

# *Television in the Saskatchewan Legislative Assembly*

*Gordon Barnhart*



**View of the chamber showing three camera locations — below the clock and on walls at the extreme left and right of the photograph** (*Photographic Services Agency, Government of Saskatchewan*)

**M**arch 17, 1983, marked not only the opening of the second session of the twentieth legislature, but it was the beginning of television broadcasts from the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan. Television in Canadian parliaments is not a new concept. The idea has been debated at several Commonwealth Parliamentary Association conferences and

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television systems have been in place in several legislatures and the House of Commons for some time now. The uniqueness of the Saskatchewan experience is that the televising is being done by an automated computer-driven television system of five remote control cameras located unobtrusively in the Chamber. Three cameras are controlled by pre-set camera shots stored in the computer. Most of the switching is done by the computer, activated by the sound system switcher.

The Saskatchewan legislature is the first parliament in the world to use an automated switching system for television. Innovation and experimentation in legislative broadcasting is not new to Saskatchewan. In 1946, the legislature was the first in Canada and second only to New Zealand in the Commonwealth to broadcast its proceedings over radio. At first, there were only two microphones used which were passed from speaker to speaker by the pages.

In 1947 the assembly became the first legislature in the Commonwealth to produce an "electronic Hansard." Rather than having shorthand reporters record the proceedings, a dictaphone recorder with wax belts was used with great success. (See article by George Stephen in *The Table*, Vol. XV, 1946).

In each of these examples, necessity was the mother of invention. Since the population of Saskatchewan in the 1940s was sparse and thinly spread over a vast distance, it was felt that radio could bring the parliament to the people if the people could not come to the parliament.

Likewise, shorthand reporters in Saskatchewan were hard to find in sufficient numbers and on a part-time basis to cover the sessions. This difficulty led to a will to experiment with new technology — the forerunner of our current tape recorders.

The automated television system also grew out of a need to provide coverage on a sessional basis (less than six months of session time per year) at a reasonable cost. One way to accomplish this was to devise a method which required few personnel and minimum operating costs. The end result was a system which requires a total of three people to operate it — a Director of Television Services, and two technician/operators. If a staff complement of thirty or forty people was required on a year-round basis to provide six months of service, the concept of a television service, operated by legislative employees, would not have been practical.

The decision to proceed with "computerized television" was not made quickly. Television in the legislature was debated and considered frequently over the last decade. The first formal study of the concept was initiated in 1975. A committee on Rules and Procedures was established and instructed to "review the feasibility of televising the proceedings of the Legislative Assembly." The committee reviewed the system used in Alberta where the media were invited into the chamber to record, on film or tape, proceedings of their choice. At this time, the House of Commons was initiating an experiment in televising its proceedings by means of a parliamentary television system. The Saskatchewan committee favoured the Ottawa model in principle and favoured prohibiting the media from coming onto the floor of the House with their cameras. However, a legislative-owned-and-operated television system had very definite disadvantages — a high initial capital cost and, with the prospect of having approximately twenty or thirty personnel — a high annual operating cost. There was also a lack of cable companies in existence in the province at that time and thus no means of distributing the legislative proceedings to the public on a daily gavel-to-gavel basis. These obstacles caused the Saskatchewan Committee to recommend that the Legislative Assembly not proceed with television "at this time."

The assembly renewed its study of the television question in 1979. By this time, the chamber had been refurbished and a new sound system installed. Much of the refurbishment and the sound

system was done with an eye to the coming of television cameras. The 1979 committee noted that since the 1976 report, cable companies in Saskatchewan cities had been established and thus provided a means of distribution. The new models of television cameras required much less light (approximately 35 foot candles as compared to the previous requirement of 120 foot candles) which eliminated the need for bright hot lights and the disruption of the historic atmosphere of the legislative chamber. The biggest breakthrough, however, was that technology was now available to provide an automated system thus drastically reducing the annual operation costs. In December 1980, the Rules Committee recommended that the Legislative Assembly proceed with an in-house television system modelled on the Ottawa system but with the computer option added. In agreeing to this recommendation, the Legislative Assembly opted for recording and broadcasting the complete proceedings and not just the highlights thus offering coverage of all members of the Assembly. This decision was not a unanimous one and in fact many of the cabinet ministers of the day, (ones who would have the most coverage), opposed television in the legislature. The decision was carried by the private members on both sides of the house.

Once the decision was made to proceed, three projects were begun immediately. The lighting was upgraded. Previously, most of the lighting in the chamber came from a skylight above the chamber which consisted of banks of fluorescent tubes. This means of lighting was costly to maintain and provided insufficient light. The fluorescent system was replaced with metal halide lamps thus increasing the light levels in the chamber to approximately 35 foot candles (still a very acceptable and comfortable level) without affecting its physical appearance.

The second project was to fit five cameras into the walls of the chamber without affecting its historic appearance. One camera was recessed into each of the four corners of the chamber and one was recessed into the woodwork over the main entrance facing the Speaker's dais. The cameras move silently and are without tally lights. To the casual observer, the cameras are not obvious.

The third project was to design the equipment and a television control centre (TCC). A team of local engineering, electrical and acoustical consultants were contracted together with the firm of Applied Electronics in Toronto. This team designed the system by using Ikegami cameras (Japanese), Schneider lenses (West German), Vinton computer and servo units (British) and Canadian electronic equipment. A former broom closet adjacent to the Chamber was converted into a well lit, environmentally controlled and aesthetically pleasing control centre large enough to hold all of the television and audio equipment and three personnel.

By the fall of 1982, the system was in place and ready for testing and operator training. The fall portion of the session served as a necessary test and training period. The performance of the equipment exceeded our original expectations. In the design stage, we felt that a five to seven second time lag for the automated cameras to get into position would be acceptable. In practice, the servo cameras are into position and focused in less than two seconds — a performance that has silenced the critics who claimed that an automated system would not be as fast as a manually controlled camera.

The camera facing the Speaker and the two cameras in the corners to his immediate left and right are microprocessor controlled cameras. When the Speaker is on his feet, the camera facing him is on. When the Speaker recognizes a member, the audio switcher activates that member's microphone. The fact that a certain microphone is active automatically stimulates the appropriate servo camera to tilt, pan, zoom and focus on the member on his feet. When the camera is ready (usually within one second), the computer automatically switches to program the camera which is trained on the member who is speaking. The name of the member and the constituency he represents appears automatically on the screen for five seconds. This process is repeated as different members rise to speak. The two remote control manual cameras are used for alternate shots for variety, for broad applause shots and for divisions. The system is capable of keeping up with the fast pace of the House during Oral Question Period.

With all of this automation, why are even three people needed to operate the system? Fine adjustments of the cameras as the speaking member moves in his place, selection of manual shots for variety for the viewer and replacement of audio video tapes each hour keep the operators busy. The operators who are qualified electronic technicians are also responsible for maintenance and repair of the equipment. The Director has been consumed by his daily duties and liaison with members, caucus staff and news media.

Since the Saskatchewan telecast does not have a broadcaster/host like the Quebec or Ottawa broadcasts, factual information concerning the proceedings of the Legislative Assembly is

shown in print across the bottom of the screen from time to time, eg. "Consideration of Estimates of the Department of Education — Committee of Finance."

The total cost of the television system and necessary renovations was approximately \$1.5 million with a projected operating cost of \$100,000 per year to cover salaries and the cost of the video cassettes.

The Legislative Assembly has established a set of guidelines for the broadcasts. Only the member who is on his or her feet is to be shown with a head-and-shoulders or a medium close-up shot. Some of the members who are seated around the member speaking can also be seen. Split screen shots are not permitted. "Applause" shots may be used as long as they are "in good taste and reflect the decorum of the Chamber." One complete set of audio video cassettes for the session is to be stored permanently in the Provincial Archives. Audio video tapes cannot be used during a general election or by-election in the province. Members may take copies of their own speeches but if they wish to use a copy of another member speaking in the Legislative Assembly, they must have the permission of that member.

The media have access to recording facilities in the press gallery or copies of tapes can be made later by the television personnel. The Legislative Assembly has installed a fibre optic link to Sask Tel Television Operations Centre in Regina and a microwave link to Saskatoon. The media, either broadcaster or cablecaster, may pick up a live feed from Sask Tel's Television Operations Centre.



**Television Control Centre: H. Gary Ward, Director of Television Services (standing) and Technicians Ihor Sywanyk and Kerry Bond. (Photographic Services Agency, Government of Saskatchewan)**

Now that we have been telecasting for almost a month, the cablecasters in Regina and Saskatoon have shown each complete sitting of the legislature. Four more cable companies in other cities were connected on April 11, 1983. The present distribution cost of this signal, paid by the Legislative Assembly, will be approximately \$21,000 per month during the session. In the not too distant future, it is reasonable to believe that all cablecasters in Saskatchewan will be carrying the complete legislative proceedings.

For special events such as the Speech from the Throne and Budget Speech, the broadcast networks have shown live coverage and indicate a keen interest to continue to do so, thus giving the entire province an opportunity to watch the Legislative Assembly in action. Most broadcasters in the province have access to a daily feed in order to prepare news clips for the evening and late night newscasts. One broadcaster has begun a weekly report on the legislative proceedings.

The telecasters are pleased with the signal they are receiving and with the positive public reaction to the legislative coverage. It is hard yet to accurately assess the public reaction or to know how many viewers are watching the proceedings. I have heard a few viewers say that the legislature is a "zoo" — wild, exciting but frivolous. Others have shown appreciation at being able to watch first-hand, Saskatchewan's elected members debate public issues without depending on any interpretation from the press. The Saskatchewan electorate has traditionally been well informed and interested in public issues. An average turn-out at the polls of over 80% of the registered voters confirms this keen interest. Television will offer the electorate another means of following the debate in the Legislature.

What has the reaction of members been to having television cameras in the assembly? The introduction of the cameras and the test period without broadcasting was spread over several months. By the time the broadcasts began, most members were not conscious of the cameras. It is too early to assess what effect television will have on the proceedings. Many members (but not all) have begun clapping instead of pounding their desks to show approval. Members have been moving around to fill empty desks surround-

ing a speaking member thus creating a "full house" effect at all times. Other than these cosmetic changes, the heat and flavour of debate has not changed. The business of the Assembly goes on. Since the cameras are constantly in operation, it is less tempting to play to the audience than with radio which is on for only a portion of the daily proceedings (75 minutes each day of the two major debates address-in-reply and budget debate).

Some members are still apprehensive about television in the assembly and a few still oppose the concept. By and large, members have already accepted television in the chamber and value the opportunity to speak more directly to their electorate. A common philosophy has developed — "just forget that the cameras are there . . . but don't forget that the cameras are there."

The installation of the television system is not the final step in a project but in itself will lead to further steps. Already the Assembly is considering broadening its distribution throughout Saskatchewan and extending the coverage to some of the Standing Committees. At the time of writing, no decisions have been made in these fields but it is conceivable that our present system will be expanded over time.

The television system in Saskatchewan has taken advantage of the "state of the art" in electronics and is operated with a minimum of personnel who can be productively occupied even while the legislature is not sitting. The need to bring the proceedings to people spread throughout the province at a minimum of cost led to the development of the system now in place. The legislative committee concluded its report on television by stating that the "television installation . . . will offer a good quality audio and video tape of the proceedings for use by the conventional television stations in their news broadcasts and current affairs programs and will provide the opportunity for many of the citizens of Saskatchewan to watch the proceedings of the Legislative Assembly thus serving to strengthen the bonds between the electorate and their representative body." The first part of this prediction has been achieved. The goal of strengthening the bond between the elected and the electorate is one that must always be pursued. A combination of radio and television broadcasts will help to achieve that goal.