

Parliament and Television (1)

Pierre Menard

In a sky a-glitter with communications satellites, it is time for Canadians and their Parliament to make better use of their parliamentary television network.

Since 1977, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's Parliamentary Television Network has provided millions of Canadians the daily opportunity to watch the live proceedings of the House of Commons. By agreement with the Speaker, the House's Broadcast Service provides live television pictures and sound from the Commons Chamber to the CBC. Under the authority of a national television network licence issued by the Canadian Radio Television Commission, the broadcast is then beamed by the CBC via satellite to Canadian companies free of charge.

For viewers who may not understand the intricacies, rules and procedures of Parliament, the hosts (John Warren in English and Gilles deLalonde in French) provide explanatory material at the beginning of each day's broadcast, setting the scene and describing the matters that are to be taken up in the House that day. They also provide a wrap-up at the end of the day, reviewing what has taken place and informing viewers of what is scheduled for the next day. They must be ready, at a moment's notice, to fill-in during breaks in the activity as in the case of a vote being called or Royal Assent.

For viewers, the highlight of daily proceedings is Question Period. This 45-minute segment and Members' Statements (the 15 minutes that precede Question Period) are taped and rebroadcast at the end of each sitting day.

In the interest of making television more accessible to the hearing impaired, live sign language interpretation of Question Period is provided. The interpreter, Mrs. Christine Wilson, holds one of the highest qualifications in the field of interpretation for the deaf; the Comprehensive Skills Certificate of the American Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. Mrs. Micheline Martineau, who is herself deaf provides French sign language interpretation by watching Mrs. Wilson on a television monitor and interpreting the English sign language into French. (The CBC is considering publishing a booklet of new political sign language symbols developed by Mrs. Wilson.)

The CBC's Parliamentary Television Network has grown into a unique broadcast vehicle. It is distributed to some 4.8 million homes (13.7 million Canadians) by approximately 200 out of Canada's 453 cable companies. This has tremendous potential for increasing public interest and awareness of Parliament among viewers across the country. Viewer growth and concern is reflected in audience mail content and quantity, feedback from Members of Parliament themselves and their staffs, media representations, especially from the Parliamentary Press Gallery, and

cable company inquiries for information to pass on to their subscribers.

In the past two years alone 45 more cable companies have offered the CBC's Parliamentary Television Network for the first time, representing two million new potential viewers. Now that the network is successfully established and no longer experimental, the time has come for some re-examination and evaluation.

An average day in the House lasts 6-1/2 hours adjourning at 18:30 eastern time. This leaves 17-1/2 hours of very valuable satellite time which is paid for but unused each day the House sits, plus the "dead air" during 17 weeks of annual recesses and weekends. The satellite has always been leased as a 24-hour facility, costing Canadians approximately \$250,000 per month. It must not be wasted. It reaches 13.7 million people and distribution is still growing quickly.

Parliament and the CBC have had ongoing consultations regarding the Parliamentary Network and how best to use the portions of satellite time when the House is not sitting. Though Canadians are offered complete live coverage of the daily proceedings of the House of Commons it is during weekday daytime hours while a huge potential audience is at work or school. People know Parliament is televised but they are rarely home to watch it. Even the replay of Question Period is too early for many Canadians since there is no delay for western time zones. The network is only available on cable television and not all cable companies carry the service. Most who do, offer it on a channel that requires the viewer to own a converter.

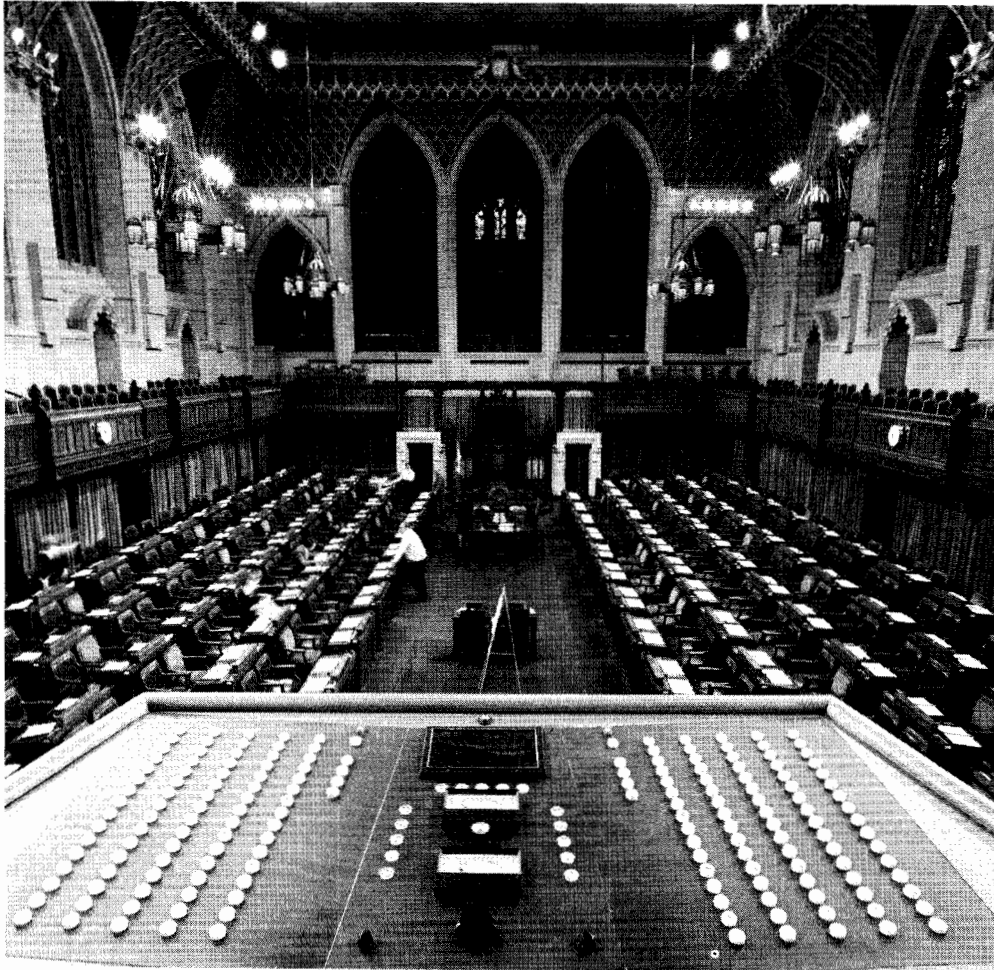
The Committee on Reform of the House of Commons heard several representations from groups that feel cable companies should carry this service as a requirement for licence. Many cable companies switch off the satellite network every day and throughout the parliamentary recess because the satellite channels only display a message stating when proceedings of the House of Commons will resume.

Of the minority of people home during the day, an estimated 100,000 follow the proceedings each week. To make the proceedings truly available to the vast majority, a simple replay of the entire sitting would be a significant step. It would immediately provide a much more effective medium for public participation in our democratic process. There is time to replay the entire proceedings twice a day by making full use of the existing satellite facility.

Many different topics and issues are covered every sitting day, each with its own interested public. The spontaneous nature of the live proceedings makes it difficult to predict when a particular issue is to come up. Few interest groups and individuals can monitor proceedings all day long to determine what is said on a subject of special concern to them.

Once the House has adjourned for the day, however, an accurate viewer guide to the replay becomes available. If 20 topics

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CBC installs lights and cameras for the CBC Parliamentary TV Network (Proulx Brothers, Ottawa and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation)

are raised one day, 20 publics can be advised when to tune in for debate on their own areas of concern. Canadians would, first of all, be home to watch and secondly, they would have prior knowledge as to what subjects were coming up and at what specific time. Viewers could record portions of special interest to them.

Teachers who use the Parliamentary Network as a teaching aid could do so much more effectively. More schools might begin to use such a valuable resource. Though Parliament Hill is one of the best known sights in Canada, far less is known of the process that takes place inside.

Beyond the proceedings of the House of Commons, there are many other uses for such a network. Over the past five years while the House was in recess, the CBC's Parliamentary Television Network has offered Canadians certain other programs including CRTC Pay TV Hearings, NASA Space Probe Saturn Flypast, the meetings of the Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons on the Constitution of Canada, the First Ministers and Native Leaders' Constitutional Conference on Aboriginal Rights, the National Leadership Debate and the Papal Visit. The most recent and most popular additional use of the network (partially due to expanded household distribution) was the ten-day live broadcast of NASA's Challenger space shuttle mission with Canada's first astronaut aboard.

It is exciting to think of other applications for this satellite facility. For example, the Reform Committee recommended the broadcasting of parliamentary committees to reach all Canadians

rather than the few spectators who can observe their activities in person.

Coverage of committee hearings would provide an opportunity to see the House of Commons at work. News media rarely, if ever, provide extensive coverage of debates. In an age of communications and information, journalists are forced to condense parliamentary news or drop it entirely from daily newstory line-ups. Canadians must now rely upon the media's editing for information and opinion. As witnesses to the only televised committee to date (the Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons on the Constitution of Canada), Canadians could see that it is before Parliamentary committees that the citizens of Canada come face-to-face with their Parliament. Canadians could see other Canadians, ordinary people, suddenly becoming a very real part of their own democratic institution, illuminating and strengthening the Canadian spirit in the process.

The satellite facility might be extended to the Governor-General. She has expressed the desire to see the Canadian Bravery Awards televised in their entirety, not just one or two minute highlights. This is a ceremony that generates much human emotion (as did the Constitutional Committee hearings). Canadians want to see their legitimate heroes and to hear their stories.

There are many important things going on in Canada that are too often by-passed or condensed by the usual network programs. The Parliamentary Network could continue to offer

public hearings, major conferences, and special Canadian event coverage. Further good use of satellite time would be weekend replays of highlights in House proceedings – Question Period, budget speeches, Throne Speeches, debates, private member speeches and bills.

Televised information on the network could take the simple form of printed material much like existing billboard type cable channels. This might include:

- an introduction to every MP and what he/she does;
- how to reach your MP;
- committee schedules;

- federal information services;
- seating plans and House calendars;
- lists of ministers, critics, etc.

There are many pay television and specialty channels available to Canadians but none more devoted to live Canadian information programming, with 100% Canadian content. A fully used television network would be very cost-effective in terms of dollars spent per potential viewer and especially in terms of increased public interest and awareness.

With its magical ten-metre dish and huge nation-wide signal, the CBC's Parliamentary Television Network can become a most effective vehicle for relating Parliament to all Canadians. ■

Parliament and Television (2)

Robert Anderson

In Canada, we have had House of Commons debates on television for eight years. Our installation has served as a model for many countries which have sent representatives to Ottawa to see how we do it. It has been a success but the cameras have been too restricted in their coverage, resulting in a distorted view of what is going on in the most important room in the nation. The work of the committees of the House has been almost entirely neglected, even though the original motion to broadcast included the committees.

The McGrath Committee on Reform of the House of Commons has recommended a review of the television coverage of the debates and the televising of committees. There is a larger question which has not yet been addressed: what is to be done about the Parliamentary television network. Except when the House is in session, it sits there unused.

Concern also exists about the audience for Parliamentary television. Short excerpts are used on network newscasts and Question Period gets a good play, but the full coverage of House debates, which is what the Parliamentary network consists of, is available only on cable. The cable systems are not required by the Canadian-Radio Television and Telecommunications Commission to carry any of it. One can argue that Parliament should be available anywhere in the country where there is a cable system with the channel capacity.

First, we are going to have to decide to whom the "CBC Parliamentary Television Network" belongs. The CBC pays for it and in fiscal year 1984 it cost the CBC three million dollars for the two satellite channels, one English, one French. The commentator introductions, which require studios and staff, last year cost the

CBC \$665,000. That is heavy going for a national broadcasting service which is already having to cope with cuts imposed by a cost-conscious government. The CBC pays for the network but has no control whatsoever over it. This was made quite clear to them when they announced recently that to save money, they were going to do away with one of the satellite channels and would use only one commentator doing the introductions in both languages. The shouts of Members of Parliament about interference with Parliament's network made the CBC reconsider.

With few exceptions, efforts of the CBC to put the unused time on this network to use have been discouraged by the CRTC which appears to be suspicious that CBC is trying to sneak in CBC II, a second network on cable that CRTC refused to license several years ago. With such formidable opposition, what is CBC to do? One thing they could do to save money is to leave the filming of the Parliamentary commentators to Parliament's own television service. They could take this on quite easily and much less expensively. Parliament owns and operates all the broadcasting facilities within its buildings. The network begins when the signal leaves the buildings, where CBC takes it over and gets it via satellite to those cable systems that have ground reception facilities.

If the Parliamentary television network is to be put to further use as a public affairs network, who would programme it and where would the money come from? In the United States, an enterprising entrepreneur, Brian Lamb, having access to the newly available gavel to gavel coverage of the House of Representatives and to the hearings of congressional committees, persuaded a group of cable companies to pay the costs of a cable network. He named it C-SPAN, the Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network, a 24 hour service of public affairs and congressional coverage.

The cable systems pay C-SPAN three cents a month per subscriber for the service, which operates on a very slender budget.

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