

Effective or Affectation? Televising Parliamentary Proceedings and Its Influence on MPs' Behaviour*

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This dull, safe coverage is deliberately less interesting to the audience to make it more acceptable to MPs. No matter. The restrictions can always be relaxed later. They will be, as the Commons discovers the need to make its deliberations more compelling viewing. Broadcasters will be on their best behaviour but will gradually develop confidence and begin to deal less deferentially. So the coverage will get more interesting and television will become addictive. Fears will prove groundless. MPs will wonder why they wasted so much time resisting it in the first place.²

Former British Labour MP Austin Mitchell was a long-time advocate for televising the House of Commons. He got his wish on 21 November 1989. Writing not long after the start of television coverage, Mitchell judged it to be mediocre but predicted it would improve, even suggesting it would become compulsive viewing and MPs would reflect on their initial hesitancy. Of course, he was writing well before the development of 16:9 ratio, warts and all high definition TV.

¹ I am grateful to the New Zealand Parliamentary Library for researching data and media coverage. In particular I would like to thank Geoffrey Anderson, Jessica Ihimaera-Smiler, John Molloy, Hannah O'Brien, Tracey Shields, Bridgit Siddall, Rebecca Styles, Bessie Sutherland, Michiel Verkade and Brent Willis. I would also like to thank members and staff of the 51st Parliament who responded to my survey.

² Austin Mitchell, 'Beyond Televising Parliament: Taking Politics To The People'. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 43(1) 1990, p. 4.

An article in *The Telegraph* (UK) published 25 years later asked, ‘Have TV cameras in Parliament made political debate coarser?’ It claimed behaviour in the UK Parliament was no worse than before cameras arrived: ‘If anything, MPs are more watchful’ and ‘Fewer MPs are thrown out of the chamber today for bad behaviour’.³ This supports the idea that television cameras have had a positive influence on parliamentary behaviour.

This paper analyses the behaviour of MPs in New Zealand’s debating Chamber from 1997 to 2016. The genesis of the paper was the looming tenth anniversary of Parliament TV (PTV) in July 2017 and particularly comments from some parliamentary old hands that the conduct of members had improved since the start of official television coverage. Overall, the results of my research suggest that televising the New Zealand Parliament has had a favourable effect.

My research drew on a number of key publications on the subject of broadcasting parliamentary proceedings.⁴ Comparisons between the New Zealand experience and other jurisdictions and detailed psychological analysis about the reasons for parliamentary behaviour in New Zealand were both deemed beyond the scope of this research and are not discussed here.

³ ‘Have TV Cameras in Parliament Made Political Debate Coarser?’. *The Telegraph* (UK), 21 November 2014. Accessed at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/11244147/Have-TV-cameras-in-Parliament-made-political-debate-coarser.html>

⁴ These include Jay G. Blumler, ‘The Sound of Parliament’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 37(1) 1984, pp. 250–66; Bob Franklin, ‘A Leap In The Dark: MP’s Objections To Televising Parliament’. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 39(3) 1986, pp. 253–66; Suzanne Franks and Adam Vandermark, ‘Televising Parliament: Five Years On’. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 48(1) 1995, pp. 57–71; Inter-Parliamentary Union, European Broadcasting Union and Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments, *The Challenge of Broadcasting Parliamentary Proceedings*, 2007 (accessed at: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reference/2016-07/challenge-broadcasting-parliamentary-proceedings>); Mitchell, ‘Beyond Televising Parliament’; Stuart N. Soroka, Olga Redko and Quinn Albaugh, ‘Television in the Legislature: The Impact of Cameras in the House of Commons’. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 68(1) 2015, pp. 203–217.

WHAT CONSTITUTES GOOD OR BAD BEHAVIOUR?

When it comes to the perceived modification of behaviour by parliamentarians, a number of potential reasons could be at play. The presence of television cameras may be merely coincidental. For example:

- The demographic make-up of New Zealand's Parliament changed after the introduction of Mixed Member Proportional representation in 1996. Maybe today's parliamentarians are just more relaxed and tolerant than those in the past.
- Some of the more turbulent and newsworthy members may have mellowed with maturity or else left Parliament.
- Perhaps we have become so accustomed to badly-behaved MPs that we just do not notice bad behaviour anymore.
- Maybe the cocktail of popular culture, smart technology and the ubiquitous YouTube has made MPs' behaviour seem relatively quaint, compared to the latest viral video of celebrities such as Kim Kardashian.

Despite the abundance of possible alternative influences on actual and perceived parliamentary behaviour, there is a fixed, measurable point of 17 July 2007 on which PTV started. With this day as my pivot, data from 20 years of House proceedings was analysed, spanning 10 years prior to the introduction of PTV and 10 years following its introduction. This data was supplemented with a survey of MPs and their staff. If the behaviour of MPs was shown to have improved after the installation of television cameras in the Chamber, and their attitude towards PTV was favourable, it could be argued that the strict rules currently governing coverage should be relaxed. This would allow the PTV director to use a greater variety of camera shots, making footage even more interesting and engaging for viewers.

It is acknowledged that terms such as 'badly-behaved' and 'improved' imply value judgements. Reacting to their inclusion in a 2004 list of 'worst-behaved' MPs, two Opposition MPs from the National Party, Dr Nick Smith and Gerry Brownlee, defended their performances, countering that it proved they were 'hard at work' and 'being the most active (rather) than being the worst-behaved.'⁵ Clearly, there is disagreement as to what constitutes 'good' behaviour in the Chamber. Nevertheless, both *Standing*

⁵ 'Dunne's Baddies List Upsets National MPs'. *The Press*, 24 December 2004.

Orders of the House of Representatives and Speakers' Rulings provide authoritative guidelines that must be followed. For the purposes of this study, any value judgements regarding MPs' behaviour reflects those made in these authoritative publications.

THE GENESIS AND GROWTH OF PARLIAMENT TV

PTV is a dedicated channel operated by the Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives and is available on three digital platforms: Freeview, SKY and Vodafone. It is web streamed on Parliament's website (www.parliament.nz) and its *Virtual House* mobile device app. Video on demand clips are also available on the website.

Standing Orders require that the House 'sit in total about 90 days in the calendar year' (Standing Order 81 (3)). A Sitting Programme for each year is recommended to the House by the Business Committee (a select committee with representatives from all parties). PTV broadcasts all proceedings of the House, which sits on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays for approximately 30 weeks every year, shortened to accommodate the triennial general election. In a typical parliamentary year, PTV screens at least 510 hours of live footage and 315 hours of replays. The remaining screen time displays a looped message with details on making Select Committee submissions and how to access and engage with Parliament.

In 2007, PTV's mandate was simply to broadcast live coverage of House proceedings; consequently, its technical capacity was relatively uncomplicated. Since then, new equipment has been added to allow replays, simultaneous English interpretation of Te Reo Māori, live closed captioning and the integration of NZ Sign Language interpretation. Making better use of PTV downtime has been a long-time goal and is presently being developed.

Prior to PTV, television coverage of parliamentary proceedings was limited to occasional filming by New Zealand's two commercial channels operated by Television New Zealand (TVNZ) and TV3, which set up their own *ad hoc* facilities in the Chamber galleries. From 1988 to 2007, successive Speakers allowed television coverage of question time; however, parliamentary filming rules restricted what could be shown to only the member with the call or the Speaker. This rule that flew in the face of the

‘news media’s ability to freely report and scrutinise the behaviour of our elected representatives’.⁶

In 2002, the Triennial Review of Parliamentary Appropriations recommended investigating the establishment of an in-house television facility. In its 2003 review, the Standing Orders Committee set out a proposal for the installation of small robotic cameras located under the galleries in the Chamber, remotely-controlled from a studio in Parliament buildings. Being closer to eye-level, coverage would prove to be a dramatic improvement on the high-angled shots from the galleries of coiffured hairdos and balding pates. Some backbench seats also could not be seen from the galleries.⁷ One of its recommendations—not to allow broadcasters to use their own cameras once PTV was operating—led to a running battle with the news media.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARLIAMENT AND THE MEDIA

Like most other jurisdictions with an active Fourth Estate, relations between Parliament and the New Zealand media have often been both testy and tested. When the commercial, ratings-driven needs of the media and Parliament’s requirement for fair representation clashed, it created an environment of antagonism and mistrust between the Speaker and the Parliamentary Press Gallery. For example, in August 2000, *The Evening Post* newspaper published a photo of National MP Annabel Young yawning in the House during a lengthy legislative debate. *The New Zealand Herald* described this as ‘a good piece of photojournalism, telling the story of the filibuster as it was for those in the House’.⁸ This prompted Speaker Jonathan Hunt to issue a week-long ban on both television cameras and newspaper photographers.

⁶ ‘Cameras in the House’. *The Press*, 21 March 2005.

⁷ John E. Martin, *The House: New Zealand’s House of Representatives 1854-2004*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 2004, p. 321.

⁸ ‘Suppress the Yawn, But Not the Picture’. *The New Zealand Herald*, 15 August 2000. Accessed at: https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1 and objectid=147880

In late August 2006, Speaker Margaret Wilson banned TV3 after it showed New Zealand First MP Ron Mark making a one-fingered gesture towards the National Party members sitting in the Opposition benches. TV3 director of news and current affairs, Mark Jennings, responded:

We were only showing what would have been observed by members of the public if they had been sitting in the public gallery on that day ... Politicians behaving badly is a news story and the public have a right to see what is really going on in the debating chamber.⁹

TV3's tactic was not without its critics from within the media. In September 2006, media commentator Tom Frewen, in *The National Business Review*, referred to the disingenuous nature of TV3's breach:

Over six years, one MP yawning, another asleep and another making a rude gesture do not add up to the ongoing and widespread bad behaviour that the media would have you believe goes on all the time and which they so bravely bring to your attention at great risk, not to themselves, of course, but to their credibility.¹⁰

In June 2007, in anticipation of uninterrupted televised coverage of parliamentary proceedings, a report of the Standing Orders Committee made the case for a review of the parliamentary rules for filming the Chamber. These rules had operated since 1990 and been restated by Speaker Hunt in 2000:

In order to sustain interest and to give a more accurate impression of how the House actually operates, the scope of coverage could be expanded ... There is a balance to be struck between the need to maintain a true record of the proceedings (interjectors do not have the call and have no right to intrude on the coverage of the member who does) and making the coverage visually informative by showing a reaction to what is happening. It is proposed to make provision for limited reaction shots involving questions and interjections and to permit more general background shots

⁹ Mike Houlahan, 'TV3 Calls Parliamentary Rules on Filming of MPs "Arcane"'. *The New Zealand Herald*, 29 August 2006.

¹⁰ Tom Frewen, 'TV3 Scores Own Goal When It Points the Finger'. *The National Business Review*, 8 September 2006.

so as to illustrate the mood of the House and introduce some variety into the coverage.¹¹

The report proposed permitting the commercial television channels to continue filming from the galleries, as long as they adhered to proposed new and more liberal rules for filming and conditions for use of official television coverage. These were to be incorporated into Standing Orders as Appendix D.¹²

Operated by professional television staff under contract to the Office of the Clerk, the coverage provided by PTV has proven to be unbiased, yet shot with as much creativity and flair as Standing Orders allow. Initial protests from the commercial news media have reduced to the point that PTV footage is now regularly used by TVNZ and TV3, often interpolated with shots taken by the channel's own high-angled cameras in the galleries. It appears commercial television directors prefer shots of faces to hairdos and bald pates.

ASSESSMENT OF PTV'S INFLUENCE ON MPS' BEHAVIOUR

Four comparisons using data compiled for the 10 years before the start of PTV and the 10 years after PTV have been used to assess the impact of PTV on MPs' behaviour. The four comparisons concern:

1. Ejection of members from the Chamber
2. Withdrawals and apologies
3. Points of order
4. Questions to members

Although the linkage of cause and effect is inferred rather than demonstrated in these comparisons, this analysis offers a rudimentary measure of three alternative potential outcomes: that television cameras made no difference to members' behaviour; that television cameras had a negative influence on behaviour; or that television cameras

¹¹ New Zealand House of Representatives, *Television Coverage of the House*, Report of the Standing Orders Committee (I.18A), June 2007, p. 3

¹² House of Representatives, *Television Coverage of the House*, pp. 7-8.

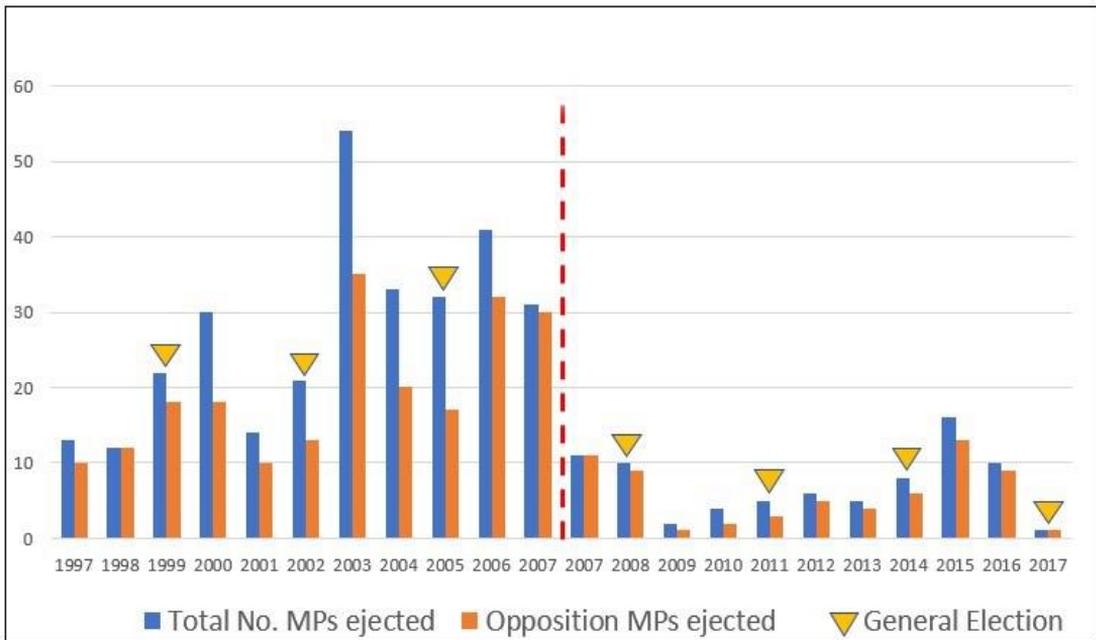
had a positive influence on behaviour. For each comparison, the data concludes at the end of the 51st Parliament on 18 August 2017.

Comparison 1: Members ejected from the Chamber

The Speaker has the ability under Standing Order 89 to 'order any member whose conduct is highly disorderly to withdraw immediately from the House'. Of a total of 382 ejections over 20 years, 79.3 percent occurred pre-PTV: 303 pre-PTV versus 79 post-PTV (see Figure 1). Looking at the seven triennial general elections since 1999, there were increases in MPs ejected immediately following the 1999, 2002 and 2005 elections. Since the start of PTV, misbehaviour in the Chamber after an election seems to have abated.

The 47th Parliament of 2002-2005 was particularly noteworthy for having 40 Ministers, all Labour members, ejected. This total contrasts with the post-PTV figure of only ten Ministers ejected from the Chamber between 2007 and 2017. The improved behaviour of Ministers is not entirely surprising. Ministers are the subject of most media attention and have a small army of press secretaries, communications advisors and media minders to help form and facet their public image. It is not difficult to conclude that Ministers are coached to restrain themselves in the House to avoid negative publicity. If television cameras have modified the behaviour of members, including Ministers, it appears to have been for the better.

Figure 1. Members ejected from NZ House of Representatives



Interestingly, being ejected from the Chamber does not necessarily hinder an MP's parliamentary or ministerial prospects. Six MPs in the 51st Parliament feature in the list of top ten offenders from 1997 to 2016, and include a former Prime Minister, Rt Hon Bill English, the current Deputy Prime Minister, Rt Hon Winston Peters, and Rt Hon Trevor Mallard who, on 7 November 2017, was elected Speaker of the 52nd Parliament.

Comparison 2: Withdrawals and Apologies

Long standing Speakers' Rulings allow the presiding officer to require a member to withdraw a statement and give an apology, unreservedly. This is one of the most effective procedural mechanisms to maintain order when the House becomes agitated. It can defuse an explosive atmosphere and avoid a member being asked to leave the Chamber.

Figure 2. Withdrawals and Apologies

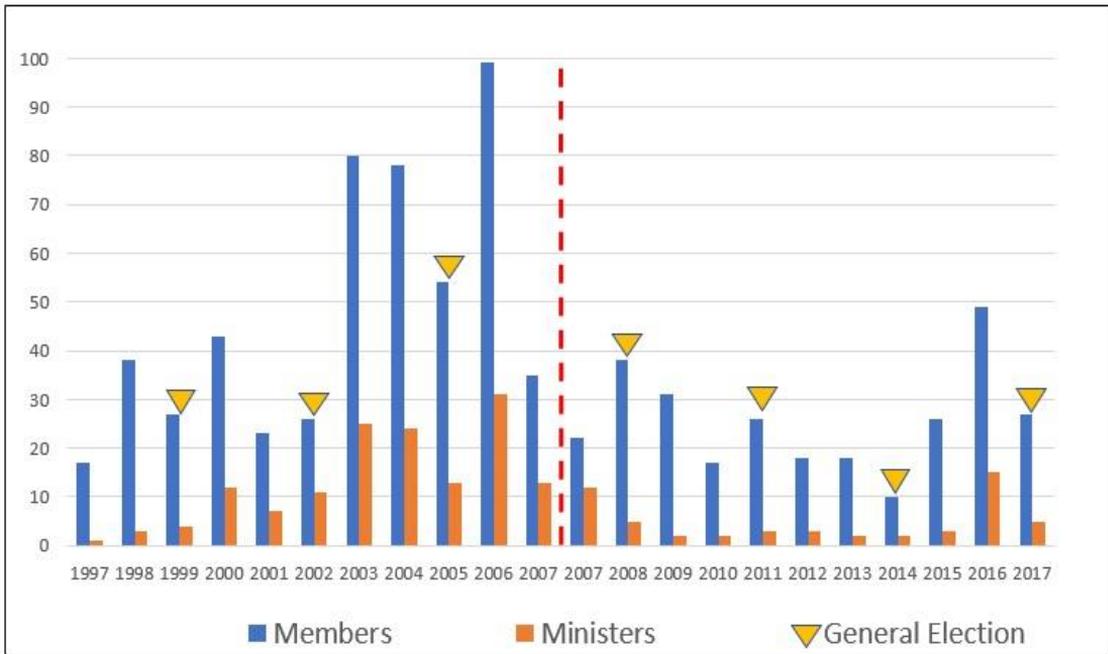


Figure 2 shows that from a total of 802 withdrawals and apologies over 20 years, 64.8 percent occurred pre-PTV (520 pre-PTV versus 282 post-PTV). Ministers made 193 of these withdrawals and apologies (144 pre-PTV and 49 post-PTV). Ministerial behaviour during the Fifth Labour Government of 1999-2008 appears to have been particularly challenging for the Speaker, with 136 Ministers reprimanded in the pre-PTV period. In 2006 alone, 31 Ministers were pulled up. As with the ejection of members, if television cameras have modified the behaviour of members, and in particular Ministers, it appears to have been for the better.

Comparison 3: Points of Order

When properly used, a point of order gives a member the ability to raise a procedural issue with the Speaker. Nevertheless, in an adversarial debating Chamber, points of order are often used to disrupt an opponent's speech. Sometimes a point of order is a feebly camouflaged attempt to grab attention, presumably grandstanding for the benefit of the radio microphones and television cameras.

Due to the large number and frequency of points of order, the analysis presented here is restricted to points of order raised during Question Time on Tuesday and Wednesday in the week when the highly-publicised annual Budget is delivered (traditionally on a

Thursday in mid-to-late May). My research does not assess the content of each point of order as its effect is the same, even if made between speeches; it interrupts the flow of business. Further research would be needed to determine the extent to which points of order were either productive or disruptive.

Figure 3. Points of Order

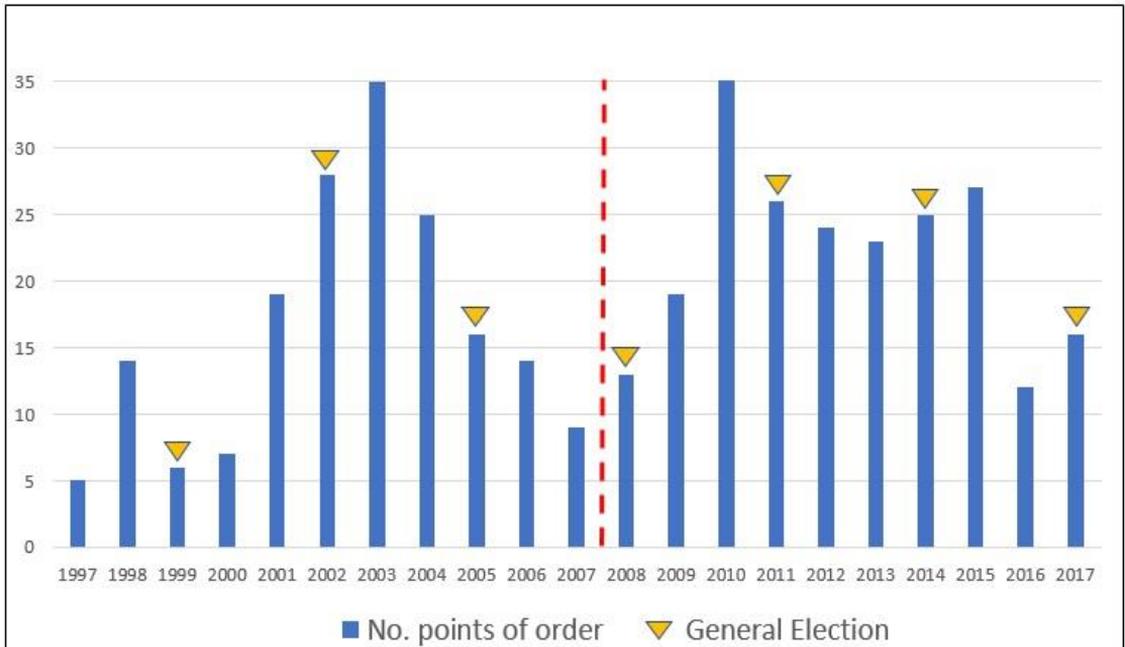


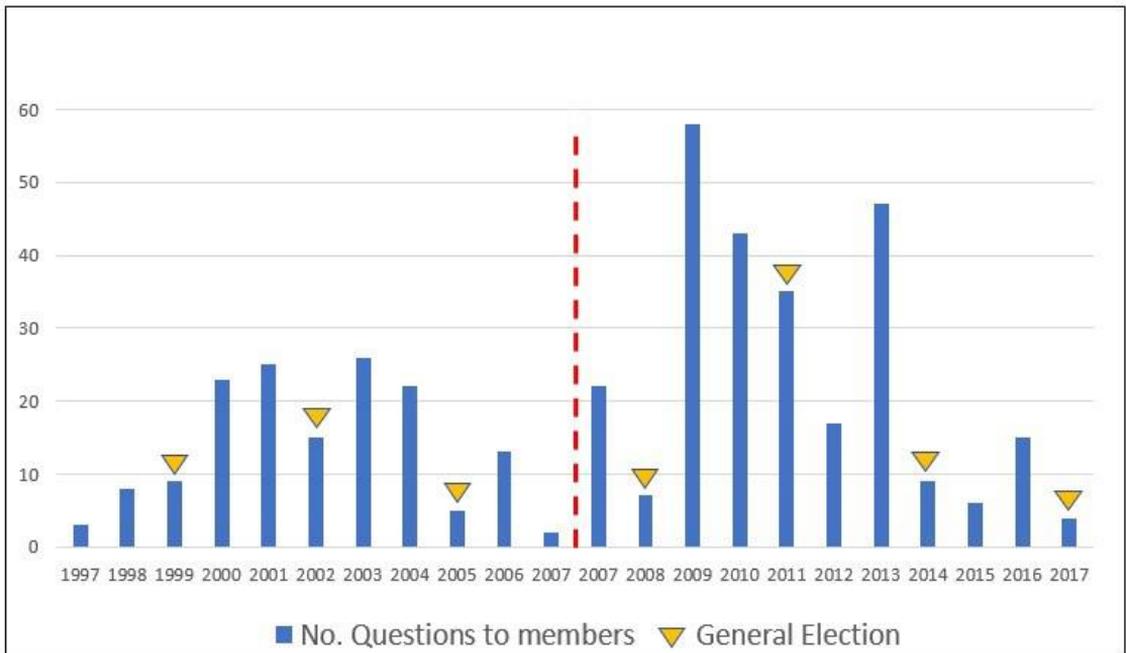
Figure 3 shows that nearly 55.3 percent of a total of 399 points of order over 20 years occurred post-PTV (178 pre-PTV versus 221 post-TV). It seems that the television cameras have not significantly affected the number of points of order made by members. Any anxiety that members would feel restrained by television cameras or, alternatively, be encouraged to ‘showboat’ is not reflected by the relatively even pattern of use of points of order pre- and post-PTV.

Comparison 4: Questions to members

Under Standing Order 379, a member may be asked about ‘any bill, motion or public matter connected with the business of the House, of which the member has charge’. These questions are asked immediately after oral questions to Ministers: in television parlance, this is prime time viewing. Presumably an MP wishing to maximise television coverage would take advantage of this Standing Order. Did they?

Pre-PTV, 151 members asked questions of a member; post-PTV there were 264 such questions. From a total of 415 questions to members, 63.6 percent happened post-PTV. It appears the television cameras have enticed members to make the most of this media opportunity.

Figure 4. Questions to members



This is the only result from the four comparisons that shows an increase in activity. It is arguably a positive outcome, as questions to members give the viewing public an opportunity to learn more about parliamentary business. A more cynical interpretation would be that members have figured out how to maximise the television opportunity of Question Time. This development did not go unnoticed by the Speaker of the 51st Parliament, Rt Hon David Carter, who commented on the use of members' questions:

I can see a discussion occurring at the Standing Orders Committee before too much longer about whether (questions to members) are necessary. If

they are simply a means of raising publicity on a bill that is placed on the Order Paper, I can see that being questioned by members.¹³

From the above four comparisons, it can be reasonably argued that the presence of television cameras in the Chamber has, overall, improved the behaviour of MPs, and particularly Ministers. Simultaneously, the ability of members to function in the Chamber has not been impeded; arguably, they are now more positively engaged.

WHAT DO MPS THINK OF PTV?

The Office of the Clerk commissions biannual surveys asking respondents to rate the media used by the public to access Parliament. As helpful as these surveys are in evaluating public engagement, they offer no data specific to whether and how New Zealand's MPs value PTV. To fill this gap, I conducted an online poll of members and their staff.

Eight questions were emailed to party whips and party leaders' chiefs of staff to distribute to their members and support staff. A total of 59 responses were received. These came from 18 MPs (out of a total of 121 MPs) and 34 support staff, with identities of seven respondents undeclared. Although the survey was based on a small sample size, responses were received from all political parties represented in the Parliament except one (ACT, which has only one MP). Compared with the results of the 2014 general election, National Party members were underrepresented in the sample, while the Labour, Green and NZ First parties were all overrepresented.

Nearly 97 percent of respondents claimed to watch coverage of proceedings on PTV. Of these, 82 percent used the internal television system on the parliamentary precincts, 54 percent streamed from Parliament's website, 43 percent watched PTV at home, 41 percent viewed video on demand and 39 percent used the *Virtual House* app. Nearly 70 percent use footage on their social media and 61 percent regularly update content.

To the question 'How do you rate the value of PTV to you personally, or to the institution of Parliament, or to the nature of democratic representation?', there was a strong positive response of 98 percent, with 65 percent valuing PTV as 'essential' and

¹³ Hansard, 25 August 2015, volume 708

33 percent seeing it as 'very important'. Only one respondent responded 'not important at all' and none indicated that 'it isn't that important'. When asked if they were aware of the television cameras in the Chamber, 17 MPs responded with 14 answering 'yes'. Asked if the presence of these cameras made them feel uncomfortable or self-conscious, only one MP answered 'yes'.

The combination of usage and perceived value leads to a number of conclusions:

- PTV is greatly valued by MPs and their staff.
- PTV is a popular communications component in today's social media mix.
- Television coverage in the Chamber does not negatively affect MPs' behaviour in the House.

CONCLUSION

The results from the four comparisons appear to indicate that MPs are now less rowdy, better engaged and more media savvy than they were before PTV. Similarly, the survey results appear to confirm that MPs and their staff are prolific users of PTV for their social media channels and consider PTV to be a highly significant part of New Zealand's democratic landscape. It is therefore fair to conclude that PTV has not impeded or impaired the ability of MPs to undertake their representative and advocacy work in the House.

After a decade of providing coverage of proceedings, PTV has proven to be a professional and balanced provider of official television coverage. Although Appendix D of Standing Orders prohibits broadcasting 'interruptions from the gallery' (Part A (1) 8), PTV currently recognises the unique flavour of the House and covers waiata (song), karakia (prayer) or similar activity in the galleries if the Speaker or presiding officer gives approval. However, to encourage greater viewer engagement, a wider variety of camera shots, including discretionary close-ups, would better convey the atmosphere of the House. This is not to say the rules should be liberalised to accommodate the media's self-serving interests. The dignity of Parliament is paramount, and its proceedings should not be reduced to a snappy headline or clickbait. Parliament's function is not to provide fodder for journalists after a good story or to cultivate their careers as political operatives.

It is to be hoped that one day the Standing Orders Review Committee will agree that MPs can trust the PTV operators to both maintain the dignity of Parliament and make

coverage more engaging for the public. And maybe even, as Austin Mitchell envisaged, it will become addictive.

POSTSCRIPT

Research for this paper began in 2016, as part of the *Parliamentary Law, Practice and Procedure* course at the University of Tasmania. Six months after this paper was originally submitted in 2017, outgoing Assistant Speaker Lindsay Tisch noted in his Valedictory Statement that the behaviour of members 'has improved with the advent of the television live feeds'.¹⁴

¹⁴ *Hansard*, 10 August 2017, Volume 724.