The Case for

TELEVISING PARLIAMENT

by

ROBIN DAY

Foreword by

The Right Hon. R. A. Butler, C.H., M.P.

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NOTE

The author wishes to emphasize that this pamphlet expresses his personal opinion and should not be taken as representing the views of the BBC.

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THE SWING OF OPINION

One wet and windy night this year a small group of men were huddled together underneath dripping umbrellas in Parliament Square, a few feet from Abraham Lincoln's Statue. The time was 10.15 p.m. and the date Monday June 17th, 1963. Across the Square, the House of Commons had just voted in the most critical division for many years, after the debate on the Profumo scandal.

The men who sheltered under the umbrellas were Members of Parliament and reporters. They were taking part in a BBC television report on the division, in which 27 Conservatives abstained. The MPs had rushed out from the lobbies to join the Panoramo outside broadcast team waiting across the road in Parliament Square.

The news, the occasion, and the weather made it a dramatic broadcast. But it was a lamentably awkward and secondhand way of using television. Many people, including MPs, suddenly realised how television is hamstrung in its efforts to communicate important Parliamentary proceedings to the public. A typical comment came from the TV critic of the Daily Mail:

"Though my own feelings have never been more than lukewarm towards the idea of televising Parliament, the Profumo debate was obviously a strong argument in favour of it... you felt that television's attempts to report and analyse the progress were a very feeble substitute indeed for being able to see and judge for yourself."

There was no question of televising the debate itself, for Parliament still shuts its doors against the television cameras as firmly as it shut them against newspaper reporters in bygone days.

There was not even the possibility of getting rooms inside the Parliament buildings as studio centres for the service which the TV networks were seeking to provide throughout the debate. So the BBC operated outside in the Square, and Independent Television News set up a makeshift studio in a nearby pub.

Such were the best arrangements which could be made for television coverage of this crucial Parliamentary event. No incident has done more to strengthen the case for televising Parliament.

Until recently the thought of TV cameras in the House of Commons was repugnant to all except a very few. But with television firmly established as part of the press and of public life, the idea has steadily gained favour both inside Parliament and out. It has become
increasingly evident that Parliament, in its own interest, should not continue to shut itself off from the television cameras.

Six years ago, after suffering the frustrations of a Parliamentary reporter trying to describe six-hour debates in two-minute verbal reports on TV, I began asking leading Parliamentarians about televising the House. 'Over my dead body' was the most frequent reply, but some at least were open-minded. Even so, no one took it very seriously.

When the Canadians televised the State Opening of their Parliament by the Queen, recordings of this ceremony were seen in Britain. The BBC promptly applied for permission to televise our own State Opening at Westminster. In the following year, 1958, after many doubts and misgivings, Government and Opposition eventually agreed that this could be done. The television coverage was hailed as brilliant and the Constitution survived.

Television had entered Parliament for the first time, though the Government declared that there was no intention of allowing cameras into the ordinary business of Parliament. The broadcast made constitutional history. Television enabled all the people to witness an ancient Parliamentary ritual previously seen only by a privileged few. As a television spectacle it was second only in splendour to the Coronation. But to me, working as a commentator for this ceremony, it did not seem right that television should be admitted only to show the pageantry and the symbolism, while being excluded from the working life of Parliament.

At first only a very small minority of MPs shared this opinion. But gradually the growth of the television audience and the problems of political broadcasting made more and more MPs revise their views. It was not until Aneurin Bevan sprang a surprise on everybody by advocating the televising of Parliament, that the Government was forced to think about it seriously for the first time. Mr. Bevan was speaking in the debate on the Address in 1959:

"At the beginning of this Parliament I am going to suggest that a serious investigation takes place into the technical possibilities of televising Parliamentary proceedings."

Mr. Cyril Osborne (Louth): "Oh, no, Nye."

Mr. Bevan: "I know that Members shake their heads, but why should they be so shy? . . . All I am suggesting is that in these days when all the apparatus of mass suggestion are against democratic education, we should seriously consider re-establishing intelligent communication between the House of Commons and the Electorate as a whole. That, surely, is a democratic process."

In one or two private arguments Mr. Bevan had tackled me vigorously about the problems of televising Parliament, but he had quickly grasped the essential point that Parliament should not be shut off from the power of television. I was less surprised than others when he made his suggestion from the despatch box. What particularly disturbed him was the system under which politicians were granted access to television’s powerful platform. This was one of the main arguments he gave for televising Parliament:

"Recently, and not only recently but for many years now, there has grown up what I consider a most humiliating state of affairs in which Members of the House are picked out to take part in television broadcasts at the ipse dixit of the bureaucracy at Broadcasting House. In fact there has been nothing more humiliating than to see Members of Parliament in responsible positions selected by unrepresentative persons to have an opportunity of appearing on the radio or television . . . Also, what is almost worse, political alternatives are not placed before the people in a realistic fashion because of the selection of speakers that takes place. I have complained about this on many occasions."

Unfortunately Mr. Bevan followed up his powerful argument with a proposal that made even the most ardent advocate of televising Parliament blanch:

"There ought to be a special channel that they can turn on and listen to us at any time. I am not arguing that we should have only special debates televised, but that there should be a special channel for the House of Commons itself . . ."

Mr. Bevan’s case for televising Parliament had been impressive, but his idea of a complete and continuous transmission was widely ridiculed. It distracted attention from the strength of his main argument. No other way of televising Parliament was discussed on that occasion.

It seemed to me that an alternative method was much more likely to gain acceptance—a late-evening ‘Television Hansard’, which would be an edited recording of the day’s proceedings,* varying in length according to what had happened. A TV Hansard on these lines, I argued, would avoid all the main objections to Mr. Bevan’s proposal:

*The name 'Television Hansard' has been criticised as a misnomer on the grounds that Hansard is a verbatim report. But apart from the advantage of shortness and simplicity, the whole point was that unlike the traditional Hansard, television’s equivalent would have to be edited. The printed Hansard is one thing, a television Hansard would be another.
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1. It would not monopolize a special channel.
2. It would enable Question Time and important afternoon speeches to be seen in the evening by a much bigger audience.
3. There would be no problem as to which MPs are called at peak viewing hours. All would have a reasonable chance of inclusion in a late-evening edited report.
4. Tedium procedures could be omitted, thus avoiding the fear (expressed by Mr. Gaitskell) that “hours of infinite boredom” would be inflicted on the public.

This idea of an edited version has now become generally accepted as the method which would have to be used if Parliament is ever televised on a public channel.

As a result of Mr. Bevan’s request for a technical investigation into the possibilities of televising Parliament, the Government asked the BBC to make a report. This was not published. Nor were any experiments conducted.

Since 1960 the subject has kept cropping up at Question Time, and in March 1963 when the House debated Mr. Charles Pannell’s motion on Parliamentary reform, the question of televising the House had become sufficiently important for front-bench speakers on both sides to deal with it at some length. The most conservative view came from the Labour Chief Whip, Mr. Herbert Bowden. He attacked the whole idea as ‘frightening’, and said:

‘I do not like the idea... I do not want Parliament to become an alternative to That Was The Week That Was, or Steptoe & Son or Coronation Street’.

Mr. Bowden was giving his personal view—which is not shared by all his front-bench colleagues. Mr. James Callaghan, for instance, is strongly in favour of televising Parliament. (Speech reported in The Times, July 9 1962.

The Liberal leader, Mr. Jo Grimond, announced his conversion in the same debate:

“I used to be against the idea of televising the House of Commons but it is an essential function of the House to raise issues and get them across to the public. I do not want the House televised direct in session, but I want a programme like ‘Today in Parliament’ put on at night because I think this is a great function.”

The most significant contribution came from Mr. Iain Macleod. He too spoke personally, but with all the weight of his position as

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Leader of the House of Commons, Mr. Macleod’s remarks came as a complete break with orthodox Parliamentary opinion about television. Emphasizing that it was a matter for the House to decide, he recalled the groundless anxieties about televising the Coronation and the Party Conferences. Referring to Mr. Bowden’s hostility to televising Parliament, Mr. Macleod declared:

“Frankly, I disagree with him... I myself think there is a great deal to be said for it. I agree with the leader of the Liberal Party.”

He added that he could see a considerable case for an edited version, television’s “Today in Parliament”.

Since that debate, an interesting variant of the plan for an edited version has been persuasively canvassed by a member of the Cabinet, Mr. William Deedes, Minister without Portfolio. The argument runs as follows. In order to present a late-night edited version to the public on TV, the cameras would have to be running continuously and expensively all day. Mr. Deedes wants to make fuller use of this continuous camera coverage by having it ‘piped live’ on closed circuit to certain institutions such as universities, newspaper offices, clubs, etc. These organizations would pay a special subscription for this service. Mr. Deedes points to two advantages of this scheme. First, the educational value to students and others. Second, the financial contribution which these special subscriptions could make towards the very high cost of televising Parliament.

This would certainly be a very useful arrangement if enough special subscribers are interested, but my own view is that it should not be regarded as a substitute for an evening edited version, on a public channel for the entire TV audience, at a time when ordinary people who work during the day could tune in if they wish.

Despite the weight of Mr. Macleod’s support, and the growing interest among other Parliamentarians, the idea of televising Parliament is still repugnant to many MPs. Some, while not hostile, are doubtful about the proposal to televise proceedings in edited form. Others are worried about the possible inconvenience and distraction (cameras, lights, etc.) and about television’s effect on the atmosphere of debate. From conversations with MPs who are against the whole idea it is clear that many of the arguments have not been clearly put to them. This is not surprising. The question has never been fully debated in the House, nor investigated by a Select Committee.

The purpose of this pamphlet is therefore to set out the case for televising Parliamentary proceedings in edited form and to urge that
WHY TELEVISE PARLIAMENT?

There are many compelling reasons why the televising of Parliament would be immensely beneficial to the public, to broadcasting, to democracy and to Parliament itself.

1. Authentic political debate could be seen on the TV screen.

The viewer would see debates between those who have the political responsibility. Parliament may all too often be a disappointing forum, but it is at least preferable to staged studio discussions between hack controversialists brought in from Westminster or Fleet Street. Television discussions about politics may stimulate and entertain, but they are not the real thing. One difficulty with these discussions is that they can be killed by a Minister's refusal to take part. The programme may have to be cancelled. This means that the rule of balance can be used as an instrument of censorship. At best, the discussion proceeds with a loyal backbencher put up as the Minister's understudy. He may perform well, but he cannot speak with the same authority as the man responsible, the Minister. The discussion is virtually crippled.

A 'Television Hansard' would ensure that any issue discussed by the Commons is seen by the viewer in its Parliamentary setting. Instead of seeing Cabinet Ministers (when they consent) interrogated only by professional TV interviewers, the public would see them regularly confronted by those to whom they are constitutionally responsible. Television interviewing, if it is vigorous and incisive, can be a useful form of journalism. It is no substitute for Parliamentary questioning or debate.

2. Parliament would no longer be shut off from the most powerful medium of mass communication.

The Press can report Parliament as fully as it wishes. Television, denied direct coverage, cannot do more than present the briefest verbal accounts, or interviews from makeshift studios outside the House. No television technique has yet been found (even by ITN's enterprising Dateline Westminster) which adequately conveys the arguments, let alone the atmosphere, of a Parliamentary debate. How can Parliament's prestige be maintained if the work of its members goes largely unseen by the modern mass audience? By permitting the entry of television, Parliament would ensure that this potent magnifier of reputations is not monopolized by quiz panellists, announcers, commentators, university dons, and politicians who have failed to be elected.

3. A Television Hansard would solve a crucial problem of British broadcasting: the mistrust and alarm which the increasingly critical independence of TV journalism has aroused in both big political parties. This is a point which may not be generally appreciated. Over the last few years the growth of journalistic freedom in broadcasting, especially in television, has been tremendous. The duty of impartiality has been interpreted in a more robust and independent spirit. The inevitable, but not intended, result has been that the effect of some programmes may have appeared biased against the Government. The longer the Government has been in power the more noticeable and more natural has this tendency become. This may suit the Opposition at the present time, but they are fully aware that this critical independence, steadily achieved in the formative years of mass television, will not suddenly die away if a Labour Government comes to power. I have heard it argued—and this is the crux of the matter—that a Labour Government might feel itself to be in an intolerable situation if, in addition to a predominantly anti-Labour press', the supposedly impartial' TV networks maintain a critical independence whose effect might appear anti-Government. Such a situation might, it is hinted, lead to Government pressure, and attempts to curb the hard-won independence of TV journalism. Alternatively, on the more generous assumption that a Labour Government would resist any temptation to suppress or interfere with programmes, the mere prospect of such pressure might cause the TV authorities to order more caution and restraint in topical programmes.

Both these possibilities hold the most serious implications for the future of British television. Both would mean putting the clock back ten years or more. But if Parliament were televised the situation would be transformed. Any temptation to curb the vigorous impartiality of TV journalism would be removed. For whatever the effect of ordinary TV programmes, a 'Television Hansard' would ensure that the Government's case would be regularly put before the public, just as clearly and as effectively as it may be put before Parliament. What could be fairer?

Equally, televising Parliament would dispel the misgivings of the many Conservatives who may not be convinced that TV journalism would, in fact, continue to be as critical under a Labour Government. For if Parliament were televised the Opposition's case would
be presented on the screen as frequently and as fully as the Government's.

This reasoning is based on the conviction that a 'Television Hansard', with its potentially vast audience for debates on big issues, would develop into the most influential forum of public affairs on television. If I am right in this belief, other programmes featuring political discussions and interviews would cease to possess the importance with which they are now credited. In this way the uneasiness felt in both big parties about television's critical spirit would be allayed if Parliament were televised.

4. Whichever party happens to be in power, the televising of Parliament would bring much benefit to both sides. Ministers would benefit, not only from the regular platform of a TV Hansard but by being burdened with fewer TV appearances in addition to their Parliamentary duties. I once saw the Prime Minister give three airport interviews at seven-thirty in the morning after an all-night flight from America. A 'Television Hansard' could have transmitted the more important statement which he made to the House shortly afterwards. A Cabinet Minister who makes an important statement in the House sometimes repeats it more than once for TV. Otherwise he does not personally explain it to the viewing public at all. Either procedure is unsatisfactory. A 'Television Hansard' would avoid both.

Opposition leaders would benefit because a regular 'TV Hansard' would enable their views on specific topics to be seen in daily juxtaposition to those of Ministers. At present a Government has a natural advantage in TV news programmes, because Ministers are always making news with decisions and announcements. An Opposition also makes news in various ways, but its comments on an issue may not be so newsworthy as a Ministerial pronouncement on the same subject.

5. Other vexed and artificial problems of political broadcasting would be largely swept away:

(a) Political 'balance' would no longer be a crucial problem in topical programmes. If MPs have a fair and regular chance of being seen in a 'Television Hansard', the illusory search for 'balance' would cease to cause daily headaches at Lime Grove, Television House, or at party headquarters. A simple clash between official party spokesmen is easy to arrange but it may not reflect the real division of opinion. As Sir William Haley described his experience as Director-General of the BBC: '... it was child's play to keep the balance between the parties; it was a very difficult thing to keep the balance within the parties."

(b) 'Ministerial' broadcasts would rarely be needed and problems arising from them would no longer be crucial. These are the so-called 'non-political' broadcasts by Ministers on matters of national importance. The Opposition may seek to reply if they consider a Ministerial broadcast is controversial, as Mr. Gaitskell did after Sir Anthony Eden's Suez broadcast. The BBC has to decide whether such a broadcast is controversial or not. A similar situation may arise when the Prime Minister is 'invited' to broadcast on a major national issue. When Mr. Macmillan broadcast to the nation about the collapse of the Common Market negotiations, Mr. George Brown (then acting Leader of the Labour Party) was allowed a reply by ITV, but not by the BBC. Why should such invidious decisions, however fair-mindedly they are made, rest with the broadcasting authorities? A 'Television Hansard' would enable Ministerial broadcasts of national importance to be made from the proper place—the Government despatch box, and answered from the proper place—the Opposition despatch box.

(c) Party political broadcasts could be abolished. These broadcasts, widely acknowledged as being poor politics and worse television, are transmitted at peak hours on both channels at the same time. They leave the wretched viewer, who may be already converted, or beyond conversion, no alternative. A 'Television Hansard' would enable the public to see their political leaders in the nation's prime forum of debate—Parliament.

6. The system by which MPs have opportunities to appear on television would be put on a much fairer basis.

There are two ways in which this would happen:

(a) Minority opinion, as voiced in parliamentary debate, would get a fairer share on the screen. This applies not only to the Liberals, but also to rebel or dissenting groups within the big parties. Though unorthodox views are now broadcast more often than in the past, there still exists the ever-ready pressure of the Whips and party machines to keep 'representative' (i.e. official) opinion to the fore when MPs appear in TV discussions. There is, moreover, that peak-hour perquisite of party orthodoxy, the TV space allocated on both channels for 'party political broadcasts'.

The individual heretic, the lone parliamentary dissenter, has traditionally been able to catch the Speaker's eye. With the cameras in the House he would catch the public eye on television more often
than he is able to at present. A 'Television Hansard' would ensure that a Churchill of the future would not be restricted from broadcasting his warnings about the Gathering Storm.

(b) MPs would not be so dependent for their access to TV's platform on the arbitrary choice of TV executives who produce topical programmes. This was one of Mr. Bevan's main arguments, deploring 'the humiliating state of affairs' in which BBC or ITV officials decide which of the people's representatives shall appear in TV programmes. With Parliament regularly on television the question of which MPs are invited to appear in ordinary topical programmes would become much less important. Choice (of speech extracts) would have to be exercised in editing a 'TV Hansard', but quite different considerations would then apply—see page 17.

7. Individual injustices which are aired in Parliament and in the Press could be aired on the television screen. Television is virtually impotent in this sphere. It is television's gravest weakness. At present there can be brief verbal accounts of Parliamentary protests, but rarely can TV cover the issues adequately. Unlike the Press, it can rarely make investigations into individual cases or expose injustices involving legal charges or official misdeemeanours. This is partly due to the impartiality rule which may prevent any discussion if one side refuses to appear. It is also due to the lack of space to make detailed investigations into individual cases. There is the further danger of libel, a matter on which the TV authorities are even more cautious than the Press. In television, libel risks are very seldom taken and actions are rarely fought. A 'Television Hansard' would be free to report anything raised in Parliament. It would provide an entirely new platform for the exposure of justice and incompetence.

8. Television would stimulate the House of Commons to modernize its procedure and improve the standard of debate. Overhaul of the parliamentary machine is being demanded on all sides. A group of Conservative MPs has warned that our system of parliamentary government must 'change or decay'. Is it not reasonable to expect that if the way Parliament works is exposed by television to a much wider public, the result would be to encourage change rather than decay? MPs are not unresponsive to public opinion, and perhaps one reason why Parliament has been slow to reform itself is that few members of the electorate are aware of what is wrong. Hence there is no pressure of public opinion about parliamentary reform.

It is argued that television would encourage exhibitionism and stunts. I believe that the very opposite would happen. The knowledge that their activities were being seen in the homes of the electorate would make MPs think twice about indulging in the more vulgar habits, such as booing, and cheap interruptions. Consider the known effects of the television camera. How often do we see on TV the same exuberant rudery and extremism that is seen at political meetings, or even sometimes in Parliament? (Not often enough, to my way of thinking.) Contrary to a curious misconception, the presence of the television camera has the remarkable effect of making public figures behave—and argue—more reasonably. They know that this gives a much better impression on the small screen in the quiet family circle. Television's intimacy encourages the arts of persuasion and argument. Indeed television is in danger of making controversy too calm, too civilized, too moderate. Lord Hailsham's celebrated TV interview about the Profumo scandal was an exception to prove the rule. It created a sensation and provoked strong reactions of all kinds because it was so heated and impassioned, and in complete contrast to the usual political utterance on TV.

The fear that television would destroy the traditional House of Commons atmosphere was the theme of Mr. Herbert Bowden's argument when he spoke in the debate on March 15th 1963:

"Through you, Mr. Speaker, we address each other in debate. We are not speaking to the country or to the world outside. It is true that reports of our debates appear in Hansard. But the very intimacy of our debates would be lost if the atmosphere was not as it is. . . . I am very much afraid that once the television cameras swung into action the whole atmosphere of this Chamber would change. . . ."

"I have noticed that this House has its moods. It has its hilarious moods, its serious moods, and very often when an important statement is imminent we are often apprehensive and giggle and behave rather like schoolgirls. I think that is right. It is right that Members of Parliament should react in that way. If an important statement is expected, the apprehensions about what its effects may be on the country have their effects upon us. A great deal of that would be lost if it were felt that the television cameras were trained on us. Television would add nothing to our privileges or to our dignity."

What substance is there in this argument? Whether all MPs would agree that a tendency to 'giggle like schoolgirls' is one of Parliament's precious traditions, I am not sure. Certainly no one who respects
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Parliament would wish to destroy the uniquely intimate atmosphere of debate. There is no evidence that television would have this effect. On the contrary, television, with its close-up pictures seen by viewers seated in twos and threes in their homes, is a medium perfectly suited to the best traditions of Parliamentary behaviour. Members who sought to ‘hog’ the cameras by spurious points of order, or by means of ‘stunt’ adjournments and other procedural gimmicks, would soon incur the contempt of the public and the hostility of their fellow Members.

Then there is the fear that Members would ‘play to the gallery’. Mr. Macmillan gave the best answer to this point when Mr. Herbert Morrison (as he then was) referred to the danger of MPs talking to the cameras, and said that debates should not be on the basis of what the public outside would like. Mr. Macmillan expressed sympathy with that view but added:

“I am bound to say, if I give my personal opinion, that that was exactly the argument which was presented against the publication of Hansard.”

9. **There would be a new and powerful platform to counteract the monopolistic tendencies of Fleet Street.** At a time when famous organs of newspaper opinion have been shut down or threatened with extinction, the televising of Parliament would be one of the most effective ways in which television could, as it must, be built into an alternative platform of democratic expression.

10. **Television offers a measureless opportunity for re-kindling interest in Parliament.** The interest might well prove to be critical, but would that be unhealthy? The great need is to re-establish, as Aneurin Bevan said, “intelligent communication between the House of Commons and the electorate as a whole”. Nine out of ten people in Britain can now watch television in their own homes. A Television Hansard would give a vast new section of the public a fair idea of what Parliament is really about. Lord Hichingbrooke, M.P. (as he then was) summed up the argument thus:

“Parliament must work with the tools of the age or it will sculpt no monuments for the future. If there is disillusionment with the Parliamentary process it is because our difficulties are not shared with, and understood by, our constituents. Let the cameras reveal the facts.”

THE EDITING PROBLEM

There now appears to be general agreement that if Parliament is to be televised at all, it must be done in edited form. The main arguments for this method have already been stated on page 8.

Complete live transmission might be inappropriate on special occasions, such as Budget Day, but otherwise there would be an edited report of the day’s proceedings lasting from half an hour upwards and varying in length according to what had happened. It would begin fairly late at night, at, say, 10.30 p.m.

While it is agreed that continuous live transmission every day would be wholly impracticable, there is considerable doubt about how a late-night report would be edited. This is what seems to worry MPs. Who would do the editing and on what principles?

When Mr. Macmillan was asked about this he observed that editing would raise ‘delicate problems’. This is so. The editing of *all* political news raises ‘delicate problems’, particularly in television news which, unlike the press, must be politically impartial. There are TV executives and commentators whose professional speciality is in handling such problems, and who would be well qualified to work on a ‘Television Hansard’.

Will not the process of selection place too great a power in the hands of those responsible for editing? Here it should be explained that the choice of extracts from a Parliamentary debate is a very different matter from the choice of MPs invited to appear in, say, a *Panorama* or *Gallery* discussion. A topical programme like *Panorama* is initiated, devised and ‘cast’ by TV producers. A subject is chosen, the treatment decided, and speakers are invited accordingly. Inevitably there are many MPs who are rarely, if ever, asked to appear, because the producer’s choice will understandably be influenced by consideration of experience, authority or television expertise. The producer’s choice may also be affected by party demands for an acceptable spokesman.

That is what happens on ordinary TV programmes, but (the distinction is crucial) a televised report of Parliament would not be a producer’s creation. It would be a report of a public event. Selection of extracts from Parliamentary speeches would be a matter of editorial news judgment. The selection would be openly made from a known list of speakers. Similar judgment is regularly exercised in selecting extracts to be read on radio’s *Today in Parliament*, in editing TV reports of Party Conferences, and in TV coverage of election news. In all such programmes it has been found possible to
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handle the ‘delicate problems’ fairly. A further point is that a 'Television Hansard' would be seen daily, so that if complete satisfaction could not be given to everybody on a single evening, this would be achieved over a period of time.

Who would be entrusted with producing the 'Television Hansard'? This would be for the House to decide in consultation with the TV authorities. Presumably the responsibility would be offered to the BBC, or perhaps to a specially created Parliamentary Television Unit which would include personnel from both BBC and ITV. There can be little doubt that the BBC would be keenly interested in televising Parliament as a feature of its forthcoming second service, judging from the comment by Mr. Kenneth Adam, Director of BBC Television:

“If cameras are admitted to the Palace of Westminster, then BBC 2 might well be the place for an extended version of Today in Parliament.”

I do not wish to belittle the difficulties of presenting a nightly edited version. It would be a tremendous challenge, editorially and technically, even to those most experienced in political reporting on television. But with experience and practice there is no reason why the problems should not be satisfactorily solved.

The process of editing would solve one difficulty about the TV coverage of Question Time. Mr. Macmillan raised the point during an exchange on February 14th, 1963:

“. . . I am not an expert, but I should have thought that it would be rather difficult to make Question Time very good from a broadcasting point of view unless the public were given an Order Paper, otherwise the proceedings would be difficult to follow.”

This would be so if Question Time were televised ‘live’, owing to the procedure of questions being called by number without the question on the order paper being read out. In an edited version, however, the solution would be easy. The reporter presenting the programme would insert a linking phrase (e.g. ‘Mr. Patrick Wall asked Mr. Butler for a statement on his talks with the Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia’). Supplemements would be seen being put by the questioner.

This technique would enable exchanges to be selected, and questions to be followed clearly by the viewer. In introducing extracts from speeches, a similar method would be used, with the ‘link’ leading in to the extract (e.g. ‘Mr. Gordon Walker welcomed the Bill...

* Address in Leeds University, November 1962.

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but said the Opposition would move two important Amendments."

It may be argued that some MPs speak in such a long-winded fashion that it would be hard to select short extracts which fairly represented their case. This would not always be too difficult, but in any case it is unlikely that television would have the wholly desirable effect of making Parliamentary speeches a good deal more succinct than they are now. No doubt this will be attacked as changing the character of Parliament. Would this be so terrible? Parliament is ancient, but it has not yet fossilized. The style and length of speeches are quite different now from what they were fifty years ago. A little more crispness and clarity would not do Parliament any harm. The number of frustrated MPs who go home with undelivered speeches in their pockets would be fewer.

THE TECHNICAL PROBLEM

Perhaps the most serious anxiety felt by many MPs concerns the technical paraphernalia. Mr. Charles Curran asked the Leader of the House on March 15th, 1963:

"On this question of the possibility of televising our proceedings, has my right hon. Friend taken into account the difficulties that would be involved, for example, all the apparatus, gear and mechanisms which have to be brought into the Chamber? Would that make any difference to the conducting of our Business?"

Mr. Macleod replied:

"I am certain these arguments are formidable, but that they are also not insuperable."

Mr. Macmillan took the same line in answers on March 1st, 1960. Basing his replies on the BBC’s unpublished report, Mr. Macmillan summed up technical requirements as ‘a rather stronger light’ and ‘cameras in various parts of the galleries’. Mr. Macmillan described these requirements as ‘no more than rather inconvenient’. The thought of only limited inconvenience may be extremely distasteful to many MPs. It should therefore be pointed out that Mr. Macmillan’s remarks were based on a preliminary survey made more than three years ago, without experiments having been made to overcome any alleged inconvenience. An accurate assessment by the technical experts (of whom I am not one) can only be made after full experiment, taking into account the latest advances in electronic cameras and recording processes. If there are serious obstacles, these can only be overcome if the House of Commons
indicates its positive interest in being televised by saying 'We want it. Can you do it?'. This is the only way. No one would want to dislocate the procedure of Parliament by the presence of obtrusive camera equipment and the discomfort of hot arc-lamps. There has been no indication that such dislocation would result. What minor inconvenience there might be could be overcome only if experiments are permitted.

MPs would not need to be guinea-pigs when experiments are conducted. When the adjustable light-temperature system for the rebuilt House had to be tested under realistic conditions, troops from the Brigade of Guards were paraded in the Chamber as stand-ins. This admirable body of men may be less suited to perform as debaters in the Parliamentary manner. There would be no difficulty in arranging for university students to take the part of MPs in mock debates during the recess. The recess would give technicians time to consider lighting adjustments, the position of cameras, and whether any minor structural alterations would be necessary in order to hide the cameras. A small Committee of the House could attend to sample the conditions, to ensure that Honourable and Right Honourable members would not be dazzled, roasted, tripped up by cables, or hit on the head by a zoom lens when they jumped up to catch the Speaker's eye. If these fears were cleared away, Parliament could then permit closed-circuit coverage of real debates, so that Members could see how the 'TV Hansard' would be edited and presented to the public.

A Select Committee, therefore, should not only enquire into the constitutional and editorial aspects of televising Parliament, but at the same time should authorize full-scale technical experiments, the results of which would play a crucial part in determining the Committee's recommendations.

**WHO WOULD WATCH?**

How large an audience for a 'Television Hansard' would there be? For big occasions, like Budget Day, or debates on issues arousing intense public interest, the audience would be vast. The BBC's special report transmitted from Parliament Square after the Profumo debate was seen by about eight million people. This was at 10.15 p.m. The audience would have been even higher during the winter months. A slightly different example, but one illustrating the audience which can be attracted by a late-evening programme on a major political issue was to be seen in the BBC Special on the Beeching Plan (time: 10 p.m.) for which the estimated audience was 10.8 million.

Apart from such exceptional occasions it is fair to assume that for a late-night Parliamentary report there would normally be a minority audience. But it should be remembered how large a 'minority' audience can be. It is relevant to note the BBC audience figures for serious political programmes late at night. The average audience for *Gallery* has been about 2½ million, and recently even larger. Party Conference reports (at 10.45 p.m.) have had audiences of similar size. When *Gallery* has presented a 'By-election special' the audience has been as high as nearly four million. Even when the programme continued after midnight to await the results, the BBC audience was estimated at seven hundred thousand, not to mention those watching ITV's simultaneous coverage.

These figures give some idea of the 'minority' which might, on average, watch a 'Television Hansard'. Two or three million may not seem very large, but it is a very much larger number of people than those who read the Parliamentary reports in papers like The Times, The Guardian, or The Daily Telegraph. Even if fewer than a million watched at any one time, there would be a vast number of people who might watch occasionally and would thus get some sight and understanding of what Parliament does. Every day there would be something worth televising—parts of Question Time, or a Minister's statement followed by Opposition protests. The debate which follows may not always be of sensational interest, but it is bound to concern the rights or interests of somebody somewhere. Parliament would not be televised as mass entertainment but as a public service.

**PARLIAMENT, PRESS AND TV**

The case for a 'Television Hansard' is inspired by respect for the institution of Parliament. For how can Parliament maintain its rightful importance as the nation's prime forum of debate, if it shuts itself off from the nation's prime medium of mass communication?

There are those who profess a cynical contempt for Parliament. The House of Commons is an easy target for the attacks of sophisticated writers, who appear to confuse an assignment in the press gallery with the job of a dramatic critic. Parliament is not a show staged for the benefit of journalists. Its proceedings must often be pedestrian and tedious, but the most pedestrian debate matters to someone, and amid the long hours of tedium there are clashes of
principle and moments of drama. Television would let Parliament be seen for what it is: most of the time a workshop, and some of the time a theatre.

I am not primarily concerned with the interests of television, except insofar as it is prevented from serving the democratic process more efficiently than at present. Television is not an end in itself. It is simply a means of communication and expression. The admission of the TV camera would be in Parliament's own interest.

Parliament, however, has not always been able to see where its true interests lie. Two hundred years ago Parliament was not prepared to admit that the public who had elected it had a right to know what it was doing. Yet it is impossible to conceive how modern parliamentary government could have developed without press reporting. The eighteenth-century struggles between Parliament and the Press have their unmistakeable echoes in the present-day argument about televising Parliament. It was a very long time before Parliament admitted reporters or agreed to the publication of the debates. And not until the early nineteenth century was Mr. T. C. Hansard providing the regular series of reports which eventually became the official record. In 1738 the House of Commons, alarmed by the 'great presumption' of journalists in reporting its proceedings, declared it 'a high indignity and notorious breach of privilege to print accounts of debates'. The main argument was the danger of misrepresentation. This fear has its equivalent today in the warnings about unfair editing of a 'Television Hansard'. Another of the old arguments has an even more familiar ring in the TV age. It was urged that press reports should be forbidden because they would tend to make MPs accountable for what they said inside the House to people outside it!

Fortunately for Parliament and the country, this notion of democracy did not prevail for long. In 1771 Parliament was openly defied. Those who were consequently committed to the Tower of London became popular heroes. Their release was the occasion of a great demonstration. The House of Commons gave way and made no further attempt to enforce its order. But the reporting of Parliament is still, technically, a breach of privilege. And the ban still applies to radio and television which have firmly established themselves as part of the press. Since it is only by Parliament's authority that the broadcasting services operate at all, one can hardly expect any challenges in eighteenth-century style from the camera or microphone—even if the equipment was small enough to be smuggled in without anyone noticing.

It is to be hoped that Parliament will not be so slow and stubborn about television as it was about the Press. In the seventeenth century, 'news-letters'—precursors of modern newspapers—were circulating notes on the secret happenings in Parliament. It was more than a hundred years before Parliament granted reporters a bench in their own right. How long will it be before television takes its inevitable and rightful place in the Press Gallery? It cannot be long now. The case for televising Parliament is overwhelming. Future generations, accustomed to seeing Parliament on their television screens, will wonder what all the fuss was about.
Robin Day, aged 39, is a commentator and interviewer for BBC Television. He was formerly Parliamentary reporter for Independent Television News. He was President of the Oxford Union in 1950, and was called to the Bar in 1952. He stood for Parliament unsuccessfully in the General Election of 1959. His work as a television journalist has been principally concerned with political affairs and for several years he has been urging that Parliament should be televised.