TELEVISING THE HOUSE OF LORDS

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THE HANSARD SOCIETY FOR PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNMENT
The Hansard Society exists to promote research, discussion and greater public understanding of all issues affecting Parliamentary Government. In keeping with this policy the Society's research unit was commissioned to monitor and evaluate the experiment in the public televising of the proceedings of the House of Lords. When the House decided to continue the experiment beyond the original six-month period the research project was also extended. This Report therefore covers the period January 23rd, 1985 to March 31st, 1986.

The views expressed in this Report are the sole responsibility of the research team, Robert Stradling and Eva Bennett. As with all the research reports which the Hansard Society publishes, the governing Council neither accepts nor rejects the findings, conclusions and recommendations but merely commends the Report as a worthwhile contribution to the debate on the televising of Parliament.

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SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

1. Compared with the sound broadcasting of Parliamentary proceedings, television coverage has not simply been incorporated into existing news and current affairs programming. The late-night edited summaries by both the BBC and ITN, and the latter's experiment in producing a weekly programme, are significant innovations with every chance of becoming an established part of television programming if the House of Lords agrees to the permanent televising of its proceedings.

2. The use of Parliamentary coverage in newscasts has been the least successful part of the experiment.

3. Over the period of the experiment there are signs that a style and format of presentation is developing which is tailored to Parliamentary broadcasting and is not totally dominated by conventional news values. The snippets of speech selected from the contributions of individual Peers now tend to be longer than at the beginning of the experiment; studio commentaries are less intrusive and more interpretative; and the overall coverage of debates has increased.

4. Coverage of policy debates was generally very good and the coverage of detailed scrutiny of legislation in Committee and Report Stages was more extensive than expected.

5. Edited film of debates on legislation, particularly on Amendments and Clauses, may require a different style of presentation (shorter clips and more commentary) than coverage of policy debates or Second Readings.

6. The early coverage of the Select Committee on Overseas Trade, while not distorting the evidence given by witnesses, often failed to convey adequately the way in which Select Committees of the House of Lords operate. Coverage improved greatly over the period of the experiment.

7. In our Interim Report issued in November 1985, which only covered the first six months of the experiment, we suggested that the Alliance and the Crossbenchers might have some cause for complaint about an imbalance in coverage. However, over the whole 15 months of the experiment the amount of time given to Alliance speakers in edited summaries has been roughly representative of their numbers in the House and their actual contribution to the debates covered. Coverage of crossbenchers continued to be disproportionately low throughout the experiment.

8. Editors have succeeded in maintaining a rough balance between those who argue for a Motion or Amendment and those who argue against. Given the nature and membership of the House of Lords, this is a form of balance which is easier to maintain for any given debate than a simple balance between the parties.

9. Coverage of economic issues and policies is much more likely than coverage of social and welfare issues.

10. The behaviour of Peers does not seem to have been unduly influenced by the presence of cameras except that the number of speeches of less than 10 minutes duration has significantly fallen in the last fifteen
months.

11. The contribution which Parliamentary broadcasting can make to helping viewers understand the issues of the day, the social and political context in which these issues have emerged, the role of the Lords within the Constitution, the workings of the House itself and even the political tactics of the party groupings, has significantly increased particularly with the development of the edited summary and the weekly programme. ITN's contribution was picked out for particular commendation here. There is scope for further development of this kind.

12. There is clear evidence in the output from both the BBC and ITN of an upward learning curve which is apparent in the development of programmes, editing, presentation and camera work.

The Report concludes by suggesting that "It would be unfortunate if for the second time in twenty years the learning which has clearly taken place in an experimental period of Parliamentary broadcasting should be wasted."

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INTRODUCTION

On 8th December 1983 the House of Lords voted 74 votes to 24 in favour of a Motion introduced by Lord Soames:

'That this House endorses its decision of 15th June, 1966 in favour of public televising of some of its proceedings for an experimental period and instructs the Sound Broadcasting Committee to consider and report how this decision should be implemented.'

The Select Committee on Sound Broadcasting duly issued its report (Televising the House of Lords, 29th July, 1964) with detailed recommendations on the implementation on the experiment. It was suggested that:

- A six-month experiment would be adequate to evaluate the feasibility and likely problems of permanent coverage and give the broadcasters adequate time to develop a knowledge of the workings of the House and adjust to any new demands on their technical expertise;

- a convenient time for the experiment would be January 1985 until the summer recess in July;

- the Broadcasting Authorities should have access to Select Committee proceedings during the experiment;

- the experiment should operate under the same controls as sound broadcasting, as laid down in the Resolution of the House, July 27th, 1977;

- Ministerial Statements made in the Commons and repeated in the Lords, and the subsequent exchanges, should not be televised, except with the express consent of the Minister;

- matters of selection and editorial control should be left to the Broadcasting Authorities although ultimate control should lie with the House;

- cameras would generally but not exclusively concentrate on the Peer speaking;

- the overall costs would fall on the Broadcasting Authorities except for some electrical installations done by the Property Services Agency and not exceeding £10,000;

- unlike sound broadcasting, where the BBC has an obligation under its Licence and Agreement of 1981 to present a daily account of the proceedings of both Houses, television coverage should be on what the report referred to as 'a drive-in basis', with the broadcasters coming and going as they please.
A proposal to defer the implementation of the experiment until such time as the House of Commons decided to hold its own experiment was defeated by 113 votes to 66, and so on Wednesday, January 23rd, 1985, an estimated four million viewers saw at least some part of the first live television coverage of the Upper House as Peers debated Lord Beswick's Motion on the Government's economic and social policies.

The House itself made some provision for monitoring the experiment. In its Report of 25th July, 1984 the Select Committee on Sound Broadcasting had observed that:

"The House will doubtless wish the Committee to make a full report on the outcome of the experiment. A wide cross-section of opinion would have to be sought and evidence would be taken not only from Members of the House and representatives of the Broadcasting Authorities but also from leading Parliamentary correspondents and other journalists."

After the debate on this report, on November 27th, 1984 it was decided to set up a new Select Committee on Televising the Proceedings of the House to supervise arrangements for, and report on the outcome of the experiment.

Other interested parties have also been systematically monitoring the experiment. The BBC and the IBA jointly commissioned the Harris Research Centre to conduct a survey of Members of the House of Lords to ascertain their reactions to the televising of the proceedings. The IBA Research Department also conducted a 'before and after' survey of the public to see if interest in and attitudes towards Parliament, and a knowledge of the workings of the House of Lords, changed over the period of the experiment.

At the Hansard Society we felt that there was a strong case for an independent evaluation and since we have no particular axe to grind regarding the televising of Parliament but are merely concerned with promoting the academic study of Parliamentary Government, we undertook to conduct our own monitoring exercise during the course of the television experiment.

The research team took as their starting point the arguments which have been put forward by the supporters and opponents of the introduction of television cameras into the House. In the debates in the House of Lords on December 8th, 1983 and November 27th, 1984 the differences between the supporters and opponents were very clear. Those Peers who argued for the introduction of television cameras emphasized that television is now the public's principal source of political information; that public ignorance of the work and functions of Parliament are widespread; that in a Parliamentary Democracy the public should have a right to see and hear what the legislators are doing, how they conduct themselves and what arguments they put forward on the major issues and policies of the day; and that television coverage would stimulate public interest in the House of Lords and contribute to establishing an effective bridge between Parliament and the people.

The arguments against the experiment revealed a wide range of concerns. Some Peers felt that a decision with far-reaching implication for Parliament as a whole should be first taken by the elected assembly; others questioned the value of an experiment on the grounds either that it was unnecessary because it had already been demonstrated, through the closed circuit experiment in 1968, that the televising of proceedings was technically possible, or that it would not be a true test of how the House of Lords would be covered on a permanent basis if footage from the Commons was not also available to programme editors. Some other Peers feared that once the cameras were let in, it would not be possible to get them out again. However, the most frequently expressed areas of concern appeared to be: the obtrusiveness of equipment and lighting; the tendency of the television medium to distort and trivialize the message, that is, to entertain rather than to inform; the criteria likely to be used for selecting material for edited summaries, and, in particular, the possibility that one of the main functions of the House - the detailed examination of legislation - would be ignored as being too boring for the viewing public; the risks of bias and unbalanced coverage; the adverse effects which the experiment might have on the normal conduct, atmosphere and tone of debates in the Chamber.

After the first six months' experimental period had been completed the House of Lords debated whether or not to continue the experiment until the Select Committee had reported on its deliberations and a decision could be taken on whether or not to allow the cameras in on a permanent basis. Their Lordships voted to extend the experiment by 135 votes to 52. Although there was some acknowledgement that worst fears had not been realised by the experiment, the arguments rehearsed by those wishing not to extend the experiment were similar to those expressed some eight months before. There were still doubts about the criteria used for editing; some Peers felt that the new values of programme editors were producing unbalanced programming and a distorted impression of the deliberations of the House; and some felt that the introduction of cameras had significantly affected the proceedings of the House.

Some of the issues raised in those debates were taken up by the Select Committee, although their Report Televising the Proceedings of the House, 12th March 1986, does not say a great deal about the format, content, editing criteria or the balance of programmes produced by the Broadcasting Authorities. The BBC and the IBA, as we have already noted, conducted their own research but this too was addressed to fairly narrow concerns such as audience reactions and the reactions of the Peers themselves to the experiment. The Hansard Society's research unit therefore decided to concentrate its monitoring effort on those areas and issues raised by the Peers themselves, which did not seem to be covered elsewhere.

In particular, the aims of our monitoring and research were fivefold:

1. To assess whether the Broadcasting Authorities fully entered into the spirit of the experiment;
2. To assess whether the coverage fairly represented the work of the House of Lords;
3. To establish how balanced the presentation was;
4. To monitor the effects of the experiment on the everyday business of the House;
5. To evaluate the educational value of the experiment and consider whether there was scope for improvement.
The monitoring strategy adopted was as follows:

1. Video recordings of all edited summaries and items in newscasts relating to the House of Lords were analysed in terms of:
   - duration
   - selection
   - content
   - ratio of commentary to actual footage
   - ratio of actual footage to studio or outside interviews
   - priorities
   - political impartiality
   - balance.

2. Video recordings of live broadcasts were analysed in terms of:
   - content and style of presentation and commentary
   - use and frequency of close-ups, panning, reaction shots, etc.

3. A sample of nightly and weekly summary programmes were analysed in terms of the information they provided in graphics and commentary about:
   - the issue, policy or Bill under consideration
   - the workings of the House of Lords
   - the tactics and strategies being used by party Managers
   - the workings of Parliament as a whole.

4. A comparison was made, using Hansard Parliamentary Debates for 1984 and 1985, to ascertain whether the television experiment had had any effect on the length of debates or the style and length of individual speeches.

5. A comparison was also made between the proceedings in the House during the experimental period when the cameras were in and when they were not.

6. Finally, the research team also had informal discussions with editors and broadcasting staff about the experiment.

LIVE AND EDITED COVERAGE

The Report of the Lords' Sound Broadcasting Committee (Televising the House of Lords, July 25, 1984) noted that the Broadcasting Authorities would like to try a variety of programmes: live coverage of debates, short recorded news extracts and educational programmes. It was further noted that one month of the six months' period could be completely covered to ensure that the experiment might be as thoroughgoing as possible.

The experiment got off to a fairly slow start. The opening day received massive coverage, of course, with both Broadcasting Authorities offering live transmission for just under five hours and then coverage in all new programmes during the evening. However, during the next two months, BBC and ITN between them offered no more than five hours viewing time, three hours of which dealt with the live broadcast on Channel 4 of a general debate on the Official Secrets Act, on March 20th, 1985. The extent of the coverage did pick up considerably when the Local Government Bill came before the House in April. In May the IBA fulfilled its commitment to offer one month's in-depth coverage, which coincided with the Committee Stage of the Local Government Bill and in November the BBC offered a similar kind of extensive coverage which coincided with the debates on the Queen's Speech.

The extent and range of television coverage, and the different programme formats adopted, for the 15 months covered by our research. Two distinct patterns are apparent here. ITN gave much more coverage to the proceedings of the House of Lords in their newscasts and, with Channel 4, opted for a wholly new programme format: a fifteen-minute summary in the late evening, usually around midnight. BBC initially preferred to utilise its existing nightly current affairs programme, Newsnight, and did not develop a new edited programme until November 1985.

| TABLE 1 |
| Types of Programme Format and frequency of usage |
| BBC usage | ITN usage |
| Live Broadcasts | 9 | 3 |
| Nightly Summaries | 10 | 22 |
| Weekly Summaries | - | 3 |
| Specials | 2 | 1 |
| Current Affairs | 28 | - |
| Newscasts | 19 | 81 |
| Other | 3 | - |

Live Coverage: As far as live coverage is concerned Table 1 supports the view that the BBC have been rather more adventurous than ITN. Their decision to show two consecutive days of the Committee Stage of the Local Government Bill (20th and 21st May, 1985) and one session of the Report Stage of the same Bill (10th June, 1985) deserves to be commended. It
gave viewers the opportunity to see the Upper Chamber performing one of its more important functions: the detailed examination and revision of legislation. In addition to the first live transmission on the day, the Government's economic and social policies (January 23, 1985), Channel 4 provided live coverage of the debate on the Official Secrets Act and the Second Reading of the Local Government Bill (April 3th). BBC also oversaw the debate on the House - probations of the third programme from the Second Reading of the Transport Bill (11th June). Apart from the first transmission they also offered live coverage of three other general debates on policy: the Budget and Unemployment (3rd April, 1985), East-West Relations (23rd April) and the Economy, oil prices and exchange rates (10th February 1986). In reflecting on the past fifteen months' coverage we conclude that the particularities of the opponents of the experiment - those that have been present in every debate - have been very much present. They had argued that live coverage of the proceedings was not appropriate. However, the risks that concerned them would be minimal. In so far as live coverage represented more than 5% of the parliamentary time in the Lords during the period under analysis it may seem to be an appropriate description. But it should be noted that the Broadcasting Authorities had not held out the promise of much more than this. The BBC, for example, in its initial memorandum to the Select Committee on Sound Broadcasting stated quite explicitly:

"...it is the BBC view that only very occasionally would there be a House of Lords debate of such general public interest as to merit live broadcasting time." 6

The second assumption by the critics, namely that BBC and ITN would steer clear of coverage of legislation in live broadcasts and opt instead for the Wednesday afternoon general policy debate, is also clearly evidenced. Half of the debates which were broadcast live dealt with legislation.

Edited Summaries: Initially BBC seemed much more ready than ITN to introduce new programme formats, and Channel 4 showed a welcome willingness to schedule their programme to accommodate the new programmes. They introduced their first edition of Their Lordships' House, a fifteen-minute summary, on April 23rd, and for the next month offered a further fifteen edited summaries. As we noted earlier, this scheduling coincided with the Committee Stage of the Local Government Bill, but other aspects of the debate were also covered, including general debates and the Select Committee on Overseas Trade. In November 1985 they offered five fifteen-minute summaries covering the debates on the Queen's Speech and at the time of writing (April 1985) they have embarked on possibly their most extensive edited coverage so far. No doubt the crucial debate on whether to continue televising the Lords, due to take place on May 12th, 1986, was very much in the forefront of their planning. During June 1985 ITN produced three thirty-minute programmes transmitted on Channel 4 on Sunday evenings at 1 pm, also entitled Their Lordships' House. The editors used this opportunity not only to promote a chronicle of the week's developments but also to explain to viewers some of the background to the debates they were watching, and the procedures of the House. This aspect of each programme - which might loosely term the educational content - occupied approximately one-third of each weekly programme. We shall return to these programmes for a more detailed assessment in a subsequent chapter but it is worth noting that although they were not the only fifteen-minute summary which has been singled out by observers and their Lordships for particular praise, the

thirty-minute summary does offer greater scope for informing the viewers about the workings of Parliament and the background to legislation.

'Specials': This is a form of programming which has untapped potential. On March 20th 1985 the BBC put out a House of Lords Special on the Official Secrets Act debate which attracted an audience of 0.2 million at 11.45 pm. In that same programme we depicted the idea of 'The Lords Today' but the idea of taking one aspect of the day's work, or one debate, and focusing on it exclusively, with additional background information, is, we believe, worth further consideration. ITN and the BBC could develop the idea of 'Inside Special' one company or channel on a single debate or issue and transmit it during a thirty-minute document of the work of the Select Committee on Overseas Trade. The BBC has also included actual footage from the day's proceedings in a current affairs documentary and as background to a new story idea. In terms of channel strategy, on 3rd April 1985, they broadcast a current affairs Special entitled 'Inside Ulster' and used extracts from that day's Question Time in the Lords which dealt with 'Supergreens'. The clip used lasted no longer than 2 minutes 15 seconds, but this is a possibility which could be developed further on other topics of public concern. On 10th June 1985, one of the main items in BBC's Newsnight was the question of who would assume responsibility for the services which the GLC had previously performed in London. Footage of the Report Stage of the Local Government Bill in the Lords was integrated into a documentary-style item in a highly effective way.

Newscasts: It is very clear from our detailed observations over the course of the experiment that this is the least satisfactory format for coverage of the proceedings of the House. We will return to this point in more detail later. It is sufficient at this stage to say that on various occasions we did note the use of edited snippets to fill the channels was unsatisfactory. The snippets were too short to give the viewer the sense of even the speaker's argument, let alone the debate; the coverage often lacked balance; the main criterion for selection often seemed to be its suitability for linking to some other news story. The debate on the Official Secrets Act was wide ranging but the newscasts tended to select only those items of speech relating to the Clive Ponting trial; the debate on trade union ballots also covered a wide range of related issues, including the first edition programme and codes of conduct, but news editors focussed on items relating to the election of officers in the Transport and General Workers' Union. There are various other examples which we could have drawn on here.

Regional Coverage: In spite of the fact that the first six months of the experiment was virtually dominated by coverage of the Local Government Bill, which clearly had implications for many of the television regions, this does not seem to have been a great stage of take-up. For the BBC, London Plus was the main user of local interest. For ITN It has been Granada, Harlech TV and Scottish TV. The problem does not seem to be a lack of willingness or effort on the part of Parliament-

ary Broadcasting teams. During the one month's intensive coverage by ITN, for example, they fed 36 items to companies for inclusion in regional news programmes. The main problem for both ITN and BBC appears to be logistical. Most regional news programmes are scheduled for the early evening and their deadlines are such that items of local interest would have to appear in the first two-and-a-half hours of the day's proceedings if they were to be included in regional news programmes that same day. However, that does not conclude that if reliable items appear from the previous day's coverage and this certainly has only happened on a very small scale, and usually in lunchtime newscasts.
STYLE OF PRESENTATION

Professor J. Blumer, who directed the research team which monitored the introduction of sound broadcasting in Parliament, described the attitude of some broadcasters towards Parliament as virtually sacerdotal. Their emphasis was on the traditions, the dignity, the atmosphere and the mystique of Westminster. Some of Their Lordships, especially some of the most ardent opponents of the television experiment, seemed to share that kind of sacerdotal image of the Upper Chamber. In the debate on 27th November 1994, one Peer expressed these feelings as follows:

'Members of Parliament pass legislation, and none of the legislation for which we are responsible is more pleasant. It is usually putting up people's taxes, or taking away some extra little freedom, or nannying people in some way. So it is vital that the people who have to tolerate the pain which flows from that should have it in their minds that the people with the power to bring in their edicts are perhaps a bit special and are not as ordinary as we would seem if it happens to be at the awkward times that the cameras are brought in.'

Initially newscasters and Parliamentary correspondents supposed to be going out of their way to ensure that the mystique and 'specialness' of Parliament were preserved even when under the scrutiny of the penetrating eyes of the TV cameras. At no time was this more apparent than in the first day's transmission from the Lords. One newscaster encapsulated the prevailing style of the day:

'An historic image was offered to the nation today. Almost a thousand years after Anglo-Saxon leaders first gathered at a spot on the River Thames, the discussions of their modern counterparts were first seen across the land.'

Mercifully, this kind of purple prose seems to have faded to be reserved now solely for televising the State Opening of Parliament. It has been replaced in newscasts on all channels by a tendency to emphasise either the topical or controversial nature of the events highlighted which are apt to be seen. The nightly summaries when they were first introduced tended to opt for a more didactic style, e.g.:

'The House of Lords had a long week looking at a variety of Bills. Its business builds up as the summer goes on. For once on Wednesday it didn't have a big policy debate so it was able to make up time...'

or 'The Local Government Bill has now reached its Report Stage...'

More recently we have detected a raucier style of presentation which seems to reflect the style more typical of news programmes. The emphasis is more on the adversarial nature of Parliamentary debate, e.g. 'The Government has learned that the House of Lords cannot be taken for granted...'; 'Peers today joined in the widespread criticism of the Government...'; 'The Government is not short of controversial legislation this session...'; 'The Government Whips in the Lords have learned the hard way. No Bill is safe from ambush or defeat...'. It is not our purpose in drawing attention to these changing styles to give the impression that an emphasis on controversy, confrontation or party politics is necessarily objectionable. Far from it, if it reflects what actually happens in the House itself. But there is a wider consideration here. It is extremely rare for any programme on the House of Lords to discuss what happens to the amendments after they leave Their Lordships' House, or discuss whether Government Ministers take any notice of what is said in general policy debates in the Upper Chamber.

In evaluating what might be called the 'House style' for the edited summaries we were particularly interested in finding out if the programme editors were developing a style of presentation specifically tailored to Parliamentary broadcasting: a style which might convey the tone and continuity of debates and give the viewer a sense of what is happening in the House. There are a variety of ways in which this could be done. For example, one possibility is to use the Parliament correspondents, as in the case of the BBC's 'The Lords Today', or the political editor, as in the case of ITN's 'Their Lordships' House', not merely a presenter and occasional commentator but as the lynchpin of the whole programme: the person who interprets what is happening and 'fills in' the gaps between snippets of speech in order to convey an impression of the whole debate. The result usually is a sequence of short clips of speech from the debate, seldom more than 30 to 35 seconds in duration, linked by even shorter comments by the presenter (10-12 seconds in duration).

A second possibility is to provide a fairly lengthy scene-setting introduction which explains the context of a particular debate and the issues which are and then to offer much longer clips of film from the Chamber which are only occasionally interrupted by commentary either to explain the political significance of a particular contribution or to convey to the viewer the sense of the overall shape of the debate.

A third possibility is to make an editorial decision regarding which issue or aspect of the debate to focus on and which speeches make the most significant contributions and then to show much longer clips of these particular speeches ensuring that the ones selected show how the speakers are responding to each other's points in that form of debate which is a characteristic of the House of Lords.

Of course, there are other possibilities but we have given emphasis to these three because we found that both BBC and ITN at some time during the experiment used all three approaches. The first option typified much of the output from the BBC and ITN in the first stages of the experiment. A series of short snippets of speech from a large number of speakers can be a fairly good way of making sure that as many speakers and as many points of view as possible get some air time and to some extent the overall sense of the debate may be captured if not by the film clips then by the presenter's frequent interjections. On the other hand this style of presentation does not lend itself to conveying the atmosphere of the House or the style of debating typical of the Upper Chamber. It is a type of presentation which has its origins in news programmes and we found that frequently the same kind of criteria were employed as they would be for newscasts. Editors appear to be looking for comments made by Their Lordships which could be linked to news stories which were featuring elsewhere in conventional news programmes. We have already mentioned some examples of this tendency. The clearest illustration of this was the coverage of the Arts Funding debate on 6th March 1995. This debate had been moved by Lord Jenkins of Putney, the Official Opposition's frontbench spokesman on the Arts. The debate was wide-ranging.
However, the night before the debate, forty-two Artistic directors met at the National Theatre and passed a vote of no-confidence in the Arts Council, and Sir Peter Hall had publicly criticized government policy on the arts. Channel 4's 7 o'clock news included a five-minute feature on the debate which consisted almost entirely of short clips taken from the Arts Minister, Lord Gowrie's speech and focussed almost exclusively on his response to Sir Peter Hall. BBC's Newsnight treated the coverage of the debate almost like an instant archive. After drawing attention to the differences in opinion between Hall and Lord Gowrie they went on to show only two clips from the debate, lasting a total of 38 seconds, and then returned to the studio for a lengthy interview between Lord Gowrie and Joan Bakewell. It is worth noting that the interview covered similar ground to that of the speeches in the Lords that afternoon.

This emphasis on controversy and content, the focus on personalities and the reluctance to break with tried and tested styles of programming such as the studio interview, and the reliance on short clips of direct speech, are the very stuff of news and current affairs programming and reflect prevailing concepts of newsworthiness. It is not our purpose to suggest that editors concerned with parliamentary broadcasting should therefore ignore anything which happens in Parliament which might conceivably be newsworthy. We simply use the example to illustrate the potential tension between the requirements, news values and styles of presentation of television news programming and the requirements and broadcasting values which may be uppermost in the minds of those peers, MPs and other observers who favour the televising of Parliament but have been disappointed by the way in which sound broadcasting of Parliament has been used and have higher hopes for television coverage.

We concluded from our observations that this particular style of presentation is the least suitable one for programmes on general debates or Second Readings. The commentator is too intrusive and the sense of the debate is often lost. It is a much more appropriate approach for illustrating other aspects of the work of the House of Lords. It is far more effective as a style of presentation when covering the Committee or Report Stages of Government Bills or starred and unstarred questions.

In Table 2 we have attempted to illustrate our observations of these different styles of presentation by providing a simple graphic outline of programmes or coverage of specific debates within programmes drawn from the experimental period. The oblong blocks represent the length of clips of direct speech from House of Lords debates. In some cases these blocks represent a single speech, in other cases several speeches have been run together by the programme editors. The triangles represent the commentaries by the Parliamentary correspondent or political editor.

There is clear evidence here that both BBC and IN are now lengthening the clips or extracts of direct speech from individual Peers and showing sequences of clips from different Peers without excessive use of linking commentaries. IN's Their Lordships' House has certainly developed in this way as Table 2 demonstrates. In the early programmes they opted for maximising the number of speakers and the clips were rather short, averaging 25 seconds per speaker. They seldom ran more than two clips together without an interjection from the commentator. By mid-May 1985 they were showing 1-4 minutes of direct speech at a time without comment. As our Table shows, it was some time later before Newsnight began to alter its traditional current affairs style of presentation of the House but by mid-June they too were extending the duration of clips of direct speech. When the BBC's new edited summary, The Lords Today, was introd-
uced they initially reverted to the traditional style of presentation, but during the November programmes they began to show signs of a similar pattern of development.

There are now signs that programme editors are including even longer clips from individual speeches and combining extracts from speeches. This development is apparent in some of the most recent editions of Their Lordship's House. In our view this development is welcome. It does seem to convey the tone, shape and direction of the televised debate much more effectively than the shorter snippets and more than compensates for the reduced number of speakers shown.

To summarise this section, we found when talking to editorial staff that they did not seem to start out with firmly fixed ideas about an appropriate style of presentation for the late-night edited summaries. Indeed it should be kept in mind that direct television broadcasting of Parliament was a wholly new departure for them and one would expect some evidence of a learning process taking place. We believe that Table 2 does reveal a learning curve for both Channels. They are moving towards a style of presentation which is not wholly dominated by conventional news criteria and values and compared with what happened in the case of the sound broadcasting of Parliament there is much clearer evidence of both Broadcasting Authorities being willing to experiment and to learn from the experimental process.

A FAIR REPRESENTATION OF THE WORK OF THE HOUSE?

One of the recurring questions raised in the various debates which their Lordships have held regarding the televising of Parliament is whether coverage would fairly represent all of the work of the House or whether programme planners and editors would only be interested in the set piece occasions. In Table 3 we have compared the actual division of time in the Chamber of the House of Lords between the various aspects of their work in a typical Parliamentary session with the amount of coverage being given to each aspect on television during the experimental period.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work in the Chamber</th>
<th>Division of time in the Lords</th>
<th>Allocation of time on television</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Debates</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministerial Statements</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starred Questions</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstarred Questions</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 does bear out to some extent the expectation that broadcasters would be most attracted to the set piece policy debates. They are an opportunity to see some of the more illustrious 'performers' in the House of Lords; they usually involve criticisms of Government policy; and they are usually on major issues of the day. On the other hand, the view frequently expressed by critics of the experiment before it was initiated, that editors would not be interested in the boring detailed examination of legislation is not borne out by the evidence. Not only was 39% of the coverage concerned with legislation, two-thirds of this time was concerned with the Committee and Report Stages of the legislative process. Admittedly most of the experimental period was taken up with the Local Government Bill and the programme editors would certainly have found the Government defeats and 'close shaves' irresistible for television. However, they can hardly be blamed for making the most of opportunities presented to them. We can only hope that, should the televising of the House become permanent, they would still show an interest in the passage of less controversial legislation. It is worth noting here, however, that the legislation which was covered was almost exclusively initiated by the Government. Private Members' Bills and Private Bills were virtually ignored. Perhaps the most glaring missed opportunity here was the failure to cover the Second Reading of the Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms Bill on 10th December 1985.

Table 3 only deals with coverage of proceedings in the Chamber, so it is appropriate at this point to make some comments based on our observations of the coverage of the work of the Overseas Trade Committee. Coverage of the Committee was first seen on Channel 4 on 5th March 1985. There was further coverage on BBC and Channel 4 on 24th April, 15th May and 19th June. ITN gave further coverage on 16th October and a documentary on the work of the Committee was broadcast on Channel 4 on 10th July.

Undoubtedly the filming of Committee proceedings presents special problems, particularly if the coverage is not continuous. Without this sense of continuity it is difficult to convey the thinking of the members of the Committee or the way in which they might use the evidence from one witness to cross-examine another. It is easier in this situation for editors to focus on the witnesses. This inclination is inevitably strengthened when it is possible to focus on such witnesses as the Chancellor of the Exchequer and his Treasury team, the Minister for Trade and Industry, John Harvey-Jones, Chairman of ICI, and Lord Weinstock, Managing Director of GEC.

In addition to the continuity problem there are other editing dilemmas. Select Committee proceedings often lack the more distinctive structure of a debate in the Chamber. This in turn makes it difficult to create a suitable structure for the edited summaries. The 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary style which Granada Television developed for its 'The State of the Nation' series in 1973 would seem to be more appropriate but difficult to manage in this context. It suggests that television be permanent it might be more appropriate if coverage of Select Committees mainly featured in weekly or even monthly summaries leaving the editors of the nightly programmes to use the video tape of Committee proceedings as they wish without being concerned too much about fairly representing the work of that Committee.

We examined the coverage of the Overseas Trade Committee in some detail because of the problems. In our view the early coverage by both Channels failed to fairly represent the work of the Committee. In particular, we would make the following observations:
The impression given to the viewer was that witnesses came to the Committee, delivered set speeches, with occasional interruptions by members of the Committee or points of clarification; the interrogative function of the Committee tended to be overlooked; there were a number of missed opportunities when the Committee was sitting where coverage would have been of significant educational value. For example, coverage of the Lords in February 1985 was particularly sparse: only the introductions of Lords Chapple and Murray were shown. Yet during this month a number of senior Civil Servants gave evidence to and were cross-examined by the Select Committee. This would have shown a side of the work of Parliament which the public knows little about and would have shown the process whereby the higher echelons of the civil service are held accountable to Parliament; some of the editing was misleading. In some instances statements by witnesses appeared to be spliced together thus giving an impression that they were both answering the same question even though they were not. In other instances the editing and splicing led to comments being taken out of sequence without appearing to be so.

Notwithstanding these observations there is also clear evidence of a learning process at work and the later coverage of the Overseas Trade Committee has gone some way to meeting these criticisms. Coverage tended to focus more on the examination of witnesses and the interaction of ideas which was taking place. This has been usefully achieved by the use of graphics and other visual aids as a means of presenting the statistical evidence placed before the Committee.

Coverage of policy debates

Since, as Table 3 shows, the general policy debates frequently attracted the attention of the broadcasters we conducted a detailed evaluation of the coverage of six debates, comparing what had been selected for recorded purposes with the Hansard Reports of the entire debates, to assess whether the editing had succeeded in doing justice to the overall discussions. The debates evaluated in this way were:

- Arts Funding (6.3.85)
- Official Secrets Act (20.3.85)
- The Budget and unemployment (3.4.85)
- East-West Relations (23.4.85)
- Women in public life (1.5.85)
- Trade Union balloting (15.5.85).

We have already commented on the coverage of the Arts funding debate in a critical way and noted that the programme editors on all Channels focussed exclusively on just one issue which arose in the debate.

The coverage of the Official Secrets Act on ITN's Ten O'clock News and in a BBC House of Lords Special was more comprehensive than the coverage of the Arts funding debate. It was highly topical following as it did the Ponting, Tildall and Bettaney prosecutions and the highly publicised television interview with Ms. Massiter. It was not surprising therefore that the news programmes, with their limited time and their criteria of newsworthiness, should concentrate on Lord Denning's criticism of the trial judge in the Ponting case and the defense of the judge by Lord Wigoder. The BBC's 'Special' also dealt with this dispute between Lords with distinguished legal backgrounds. The other main points of focus were the perceived absurdities of Section 2 of the Act and the scope for misuse of the Act by Governments. The main features of the debate were fairly well represented although the actual Motion for the debate was not explained, the frequent work references by speakers to the Franks Committee and other deliberations on the Act were omitted as was discussion of what might replace either Section 2 or the whole Act - a fundamental theme in the debate.

The debate on the Budget and unemployment possibly offered more clues to editors as to what to leave out to select and what to include. The Official Secrets Act had not exactly followed party lines. For one thing the crossbenchers had been prominent. This debate on unemployment, initiated by the Labour Party, was clearly going to follow party lines more closely and the editors of the Newsnight programme responded accordingly. The clash between the two Frontbench speakers, Lords Barnett and Gowrie, was well-covered and other speakers were clearly selected for their known involvement and concern with this issue. The debate was perceived to have concentrated on three questions: Government policies responsible for the level of unemployment? Would increased borrowing and public expenditure create jobs? Would the Budget create the climate for enterprise in order to create jobs?

The debate on East-West Relations, coinciding as it did with the expulsion of staff from the Soviet Embassy, was highly topical. The newscasts on all Channels used footage from the debate in a highly restricted way, only taking references, particularly by Lord Home, to Soviet spies and whether or not the expulsions would have a long-term effect on Anglo-Soviet relations. However, the coverage of the debate on Newsnight and Their Lordships' House was far more wide-ranging and in our view succeeded not only the various points of the debate but also the tone and atmosphere of the House on that occasion.

Unfortunately the same could not be said of Channel 4's coverage of the Women in public life debate. It is perhaps symptomatic of the relatively low priority assigned to this issue that a two-and-a-half hour debate could be condensed into 3 minutes 44 seconds of actual coverage. Most of the 15-minute programme was devoted to the previous day's Committee Stage of the Local Government Bill (which had already been covered in the previous night's programme). The numerous references to the discriminations and constraints which women still experienced ten years after the passing of the Sex Discrimination Act and the reforms and new provisions which were discussed were omitted from the programme.

By contrast the coverage of the remaining debate, on trade union balloting by ITN and by Newsnight is to be commended. For one thing it was one of the few occasions when good coverage was given to a debate moved by a Member of the Alliance and, like the coverage of the East-West debate, it succeeded in covering the main points and conveying the sense and tone of the debate.

To pick up a point made earlier, we found evidence again here of a learning process at work and one which could have implications for coverage of the legislative process as well as policy debates.
The Broadcasting Authorities, by the terms of their Charters, are required to be politically impartial but concern has been expressed, particularly by the Alliance, about the degree of balance in the general coverage of political news on television. It is not surprising therefore that similar concerns have been expressed about Parliamentary broadcasting. In the debates in 1983 and 1984 on the decision to implement a television experiment, this kind of concern was expressed by some Peers on all sides of the House. However, political balance is not the only kind of broadcasting balance which needs to be taken into account when examining the television coverage of the House of Lords. In our research we focussed on four distinct kinds of balance:

- political balance: the allocation of air time to speakers from each of the political parties and from the crossbenches;
- balance between the frontbenches and the backbenches;
- balance between film and commentary in newscasts and edited summaries;
- balance in the selection of topics for coverage.

Political balance

The broadcasters got off to a bad start. In all the euphoria of the first day's coverage they neglected to mention the fact in the newscasts and edited highlights that the Motion for debate on that day had been moved by the Official Opposition. It was felt that there had been a lack of political balance in the overall recorded coverage and a complaint was made by the Select Committee on the televising of the proceedings of the House.

Six months after the inauguration of the experiment, in the debate to decide whether the experimental period should be extended, Lord Beswick, who had moved the Motion on that first televised occasion and complained about the lack of balance, observed that:

'Since then, certainly, more balanced extracts have been shown. I am sure that every effort will be made in any further extension to avoid that example.'

In monitoring the coverage we have given particular attention to the question of political balance. In an Interim Research Report, issued to coincide with the debate on the Motion to hold a similar television experiment in the House of Commons, we drew attention to some examples of imbalance in the coverage. Since the publication of that Report we have looked systematically at political balance in the coverage of general debates and in the coverage of the passage of the Local Government Bill through the House of Lords.

General debates: In our Interim Report we suggested that the Alliance might well feel aggrieved by the coverage of the two short debates which they initiated on 15th May 1985. In the coverage of the first debate, on Trade Union balloting which was moved by the Liberal Peer, Lord Rochester, the Liberals were only allotted 50 seconds out of a 4-minute slot on
'Newsnight' and 50 seconds out of a 15-minute edition of Their Lordships' House. The second debate that day, on the Strategic Defence Initiative and NATO, which was initiated by the Social Democratic Party, received no coverage at all.

However, taken as a whole over the experimental period of 15 months the selection of general debates for coverage could not be said to have been unduly weighted in favour of or against any particular political party. 23 policy debates have been covered in some depth during this period. Of these, 7 were initiated by Conservative Peers, 9 by Labour Peers, 5 by the Alliance and 2 by Independent Peers. Ten of the 23 Motions for debate were moved by frontbench spokesmen and spokeswomen.

If there is a matter for concern then it is not so much the selection of debates as it is the selection of extracts from speeches. To see if there was any further evidence of political imbalance in the selection of speeches we examined the coverage of five policy debates, comparing the time allocated to the different party groupings in the programmes with the division of time between the speakers in the actual debates. The results are presented in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debate: Official Secrets Act (20.3.85)</th>
<th>Division of time in edited programme</th>
<th>Division of time in full debate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initiated: Lord Wigoder (Liberal)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme: BBC Newsnight</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speakers: Conservative</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliance</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debate: Unemployment (3.4.85)</th>
<th>Division of time in edited programme</th>
<th>Division of time in full debate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initiated: Lord Barnett (Labour)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme: BBC Newsnight</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speakers: Conservative</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliance</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debate: East-West relations (1.5.85)</th>
<th>Division of time in edited programme</th>
<th>Division of time in full debate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initiated: Lord Home (Cons.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme: BBC Newsnight</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speakers: Conservative</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliance</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debate: Women in public life (1.5.85)</th>
<th>Division of time in edited programme</th>
<th>Division of time in full debate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initiated: Baroness Lockwood (Labour)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme: ITN Their Lordships House</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speakers: Conservative</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliance</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debate: Trade Union balloting (15.5.85)</th>
<th>Division of time in edited programme</th>
<th>Division of time in full debate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initiated: Lord Rochester (Liberal)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme: ITN Their Lordships House</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speakers: Conservative</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliance</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If the reader compares the allocation of time to the parties in the televised edited summaries with the division of time between the parties in the actual debates then it would seem that with regard to the coverage of policy debates there is not too much cause for concern. If anything, the Alliance tends to get slightly more air time than would if editors sought to represent their contributions to debates in a strictly proportional way. The amount of air time allocated to speeches by Labour Peers was slightly lower than one might have expected. Nevertheless it is only the debate on the Budget and unemployment which might give the Labour Party any cause to question the political balance of the coverage. Here was a debate initiated by Lord Barnett, a Labour Party frontbench spokesman of Economic affairs, but the Newsnight programme gave considerably more coverage to the response of the Conservative frontbench. Twice as much time was given to Lord Gowrie's response to Lord Barnett as was given to the latter's opening address and then by far the largest snippet of film (1 minute 42 seconds) was given over to Lord Young's winding-up speech on behalf of the Government. This was then followed by a studio interview with Lord Young.

We have examined the coverage of other general debates for similar examples of this kind of imbalance but it would appear to be a relatively isolated case.

The amount of coverage given to the contributions which crossbenchers make to policy debates appears to be satisfactory but since their chances of being included in the editorial highlights of debates on legislation are so poor, they may not feel that this is adequate compensation.

Legislation: As indicated in the previous sentence, the crossbenchers have been particularly under-represented in the television coverage of the proceedings of the House of Lords. The 200 Independent Peers, representing one quarter of the working Peers in the House, have been allotted only 7% of the television coverage. Their inclusion in coverage of debates on Government legislation is particularly poor and since the programme editors decided not to give any significant coverage to debates on Private Members' Bills, this aspect of the work of the Independent Peer is completely under-represented. One broadcaster, involved in editorial decisions, indicated to us that the reason for the comparative neglect was that 'there are so few Independent Peers known to the viewing public.' Even so we would doubt whether Independent Peers such as Lord Denning or Lord Marsh are merely or even mainly included in programmes because they are well-known.

The coverage of the Local Government Bill seems at first sight to reveal a serious political imbalance. As Table 5 indicates, much more air time (mean 1.1) but half of the broadcasting time was given to Conservative Peers than to the Peers of any other party, or to the crossbenchers. Howe-
ever, this needs further explanation. First, as the percentages in Table 5 show, the amount of time allotted to speeches from each party in the television coverage is almost identical to the division of time between them in the actual debates. Second, on the Local Government Bill a number of Conservative Peers were not only voting against the Government but were also tabling amendments to the Bill during the Committee Stage. It was not surprising therefore that the programme editors should seek to cover this kind of party discord.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Allocation of time on television</th>
<th>Allocation of time in actual debates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliance</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independents</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From what we have observed and gathered from conversations with broadcasting staff, no-one is actually working with stopwatch in hand to ensure strict parity between the political parties, nor are they attempting to allocate time in proportion to the number of Peers in each political party. Given the physical and time constraints within which the editorial staff have to operate, a point which I return to later in the report, this would not have been feasible.

That is not to say that the coverage is therefore politically unbalanced and partial. Our evidence indicates that in the coverage of legislation the editors have succeeded in allocating time in such a way as to strike a rough balance between those who argue for a Motion or Amendment and those who argue against. It is difficult to see how they could have done otherwise given the presence of the House of Lords of a large number of crossbenchers and 26 Bishops, and given that so much of the coverage during the experiment was devoted to the Local Government Bill. The Government is by no means as certain of obtaining a majority in the House of Lords as it is in the Commons and it would have been surprising if the television coverage did not reflect this difference in some way.

Balance between front- and backbenchers

A number of Peers expressed the view in the debate on 22nd July 1985 that television coverage is heavily weighted in favour of frontbench speakers. We have already reported the view that crossbenchers are more likely to appear in edited programmes if they are already well-known to the public. The same might be said of party backbenchers. In newscasts and current affairs programmes it is certainly the case that backbenchers tend to be ignored by the news programmes unless they used to be senior Cabinet Ministers or are very well known to the public. However, this applies far less to the edited summaries. An analysis of BBC's 'Newsnight' and 'The Lords Today' and ITN's 'Their Lordships' House' reveals that 44% of the direct coverage has been taken up by backbenchers by the Bishops, and 54% by the frontbenchers. This figure may well have been boosted by the coverage of the Local Government Bill, with its backbench rebellions.

Balance between film and commentary

The tendency for the commentary to be rather intrusive in the earlier broadcasts has already been mentioned. In the initial period of the experiment some 40%-50% of each edited summary was given over to commentaries, studio talk and interviews. By the end of the first 6 months, there were signs that the balance on both Channels was shifting towards more direct coverage. On average, but depending on the topics covered, direct coverage now amounts to two-thirds of each summary programme.

Nevertheless, there is a good deal of variation here. Much depends on how the editors perceive the newsworthiness and relevance of the day’s proceedings. If they are perceived to be topical, controversial and likely to include 'star speakers', especially the Earl of Stockton, then the extent of direct coverage will be high. If the day’s proceedings are not perceived to meet these editorial criteria then the emphasis will be much more on commentary, and interviews, often on the previous day's debate or a forthcoming attraction.

Balance in the selection of debates, questions and other proceedings

The grounds for including some topics or omitting others are not always clear. Although one might reasonably expect such factors as controversy, probability of Government defeats, and scope for links with major news stories, to be significant criteria of selection, this was by no means always the case. For example, the Education Corporal Punishment Bill which was the Government's response to a European Court ruling, received scant coverage on television in spite of its being defeated in the Lords. The Second Reading of the Ratings (Scotland) Bill was also ignored although this was clearly an issue in Scotland and an issue which had implications for the rest of Britain.

In logging what kinds of topics and areas of legislation were covered or relatively ignored we found certain patterns emerging. These are illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selection of Topics for Television Coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Frequency of coverage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central-local govt. relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Govt’s economic policies/record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privatisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade and Industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary education</td>
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The impact of televised proceedings

The extent to which the televised proceedings of the House of Lords has had any impact on the viewing public, Peers or even the physical environment of the Chamber is a question which has exercised everyone involved in monitoring the experiment.

The impact on the viewing public is well documented elsewhere. The average audience for live transmissions has varied from one-quarter to half a million but the total number of people who will have seen some part of these programmes is much higher, ranging from three to four million. The overall average audience for ITN and Channel 4's late night edited summaries is 291,000 with an average of 147,000 watching the repeat programmes on the following afternoon. While it is not possible to say how many people specifically watched the coverage from the House of Lords on Newsnight, it does have an average audience of 1,250,000. The late night programmes put out by the BBC under the title of 'The Lords Today' in November 1985 had an average audience of just under 0.4 million whilst the programme on the privatization debate on 27th November 1985 attracted an audience of 0.6 million.10

The results of the 'before-and-after' survey of public knowledge and attitudes about the broadcasting experiment, which was carried out by the IBA, indicate that public interest in the House of Lords has not changed significantly over the experimental period. The results also suggest that public knowledge of the Upper Chamber has also not increased to any significant degree, although there is some evidence that some minimal basic information has been grasped regarding the institution and proceedings of the House of Lords.11

The research into the opinions of Peers as to the effect which the experiment has had on their colleagues' behaviour and the procedures of the House indicates that the majority of Peers interviewed by telephone felt that the television experiment had not had any effect on the behaviour of fellow Peers and has not had an effect on the procedures of the House. However, the number of Peers who are concerned about the effect which the lighting and equipment is having on the Chamber itself is growing and this concern is also reflected in the report of the Select Committee.12

In our account of the impact of televising the Lords we took as our starting points some of the concerns expressed by Peers in the debates which preceded its implementation. In particular we attempted to establish:

- whether the duration and number of contributions made by Peers had significantly altered because of the experiment;
- whether the style and duration of Question Time had altered;
- whether the number of interventions, particularly heated ones, had significantly increased;
- whether Peers were speaking to or 'playing up' to the cameras.

To find answers to these questions we compared a sample of Hansard House of Lords official reports for 1984 (i.e. before the experiment) with a sample of official reports for days in 1985 when the cameras were in the Chamber, and days in 1985 when the cameras were not. As a case study we
also made a direct comparison between the reports of the Second Reading of the Local Government (Interim Provisions) Bill 1984 - the so-called 'Paving Bill' - which was not televised, and the Second Reading of the Local Government Bill 1985 which was.

Table 7 shows the length of speeches made in a sample of debates in 1984 and 1985 and also compares the proportion of speeches of less than 10 minutes' duration. Although it should be emphasised that this table is based on random samples, the findings do indicate that speeches now tend to be rather longer than they were before the introduction of the television cameras.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1984 sample of</th>
<th>1985 sample of</th>
<th>1985 sample of</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>debates</td>
<td>televised debates</td>
<td>non-television debates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average length of speeches</td>
<td>11 mins 48 secs</td>
<td>13 mins 40 secs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of speeches under 10 mins duration</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If a comparison is made between the Second Readings for the Local Government (Interim Provisions) Bill 1984 and the Local Government Bill 1985 then one finds marked similarities in the time, shape and atmosphere of the debates, and in each there were several heated interventions between the Government and Opposition Front benches. The main difference between the two occasions is in the duration of the speeches. In 1984 the average length of speech was 10 minutes 39 seconds and 59% of the speeches were under 10 minutes in duration. In the Second Reading debate in 1985 the average length of speech was 16 minutes 20 seconds and only 8% of the speeches were under 10 minutes in length. Of course there may be other factors which may have contributed to this definite development but the change does seem to coincide with the introduction of television cameras.

Regarding the alleged tendency of speakers to 'play-up' to the cameras we found little evidence of this, having examined live transmissions as well as edited highlights. What strikes the observer is the extent to which their Lordships seem oblivious to the cameras rather than performing to them.

The impact of the experiment on Question Time appears to have been short-lived. It was certainly the case that on the first night three live transmissions questions were rather protracted, but even on these occasions were not particularly unusual. There were a number of occasions in 1984 when questions lasted longer and considerably more supplementary questions were asked.

THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF THE EXPERIMENT

The educational implications of televising the House of Lords are a matter of particular concern to the Hansard Society. From its inception in 1965 it has been firmly committed to public education about the procedures and working of the Parliament. Consequently, in addition to our concern with monitoring the television output for balance, representativeness, impact and quality of coverage, the research team were also concerned to evaluate the contribution the television experiment might be making to political education in the broadest sense of the term.

At this point some of the people involved in making the programmes on the House of Lords might reasonably protest that we were judging them in terms of a criterion which they did not apply when making programmes and which was not required of them by Parliament. However, as we pointed out earlier in this report, the Broadcasting Authorities did indicate to the Select Committee on Sound Broadcasting in 1984 that if there was a television experiment they would favour a wide variety of programmes, including educational ones. Although they did not specify what they meant by 'educational', in this context, it seems reasonable, taking into account the actual programme content and formats which emerged, that they were not simply referring to occasional programmes outside their normal output such as documentaries on the workings of Parliament or the issues behind a particular piece of legislation.

In assessing the educational contribution we concentrated primarily on the nightly and weekly edited summaries. The educational task facing the presenters and commentators in these programmes should not be underestimated. In recent years a number of opinion surveys have amply demonstrated the widespread ignorance about the public's knowledge about British political institutions. Undoubtedly the House of Lords is the institution which is least well-known or understood. Merely allowing the cameras into the Chamber and into the Committee Room contributed to exploding a few misconceptions and myths. At least now a great many viewers know that Their Lordships do not attend sittings in ermine and coronets. The coverage of the Overseas Trade Committee and the Committee Stage of the Bill were particularly valuable in this respect in demonstrating the function which the House can play in scrutinising Government policies and legislation.

Over the period of the experiment the presenters developed a style which proved to be both lively and yet informative. A viewer tuning in to one of the summary programmes for the first time, say, on the fourth day of the Committee Stage of the Local Government Bill, would not have found herself or himself at a total loss. In the introduction to most programmes there was usually a brief summary of what was happening in the Chamber, often followed by some information about the context of the debate. So, for example, in the BBC's House of Lords Special on the debate on the Official Secrets Act, the introduction explained the background of the Act, the problems with Section 2, the recommendations of the Franks Committee, and then brought the situation up to date by mentioning recent prosecutions of civil servants under the Act. The commentator then went on to specify the Motion for the debate.

We feel that there is further scope for developing this kind of commentary. One of the criticisms which is often levelled at the door of television current affairs is that the news values
which they apply emphasise the coverage of events and incidents whereas the coverage of issues and policies, it is argued, often tends to be reduced to portrayal of the alternative positions of the interested parties while failing to explain the context of the issue. The edited summary programmes, particularly the weekly version, does provide some scope for this kind of reflection on the issues and scope for explanation of why they have now emerged and how they have come to the fore in British politics. A fruitful development here might be to combine coverage of the proceedings of the House with more current affairs-style documentaries. We would mention in this context some of Newsnight's coverage of the Local Government Bill. They set the debate into a political context by preceding it with a documentary film on the Metropolitan County Councils which were to be abolished. The film showed the services provided by the Metropolitan County Councils, went on to analyse the debate about public expenditure cuts, and finished up with interviews with local government leaders. Then the programme went on to take coverage from the House of Lords debate.

Given the widespread lack of understanding of parliamentary procedures we felt that by the time ITN with Channel 4 embarked on its intensive one-month's coverage of the Local Government Bill in May, they had evolved an approach which was a particularly effective way of explaining what was happening in the Chamber. They developed this even further when they introduced the three weekly summaries on Sunday afternoons in June.

The value of this kind of approach is probably best explained through direct illustration. At a time when Government legislation was being examined by their Lordships and viewers might have easily formed the impression that the House of Lords was a more powerful institution than they had ever suspected, the parliamentary situation was explained as follows by the presenter of one of the Sunday afternoon programmes, Sir Alistair Burnett:

'The Lords does a lot of the painstaking work which the Commons haven't the time or the mood for, and when it's done the amendments go back to the Commons and become law. But the Lords may not let something the Government cherishes through, at least not in the way the Government wants.

The House has been altering Bills lately and the other week nearly voted to wreck the Bill abolishing the Greater London Council and the other Metropolitan Authorities. If the majority in the Commons doesn't like what the Lords has done, they put it back the way they want it. Usually then the Lords - the unelected House - leaves it at that. But the Lords still has the power to turn the Commons down again, and under the Parliament Act of 1949 the Commons has to wait virtually a year before it can override the Lords' veto. One exception: the Lords cannot hold up a Money Bill for more than one month, so the House hasn't tried this since 1911.'

There then followed an interview with the Lord Chancellor, Lord Hailsham, on the role of the House of Lords in the Parliamentary system. (Their Lordships' House, 9th June 1985)

The reference in this quotation to the interaction between the two Houses of Parliament raises a further issue of educational concern. When the Broadcasting Authorities only have access to one House, and that is the unelected one, there is a risk that by simply showing the proceedings of one House, in a vacuum as it were, the viewer will receive a distorted picture. It is important that not only the issues and policies which come before the House of Lords should be put into a political context but also that the House itself is put into not just a constitutional but also a political context. The interview with the Lord Chancellor, referred to in our illustration, led to the significance of the use of the Guillotine in the House of Commons being explained; something which had not hitherto been discussed at all.

More recently, the coverage of the Education Bill, especially the clause on corporal punishment in schools, provided a similar kind of approach. In this case the nightly broadcasts by Channel 4 during the second week of April 1986 admirably dealt with the Parliamentary and political context of the debate then taking place in the House.

In their coverage of the Committee Stage of the Local Government Bill, ITN also began to explain the political tactics adopted by Government and Opposition parties. Two illustrations should demonstrate how invaluable this approach can be from a broadly educational point of view. On Tuesday, 30th April, described by the presenter as 'the most difficult day in the Committee Stage of the Local Government Bill', ITN's political editor, Glyn Mathias, explained the Opposition's political tactics as follows:

'The Opposition, in order to maximise support, left Conservative and Independent Pairs (i.e. the ones opposed to the Government's legislation) to make the main running.'

(Their Lordships' House, 30th April 1985)

On 2nd May, the third day of the Committee Stage of the same Bill, the presenter introduced that night's edition of Their Lordships' House as follows:

'A deal through 'the usual channels'! The Government wanted to secure a day before Whitsun for the Phone Tapping Bill. After negotiations, the Opposition have agreed to reduce the Committee Stage of the Local Government Bill from the expected 11 days to 10 to make way for it. In exchange they have secured a degree of control over the programme of the Committee Stage. In other words, which Sections of the Bill can be discussed on which days. It's the kind of arrangement that is possible in the more temperate political climate in the Lords.'

(Their Lordships' House, 2nd May 1985)

In addition the Party Whips have also been interviewed, as has the Conveyor of the Crossbenchers, and the Leader of the Opposition in the Lords, Lord Cledwyn, on the problems of mobilising opposition to legislation.
Fifteen months after the beginning of the television experiment it is worth emphasising that on that first live transmission from the House of Commons in January 1985 both IIN and the BBC Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit were virtually starting from scratch. There had of course been a similar televised experiment in the late 1960s but the equipment being used was different, the technical and editorial staffs were different, and great deal of learning had to take place over a relatively short span of time.

Of course, few innovations in broadcasting are ever the result of an immaculate conception; indeed, some might well be said to have been born on the wrong side of the blanket. As we pointed out earlier in the Report, the notion of having a conventional current affairs style of presenting and editing does appear to have emerged during the course of the experiment and the introduction of sound broadcasting into both Houses in the first two years of the Sound Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings, concluded that it was a resounding success for a disaster raised before and during its introduction. We suspect that some of the television broadcasting staff may have felt that the sound broadcasting was counter-productive in as much as it has been a distraction to the House of Commons, regarding themselves as being the press. However, in another sense it may be that the widespread criticism of the sound broadcasting coverage lowered the threshold of expectations for televised coverage.

Although we have expressed some criticisms in this Report about certain aspects of the coverage, by any standards, and not just by comparison with sound broadcasting, the experiment has been a success. The sound broadcast of Parliamentary proceedings was incorporated into the then 'Inside Parliament', the late-night Sunday slot on Radio 4, could have been said to be a major innovation. That is not true of the television programme. The late-night edited summaries by both IIN and the BBC continue to allow the cameras into the House, there is every reason to expect that these innovations will become an established part of television programming. There are signs that the broadcasters themselves see an advantage in continuing to service a small but regular and possibly growing audience.

There is scope for further experimentation in programme formats. In spite of the success of the edited summaries, in spite of the tendency for the Select Committee to assume that live coverage might not figure significantly in future programming, we would hope that both BBC and ITN would still be in a position to offer live transmissions at fairly short notice. IIN's position in this respect is still uncertain. As the debate on Libya on Friday, 18th April, seems to us to justify this facility, of course, it may not be looked upon with the same degree of enthusiasm in 'another place'. At the time of writing this Report, ITN is well into a series of their late-night 15-minute summaries and 'Their Lordships' House' would seem to be the flagship of their Parliamentary coverage. The BBC is about to embark on a new kind of programme, a weekly entitled 'The Lords This Week', which will be 90 minutes long and should offer greater scope for looking in depth at the work of Committees and giving the viewer a sense of the day-to-day work of the House. If the Lords vote to televised proceedings to continue and the Broadcasting Authorities' enthusiasm does not wane, this combination of pre-recorded and weekly edited summaries with occasional snippets in news programmes or live transmissions should prove complementary. Indeed it is worth noting here that both IIN and BBC seem to have curbed their natural desire to compete for coverage throughout this experiment, and to outside observers such as ourselves the relationship between both parties seems to have been very amicable and cooperative.

The technical problems and constraints do not seem to have been insurmountable. On this Lords debated whether to permit one experiment and how to implement it, some Peers mentioned the problem of broadcasting deadlines. One Peer referred to this as the 'Six O'Clock Syndrome', the assumption being that only speakers in the first two and a half hours of debate in the House would be likely to be featured in that evening's programme. However, there is an important exception, that has proved to be the case. With video and up-to-date editing equipment it is possible to still produce a short package for Channel 4 at 7 pm on the BBC's 9 pm news while that programme is actually going out live. Furthermore, the late-night summaries, often going out as late as 12.15 am has given editorial staff greater flexibility. The exception referred to is regional coverage. Since most regional news programmes go out around 6.30 pm, this has been one area where the so-called 'Six O'Clock Syndrome' might have been a reality. The BBC Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit has now conducted an experiment using a portable camera in the Gallery specifically to produce a short package on the Dockyard Services Bill for South West region and are confident that this will resolve the problem. We have heard few complaints about the camera placements in the House. The four fixed points do not seem to have unduly hampered coverage of what is happening in the Chamber and indeed on occasions may have proved advantageous. Because the cabling for the cameras is permanent the team can set everything up for transmission in 45 minutes. This means that they can decide to cover a debate at very short notice. We have been assured, for example, that it is possible to make a decision to put the cameras in at 6 am, inform Black Rod's office, and have the equipment set up for the start of that day's proceedings.

After 15 months of monitoring the output from both the BBC and IIN, we have concluded that an upward learning curve is really apparent in the development of programmes, editing, presentation and camera work, and on that basis we would suggest that it would be unfortunate if for the second time in the history of this experiment the learning which has clearly taken place were an experimental period of Parliamentary broadcasting should be wasted. It would be doubly unfortunate if at some later date a new generation of broadcasters, editors and technicians had to start from scratch yet again and learn the same lessons.
FOOTNOTES

1 Hansard, House of Lords Official Debates (8th December 1983)

2 Select Committee on Sound Broadcasting, Televising the House of Lords (HMSO, 1984, 25th July 1984)

3 Hansard, House of Lords Official Debates (22nd July 1985)

4 Select Committee Report, op. cit. (1984)


7 The percentages for the actual division of time in the House of Lords are taken from Dermot Engefield, Whitehall and Westminster (London: 1984)

8 Hansard, House of Lords Official Debates (22nd July 1985, col.1007)

9 R. Stradling, Monitoring the Televising of the House of Lords: An Interim Report (Hansard Society, 18th November 1985)

10 A full list of viewing figures can be obtained from both Broadcasting Authorities; a summary of figures is available in the Report of the Select Committee on Televising the Proceedings of the House (HMSO: 12.3.1985)


12 The Harris Research Centre, Survey on Televising the House of Lords (October 1985).