accountability. This is about the forum of the nation; the place where decisions are taken that affect the lives of every single man, woman and child in these islands. This is the place where we act and speak on behalf of the people of this nation. We have a duty to be as open and transparent as possible in our activities in this House. The BBC has a concomitant duty to reflect that to the nation.’ (HC Deb, c 156)

Not all MPs were unanimous in casting the blame for downgrading Parliament upon the BBC executives. Tam Dalyell MP observed that ‘it is all very well for the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr Winterton) to say that in the past quarter of a century serious coverage has been reduced, but something else has been reduced: ministerial interest, in both parties, in the proceedings of the House of Commons.’ (HC Deb, c 499) Roger Gale MP reflected that ‘part of the problem is us: we are boring and announcements are made on the Today programme and on The Word At One, not in this place.’ (HC Deb, c 504)
Anne Begg MP, who chairs the All-Party BBC Committee, dissents from the MPs' outcry, stating in an interview for this research that MPs were 'the only ones who were worried' about the schedule changes and that 'the reason they're protesting is because they're not hearing themselves.' She favours more informative programmes about how the Westminster process works 'rather than just straight reporting.'

First Perceptions: MPs, Broadcasters and the Public

A short time after radio microphones entered the Commons in 1978, William Price, the junior Minister who had handled broadcasting negotiations on behalf of the Government, declared:

_We have on our hands a public relations disaster. We are in real danger of making a monumental laughing stock of ourselves. The great majority of listeners have been appalled at the noise - the bellowing, the abuse, the baying, the hee-hawing and the rest. People simply do not understand that the House of Commons is an excitable, emotional and noisy place._

In retrospect, his fear was excessive. But to what extent were the broad sentiments justified? It certainly seems to be the case that the public regards the proceedings of Parliament more as a theatrical performance, and sometimes a spectacular verbal duel, than a representative legislature. It would seem that people are much more likely to recall the heated clashes of Prime Minister's Questions, which takes place for half an hour once a week, than much else that takes place in the chamber, and less still the committee rooms. While it may be the case that people do not understand the character of the House of Commons, a more probable explanation is that they are most frequently exposed to the 'excitable, emotional and noisy' moments of the proceedings rather than receiving a rounded impression of parliamentary life.

Each of the 14 MPs interviewed was asked to sum up briefly what they thought television viewers witnessed when they watched Parliament on the screen. Here is a selection of their responses:

_I think the public is seeing a very small part of the work of Members of Parliament. I think often their view of Parliament is distorted to some extent by that. I think they see the main confrontational aspects of Parliament rather than the day to day hard work of MPs._ (David Lepper)

_I think they're seeing a caricature of a confrontational assembly, which is not more than the exchange of pre-selected soundbites, in which each comes with their pebbles that they toss at each other._ (Martin Bell)

_A load of people who are shouting at each other without any real substance or outcome._ (Clare Ward)

_Sensational highlights._ (Roger Gale)
An empty chamber. Lazy MPs not doing any work, not interested in the debate. (Derek Wyatt)

The public sees discussion and debate along party lines. I don't think they get a full flavour of what an MP's job is all about. And I think quite often they might not be aware of just how stage managed it is. (Caroline Flint)

They see the chamber, if that's being televised. People don't realise the amount of work that's going on elsewhere than in the chamber. Standing committees, all-party committees, select committees, you name it, CPA meetings, group meetings, party meetings. All these things are running concurrently. But one of the first things that people look for is their Member. And he or she may not be there. (Nicholas Winterton)

I think they see part of the process that makes up a civilised nation and a democratic nation, but only part of the process. (Tony Banks)

The broadcasters who cover Parliament were asked the same question:

What they are seeing is MPs within a club, within something that is not as accessible as it should be. (Nicholas Jones, BBC)

I think the thing that they see is probably an empty Chamber where there is a question about the relevance of what the speaker is saying. I think that's the danger. (Roger Mosey, BBC)

How do these views from MPs and broadcasters compare with what members of the public themselves think they are seeing when they watch Parliament on television? The same question was asked to members of the focus group and to viewers who contacted BBC Parliament and a selection of their responses follows:

I think sometimes you think 'Oh, it's a bit of a shambles.' You know, these people are in a very high position and they are determining our destiny. It doesn't look professional sometimes ... it's not very well disciplined. (Focus group member)

Bloody chaos. The perception is based on Question Time which convinces people that MPs are like children and are not worth bothering about. God knows why so much is made of Question Time when it is the most damaging image-maker for Parliament. (BBC Parliament viewer)

I think it's a game. I think they're all acting. (Focus group member)

People see MPs and peers discussing issues in debates and committees. (BBC Parliament viewer)
Watching Parliament enables the electorate to see the process of living government: both the debate and the implementation of the majority’s wishes. (BBC Parliament viewer)

The tip of the legislative iceberg. (BBC Parliament viewer)

Self-righteous and pompous. (Focus group member)

It is a glorious knockabout which means little or nothing. (BBC Parliament viewer)

Sort of theatre, isn’t it. (Focus group member)

A collection of people, a few of whom are vaguely familiar and many others who are unfamiliar and indistinguishable. (BBC Parliament viewer)

They’re probably acting more than really putting their views across. It’s very sort of dramatic. You probably see them off camera or in their offices afterwards and they’re probably a lot more logical. I think they’re under pressure and they’ve got to stand their ground and they’ve really got to put on a good show. (Focus group member)

Looking at MPs on TV reflects the state of Parliament. With the exception of Question Time, it’s like looking at a graveyard. (BBC Parliament viewer)

Our focus group, comprising broadsheet readers with an interest in current affairs, reflected some clear public impressions, several of which were confirmed subsequently by the quantitative poll research. Group participants all agreed that Parliament should be shown on television, although there was concern about when it is shown: ‘I don’t think there’s enough coverage of it at peak times. It might be on during the afternoons, but most of us can’t watch that.’ It was suggested that there should be more short reports in the evenings. Group participants regarded parliamentary broadcasting as having educational value, although some stated that the more they knew about how parliament worked the more sceptical of its activities they became. Group participants favoured having well-packaged, accessible reports on Parliament showing not only what MPs said but why the debate was happening and the parties were taking different positions. They were mindful of the danger of interpretive reporting becoming intrusive and biased, and suggested that the key issue was the trustworthiness of the broadcasters, citing BBC and Channel Four as reliable interpreters.

Few group participants remembered seeing select committees on television, but when asked most seemed to know that there were some circumstances in which MPs worked in committees rather than in the chamber. These occasions were perceived to be more like judicial hearings, as special cases rather than an essential part of parliamentary business. When told that many MPs spend more time working on committees than in the chamber of the House, one participant commented that ‘They’re not on television much, so what you don’t see you don’t know about, do you.’ By contrast, most participants had seen Prime Minister’s Questions and this was regarded as ‘quite a spectacle ... good
television.' This function of parliamentary broadcasting as 'good entertainment' was assumed by participants to be no less important than its public information function. They tended to evaluate MPs as performers first and foremost.

Most focus group participants had generally negative observations to make about what they saw of MPs in Parliament. The comment of one participant that 'I think they should just televise it 24-hours a day and then people would realise that these people just fall asleep' was symptomatic of this outlook. They were particularly concerned about the frequent emptiness of the chamber which was seen as indicating a lack of enthusiasm on the part of MPs for parliamentary life. Participants did not seem to regard the Commons chamber as only a part of the wider business of the House. There seemed to be considerable uncertainty about whom the MPs were addressing: themselves? Media? The public? It was assumed that they ought somehow to be speaking to the public, but that they are mainly speaking to themselves or the cameras. Despite this negativity towards MPs in parliament, participants had high regard for the energy and abilities of their local MPs and recalled having seen them on television speaking in the Commons.

Focus group participants were not greatly interested in improving the quality of parliamentary broadcasting, although they were concerned about the times of the day that they could see Parliament on television. They favoured more highlights and explanation, scheduling at more viewer-friendly times and more in-depth coverage of individual MPs, perhaps on a regional basis. When asked about how they would react to broadcast coverage of Parliament being taken away or somehow censored participants were eager to emphasise their right to see and hear Parliament live, just as if they were in the Strangers' Gallery: 'I think with it being there now, it's there for good. It's not going to be taken away. It's always there if anybody's interested enough. Maybe it's quite a small minority who do tune into it, but it's there for those who wish to do so.'

The broadcasters had a much more positive sense than the focus group of the contribution of parliamentary coverage to democratic politics. Roger Mosey, Controller of BBC Radio 5 Live and Acting Director of Continuous News (including BBC Parliament, BBC News 24, BBC World and BBC Online), explained that 'if there is something of genuine significance going on in parliament we ought to try to bring that to as wide an audience as possible. And I suppose, my sort of faintly propagandistic view is that if Parliament is to maintain its role in our national life, which I think on the whole is a good thing, it needs to be on channels like 5 Live because we have a large and non-specialist audience and it needs to be broadcast at a time when people can hear it on a channel that's got mass distribution.' Mosey favours innovative approaches to parliamentary coverage, including hourly summaries of lively debates and related phone-ins. He argues that phone-ins with MPs can sometimes illuminate political debates more than direct parliamentary coverage or MPs being interviewed on the Today programme 'because the phone-in links the voters direct to politicians.'

Ann Tyerman, the Head of BBC Political Documentaries and editor of Scrutiny which covers select committees, is also committed to providing what she calls 'value added' reports of Parliament, i.e. explanation rather than mere coverage: 'It seems to me that if you can try and help people understand what's going on that's important - you know,
“We know you haven’t got much time so we’re going to make it easy for you to enjoy.” It seems to me that’s not a question of dumbing down or anything. It seems to me part of the responsibility of broadcasters.’ David Lloyd, head of current affairs at Channel 4, also favoured a value-added approach to packaging Parliament for a television audience, citing Channel 4’s Parliamentary Awards and The People’s Parliament as examples of novel ways of presenting political themes in a more accessible fashion.

Lloyd opposes the regulations that were laid down at the outset to govern the way that the cameras covered the Commons: ‘Our case is that the ITC Code is entirely competent to judge the proper and fair and duly impartial coverage of Parliament and that Members should not be trying to erect further barriers to the authentic coverage of the House … What is it about the coverage of Parliament that is so special that the normal conventions that the audience expect of coverage, that is to say that they entrust to the director of the broadcast a judgement as to what is relevant, interesting and authentic about that event. What is it about the chamber of the House of Commons that appears not to subscribe to these conventions?’ Channel 4 has maintained a position since 1990 of not running live coverage of the Commons. This view was not peculiar to Channel 4, but was shared by all the broadcasters interviewed. Roger Mosey of the BBC complained that ‘the rules of Westminster are very old-fashioned at the moment. We’re still allowed pretty well only head-on shots of the person speaking: no real cutaways, not really any sense of movement.’ Nicholas Jones, a BBC political correspondent, argued that ‘there should be an opportunity for the broadcasters to have more say over the selection of shots to make parliamentary broadcasting on television more interesting and more informative. The Parliamentary authorities who control the signal say there can only be a full-front shot of the person speaking, a wide shot, a shot of the Speaker, a side shot. There are only about half a dozen shots you can see. You can never have what in modern televisural terms is most important, a tracking shot.’ As one broadcaster stated, TV coverage of football matches has improved greatly over the past ten years, but coverage of Parliament still remains dull and over-regulated.

MPs were concerned about the limited view of their work shown by the cameras. Nigel Jones MP commented that ‘I think the public gets a false impression that it’s all the yahoo stuff that happens at Prime Minister’s Question Time or the main speeches in debates. They don’t see the real nitty gritty work considering a Bill. I don’t think we have any Standing Committee coverage at all. I think the public needs to be realigned to the fact that a whole lot of the work takes place upstairs in committee.’ David Lepper MP was concerned about television’s concentration on the work of the chamber: ‘The impression that creates in the minds of constituents is that the only important things that happen in Parliament happen in the chamber of the House of Commons. I think many of us are thinking about ways in which, if there are going to be changes in the broadcasting of Parliament, a greater emphasis needs to be given to the work of Selects Committees, and indeed Standing Committees, to try and correct that some time false impression about how MPs work, where they work and what their job involves.’ Roger Gale MP, a veteran opponent of televising the Commons, stated that ‘The televising of Parliament has given a completely false impression of the work of the House of Commons to the vast majority of the public who simply don’t understand what’s happening.’
Most MPs take the view that television has been on the whole good for Parliament. Even Nicholas Winterton MP, an opponent of the cameras in 1989, said that ‘I’m prepared to say I was wrong. I think that the televising of Parliament has overall benefited Parliament and I think that more people are aware of the scope and activity of Parliament, because it isn’t just the chamber that is broadcast ... It is what goes on elsewhere in the building. In fact, if I’m to be utterly direct with you, the chamber is the stage, the committees ... are the real graft and work of the House.’ There was also a concern that the broadcasters are only interested in their own agenda. Tom Worthington MP gave the example of health policy: ‘We’re obsessed with waiting lists. We’re obsessed with hospitals. We’re obsessed with acute care. Now, I know that what makes my constituents really healthy is nothing to do with hospitals and operations. It is to do with prevention, promotion and looking after yourself and it’s to do with the prosperity of the country and it’s awfully boring and will get no attention whatsoever.’

Some MPs wanted broadcasters to do more to explain Parliament to the public. Caroline Flint MP stated that ‘I think it’s important that there is some directional explanation given to the viewer because I think if you didn’t have that it would be quite bizarre. You’d wonder what was going on ... I found that my constituents didn’t realise that the Speaker goes from one side of the chamber to the other when she calls speakers.’ Tony Banks MP favoured ‘more pre-broadcasting information. Explain to people what’s going to happen, what’s coming up, what they should be looking for and who they think will be the main speakers.’

MPs were divided on the question of the potential for the media to enable citizens to interact with their representatives. Claire Ward MP was in favour, saying that she planned to organise a webcast in her constituency after Prime Minister’s Questions. Nigel Jones MP favoured more use of live phone-ins and web-based discussions, and Caroline Flint MP spoke highly of Radio 5 Live phone-ins presented by Nicky Campbell, which enabled real people to debate parliamentary issues from the perspective of their own experience. But Bill Olner MP expressed a concern that phone-ins on parliamentary issues could attract unrepresentative minorities and Tony Banks MP feared that such programmes could become ‘a point-scoring exercise.’

The Audience Response

A thorough analysis of the poll data appears in Appendix A. The purpose here is to consider the extent to which public perceptions of Parliament are affected by political broadcasting.

In the MORI poll the public was asked whether they had seen any broadcasts on television which showed the proceedings inside the House of Commons. Just over one third, 35% said that they had. Within the social classes A, B and C1 a greater proportion, 43% claimed they had seen the Commons. Within the classes C2, D and E correspondingly fewer, 28% claimed to have seen such broadcasts. Nearly half of broadsheet newspaper readers (48%) claimed to be viewers of parliament, compared to a third amongst those who buy tabloids (32%). 42% of men claimed to have watched, but only 29% of women. Older people were much more likely to have watched
Parliament on television than the young. 60% of socio-political activists said that they had viewed parliamentary proceedings. Most of those who claimed to have watched parliament said that the extract they saw lasted for more than two minutes.

In the TOP poll we began by measuring public demand for parliamentary broadcasting. There was broad agreement (64% opted for this) that TV should show proceedings in the House of Commons on universally available television channels. Over half (54%) also agreed that Commons coverage should be carried routinely on nationally available radio stations. Considerably fewer (35%) believed that Commons coverage should be carried only on subscription television channels. More people (55%) wanted there to be coverage of Commons committees than wanted availability of the European Parliament (49%), approximately equal to the number who wanted there to be coverage of the House of Lords.

Over two thirds of the respondents in both polls agreed with the statement that ‘It is important for each voter to have the opportunity to see at least something of what their local MP says in Parliament each year.’ This suggests that people are interested in Parliament as a representative body and that they want to be able to find out what their MP is doing there. This was supported by the focus group members who were much more interested in the activities of their own MP than in others, and whose main recollections of seeing Parliament on television were those occasions when they saw their MP.

Most of the MPs interviewed expressed doubt as to the effects upon their constituents of their being seen in Parliament on television. Most believed that constituents recognised them and liked to see them on television, but rarely remembered what they had been speaking about. As one MP put it, ‘I’ve certainly had constituents who have said to me “I saw you on telly”, but I think that often people don’t remember what I’ve been speaking about. And talking to colleagues, I’ve found that that is often a reaction as well.’ Another MP remarked that ‘they don’t notice the content of what you say, it’s whether you’re sober or drunk, or whether you look well or cheerful or happy or overweight. Content is rarely noticed.’ Perhaps television is better at showing Parliament than conveying the essence of its proceedings. Indeed, only 13% of TOP respondents found that they could agree with the statement that ‘I know what are the most important things that my local MP tries to argue for in Parliament’ - as against 60% who said that they did not know.

Respondents were less sure about the proposition that ‘It is important for each person to make their voting decisions based on having seen what their local MP has said in Parliament.’ Whereas 69% of TOP respondents claimed to want an opportunity to see at least something of what their MP says in Parliament, only 44% regarded such information as important in helping them decide how to vote. In this respect, respondents conformed to the political scientists’ assumption that voting is determined more by party loyalty or a sense of comfort with one party rather than on the basis of what individual representatives say or do.

British voters are probably quite aware that they are voting for parties more than for individual representatives, and a majority among TOP respondents (59%) agreed with the observation that ‘What MPs say, that gets shown on television, usually keeps to the
party line.' They did not, however, sense from watching Parliament on TV that MPs were mere creatures of their parties. Only 34% believed that their local MPs became 'involved in supporting matters in ways with which I don't approve because of party pressures' and significantly more opposed (40%) than supported (22%) the statement that 'Most MPs seem unintelligent, only put there to vote according to party instructions.'

Just as respondents seem to recognise party agendas, so do they seem to think that political journalists will often have their own agendas. 64% in the TOP survey agreed that 'TV journalists have their own agendas and try to manipulate MPs into saying things on TV that fit in with what the journalists think is important.' But a minority in both the MORI (41%) and TOP (24%) poll agreed with the proposition that 'Often a journalist interviewing an MP outside Parliament will bring out the MP's real opinion.' In short, journalists are regarded as pursuing their own agenda, but not necessarily in such a way as to clarify the essence of an argument. The many MPs interviewed tended to agree with the public about this: they saw being interviewed in the parliamentary studio at 4 Millbank as having the advantage of exposing them to a wider audience than direct coverage of Parliament, but it had the disadvantage of being controlled and that they are expected to deliver soundbites. MPs argued that the best way for them to be understood clearly would be if there were more reports and live coverage of Parliament.

The public does not appear to be hugely satisfied with the quality of MPs. More agreed (40%) than disagreed (14%) with the proposition that 'MPs behave in a disappointing way' and twice as many disagreed (36%) than agreed (16%) with the statements that 'MPs seem to be speaking for the public' and 'Most MPs are trustworthy people.' More, however, agreed (30%) than disagreed (24%) that 'Most MPs are doing their work enthusiastically and well.'

There was strong public agreement with the statement that 'Parliamentary procedures seem to be old-fashioned and outdated.' (59% of TOP respondents agreed and only 15% disagreed.) If one effect of showing parliamentary proceedings on television is to expose the public to what seems like an anachronistic institution with confusing rules and its own language, then far from enhancing the reputation of Parliament, such coverage may well serve to discredit it. One clue to this perception is that more respondents agreed (43%) than disagreed (27%) with the statement that 'Much of what is said in Parliament is difficult to understand.'

Parliament and the Public: Confusion and Disenchantment

The public's view of Parliament derives largely from how it is reported. The decline in newspaper coverage, which has been well charted by McKie (1999), has left the electronic media as the principal reporters, as well as being the sole providers of coverage live from the chamber or committee rooms. But what exactly does the public think it is seeing and hearing when Parliament is broadcast?

The public in general has an exaggerated sense of the centrality of Parliament in national governance. Many people imagine that Parliament and Government are the same; that
Parliament initiates the law-making process; that MPs run the country. In reality, most MPs are not members of the Government; very few policies originate in Parliament; they are determined and put into legislative form by Government departments; and MPs do not run the country, but hold to account those who do. Executive power resides in the Cabinet Office, Ten Downing Street and the major Departments of State, rather than in parliament. These are not televised.

The closest that Government comes to being televised is when Ministers (including the Prime Minister) appear before the House of Commons to answer questions. Such question periods can provide compelling scenes for television and radio coverage, with the legislative representatives assuming the role of journalists as they press members of the Executive for answers to difficult questions. Select committees, in a more protracted and in-depth fashion, perform a similar role. The media are especially interested in dramatic moments when members of the Government face direct parliamentary questioning. The emphasis upon the appearances of Government member is borne out by our content analysis, which showed that a clear majority of MPs shown in Parliament on the main BBC and ITN nightly News broadcasts were Government members. (Indeed the Prime Minister was shown speaking in Parliament more than all backbench MPs added together.) This serves to reinforce the public misconception that parliamentary business is essentially about Government MPs speaking, with occasional rejoinders from the shadow front bench.

What about the role of Parliament as a debating and scrutinising body? In 1993 the eminent political scientist, Philip Norton, published a book called Does Parliament Matter? In it he argued that although it has been ‘a notable feature of twentieth-century perceptions … that legislatures are in decline’ this assumption ‘derives from a fairly narrow view of parliament’, based upon Parliament’s capacity to influence the outcome of public policy; Norton’s book began with the different assumption that ‘there is more to Parliament than law-making.’ It is only on the basis of a clear distinction between the non-legislative functions of Parliament and the notion of Parliament as a governing institution that the public can be expected to make proper sense of its role. When cameras entered the Commons ten years ago neither MPs nor the broadcasters saw it as their role to address the fiction that Parliament is governing. As a result, people have continued to regard parliamentary coverage as if it was solely about Government (hence the emphasis upon Prime Minister’s Questions and Ministerial statements) or to regard parliamentary proceedings as being opaque and peripheral to real power.

Peter Riddell, whose column in The Times offers regularly intelligent insights into parliamentary life, has argued persuasively that current trends in parliamentary coverage ‘are worrying for the functioning of our democracy’ because of journalists’ lack of perspective, detachment and recognition of real significance. But he does not place the blame entirely upon media commentators; the institution itself has to justify its existence as a pillar of democracy:

Parliament has to justify that it is worth reporting, not just that its procedures are comprehensible, but that what happens in the Palace of Westminster itself matters. MPs have to show that they are not just engaged in an empty partisan ritual, but,
rather, that they are holding ministers to account and scrutinising legislation properly. (Riddell in Seaton: 17)

In particular, Riddell has pointed to the fact that power has moved to new centres, away from Westminster: the devolved assemblies, Brussels, Strasbourg, the courts, the City, the utility regulators. Coverage of Parliament needs to take into account these different loci of power.

Parliament is no longer the only forum in which politicians can make themselves heard. The most important consequence of parliamentary broadcasting has been the creation of 4 Millbank, where the BBC, ITN and Sky have their parliamentary studios. Ironically, just as MPs permitted live coverage of their proceedings, partly as a bid to be seen and heard by the public without the mediation of editorialising commentators, the broadcasters established their own centre to rival the self-regulated discussion of the Commons chamber. Now interviews conducted by journalists at the expansive 4 Millbank studios, or the adjacent College Green, count more in publicity terms than catching the Speaker’s eye in the Commons chamber. Each of the MPs interviewed for this research was asked whether it was more important for them to be interviewed at 4 Millbank or to make a speech in the Commons chamber. Most pointed out that the advantage of making a speech was that they could say what they wanted in their own terms, but almost all stated that an interview was worth more to them than a Commons speech.

Governments (both this and the last one) can use their media machines to bypass Parliament by making (or leaking) policy announcements before they are raised in Parliament. Ministers are placed on radio and television programmes to justify new policies to the public before they are announced to Parliament. Inevitably, such strategies weaken the power of Parliament. The Speaker has criticised Ministers for this.

Perhaps, rather than broadcast coverage of Parliament being seen by MPs as a manifestation of their political significance (as if appearing on television is in itself proof of national importance), the politicians should heed Riddell’s counsel and regard the cameras and microphones as a way of convincing the public that they matter and that they can do their jobs well. Lynda Clark MP has taken up this point in a recent Fabian Society publication entitled Broadcasting Politics:

My prediction is that if MPs take their job seriously, improve and modernise their procedures to allow effective policy debate, improve law making and increase the effectiveness of their scrutiny of the executive, the media will take an interest in and publicise some of the important work they are doing.

Events surrounding the Commons debate on the Welfare Reform Bill on 17 May 1999 suggested that parliamentarians, and particularly party managers, are taking broadcast coverage of the Commons seriously. The debate concerned a controversial Government Bill which some backbench Labour MPs claimed would disadvantage those in receipt of disability benefits. The House began debating the Bill in an all-night sitting. The Conservative Opposition were accused of wasting time discussing non-controversial clauses in the Bill so that the embarrassing discussion of the disability benefits would not
be reached until early morning and ‘prime time’ breakfast radio and television. In the event, the Government Whips stopped the debate and rescheduled it for later in the week. The Opposition accused the Government of doing this to avoid ‘prime time’ embarrassment and Government speakers accused the Opposition of filibustering. It could well be that this was the first case, after ten years, of live Commons coverage influencing the legislative timetable. Regardless of the allegations and counter-allegations in this particular spat, it suggests that MPs are conscious of the potential impact upon the public that television and radio coverage represents. Interestingly, the only Commons actuality used on the BBC Breakfast programme in April or May 1999 concerned the Bill in question.

As things stand, public esteem for Parliament is in a long-term decline, seemingly unaffected by ten years of broadcast coverage. As Curtice and Jowell observed in their 1995 study of ‘The Sceptical Electorate’, ‘Few independent commentators these days seem to dispute that the British public is losing whatever confidence it ever had in its politicians.’ They found that over two-thirds (69%) of the public believed that the present system of governing Britain could be improved ‘quite a lot’ or ‘a great deal.’ This compared with 63% in 1991 and 49% in 1973. A quarter of the public (25%) agreed with the statements that ‘Generally speaking, those we elect as MPs lose touch with people pretty quickly’ and ‘Parties are only interested in people’s votes, not in their opinions’. In 1987, before cameras entered the Commons, 16% and 15% respectively agreed with these statements. The point here is not to suggest that televising MPs has made them unpopular, but to show that coverage has not resulted, as some of the early advocates of televising thought it would, in an enhancement of their reputation.

There has been a conspicuous trend towards public disenchantment with parliamentarians. A MORI poll in 1996 found the public to be quite clear about what it heard from politicians on TV and radio:

*When you hear politicians from different parties on radio and television, do you have the impression that they are mainly concerned with reaching agreement or are they mainly concerned with scoring points off each other?*

- **REACHING AGREEMENT** 3%
- **SCORING POINTS** 93%
- **DON’T KNOW** 4%

*When you hear politicians on television or radio, do you feel that they fairly often break new ground, or do you almost always feel you’ve heard it all before?*

- **NEW GROUND** 4%
- **HEARD IT BEFORE** 92%
- **DON’T KNOW** 4%

*When you hear politicians on television or radio, do you feel that they are usually saying what they believe to be true, or are they usually merely spouting the party line?*

- **TRUTHFUL** 6%
- **PARTY LINE** 88%
- **DON’T KNOW** 6%
This overwhelming perception of parliamentarians as point-scoring, unoriginal and dogmatically partisan cannot be blamed entirely on negative reporting by journalists. If one purpose of broadcasting Parliament was to allow people to judge it for themselves, the low esteem MPs are held in by the public has not been elevated by ten years of live exposure.

The central aspect of parliamentary communication is speech - indeed, speech-making. Television is quintessentially an image-based medium. Radio gives greater emphasis to words, television to pictures. Parliamentary speeches are of a sort not common on the rest of television, or indeed in everyday life. At best, such speeches are regarded as oratory and the behaviour of the speech-maker is judged in terms of a performance. But most parliamentary debate involves speech that is far from enthralling: sometimes it is technical or abstruse; often it is ill-conceived and too long for television. One MP stated that ‘If the MPs insist on giving forty-minute dull speeches, then they should not be surprised that nobody pays a blind bit of attention’ and another explained that ‘There are messages that need to go out and people need to understand what’s being done in their name. And unless you do it in a form that people might be interested in you won’t get that message across.’ Could one of the objectives of Commons modernisation be to make its proceedings more appealing to the viewing public? When cameras were allowed to enter the Commons strict rules of coverage were set out so that the purpose and dignity of the House would be fully respected. Might it be time for parliamentarians to give serious thought to meeting the democratic needs of the public to observe parliamentary deliberation without being distracted by obscure procedures and inaccessible rhetoric?

The Future of Parliamentary Broadcasting

i) The Dedicated Channel

Soon after the Commons allowed cameras in, Austin Mitchell MP argued for the creation of ‘a national public affairs channel’ which would provide both live and recorded coverage of both Houses of Parliament as well as select and standing committees. Mitchell proposed that this as ‘a public service which government should finance.’ (Mitchell, 1990) In January 1992 the Parliamentary Channel was launched, paid for not by government but by the cable TV operators. In 1993 the channel began recorded coverage of the House of Lords and in May 1995 it began recorded coverage of committees. In 1997 broadcasting hours were increased. A year later the cable operators withdrew their commitment to finance the channel and the Commons Broadcasting Committee had to consider a proposition from the BBC to take over the channel. This was accepted and BBC Parliament began broadcasting in November 1998.

BBC Parliament is not available as a universal, terrestrial channel. The channel provides live, unmediated ‘gavel-to-gavel’ coverage of the House of Commons; recorded, unmediated full coverage of the House of Lords; 26 hours of committee coverage; daily and weekly reports on the European parliament, as well as weekly reports on the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly; a daily summary programme on events in the Westminster Parliament. The channel broadcasts for 129.5 hours per week, 12 hours longer than the previous Parliamentary Channel. The first year’s costs for the channel were £1.5 million. The service is run from 4 Millbank which houses the BBC Westminster

21
Politics Unit, but it is a separate organisation. The coverage provided by BBC Parliament is of the simplest kind. Captions provide factual background to the issues discussed and names of speakers. There is an invitation for viewers to call or email to comment on what they are seeing, but comments are not at the moment broadcast on air.

BBC Parliament has been an important development for parliamentary broadcasting, in that it clearly provides a unique service and reflects a strong BBC commitment to parliamentary coverage. As the BBC stated in its submission to the Broadcasting Committee in July 1998, ‘A Parliamentary Channel is the essence of public service broadcasting - making available to licence-payers the working of their legislature.’ As long as it confines itself to simple coverage and is not available on universally accessible channels, BBC Parliament is bound to remain a minority attraction. Although reliable audience figures are not yet available, Nigel Charters, the Managing Editor of BBC Parliament, estimates its audience as being 30 to 50,000 at any one time.

A fear expressed by some broadcasters is that the presence of a dedicated channel for parliamentary coverage could become an alternative to coverage or reporting of Parliament on the more widely accessible channels. David Lloyd of Channel 4 has argued that ‘the risk is that the more there are parliamentary channels the less particularly the main terrestrial networks will think they need to cover any of parliament whatsoever ... On the one hand, yes, you’ll have a market choice, but on the other hand the risk will be that if you only watch ITV or Channel 5 or whatever in the course of a week you won’t see any of it at all.’ To some extent, this has happened in the USA, where C-Span has become something of a broadcast ghetto for coverage of Congress, while the more popular networks only use snippets of Congressional actuality to illuminate broader political stories.

C-Span in the USA and CPAC in Canada both provide useful models for the development of BBC Parliament, especially if there are plans to turn it into a broader public affairs network. C-Span (which stands for Cable Public Affairs Network) went on air on 19 March 1979 when the US House of Representatives opened its proceedings to the cameras, and C-Span II started on 2 June 1986 when the Senate allowed the cameras in. C-Span’s programming has extended beyond live coverage of Congress, to include a variety of features which help to explain and interpret the political debate. There are regular phone-ins in which viewers can speak with politicians and policymakers; over 15,000 callers each year are put on air. There is a popular feature in which the authors of political books are interviewed. In 1982 the channel pioneered a nine-hour fly-on-the-wall programme called ‘A Day in the Life of a Congressman’ which helped to provide a broader picture of a Congressman’s working day than can be conveyed by floor coverage of Congress. C-Span also runs an online information service. In national viewing surveys, between 6 and 8% of US television viewers claim to have watched C-Span within the previous week. Brian Lamb, who runs C-Span, has estimated that there is an average audience of between 50 and 100,000 viewers at any one time. C-Span viewers are significantly more politically active than other US citizens, with 78% voting in elections, an increase over the general population of over 25%. They are more engaged but not necessarily more satisfied: a 1994 poll found that C-Span viewers had a markedly more negative view of Congress than others. (Times Mirror Centre for the People and the Press, ‘Profile of the Regular C-Span Viewer’ in Frantzich and Sullivan: 249)
Live parliamentary coverage by television began in Canada in 1977. It was originally undertaken by the CBC, but budget cuts led to CBC ceasing to fund the service in 1992. Since then parliamentary coverage has been provided by CPAC (Cable Public Affairs Channel) which is funded by a consortium of cable operators. The channel was relaunched with a new programme format in October 1996. It broadcasts for 168 hours per week, with 24% of its schedule devoted to parliamentary proceedings. CPAC also produces original programmes, including *The Roundtable*, a live phone-in, *Inside Ottawa* in which politicians and journalists consider the week’s major political developments and discuss forthcoming issues and policies and *Scrum* which features impromptu press conferences held by members in Parliament Hill. In addition to these regular features, CPAC, like C-Span, covers party conferences, think-tank seminars and campaign meetings. CPAC has succeeded, to a greater extent than C-Span or BBC Parliament, in presenting itself to viewers as a broad public affairs channel, while still maintaining its commitment to extensive parliamentary coverage.

The European country with the longest experience of parliamentary broadcasting is Denmark. A dedicated channel, DK4, cover all the debates. TV2 and DR have studios inside the parliament building and cover debates in what is commonly regarded as being a particularly lively fashion.

By contrast with Denmark, the Scottish Parliament is the newest in Europe to be televised. An Expert Panel on Media Issues in the Scottish Parliament was set up by the Scottish Office prior to the first election of the parliament to report on how the parliament and the media should relate to each other; how the parliament should present itself through the media; and how the media should conduct parliamentary coverage. The Panel’s report, published in March 1999, stated that ‘The Scottish Parliament should have the minimum of rules for television coverage’ and that ‘The “gallery-surrogate” model, allowing the viewer to observe any aspect of proceedings at any time, as though he/she were a spectator in the public gallery should be adopted in filming proceedings.’ Coverage of the Scottish Parliament is considerably less regulated than coverage of Westminster and it remains to be seen how much this might contribute to more interesting coverage of parliament and whether Westminster-based broadcasters will seek the adoption of similar rules of coverage.

**ii) Media Education For Democratic Citizenship**

The voter turnout for the 1997 general election was the lowest since 1935. Since then, voter turnouts in local council and European parliamentary elections have been remarkably low.

Following the recommendations of the Crick Report (1998), there is to be a serious commitment by schools and colleges to prepare young people for participation in the democratic process. Just as other educational campaigns, such as literacy and health awareness, are assisted by relevant media output, perhaps it is necessary for broadcasters not merely to supply a parliamentary service but to seek ways of cultivating greater democratic demand. When American football was first covered by Channel 4 considerable resources were put into explaining the rules to viewers. At the beginning of
each new season this educational process is renewed so that new viewers can follow the game. The rules of Parliament are at least as complex as those of American football, yet there is no equivalent media campaign to explain them. Jenny Abramsky, when she appeared before the Broadcasting Committee as the BBC’s then Director of Continuous News, stated that in establishing BBC Parliament the Corporation planned to ‘look at ways of extending the BBC’s education remit by giving access to Parliament to schools and to a whole series of background information that schools would be able to get access to.’ This is a commendable objective and The Hansard Society will be working with the BBC to look at imaginative ways of making parliamentary democracy comprehensible and meaningful to young people. The Hansard Society and BBC Education have collaborated to produce a CD-Rom introducing parliamentary democracy.

First-time voters have no fewer political rights or responsibilities than others and it is therefore necessary for them to feel that what goes on in Parliament relates somehow to them as members of a democratic society. A 1998 MORI survey asked young people aged 16-21 which professions they had most and least respect for. 36% had least respect for MPs, with only journalists, at 48%, respected less. Might this have something to do with the degree of understanding the public has about what MPs do?

A 1999 MORI poll, conducted on behalf of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, found that 28% of secondary school pupils thought that politics should be covered in more detail to prepare them for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life, against 6% who thought that the subject was already well covered. Politics received the lowest percentage of respondents of any issue who considered that it was well covered in schools at present. A 1998 MORI poll, conducted for the Institute of Citizenship, suggests that the failure to provide political education in schools has a marked effect upon adults ability to pursue their democratic rights. People were asked how much they thought they knew about various aspects of citizenship; 64% believed they understood their responsibilities as citizens and 50% thought they knew their rights as citizens, but only 36% considered that they knew the way Parliament works, with 28% understanding their local council and 17% the European Union.

Useful lessons can be drawn from C-Span’s Congress in the Classroom and CPAC’s CPAC in the Classroom projects. ‘By April 1995, nearly 11,500 teachers had affiliated with C-Span’s program for teachers. One hundred and twenty faculty development grants, totalling $60,000, had been awarded. Nearly six hundred college faculty had participated in seminars sponsored by C-Span. The C-Span school bus carried the network’s message across the country. Once the network began to use on-line services, C-Span distributed lesson plans based on its coverage.’ (Frantzich & Sullivan: 93)

The main distinction in forms of parliamentary broadcasting over the past ten years has been between direct coverage and more explanatory forms of coverage. BBC Parliament is an example of direct coverage with minimal mediation. Westminster Live is a good example of direct coverage which is well packaged in a form that adds value to viewers by offering explanation and interpretation. The BBC, in particular, seems to be committed to providing creative and interesting ways of explaining what is going on in parliament. Scrutiny, the occasional series of 40-minute programmes that follows the
work of specific select committees, is an excellent example of how potentially dull parliamentary activity can be presented in a lively and politically contextualised way. Similarly, Channel 4's annual Parliamentary Awards offers a fresh and urbane sense of parliamentary life, allowing the public to gain a feel for the culture of Westminster. Channel 4's A Week In Politics, presented by the late Vincent Hanna and Andrew Rawnsley, with regular commentaries by John Cole, provided an unparalleled insight into parliamentary affairs which has yet to be equalled by any subsequent programme format. There is scope for more of this kind of explanatory parliamentary programme-making.

iii) New Media: Connecting Parliament to the People

Parliament is an ancient institution. Television is no longer an infant medium of communication. The Westminster Parliament has modernised in the last ten years, moving from being one of the most technologically backward European parliaments to being amongst the most advanced in its use of ICTs. (Select Committee on Information, First Report, February 1994, Appendix 8; POST, 1998; Coleman, 1999c) The TV networks are adapting to the digital, multimedia age that is upon them. In recent years they have begun to produce their own impressive online services, including BBC News Online, ITN Online and Sky Online. BBC News Online, is the most visited UK information site on the web: it attracted 53 million page views in May 1999, of which 1.5% were for the UK Politics section: approximately 8-900,000 per month.

At the heart of the new technologies of information and communication is the capacity for interactivity. Traditional media have been largely non-interactive. One could send a letter to a newspaper or call a radio or television phone-in, but in general both print and electronic media have been monological: they have presented information and communicated with the public without anticipating feedback. Inherent to both the internet and digital TV is interactive feedback. With new media, interactive networks of communication are possible, not simply between broadcaster and receiver but between receivers and receivers. These interactive networks facilitate participation. There are questions to be raised about the inclusiveness of such participation; as long as access is limited only to those who can afford modems and other feedback technologies, new networks of communication can never be authentically democratic. Nonetheless, the media are coming increasingly to be regarded less as channels for monological messages from on high and afar, and more as participatory networks of public communication.

This new media environment could have significant implications for political communication. It will not (and should not) remove the need for broadcast coverage of representative institutions. Despite some far-fetched visions of push-button direct democracy, there is good reason to believe that representative political structures will continue to be regarded by most citizens as the most efficient, convenient and intelligent way of organising democracy. Neither will disintermediation, whereby ICTs provide citizens with a direct route to raw information, remove the need for trusted reporting, explanation and commentary. As has been suggested above, the added educational value of such programming strengthens democratic citizenship. Providing reliable direct coverage, reports and commentaries will continue to be the job of professional broadcasters.
The new media will create additional opportunities for the public to connect more closely with their representatives and to involve themselves more actively in deliberation of issues that affect them. These changes could serve to strengthen representation and provide for more inclusive public deliberation, both of which would enhance democracy.

The poll findings for this research showed that people regarded it as important to be able to receive information about what their own MP is saying and doing in Parliament. At present parliamentary coverage is generalised, seeking to provide information about all MPs. It may well be that individual viewers have less interest in the behaviour of all MPs than in their own one, just as football fans are more interested in the club they support than random coverage of all games. ICTs enable their users to search for specific information. For example, it is possible to create search engines that will allow individuals to type in the name of their constituency and find out the name of their MP, their MEP, any member of a devolved assembly they might have and their local councillors. They could then find out what each of their representatives has been doing in the last week and their schedule for the week ahead. Minutes of meetings and audio or video links to relevant debates or committee meetings could be offered. There could be opportunities to search by subject, so that someone wanting to know what their representatives have said about, for example, the euro or animal rights can find this information without having to read through vast amounts of material. Search facilities can help to point people towards Westminster, Strasbourg, devolved assemblies or local councils, and, through datamatching, can find links between them all. In technical terms, such search facilities address what information scientists call the problem of metadata. People know what they want to know but not where to find it. In an increasingly complex political world, one role of the new media could be to enable people to focus upon what they need to know rather than just what others choose to tell them.

The company, Westminster Digital, which is licensed to put live parliamentary proceedings on the internet, is currently preparing to experiment with the provision of metadata that could enable citizens to control their own access to the parliamentary archive. The proposed operation will involve three elements: the creation of a vast index of parliamentary data, based perhaps on the existing index developed by the compilers of Hansard; the digitalisation of the entire feed currently used for broadcast coverage; and a means of navigating and physically viewing such data. The creation of such a service is technically within reach. The significant resource costs of developing such a public service will only be worthwhile if there is sufficient demand for it.

As well as information-seeking, new media can provide new channels of communication between representatives and those they represent. In particular, they open an opportunity to strengthen political communities, such as constituencies or regions. BBC Online's new campaign to encourage online communities, linked to the Home-Office supported project of creating a Community Channel, is an important new initiative. Nigel Chapman, Director of BBC Online, stated a commitment 'to encourage our audiences to talk to each other, putting like-minded people in touch with shared experiences and interests. Through community forums, the BBC can act as a catalyst for all kinds of debate across the UK.' One type of 'community' that could be encouraged to communicate and thereby strengthen itself online is the parliamentary constituency.
Such a channel could enable MPs to consult with those they represent and allow citizens to share experiences and ideas with their representatives. So, after participating in an important debate or raising an issues in Parliament, MPs could appear before interested constituents to explain themselves and answer questions. Such sessions could be archived and accessible at any time. The Community Channel could host phone-ins with MPs, cyber-surgeries (already being run by Margaret Moran MP) and local debates. For Euro-constituencies the size of the online community would expand to fit that particular community. New media channels can adapt fluidly to fit different political communities.

New media can provide a multiplicity of fora for public deliberation. It is generally assumed that democracy works best when the public is engaged. Professor Ivor Crewe has argued persuasively that the key determinant of active citizenship is experience of discussion. (Crewe: 1996) At present there are very limited opportunities for members of the public to become involved in discussion about policies that affect them. Many people feel that they are not listened to, that their views do not matter and that their representatives do not speak on their behalf - and could not because they don’t know what they think.

Lynda Clark MP has argued that new technologies will enable the public to participate in debates emanating from Parliament: ‘members of the public could be given the chance to express their views through the internet while debates are live. If MPs wanted, they could take part in an internet discussion after a committee meeting had finished.’ (Fabian Society: 1998: 25) With digital storage of parliamentary data, it is not even necessary for interaction to take place at the same time as an event takes place in Parliament: the event can be stored and the discussion can take place over a longer period, at the convenience of the public and their representatives. The Hansard Society has been in discussion with Westminster Digital about the hosting of such online public discussions.

At the moment, important issues of policy are made without adequate public debate occurring. A poll commissioned by Charter 88 found that 72% of the public considered that there was insufficient public debate about the reform of the House of Lords. That has been the subject of the Hansard Society’s first online Democracy Forum (www.democracyforum.org.uk) A summary of the discussion will be presented to the Royal Commission on the Reform of the House of Lords. As importantly, the way in which the Forum is used will be researched and evaluated as part of our Parliament and Electronic Media programme. There is much to learn about best practices for online public discussion. As part of the ongoing research, we shall be examining online discussions elsewhere: the National Dialogue on Social Security in the USA; Minnesota e-democracy; the Openaustralia forum; and the Dutch Besliswijzer projects.

The extent to which all or any of these new media opportunities will strengthen parliamentary democracy must be a matter for careful experimentation and evaluation. In September 2000 The Hansard Society will be collaborating with Balliol College Oxford to run an international conference on ICTs and democracy; by then, some of the lessons from this next stage of the research might be clearer.
Ten years ago there were high expectations for the future of parliamentary broadcasting. The transition to a televised House of Commons has been successful and probably irreversible, but there is less television coverage on prime-time terrestrial channels now than there was then, with fewer viewers choosing to watch Parliament on television than did ten years ago. Public perceptions of Parliament have not become more positive over ten years, but the wish for representative institutions to be available for viewing on television has strengthened. Ten years from now we would hope to see a continuation of parliamentary coverage and reporting, both on universally available channels as well as the dedicated channel which by then might have become a rather more expansive public affairs network. We would hope to see a continuation, and ideally an expansion, of professionally-produced programmes which add educational value to parliamentary coverage by explaining procedures and issues. We would hope that recorded material from Parliament can be used as a resource in the teaching of democratic citizenship to young people. We would expect to see further adaptation to the new media environment, providing greater connectivity between citizens and their representatives and facilitating useful public deliberation. We would hope that all of these developments will strengthen our political culture and serve to make democracy more visible.
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McKie, David, (1999), Media Coverage of Parliament, The Hansard Society


Negrine, Ralph, (1998), Parliament and the Media: A Study of Britain, Germany and France, Royal Institute of International Affairs, Pinter


Mallory Wober conducted the quantitative analysis for this report and contributed in positive ways to several aspects of the research. MORI conducted the poll research and Ipsos-RSL conducted the Television Opinion Panel (TOP) survey. Oliver Bange, Roland Schatz and the staff of Media Monitor International conducted the content analysis. Melanie Lombard worked diligently and energetically as research assistant, and Joyce Allen transcribed the taped interviews. Several broadcasters helped with the research: from the BBC, Nigel Charters, Melanie Essex, Nicholas Jones, Roger Mosey, Anne Tyreman and Brian Walker; from Channel 4, David Lloyd, and also the librarians at ITN and the ITC. The following MPs agreed to be interviewed: Tony Banks, Martin Bell, Anne Begg, Mark Fisher, Caroline Flint Roger Gale, Nigel Jones, David Lepper, Austin Mitchell, Richard Spring, Claire Ward, Nicholas Winterton, Tom Worthington and Derek Wyatt. The research benefited from useful communications with Margaret Douglas, Henrik Jensen, Ralph Negrine, Peter Riddell and Jean Seaton.
APPENDIX A

Two Studies on Public Perceptions of Parliament

Introduction

The Hansard Society obtained facilities to carry out two surveys for which fieldwork took place in April 1999. One survey consisted of three (compound) questions within an Omnibus run by MORI; the other was carried by the Television Opinion Panel (TOP). The TOP is run by Ipsos-RSL, for a consortium (Broadcasters Audience Research Board) jointly owned by the BBC and Independent broadcasters. The TOP survey involved six - compound - questions.

Both surveys aimed to assess amounts of reported viewing of parliamentary broadcasting and perceptions of how Parliament functions. The TOP study ranged more broadly to investigate what people thought should be broadcast - not just from Westminster but from other legislatures as well. The MORI Omnibus carries base personal data on respondents concerning not just their age, sex and socio-economic status but also their level of political activism and educational attainment, and which party they would intend to vote for at the next general election.

As certain questions were carried in similar (though not identical) forms on both surveys, one product has been to compare the results to corroborate both. As certain questions in the TOP survey were run in a very similar TOP survey in 1990, and in some instances in earlier TOP studies, it has also been possible to examine the degree and direction of any changes in public perceptions on these matters over a decade.

It is possible to analyse the results further than simply representing the replies piecemeal to each question, to explore (not 'prove') whether the amount of viewing of parliamentary broadcasts has any connection with the perceptions that develop and which people express. If no connections are found it is extremely unlikely that there can have been any influence. If connections are found then an influence of what one has seen may be at work. It is possible to tease out whether some underlying personal characteristics may or may not be more responsible for such connections, leaving it more, or less likely that viewing broadcasts can be judged to have had some influence. The TOP panel has just sufficient respondents in each of Scotland, Wales and England to yield effective representations of experience and perceptions in each of these nations and comparison of these will be an important element of the two studies.

Two separate and complete reports each focusing on its particular data source are available, and the text here refers to important aspects of each of them.
### Table 1 - Evolution of Aspects of Requirements for Broadcasting of Assemblies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Year Measured*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV coverage of the Commons should be carried on channels available to everyone (B1,B2,ITV,C4)</td>
<td>86 88 90 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coverage of debates and discussions in the Commons should be carried, routinely, on nationally available radio stations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV should regularly, but not too often</td>
<td>SHOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>: proceedings in the House of Commons</td>
<td>64 63 68 -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>: proceedings in the Commons: the Queen’s Speech</td>
<td>- - - -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV should regularly, but not too often</td>
<td>SHOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>: Committees</td>
<td>- - - -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>: proceedings in the European Parliament</td>
<td>50 51 56 59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>: proceedings in the House of Lords</td>
<td>53 53 57 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>: proceedings in the United Nations Gen Assembly/Security Council</td>
<td>45 50 50 56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>: proceedings in the Commons: Private Members’ Bills</td>
<td>- - - -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>: proceedings in the Big UK city councils</td>
<td>47 47 50 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV coverage in the Commons should be carried on Cable or Satellite Channels available to whoever wants to subscribe to them</td>
<td>- - - - 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV should regularly, but not too often</td>
<td>SHOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to the whole UK proceedings in the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>: Scottish Parliament</td>
<td>- - - - 43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>: Welsh Assembly</td>
<td>- - - - 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV should regularly, but not to often</td>
<td>SHOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>: in Scotland only, proceedings of the Scottish Parliament</td>
<td>- - - - 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>: in Wales only, proceedings of the Welsh Assembly</td>
<td>- - - - 58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*the figures shown are SCALE SCORES in which a reply of ‘strongly agree’ is given 100 points, ‘agree’ earns 75 points, ‘not sure’ 50 points, ‘disagree’ 25 points and ‘disagree strongly’ gets no points; the average points score is then calculated.

There have been overall small but positive changes since 1990. Ceremonial in the Commons (exemplified in the Queen’s Speech) is not required to take second place to committee work or to private members’ Bills. Committees are considered as important as is Ceremonial, to be shown on television. Universal television channels are where most think the Commons broadcasts should be shown. People think the European Parliament should be broadcast, as much as they consider applies to showing proceedings in the House of Lords. National radio comes close in support to universal TV as a desired platform for broadcasting the Commons. Niche market screen channels are clearly less
favoured than are nationally available ones as platforms for broadcasting the Commons. There is ‘negative demand’ in the UK-wide results (which are dominated by the English part of the panel) for the Scottish and Welsh material to go UK-wide. The UK opinion regarding the domestic showing to Scots and Welsh of ‘their’ material is at the same level as UK opinion on TV showing the House of Lords nationwide. Private Members’ Bills and the United Nations produce less ‘appeal’ than do the proceedings in the Lords, which comes just behind the degree of approval for showing the European Parliament.

**What People Think About MPs and Journalists (TOP and MORI Results)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2 - Perceptions Concerning Local MPs and Journalists</th>
<th>Scale Score:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important for each voter to have the opportunity to see at least something of what their local MP says in Parliament, each year</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV journalists have their own agendas and try to manipulate MPs into saying things on TV that fit into what the journalists think is important</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voters can probably find out best about what their MP thinks and does, by reading the local newspaper or listening to local radio</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What MPs say, that gets shown on TV, usually keeps to the Party Line</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important for each person to make their voting decisions based on having seen what their local MP has said in Parliament</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most MPs are doing their job well</td>
<td>( )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often a journalist interviewing an MP outside Parliament will bring out the MP’s real opinion</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Agreement between MORI and TOP methods of enquiry is close. It is widely found important that people should be able to see on TV at least something of what their MP says in the Commons each year. Radio and the local press are considered good ways of finding out about MPs’ thoughts and actions, by somewhat fewer than those who favour television*. Respondents tend to think MPs obey the Party Line. Respondents claim to recognise journalists’ own agendas; and finally, there is no noticeable balance of confidence that journalists can bring out MPs’ real opinions.

* we do not know to what degree the endorsement of TV correlates positively, negatively or at all with the endorsement of press and radio, until further statistical analyses are available from the fieldwork contractor.
### Table 3 - Perceptions of MPs and of Parliament

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Scale Scores*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary procedures seem to be old fashioned and outdated</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most MPs from different parties get on well together, in private</td>
<td>62 (61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPs sometimes seem to be speaking for the broadcasters rather than to each other</td>
<td>61 (57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPs behave in a disappointing way</td>
<td>58 (60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My local MP probably gets involved in supporting matters in ways with which I don’t approve because of party pressures</td>
<td>56 -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It should be up to the programme makers to judge whether to show or to report proceedings, when there are obvious stories that have to be told</td>
<td>56 (59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Much of what is said in Parliament is difficult to understand</td>
<td>55 -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There will probably be more benefits than drawbacks in having separate assemblies in Scotland &amp; Wales</td>
<td>52 -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most MPs are doing their work enthusiastically and well</td>
<td>51 (51)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Scale Scores*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most MPs are trustworthy people</td>
<td>47 (49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most MPs seem unintelligent, only put there to vote according to party instructions</td>
<td>46 (45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPs seem to be speaking for the public</td>
<td>41 -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know what are the most important things that my local MP tries to argue for, in Parliament</td>
<td>35 -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The power of the European Parliament over administration &amp; laws in each E.country should be increased</td>
<td>30 (34)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figures in bold refer to 1999; (those in brackets were measured in 1990)*

There is a noticeable margin of rejection for several statements describing satisfactory service by MPs. The least acceptable proposition in the whole array was, and remains even more emphatically, that the European Parliament might be given any greater power over administration and laws in the UK. In general, data from 1990 indicate that differences are much more similar - across issues - than they are different - on any specific matter - across the decade.

Changes that are small, but which may be statistically significant include that there is more feeling now that MPs speak to broadcasters rather than to each other; there is less feeling now that MPs are behaving in a disappointing way; and there is now less trust in programme makers’ discretion whether to show or to report proceedings.
Reported Behaviour - Viewing of Parliament

Two aspects of viewing Commons broadcasts were explored; one involves simply the amount said to have been seen and the other concerns what proceedings were seen.

Table 4A - Claimed Amount of Viewing Of Commons Broadcasting (TOP)

How much have you seen of recent direct TV coverage of the House of Commons?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOP Respondents Aged</th>
<th>16-24</th>
<th>35-44</th>
<th>65+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice a week or more</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>once a week</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>once in two or three weeks</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very seldom or never</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4B - Self Estimates of Viewing Proceedings in the Commons (MORI)

Q1a “during the last month, did you see any broadcast on TV that showed the proceedings inside the House of Commons?”

Q1b “and did it last longer or shorter than two minutes?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ALL</th>
<th>15-19</th>
<th>20-24</th>
<th>65+</th>
<th>Engl</th>
<th>Scot</th>
<th>Wales</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>1065</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>906</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saw Proceedings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 2 mins</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 2 mins</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saw any:</td>
<td></td>
<td>35</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(thus: saw none)</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The overall patterns obtained from MORI and from the TOP are quite similar. It is conspicuous that amongst first-time-eligible voters the norm is not to have seen anything of Parliament broadcast; this even remains true among middle-aged respondents, but amongst the retired there is much more reported viewing of the Commons. There is a suggestion that Scottish viewers will have been slightly less likely to have seen Westminster than were English or Welsh viewers.

Since much of what has been seen from the Commons will have been included in news broadcasts, people may well presume that other topics in the news will have been discussed in Parliament and broadcast and seen from there. To try to cope with the problem of ‘false’ reports of what has been seen, two topics were devised which, to the best of our knowledge, had not been discussed at least during this parliamentary term.
The object is to produce a scale combining the instances of topics claimed seen that really were discussed and broadcast, offset by a factor calculated from the amount of claimed viewing of topics which were not aired. The use of this scale is explained in the separate fuller reports.

Table 4C - Impressions of Which Topics Were Seen Broadcast, From The Commons

(TOP question): What is your impression, from watching news, listening to the radio or reading the press about the time the House of Commons has spent discussing: —
(MORI question) Which of these issues, if any, have you seen live extracts on during the last month

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>TOP Net %*</th>
<th>MORI % saying seen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bombing Serbia</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Lawrence</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abolishing Peers in the Lords</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modernisation of NHS</td>
<td>-7</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(the banana dispute with the USA)</em></td>
<td>-13</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>-65</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.M.Bill: Fur Farming</td>
<td>-76</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cttee: C’mmw’th Games</td>
<td>-76</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(cycle pathways across UK)</em></td>
<td>-80</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*this is the difference between those who reply ‘a great deal’ and ‘quite a lot’ of time, minus those who reply ‘not much’ and ‘hardly any or no’ time; *items in italics were not in fact discussed in or broadcast as from the Commons.*

MORI and TOP measures give similar hierarchies of claimed amounts of discussion noticed in the Commons.

Connections Between Viewing Experience and Perceptions of the Commons

The section that follows has been derived from the MORI survey. (A more detailed similar analysis is awaited from the contractors for the TOP study).

A technique called Multiple Regression Analysis (MRA) can take a ‘dependent measure’ (that begs the question - it may not turn out to be dependent, but we hope it may) and around a dozen ‘predictor measures’ and calculates to what extent each one of these ‘predictors’ does indeed have such a resilient connection with the dependent measure that this remains true notwithstanding a ‘cat’s cradle’ of interconnections amongst predictors, and with the dependent measure.
An MRA has first been calculated against one perception item - that MPs do their work well, using all the measures we have, separately, of other attributes of respondents. The activism scale consists of ten statements to each of which the respondent says either yes or no (have you ever: a) presented views to a local councillor or MP .... e) made a speech before an organised group ... j) voted in the last general election) and a point given for each ‘yes’. The recognition scale gives a point for each of the seven topics (which really were discussed in the Commons) and subtracts 7/2 x points for the two topics which were NOT discussed in the Commons. This attempts to ‘correct for’, or at least to allow for, false positive reports of seeing topics discussed, when they have not been. Press reading gives 3 points for reading broadsheets either on weekdays or Sundays, 2 for reading ‘midloids’ (Express, Mail) and 1 for reading tabloids, again in each of the weekend and on weekdays. The first MRA (not reported here) showed that the perception measures 3a,3b, and 3d were best predictors of 3c; so separate MRAs have been calculated omitting perception measures as predictors of each other.

The meanings of the figures in Table 5 will be explained in the text below it.

**Table 5 - Multiple Regression Equations Identifying Independent Indicators of Four Perceptions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception Statements*</th>
<th>Q3a</th>
<th>Q3b</th>
<th>Q3c</th>
<th>Q3d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R Squared</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of F</td>
<td></td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measure in Equation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q1 Pmt Seen</td>
<td></td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2 recognition</td>
<td></td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activism</td>
<td></td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Intention</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cons</td>
<td></td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*the meanings of these statements (in their TOP rather than MORI forms) are shown in Table 2 - and fully in the separate MORI report, as well as in the text below.

An ‘adjusted R Squared’ figure can be seen as the ‘per cent of the variation’ in the results on the dependent measure which have been successfully ‘explained’ by correlations together with the ‘measures in the equation’. F is a statistic which indicated whether the
adjusted r squared figure is or is not accidentally different from zero. Dashes show where the attribute in the first column has no connection with the perception being examined. The figures show how many chances there are, in 100 (if one could afford to repeat this survey 100 times!) that such an outcome as the correlation between the two measures (shown in detail in the separate report) would have arisen, simply by chance. In effect, the smaller (like .00) figures tell us that two measures are well connected, not just by chance; and this is the case when all the other interconnections between measures (which potentially could give rise to spurious correlations between any two particular measures) have been mathematically set aside.

Thinking Well Of MPs: Perception 3c

In the present instance, the third set of columns above shows that: sex, class, amount of claimed viewing of Commons, the number of topics said to have been observed there, one’s amount of reading of broadsheet newspapers (or tabloids), one’s level of educational attainment, political activism or of declared inclination to vote Conservative:

none of these measures were independently connected with thinking well of MPs.

Three measures were independently connected with thinking well of MPs. Saying one intended to vote Labour had an independent connection with perception of MPs’ work - those who declared a Labour preference were less likely to say MPs worked well. Older people were more likely to agree that MPs worked well. At a lower level of significance, those who said had seen the Commons more often, tended to give a better score for agreeing that MPs did their jobs well.

Perception 3a: Journalists Can Bring Out MPs True Views ...

The figures at the top of the column show that all the ‘predictor’ measures taken together jointly provide no better than zero prediction of a person’s reply on Q3a.

Perception 3b: It is Important to have TV Show Something of what your Local MP Says In Parliament

All the ‘predictors’ together yield only a very little knowledge of what a person may say on Q3b, but this foreknowledge is just better than zero. The items which do ‘predict’ the perception include that: those who said they had seen the Commons more often tended to give a better score for agreeing that television should show what local MPs say; those who were more correct in identifying what had been discussed tended to give a better score for agreeing that television should show what local MPs say; activism, intention to vote Labour - and also intention to vote Conservative (though to a less significant extent) at the next general election were all independently connected with wanting television to provide coverage of local MPs’ contributions in Parliament.
Perception 3d: MPs generally stick to their Party Line in Parliament

This perception was more strongly predicted, jointly, than were the other three; six individual predictor measures were independently connected with this perception. Older people, women and those of lower socio-economic status were - each characteristic operating independently - more likely to agree that MPs stick to their party line; more activist people and those with more educational attainment were more likely to agree that MPs stick to their party line. It is important to note that the measures of amount of reported viewing of the Commons, and the accuracy of reporting what viewers said was discussed therein - these measures were not significant predictors of thinking that MPs stick to their Party Line.

Discussion

There is encouragement for a conclusion that the public wants television to show the Commons - and that those who have seen more have altered perceptions. If it was true that the locus of candid political discourse had shifted from the Chamber of the House to College Green one might have expected people who are more politically activist to have said so, and a correlation to have appeared between these two measures. This was not observed. Nor was there an independent correlation between level of education attained, and perception that journalists' interviews can bring out MPs' true opinions.

The seductive analysis that the locus of political discourse may have shifted significantly to College Green or to the television studio would expect there to be a correlation between amounts of interviews seen on College Green (which was not measured), and the perception that journalists elicit 'true opinions' in their out-of-chamber interviews. It is not unlikely that the amount claimed to have been seen in Parliament (which was measured) would be correlated with the number of interviews seen on College Green, and if this is so there would have been significant connections found between measures of how much one says one has seen in Parliament (and what one says was discussed there), and this perception, that journalists elicit 'true opinions'. No such correlation was, however, found. If this point is felt to deserve further investigation, it may be accepted nevertheless that the tentative indication at this stage is that viewers respond better to MPs' discourse within, rather than to that outside the Chamber (see the last item in Table 2).

The second perception measure in Table 5 has what we may call a 'validated viewing' pointer to an influence of viewing: not only does how much one says one has seen, but also 'getting it right' in terms of knowing what was actually said are both independently connected with wanting to have television show local MPs' contributions. This finding is all the more important given that (prior) activism level - (but not education) is not a better predictor of results on this perception item.

It is noteworthy that the measure of press reading was not significantly connected with any of the four perceptions measured in the MORI survey.
The perception that MPs do their jobs well is not predicted by prior attributes of activism and educational attainment, but is - even though weakly - predicted independently by having seen more of Commons on television - though this is not ‘validated’ by a simultaneous connection between correct topic recognition and thinking MPs do their jobs well.

The ‘negative’ perception, that MPs ‘stick to the party line’ is predicted by activism and education levels (which we may interpret as sources of expectation unaffected by broadcasting), but is not predicted by actual frequency of viewing or of correct recognition of what was discussed.

J.M.Wober
June 1999
APPENDIX B

The British Parliament in BBC and ITV evening news, January-March 1999

Introduction to methodology

Media Tenor has undertaken a first in-depth study of the way in which the British parliament is presented to the public by television evening news. Each day the Six and Nine o'clock news on BBC 1 and ITN's Early Evening News and News at Ten were analysed in the period from 1 January to March 30th. A basic set of data was created for each news item (feature), regardless of its nature or focus. Additionally, special and more detailed sets of data were created if one of the three major parties (Labour, Conservative, Liberal-Democrats) or one of their leaders (Blair, Ashdown, Hague) featured in a specific news item.

The information provided by the basic data set includes the area of reference, the main actor, the prevailing topic and the (implicit and explicit) valuation on the actor in relation with this topic. Furthermore, it gives us the names of all persons on which the news bite focussed (for more than 5 seconds). If this "person in focus" (pif) was a member of either House of parliament additional information shows in which location the member of parliament was depicted/interviewed by the broadcasters. The type of news presentation (interview, feature etc.) was also coded. Within these sets of data each of the described filters can be related to any other one. Thus, for example, not only the frequency of "actors" can be analysed, but also their overall ratings/valuations and their ratings on specific topics. This, of course, makes for the unique advantage of a qualitative over a mere quantitative method of analysis.

Results

Parliament is rarely in the focus of TV news reports - at least not from January to March 1999. This might have changed in the meantime as a result of the recent debate on parliamentary reform. Parliament's meagre representation is particularly striking when compared with the attention paid by the same programmes to Government, heads of Government or other Government-related institutions. Thus it comes hardly as a surprise that the members of parliament too constitute a rather small proportion of all personalities shown in TV news. And even this small share is dominated by the Prime Minister (almost a quarter of all news items featuring MPs concentrate on Tony Blair) and other members of his cabinet. Parliament received predominantly negative ratings. It thus proves a general rule, according to which actors with little media presence are prone to negative ratings from the media. It is only topped by the EU Commission, other governmental institutions and the army. Ratings like those held by celebrities and the royal family appear desirable but unobtainable.

TV news concentrates on the UK (rather than on international events) and inside the UK on London and its surroundings. Exceptions to this general observation is for obvious reasons Northern Ireland, but also Scotland and Wales - probably due to some discussion at the beginning of the year about local parliaments. As a result, other regions from the UK
receive little coverage as do MPs, whose constituency lays within these regions. If the TV news coverage of MPs is meagre in comparison to other personalities of public life, that of female MPs is even less. If it was not for Clare Short's role in the government - women in parliament would hardly become visible to the TV audience. The location, in which MPs are featured on TV, constitutes another interesting aspect of TV news coverage. The leaders of the three major parties show a significant - though not a great - share of news time in Parliament. Ministers, however, are almost never shown inside the House but predominantly either in their offices or elsewhere "in action".

There was little evidence for the argument that broadcasters tend to rate MPs more negatively when the interview takes place outside Parliament. The statistics on Blair, Ashdown and Hague vary in this respect and allow for no generalisation. Further research over several months might help to sharpen the picture. The topics identified for each of the three major parties resemble their current role. While Labour is associated in TV news with "governmental" topics like taxes, the euro, the budget and Northern Ireland, the Conservatives are mainly presented with topics related to their role in Opposition. Health and regional politics are traditionally good topics to score against the Government. Meanwhile the Liberal Democrats appear rather inward looking and - if we believe the TV news - occupied with affairs in their own party and its future leadership (at the beginning of 1999 Ashdown declared his intention to step down). In terms of topics covered, early and late evening news only show little differences. Probably due to the available time the late news seem to offer more information about social events but also about more complicated topics that demand a greater amount of background information (as most international events and treaties do.)

Conclusions

Further analysis is advisable - to prove the results of the pilot study on a longer time scale and in order to provide further in-depth results. One might envisage a comparison between TV news and print media on the representation received by MPs and on the topics they are associated with. A comparison of the results with those in other nations, notably France and Germany, might help in the evaluation of the analysis. And last but not least, a special study on the presentation and valuation of the current moves on parliamentary reform appears necessary to fully understand its perception by media and public alike.
The British parliament in BBC and ITV evening news, January-March 1999

main actors by frequency

- celebrities
- NATO
- criminals
- * government/cabinet
- ** head of state
- other government institutions
- army
- *** head of government
- society in general
- other political groups
- police
- EU-Commission
- royals
- refugees
- parliament

* British government: 170 mentions
** predominantly foreign heads of state
*** Tony Blair: 61 mentions
The British parliament in BBC and ITV evening news, January-March 1999

Members of Parliament: presence on TV news
Share of MPs in overall number of persons in focus

Early evening news:
Six o’clock news (BBC 1)
Early evening news (ITN)

Late evening news:
Nine o’clock news (BBC 1)
News at Ten (ITV)

The British parliament in BBC and ITV evening news, January-March 1999

Members of Parliament: TV presence
Share of individual MPs in percentage of overall coverage on Members of Parliament

100% = share of all MPs in persons in focus
The British parliament in BBC and ITV evening news, January-March 1999

rating of main actors

- celebrities
- NATO
- criminals
- governmt/cabinet
- head of state
- other govern instn.
- army
- head of govern
- society in general
- other politcl group
- EU-Commission
- royals
- parliament

- the negative rating is mainly due to reports on Milosevic

The British parliament in BBC and ITV evening news, January-March 1999

What countries the TV news referred to

areas of reference by nation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>UK in general</th>
<th>Serbia</th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>Northern Ireland</th>
<th>Greater London</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Wales</th>
<th>Jordan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The British parliament in BBC and ITV evening news, January-March 1999

Locations shown in TV appearance by person in focus

Tony Blair
- in parliament: 45.8%
- in government office: 24.6%
- in government action: 19.3%
- other non-political: 10.4%

Paddy Ashdown
- in parliament: 45.6%
- in government action: 15.9%
- other non-political: 38.5%

William Hague
- in parliament: 56.7%
- in government office: 22.9%
- in government action: 10.7%

Robin Cook
- in parliament: 14.9%
- in government office: 37.9%
- other non-political: 25.4%
- Millbank TV studio: 15.4%
- other: 6.5%
The British parliament in BBC and ITV evening news, January-March 1999

TV appearances of MPs by gender

- Female MPs: 6.6%
- Male MPs: 93.4%

Note the difference in scale.

Ranking of MPs by number of TV appearances
Top Six male and female MPs

- Blair, Rt Hon Tony
- Cook, Rt Hon Robin
- Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
- Robertson, Rt Hon George
- Straw, Rt Hon Jack
- Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy

100% share of all MPs in person in focus
The British parliament in BBC and ITV evening news, January-March 1999

Party share by media

![Bar chart showing party shares at different timeslots]

The British parliament in BBC and ITV evening news, January-March 1999

Topics by party

Labour

- monetary union, EURO
- budgetary policy
- tax policies i.e.
- health policies
- Northern Ireland
- state of the party
- GM Food
- coalitions/alliances
- internal unity
- social policies
- parliamentary work

Selected topics (first ten plus parliamentary work)