

Images of the House of Representatives

Impact of changes in media and communication technologies

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For much of its history pictorial images of the House of Representatives have been confined to cartoons and still photographs on significant occasions. Radio broadcasting was introduced in 1946. Proceedings are now televised to some extent and are accessible on the Internet.

To mark the centenary of the Australian Parliament, the Department of the House of Representatives published a book entitled *Images of the House*.¹ The book provides a pictorial record of the first hundred years, 1901–2001, of the House of Representatives. The nature of the images, and the mode of presentation of the House to the public, have changed considerably over the century, reflecting the wishes of parliamentarians, changes in media and communication technologies, changes in societal expectations, and changes in the way the media reports information, amongst other factors. Today a great deal of parliamentary information is available almost instantly to the public through the Internet without media filter. This has not always been so — and it is of interest, although beyond the scope of this article, to reflect on the impact of these changes on the effectiveness of the Parliament, and on the public's perception of the institution.

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¹ Department of the House of Representatives, *Images of the House: the first hundred years: House of Representatives 1901-2001*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra 2002.

Newspaper reporting

At the commencement of the Commonwealth Parliament in 1901, the press's reporting of the proceedings of the House of Representatives was detailed, with lengthy extracts of the proceedings being reported in the major metropolitan dailies.

The minutes of evidence of the Printing Committee of the House (sitting in conference with the Printing Committee of the Senate) of 20 March 1902, refer to the supply of copies of *Hansard* to newspapers, and indicate the priority accorded the matter:

The matter was first dealt with by the Prime Minister who ordered copies to be sent to a large number of newspapers. . . . Copies are supplied to all the principal town and country newspapers. They are sent to 245 newspapers in New South Wales, 194 in Victoria, 100 in Queensland, 133 in South Australia, 110 in Western Australia, and 60 in Tasmania.

Parliamentary reporting in the major dailies was factual, often extensive, and unadorned by image. In addition to the verbatim extracts, there were articles supported by illustrations, including cartoons, sketches and photographs, in magazines and periodicals of the day.

Representatives of the press have observed proceedings of the House since its inception. Members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery can be seen in these early photographs seated in the press gallery, located behind and above the Speaker. All members of the press gallery were male, as were all the Members of the House. At times detailed sketches of the Chamber were made and they were featured in the newspapers of the day as prints. The other main parliamentary related images that appeared in the early newspapers took the form of cartoons or caricatures. The cartooning tradition is long-established in Australia — and then, as now, could be caustic.

In these early years, the public also saw their politicians through documentary films. From the 1930s to the 1960s, 'Movietone News' and 'Cinesound Review' newsreels, for example, were popular. These were short black and white documentary films of the major news items of the day, which were screened in movie theatres before the main features. However, there was almost no footage of the House in session.

Still photography — photographs of the House in session

In the early years of the House of Representatives, very few photographic images of the Chamber in session were taken. The photographs that were taken were formal, posed and were to record significant events. They were black and white — or in sepia tones. Colour photographs did not appear until the 1970s. Each photographic opportunity — and there were few — was subject to the formal approval of the

Speaker. Photographs were taken by private photographers or by newspaper photographers.

After the opening of the Commonwealth Parliament, the first known photographs of the proceedings in the Chamber were taken on 8 October 1901 and were of the first Federal Budget and the introduction of the Customs Tariff. We also have photographs of the debate on 13 November 1918 of the Address to King George V on the acceptance by Germany of the terms of the armistice to end the Great War; the last sitting of the House in Melbourne, Victoria, on 24 March 1927; and the first full day sitting of the House in Canberra on 28 September 1927. There are few other known photographs from these early years.

On 8 October 1901, after the first Chamber photographs were taken, the Leader of the Opposition, Mr George Reid, stated:

I hope that in the flashlight photographs that have been taken to-night we have seen the last of a most irregular and, I think, most unseemly proceeding. . . . Since the matter had gone so far, and every arrangement had been made, I did not think it gracious to raise any objection before the photographs were taken; but now that the photographing is over, I beg, as an individual member, to express the hope that our proceedings will not be interfered with by any such exhibitions in the future.²

The initial phase where photographs were rare and limited to significant events continued for many years. By the mid-1960s, the status was as follows:

For at least twenty-five years photographs have been strictly limited to special occasions or for historical purposes. In that period, all requests have been submitted to Mr Speaker and approval has been given only with the concurrence of the Leaders of the various Parties and subject to such conditions as to time and place imposed by Mr Speaker.³

In the 1940s, the potential advantage to one side of politics from the taking of photographs in the Chamber led to a matter of privilege being raised. The motion — that the company producing the talking film in which only one side of the House speaks is guilty of contempt of this Parliament — was negated on party lines.⁴

In the 1960s, a policy was introduced that whenever there was significant change in membership of the front benches of the Government or the Opposition, photographs would be taken by the News and Information Bureau. The policy had not been in place very long when a photograph, taken under the policy, of the Leader of the Opposition, was used in an advertisement in the *Canberra Times* and other newspapers. The matter was raised as a matter of privilege, and a breach of

² House of Representatives Debates (8.10.1901) 5734.

³ Departmental file 125/37 — Photographs of the Chamber in Session — Summary of requests received and action taken.

⁴ House of Representatives Debates (30 June 1943) 593.

parliamentary privilege was found.⁵ One can postulate that it set the tone for some time.

However, in the 1970s the needs of the electronic media drove change. The television media sought permission to use still photographs from departmental files as a backdrop to their news coverage. As technology improved, the cameras were moved around the still photographs. The appointment of the first political commentators by the television channels led to change in the way parliamentary and political news was conveyed to the public. Doorstop interviews tended to supplement, complement or dispense with the need for, still photographs from the files.

The media subsequently sought and were given permission to come into the House and take moving pictures as background to the news. The films were taken from the press gallery, for a limited period, and were without sound. When televising of proceedings was permitted in the early 1990s (see below), the networks were given access to the footage.

In 1992, following the introduction of televising of proceedings, the Speaker approved access to certain proceedings for still photography. Access is limited to photographers who are members of the Press Gallery or the government photographic service, Auspic. In addition, a limited number of photographers representing major newspapers are permitted to attend Question Time provided they have obtained permission to attend beforehand. Photographers' activities are subject to guidelines intended, where possible, to put them on the same footing as the television camera operators.⁶

Access to the Chamber for still photography of proceedings continues to be controversial. Pressure from the media to relax the guidelines for access continues. On the other hand there is a legitimate concern from Members that photographs can be used out of context.

For example, a decision by Speaker Neil Andrew to allow photographs of the vote on the Bill on human cloning and embryonic stem cell research, a controversial bill where a free vote was permitted, was reported in a major daily as having drawn 'howls of protest' from the Chief Opposition Whip, Mrs Crosio.⁷ The Chief Opposition Whip was concerned that some members 'may be persecuted because there is photographic evidence being displayed on the front page of their local newspaper as to how they have acted or voted in this particular instance'.⁸ The *Australian* took the view that the public have the right to see their democracy at

⁵ Harris I C (ed.) *House of Representatives Practice*, 4th edn, Canberra, 2001, pp. 820–1.

⁶ Details of the conditions applying to still photography are set out in Harris I C, *ibid.*, pp. 121–3.

⁷ *Australian*, 30 August 2002, p. 10.

⁸ House of Representatives Debates (29.8.2002) 6111.

work — parliament belongs to the voters, not the politicians they elect to represent them there.

Radio broadcasting

Following World War II, the public were able to hear the Parliament in operation. Radio broadcasting of proceedings commenced in 1946. The Parliament of Australia was the second Parliament of the Commonwealth, after New Zealand, to introduce broadcasting of proceedings. Radio broadcasts are required by and controlled under the *Parliamentary Proceedings Broadcasting Act 1946*. The Act directs the government broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), to broadcast the proceedings of the House of Representatives or the Senate, or of a joint sitting pursuant to section 57 of the Constitution. The Act also authorises the appointment of a supervisory Joint Committee on the Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings.

Introduction of radio broadcasting was not without reaction from the press.

Ever since the suggestion was made that the proceedings of the Parliament should be broadcast, by cartoons and articles the press has ridiculed it, regarding this innovation as a breach of the press monopoly.⁹

In moving the second reading of the Parliamentary Proceedings Broadcasting Bill, the Minister for Immigration and Minister for Information, Mr Arthur Calwell, stated:

The world is witnessing a great struggle for the preservation of democratic ideals . . . one of the greatest dangers to the form of government favoured by our people is the lack of interest they display in the functioning of their democratic institutions. . . The enactment of this measure would, in my opinion, go far towards strengthening the association between the Parliament and the people . . .¹⁰

In supporting the Bill, the then Leader of the Opposition, Mr R.G. Menzies, stated:

As a general principle, I think that it is desirable that the public should have the fullest access to parliamentary discussions. . . . It is desirable that the electors should be in a position to know what were the actual words spoken by a member of Parliament. It is equally important that they should be in a position, by actually hearing, to assess the personality and significance of the speaker. In one sense, the ideal Parliament would be one in which all debates were carried on in the presence of all the people.¹¹

When sitting, the Parliament is broadcast on the ABC. The proceedings of the House and the Senate are broadcast on alternate days. Since 1988, the broadcast has been on an ABC network established to carry the broadcast of proceedings and

⁹ Mr Beazley K [Snr], Member for Fremantle, House of Representatives Debates (28.6.46) 2054.

¹⁰ House of Representatives Debates (21.6.46) 1716.

¹¹ House of Representatives Debates (28.6.46) 2033.

news material — formerly the Parliamentary and News Network, now called NewsRadio. It was not until November 1988 that other radio stations or networks were permitted, subject to conditions, to broadcast excerpts from proceedings.¹² Professor Clem Lloyd, in a bicentennial publication on the parliamentary press gallery, saw the extended length of time that elapsed before the electronic media were given access to this audio record as ‘a curious anomaly’.¹³

There was an immediate visual impact in the Chamber from radio broadcasting — the erection of a control booth and the installation of microphones. Initially, microphones were placed on the Table and a small number of floor microphones were installed to cater for the remainder of the Chamber. The general Chamber microphones were placed on poles approximately two metres high, prompting a Member at the time to describe the installation as ‘converting the chamber into something resembling a magnified dental parlour or a Barnum and Bailey circus’.¹⁴ By the 1960s, the large floor microphones had been replaced by more discrete microphones installed in Members’ desks.

The press continued, however, to be the dominant medium in conveying the proceedings of the Parliament to the public.

The limited impact of the electronic media on political journalism by the end of the 1960s manifest in the few cursory references made to it by the [Joint Select] committee [on the New and Permanent Parliament House].¹⁵

However, it should be noted that the Joint Select Committee on the New and Permanent Parliament House in its March 1970 report (television having been introduced into Australia in 1956), recommended the televising of proceedings throughout a new Parliament House, on a closed circuit basis.

The dominance of the press changed in the 1990s with the televising of proceedings.

Televising proceedings

Access to the proceedings of the House for televising proceedings came late to Australia compared to many other parliaments. Televising has been permitted only since 1991, and initially on a trial basis. Prior to this, television coverage was permitted to record some of the more notable parliamentary events, commencing with a joint sitting of the Commonwealth Parliament in 1974.

¹² See Harris I C, *op cit.*, pp 120–21.

¹³ Lloyd C J, *Parliament and the Press: The Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery 1901–88*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 1988, p. 241.

¹⁴ House of Representatives Debates (28.6.46) 2039.

¹⁵ Lloyd C J, *op cit.*, 1988, p. 217.

In April 1974, the Joint Committee on the Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings reported that ‘conceptually, it is desirable to televise a portion of the debates and proceedings of the Parliament’ and recommended that a closed-circuit trial period of televising be undertaken before the Parliament makes a final decision.¹⁶

The committee recommended that the ABC be obliged to telecast, on a regular basis, Question Time from the House or Senate on each sitting day and a one-hour summary program each weekend. The two programs would be produced by a Parliamentary Television Unit under the Presiding Officers’ control. Access to the Parliamentary Television Unit’s video tapes would be granted to any television network on specified conditions, framed:

to provide a means, in conformity with acceptable standards of dignity, propriety and decorum, by which the proceedings of the Parliament should be made available to the people of Australia for their knowledge through accurate and impartial coverage of the debates of the Senate and the House of Representatives and public meetings of their Committees.¹⁷

The report also included sketches and photographs showing how the Chambers might look with cameras installed on both a trial and a permanent basis. For the trial it was proposed that cameras and camera operators be mounted on mobile stands, giving the appearance of converting the Chambers into film studios. The permanent fit-out involved hidden cameras. Although the report and its recommendations were not debated by either House and there is no record of Government response, the framework for televising of proceedings proposed, was, in general, in time, adopted.

Closed-circuit televising of proceedings was authorised by the House in May 1983 and cameras were subsequently installed in the Chamber to allow proceedings to be monitored from the offices of the Speaker, the Leader of the House, the Manager of Opposition Business and the three party whips. In the construction of a new Parliament House building, the necessary cabling was laid and cameras were installed — in the Chambers of the House and the Senate and in certain committee rooms — to allow for the televising of proceedings should it be permitted. From 1989, following the move to the new Parliament House building in May 1988, members were able to view proceedings in their rooms through an internal monitoring system.

In February 1991, the Leader of the House, Mr Kim Beazley, moved that the House proceed to televise proceedings, initially on a trial basis. In responding to the motion and in supporting the Government’s decision to televise the proceedings of the House — although being critical of the length of time it had taken the Government to reach a decision — the Manager of Opposition Business, Mr Wal Fife, stated:

¹⁶ Joint Committee on the Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings, *Report Relating to the Televising of Parliamentary Proceedings, Parliamentary Paper No. 61*, Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives, Canberra, 1974, p. 4.

¹⁷ *Op cit.*, p. 51.

It must be said, Mr Speaker, that the quality of debate in this chamber, which at times includes personal vilification and language, if used in a pub, would incite a brawl. This has added, of course, to the public's sense of disenchantment with politics. By televising Parliament and opening the procedures of this chamber to television viewers around Australia, I believe that we will be imposing a discipline upon ourselves, and in particular upon the Government, to raise our standards, address the urgent issues which confront our nation and show the people who voted for us that we can responsibly represent their interests.¹⁸

Throughout the trial, the ABC was permitted to broadcast Question Time live from the Senate and the House of Representatives and television stations were permitted to use excerpts of the internal television monitoring service in news telecasts. Viewer research at the time showed that an average of 68,000 people watched the live telecast of Question Time in the House. These figures then represented one in 250 Australians.¹⁹

Following the trial, in October 1991, continuing approval was given to televising of proceedings, with further review in 1993. The 1993 review amended the conditions for broadcasters to allow withdrawn remarks and points of order to be re-broadcast. However, these changes were quickly overturned by the House. On 20 October 1993, in moving motions to amend the conditions, Mr Beazley, Leader of the House, stated:

television is different from any other element of portrayal of debate in this place. By a quantitative order of magnitude it is so massively more effective in getting a point into the lounge room of the average Australian that that quantitative difference takes on a qualitative character.²⁰

Some may consider that Mr Fife's aspirations for the House have not been fulfilled, and may see the television focus on Question Time as undesirable from the perspective of the House's dignity and reputation. Don Watson, in his biography of former Prime Minister Paul Keating, questioned the suitability of the television medium for portraying the Parliament, in these terms:

Viewers do not understand the nature of the combat; they see it as real when it is theatre, and theatre when it is real. Reality itself they have no hope of seeing in short, carefully edited grabs; and with less and less understanding of the purpose and traditions of the place. . . . The media would make a great display of sharing the public's loathing of loud, vituperative Question Times; but you could not win in Question Time by being quiet and accommodating — and you couldn't win in the media.²¹

¹⁸ House of Representatives Debates (12.2.91) 316.

¹⁹ Select Committee on Televising, *The Eyes Have It! Inquiry into the Televising of the House of Representatives and its Committees*, Parliamentary Paper No. 464, Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives, Canberra 1991, p. 6.

²⁰ House of Representatives Debates (20.10.93) 2190.

²¹ Watson D, *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart: Portrait of Paul Keating PM*, Random House Australia, Milsons Point 2002, pp. 51–2.

At the commencement of the 38th Parliament in 1996, the House agreed to conditions for the live broadcast and rebroadcast of the proceedings and excerpts of proceedings of the House and of the Main Committee and these continue to apply.

- (1) Broadcasting and recordings may only be made from the official and dedicated composite vision and sound feed provided by the Sound and Vision Office;
- (2) Broadcasts shall be used only for the purposes of fair and accurate reports of proceedings, and shall not be used for:
 - a) political party advertising or election campaigns;
 - b) satire or ridicule; or
 - c) commercial sponsorship or commercial advertising;
- (3) Reports of proceedings shall be such as to provide a balanced presentation of differing views;
- (4) Excerpts of proceedings which are subsequently withdrawn may be rebroadcast only if the withdrawal also is rebroadcast;
- (5) The instructions of the Speaker of the House of Representatives, or the Speaker's delegate, in respect of broadcasting, shall be observed.²²

The composite vision and sound feed provided to networks must be produced in conformity with guidelines set for the parliamentary camera operators. The key requirements of the guidelines are that, as a general principle, cameras should focus on the Member with the call, with shots no closer than 'head and shoulders'.²³

From 2000, the televised proceedings of the House and the Main Committee, as well as some of the public hearings of parliamentary committees, have been broadcast live over the Internet. Through the Internet, the public has access to the proceedings of the Parliament in full. In the Australian Capital Territory, subscribers to a broadband service can have television access to the full proceedings of the House and the Senate.

Conclusion

The proceedings of the Commonwealth Parliament have always been open to the public. Yet, there is also a considerable body of anecdotal evidence suggesting that modern media coverage tends to favour short messages with points of views lacking in nuance. As a result, the opening up of Question Time to television in the 1990s has fostered an image of the House as confrontationist. However, it has, at least, continued to link the Parliament to the people. Today, through the Internet, the proceedings are almost instantly available and the House will need to continue to adopt modern communication technologies to maintain that crucial link. ▲

²² *Votes and Proceedings*, 1996–98, pp. 42–3.

²³ See Harris I C, *op cit.*, 2001, p. 118.