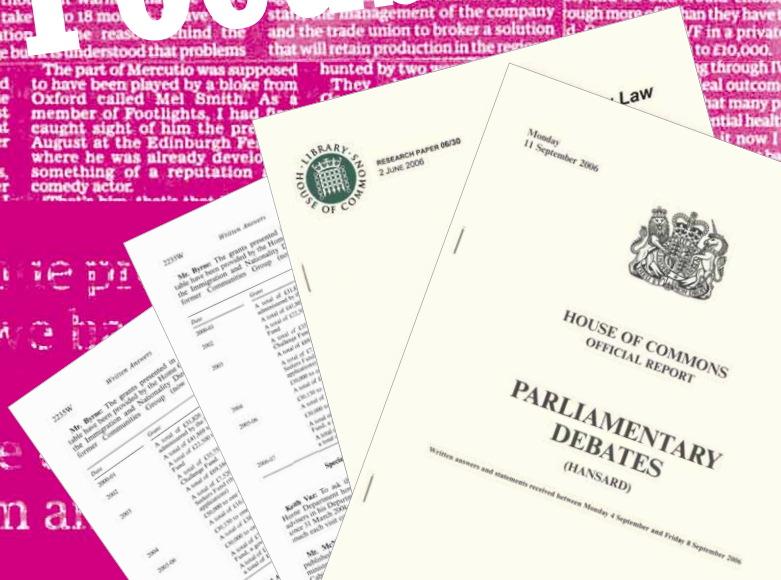


Parliament in the Public Eye 2006: Coming into Focus?



A Review of the Hansard Society Commission
on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy
(The 'Putnam Commission')
Edited by Gemma Rosenblatt



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(The 'Puttnam Commission')***

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Tel: 020 7438 1222, Fax: 020 7438 1229, hansard@hansard.lse.ac.uk

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Preface

This report is an overview of what has happened since the Hansard Society Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy, chaired by David Puttnam, reported in May 2005. The collection of short essays and comment pieces looks at what has happened since the Commission's report *Members Only? Parliament in the Public Eye* was published.

David Puttnam introduces the report, highlighting the changes in the last 18 months and what he would like to see happen next. Clare Ettinghausen considers the Puttnam Commission's findings in relation to the administration of Parliament and how this impacts on communications. Patricia Hodgson follows this with a review of how a co-ordinated strategy would improve parliamentary communication, and Virginia Gibbons looks at the role of the media. Jackie Ashley ends the report with a summary of changes to date.

Each of these essays is followed by a comment from those who know these issues best: Rt Hon Jack Straw MP, Leader of the House of Commons; Rt Hon Theresa May MP, Shadow Leader of the House of Commons; John Pullinger, House of Commons Librarian; and Greg Hurst, political correspondent of *The Times* and Honorary Secretary of the Parliamentary Press Gallery. The audit of recommendations at the end of this report analyses each of the Commission's 39 recommendations and what has changed over the last 18 months.

This collection of essays has been published to promote discussion of the Commission's report and highlight what still remains to be done. The Hansard Society will continue to monitor the progress of the Commission's recommendations in future meetings, events and publications.

Hansard Society, November 2006

Chapter One

Introduction: David Puttnam

In 2004, I accepted an invitation from the Hansard Society to chair a Commission to examine the communication of parliamentary democracy. The Commission's members were drawn from a very distinguished group representing politics, journalism and the academic world and I remain extremely grateful to all of them for the time, commitment and energy which they have continued to give to the consideration of the issues.

The Commission's findings were published in May 2005 in a report entitled *Members Only? Parliament in the Public Eye*. Our principal argument was that the public have a right to expect Parliament to communicate its work effectively and usefully, and in a way that offers the opportunity for genuine engagement by all of the citizens of the United Kingdom. The need to communicate goes hand in hand with the growing need for Parliament to re-establish its institutional identity. This report looks at the progress of the recommendations we made 18 months ago.

Our original report concluded that far too many citizens (particularly the young) no longer believe that Parliament, let alone the Executive, really share or understand their day-to-day concerns. More precisely, they feel themselves marginalised, and even excluded, from those issues (climate change, pensions, or the pros and cons of nuclear power would be good examples) on which they would like to focus, and, if possible, become that much more knowledgeable. They also want to be part of the debate, not simply passive 'observers', thrown bits and pieces of possibly sanitised information whenever the Government decides it is ready to part with it.

If we ignore such disengagement from politics – or, to be more precise, the hostility that exists towards politics in general – we are, in our negligence, laying the foundations upon which political extremism can all too easily flourish, and which at some point may become unstoppable. To sit in an exalted place, unaware and unresponsive to change and churn in the society that surrounds you, has been the traditional recipe for the downfall of the mighty.

When our report was initially published, it received what can only be described as 'mixed notices'. However, within a week things began to look up, largely I suspect as a result of people actually reading it; the ability of knowledge to break down prejudice never ceases to amaze me!

Since then, members of the Commission, with the support of the Hansard Society, have been monitoring the implementation of our recommendations and, in a number of ways, attempting to raise awareness of the Commission's findings. As a result of this activity there have been some genuinely encouraging developments. An important first step was a debate of the Commission's findings in the House of Lords on November 3 2005.¹ Subsequently, the report was considered by a range of Commons and Lords committees – in particular the House of Lords Information Committee and the House of Commons Administration and Modernisation Committees.

Since this time, other parliamentarians and committees have continued to engage with the Commission, for example, the House of Lords European Union Select Committee. When it published a report to examine public awareness of the role of the House of Lords in the scrutiny of EU legislation, the Committee referred in detail to our findings.² Its thoughtful consideration of these issues has set an example which others will hopefully follow.

The Prime Minister has also shown an active interest and encouraged a number of other ministers to look at ways in which these recommendations, taken together, can advance the cause of public engagement – something he takes very seriously. As, increasingly, in fairness, are most parliamentarians. Indeed, the Conservative Party has set up its own 'Democracy Taskforce' under the Chairmanship of Kenneth Clarke MP.

Since our report was published, Parliament has made some significant improvements to a number of aspects of its communication strategy and practice. In fact, there is a sense that an overall cultural change has begun to take place within Parliament as a whole.

We have seen a welcome expansion of the Parliamentary Education Unit. There has been the appointment of a managing editor of the parliamentary website, in preparation for the 'radical redesign' agreed by both Houses as being necessary

.....
¹ HL Deb 3 November 2005 c311

² European Union Committee (2006), *EU Legislation – Public Awareness of the Scrutiny Role of the House of Lords*, HL 179.

and urgent. A new Head of the Library and Information Services has been appointed in the Lords. Both in the choice of personnel and the thought that has gone into their job descriptions, these are very much steps in the right direction and to be welcomed.

However, a number of other recommendations have yet to be implemented and the Commission will be tracking their progress over the coming months. This includes, in particular, a review of the House of Commons administration (the 'Braithwaite arrangements'). The terms of reference chosen for this review will be crucial in determining whether many of the Commission's recommendations relating to the administration and management of Parliament will fall within its remit. We anticipate that more information will be available on this by the end of the year.

So mostly good news, but before any of us can get carried away with enthusiasm it is worth repeating what we said in our report – namely that the pace, and in some cases the nature, of the changes taking place in society are occurring so rapidly that even our best efforts at incremental change mean we are inevitably falling behind public expectations.

As I see it the problem lies not in our commitment, but in our ambition.

What is needed is not another round of incremental change, but a step change – and a rather large step at that – in the way Parliament seeks to engage with the electorate, most especially the younger members of that electorate.

It is essential to recall the context in which our recommendations were made, for example, the continuation of low levels of participation and knowledge about Parliament. Our report was published almost immediately after the May 2005 general election – when average turnout was 61%. Since then, local elections in May 2006 saw a 37% turnout.

The most recent Hansard Society and Electoral Commission *Audit of Political Engagement* (March 2006) found that:

- Only 44% of people could correctly name the MP for their own constituency;
- The percentage of people who feel themselves to be 'knowledgeable about politics' had dropped to 39% from 45% the previous year;

- The proportion with an 'interest in politics' rose from 53% in 2005 to 56% in 2006;
- The number of people who believe that our present system of governance works well remained static at 34%, whilst those who believe that 'getting involved works' dropped by 3% to 33%.³

Our Commission looked at a number of other social and political trends. These included the decline in identification with political parties; Parliament's need to 'compete' with other political entities; changes within Parliament; patterns of cultural consumption, and an evolving media culture.

We are still failing to respond sufficiently to these trends. Many of the electorate under 35 now regard the internet as their principal source, not only for communication, but also for knowledge. We would be wilfully myopic were we to ignore the opportunity this represents to create a new generation of informed citizens. We can, and must, use technology to address their individual concerns, and steer them towards whichever aspect of the parliamentary process is most likely to satisfy their interest.

Let me offer an example. In October 2005, at an internet conference in London, I had the privilege of sharing a platform with Bill Gates, and listened to his very compelling vision of the future – not the distant future, but the world of information as it is likely to be in 2010, at the possible time of the next general election.

In following this up, I became far more aware of the sheer scale and sophistication of web-based companies such as Amazon.com. Amazon fulfils the orders of more than 50 million regular customers. A regular customer is judged to be anyone dealing online with Amazon more than once a month. You enter their home page to be greeted with something like: 'Hello David Puttnam, you recently purchased "so and so". Did you know that the same author has a new book out?' Or, 'we noticed that you're developing a growing interest in contemporary jazz. Are you aware of the following CDs that have been released in the past couple of weeks?'

My interests have been accurately captured so that I can be constantly updated about what has recently become available within *my* predetermined areas of interest. What this offers is nothing less than an 'enabling mechanism' that could,

³ Electoral Commission & Hansard Society (2006), *An Audit of political engagement 3*, (London: Electoral Commission & Hansard Society).

if used intelligently, significantly increase interest and, at the same time, a far better understanding of the work of Parliament.

I think we would probably all accept that interest in politics – certainly politics as we now know it – has reached *such* a low ebb that it is difficult to see how it can be revived through what might be termed ‘natural, or traditional means’. The electorate will connect with Parliament only through those issues which are of genuine concern to them. This also requires a belief that their newly informed interest can, over time, translate into influence. So, for jazz from Amazon.com – read ‘climate change’, ‘pensions’, or ‘nuclear power’ from Parliament.com.

Why should not every citizen of this country directly connect and learn about the issues that most affect their lives, through access to whatever parallel activity is taking place in Parliament? When, as returning visitors, they are greeted by name, as citizens, at the entrance to the parliamentary site, why should they not discover what an enormous amount is *already* happening within Parliament?

None of this is science fiction. All of it can be achieved here and now. Most importantly, it represents an opportunity for Parliament to prove that it can escape from the dead hand of institutional incrementalism. It is my belief that once it does so, other equally desirable changes will undoubtedly follow.

This report is an important contribution to the process of increasing the momentum for change. Here, the media have a critical role to play. The Commission argued that Parliament had to take the first steps in reforming its approach; but if we are to move forward, it is equally vital that the media offer an intelligent response. Our report offered some thoughts on the way in which aspects of the media could play their part in improving the communication of Parliament.

As Chair of the Commission, I feel proud of what we started, and increasingly impressed by the commitment among parliamentary officials to bring about constructive change within the difficult timetable that confronts them. In respect of attitudes towards public communication within Parliament itself, there is something of a ‘generational divide’; it is vital that agitation for change comes from the most recent intakes before they, as so many before them, become over-acclulturated and ultimately complacent.

My greatest reservation lies with the media’s willingness to respond to the challenge. I see little of the concern that is growing within Parliament, both among MPs, Peers and officials, reflected in mainstream press or television coverage.

To achieve the aims that the Commission set out requires a joint effort. At present I would be inclined to give Parliament a B and the media a C minus. I can only hope that the response to this book will prove me wrong!

Strong and effective communication remains at the heart of *all* of the issues our Commission considered. As the former Prime Minister AJ Balfour once put it: 'Democracy is government by explanation'.

That is the belief which lay at the heart of our original proposals, and which informs all the essays which follow.

David Puttnam (Lord Puttnam of Queensgate)

Chair of the Hansard Society Commission on the
Communication of Parliamentary Democracy

Comment: Jack Straw MP

Representative politics is in trouble. Turnout in general elections has dipped to unprecedented low levels: 59% in 2001 and 61% in 2005. Membership of political parties has halved over the last 25 years. Worryingly, the decline in voting and party membership is most pronounced among the young. Turnout among 18-24 year-olds in the last general election was around 37%; more generally, studies have found younger age groups to be less politically active than other sections of society.¹ Across all social groups, politics and political institutions are viewed with cynicism. Parties are disliked, politicians are distrusted, and Parliament – the foremost institution in the democratic process – is widely regarded as irrelevant and out of date.²

The root causes of this increase in cynicism and broader secular decline in political participation are complex and manifold, arising from profound socio-economic changes over the past half century. The world today is almost unrecognisable from that which existed in the days when electoral turnout averaged above 80% and membership of the main political parties ran into millions, rather than hundreds of thousands. Contemporary citizens are more demanding than their forebears, displaying more consumerist instincts in their daily lives and in their politics. Society is more diverse and fluid, and life generally appears to move at a faster pace than ever before, driven forward by astonishing and apparently relentless progress in technology.

This is perhaps most obvious in the way we communicate with one another. For over 50 years, Britons got by with a handful of television channels and communicated with people over long distances either on landline telephones or by letters posted through the Royal Mail. In the blink of an eye all that has changed. We still use landline telephones and 'hard-copy' letters, but these modes of communication have in many instances been supplanted by more modern forms of interaction. Mobile phones are almost universal, email is commonplace and the internet has not merely transformed the way we communicate but created an entire virtual world. Digital and satellite technology promise to be even more revolutionary, providing a platform for interactive TV that is the stuff of science fiction. Already

¹ Electoral Commission (2005), *Election 2005* (Electoral Commission: London); Electoral Commission & Hansard Society (2005), *An Audit of political engagement 2* (London: Electoral Commission & Hansard Society).

² Hansard Society (2005), *Enhancing Engagement – Parliament and the Public* (London: Hansard Society).

it has given rise to an explosion of television channels and heralded the creation of 24-hour news coverage.

Within this new world, old political institutions such as Parliament have struggled to keep pace and retain their pre-eminent position. While it would be too unfair to say that Parliament has remained stuck at the landline stage in a wireless era, the Puttnam Commission was right to assert that the institution had not done enough to meet its communication responsibilities in a rapidly changing world. As it starkly concluded: 'In the 21st century, institutions that do not communicate fail. And in this Parliament is failing.' The Puttnam Commission proved to be a useful catalyst, accelerating some changes that were already in the pipeline as well as identifying further measures that would improve Parliament's capacity to project itself more effectively to the public and the media.

Since it reported, a number of changes have been made to Parliament's communication and workings. These are beginning to address some of the problems outlined by the Puttnam Commission. A more relaxed regime for broadcasters in the Commons and Lords is being trialled; media advisers for select committees have helped to increase coverage of that side of Parliament's work; visitors to the building now receive a better welcome following the appointment of visitor assistants; work is advanced on a proper reception centre for visitors (alongside Westminster Hall); plans for a dedicated educational visitor centre are being discussed; a *New Voters' Guide* has been distributed to new electors; new outreach officers are developing links with every secondary school in the country; and the parliamentary website is undergoing a major redesign.

These are important steps, but I want things to move further forward. In particular, as Leader of the House of Commons, I want to see more emphasis on the heart of Parliament – the Commons Chamber. That is what most people see when they think of 'their' Parliament. As events in recent years have shown, notably during the debate over military action against Iraq, the Chamber has not lost its ability to become the principal cockpit of national debate. Yet although the quality of debate remains high, the occasions when the main focus is on the Chamber are less frequent than they should be. For the most part political debate is played out for the mass audience in television and radio studios. The questions we must ask are how we rise to the challenge of a 24-hour news culture and how we bring the focus back to the Chamber. The alternative is to risk marginalisation, not only of the main Chamber but of the institution as a whole.

It is all too easy, when bemoaning the lack of media coverage of debates in the Chamber, to blame the media themselves for failing to pay enough attention to

what goes on in Parliament. To my mind, this is to get the argument the wrong way round. There is an issue for the media about how Parliament is reported; but we need to examine the beam in our own eye by asking whether we, as parliamentarians, are doing enough to ensure that what goes on in the Chamber is topical and relevant so as to influence their decision in favour of Parliament. As Chair of the House of Commons Modernisation Committee, I am working with colleagues from all sides of the House to examine what measures could help to achieve this goal. Colleagues on the Administration Committee are also assessing what they can do to help improve media coverage of Parliament. Recent changes to broadcasting rules are a positive step, and should help the process of giving viewers more insight into Parliament and its work. Such steps have certainly done nothing to undermine Parliament. I am keen to explore what more can be done in this area.

The fundamental question for parliamentarians will always be content. The mechanics of covering Parliament are of course important, but it is the substance that is crucial. All the camera angles in the world cannot make a football match more engaging if the standard of play is poor. That is why we must concentrate our efforts on what goes on in Parliament. Changing the format of parliamentary questions to make them more topical, as recommended by the Puttnam Commission, is one reform that might prove helpful, by making those sessions more spontaneous, contemporary and attractive to participants and observers alike. Encouraging MPs to devote more attention to the Chamber and their parliamentary role more generally must be a central part of the Modernisation Committee's future work. We also need to examine ways of involving the public in Parliament, not just as spectators, but as active participants. The Hansard Society is at the forefront of such moves, through projects such as Citizen Calling and TellParliament, which allow citizens to feed directly into select committee inquiries and consultations on draft legislation. I am determined to play my part in this because the relationship between citizens and the state is crucial to the future health of democratic government. It is vital, as we seek to rise to the challenges of the extraordinary revolution in communications culture, that in so doing we provide the people we serve with more opportunities for direct, meaningful engagement with their elected representatives. As the old Chinese proverb goes: 'Teach me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand.' Doing more to involve the public is where Parliament's future lies and that is where my colleagues and I must strive to take it.

Rt Hon Jack Straw MP

Labour MP for Blackburn and Leader of the House of Commons

Chapter Two

Organisational Change within Parliament: Clare Ettinghausen

The Puttnam Commission examined a wide array of issues within the broad remit of the communication of parliamentary democracy, including the reasons why communication activity had not been carried out satisfactorily to date. This failure was partly attributed to the lack of a central office to co-ordinate communications within Parliament, the absence of a communications strategy and the wider way that the Commons, in particular, organises itself. The Commission did not place undue expectations on Parliament. That is, that Parliament should go above and beyond that which other organisations assume is normal. Rather, the Commission wanted to bring Parliament up to a level playing field.

Parliament's Approach to Communications

The Commission was critical of the way communications were dealt with in Parliament, claiming that they were not carried out in a strategic manner. This, the Commission stated, should be viewed in the context of how Parliament is managed as a whole. It identified, in general, a lack of strategic thought and a blur between officials responsible for the smooth running of parliamentary business and those responsible for the smooth running of Parliament as a large organisation – two separate functions which at present overlap. The Commission noted that the House of Commons is organised around a long established departmental structure that did not incorporate communications functions in a coherent manner. This was not a criticism of the individuals; but rather of the structure in which they operate. The Hansard Society works with officials of both Houses on a daily basis and we are always impressed with the job that they do, but there is an ongoing need to evaluate the organisational framework.

A Single Communications Department

The Commission called for the centralisation of communications functions into a single cross-House department. The aim was to focus minds on the communication of Parliament across both the Commons and the Lords. There are very few cross-House structures within Parliament, and the Commission felt that

communications was an ideal candidate to be part of a new unified system. The department would be expected to report to MPs and Peers, to plan strategically and to look across all forms of media to develop communications functions.

To date, the idea of a single communications department has not been formally considered; nor do many within Parliament support the notion of bringing together communications into one unit. Despite this, we have been impressed with the work of communications staff in both Houses since the launch of the Commission's findings. In particular, media officers for select committees have, through their efforts, managed to increase the coverage of committee work.

However, this falls far short of what the Commission recommended. The present working arrangements between the Commons Administration Committee and the Lords Information Committee on a parliamentary visitor centre perhaps demonstrate that, in matters where the public are involved, working across Parliament can be effective. Furthermore, the new Parliamentary Information and Communications Technology department (PICT) is an example of a department specifically set up to serve the needs of both Houses. It could be argued that now that a precedent is established, it will be easier to introduce other changes that genuinely serve both Houses from one central department.

A Communications Strategy

The Commission argued that a communications strategy had to be at the heart of any organisational change relating to communications. Central to this was agreeing a set of principles along which any communications strategy would be developed. Such principles would, if agreed by MPs and Peers, give clear guidance for parliamentary officials when structuring and implementing communication plans. The principles identified by the Commission as representing the basic minimum standards for such work were: accessibility and transparency; participation and responsiveness; accountability to the public; inclusiveness; and being a model of good practice in management and communication. It was noted that the principles adopted by the Scottish Parliament (sharing the power; accountability; access and participation; and equal opportunities) had been important in defining the approach of the new legislature.

A Chief Executive

In chapter six of *Members Only?*, the Commission noted a lack of political and managerial leadership. In any large organisation, it is important to have a focal point. In most organisations, this would be the Chair and Chief Executive and

board of trustees or shareholders. However, in the Commons at least, this is a quasi-political body chaired by the Speaker. The House of Commons Commission has a broad remit, ranging from the pressing security issues of the day, to public information matters. Questions should now be asked as to whether this is the right body to oversee the organisational management of our central democratic institution.

In looking at Parliament's communications, the Commission could not help but cast a wider net into how Parliament 'fulfils its constitutional functions, how it administers itself'. While acknowledging the work of units like the Group on Information for the Public (GIP), the Commission concluded that the present system of governing itself was inadequate. It called for an independently elected House of Commons Commission, free from frontbench influence. The Commission also received evidence that a Chief Executive would be a welcome asset to run the administration of the Commons.

There is at present ongoing discussion within the Commons about a review of the 'Braithwaite arrangements' – the management changes that were implemented after the 1999 review of the administration of the House of Commons.¹ At the time of writing, no terms of reference are available, but we understand that the upcoming review may be wide enough to include the question of whether the current administration of the Commons is 'fit for purpose'. Parliament is more than the workplace of MPs and Peers and we would urge the review to be cast as widely as possible. The remit should also include working arrangements with the House of Lords, which often seem to be organised on an ad hoc and needs-only basis. The Puttnam Commission recommended that a Chief Executive, experienced in the management of complex organisations, should be appointed to head the administration of the House of Commons. I believe that a Chief Executive of Parliament, a figure appointed to be the public face of the institution, accountable to both the Commons and the Lords and charged with the management and administration of Parliament, is a sensible option; there are more arguments in favour of this proposal than can be stacked up against.

In a Westminster Hall debate on the House of Commons Commission Annual Report, Martin Linton MP (a member of the Puttnam Commission) drew attention to the proposed Braithwaite review.² He noted that the issue of membership of the House of Commons Commission and that of a Chief Executive had been included in the *Members Only?* report and that these should now be seriously considered

¹ House of Commons Commission (1999), *Review of Management and Services*, HC 745.

² HC Deb 3 November 2005 c351WH.

by the House. The upcoming Braithwaite review may be the only opportunity for the next decade or so to analyse whether the current structure delivers for the public as well as for Members. The broadest terms of reference must be encouraged, to include whether a Chief Executive and a central communications department serving both Houses are now necessary.

The Puttnam Commission made a clear case: the way that Parliament is currently organised is hindering its effectiveness in communications (and beyond) and clear leadership is needed to take Parliament forward in these rapidly changing times.

Recent Progress

Since the Puttnam Commission reported, the Hansard Society has been working with members of the Commission to take forward the recommendations. As has been outlined elsewhere, progress has been mixed, with some recommendations being adopted fairly quickly, while others have fallen by the wayside. Change within Parliament is always complex and one cannot ignore the fact that this is, by default, a highly political institution. However, the success of previous Hansard Society Commissions suggests that, over time, opportunities for change arise.

There has been some progress in the way that Parliament organises its communications functions. GIP has produced a business plan which has measurable aims and targets upon which success can be evaluated. The individuals now in post as Commons and Lords Librarians both have remits and responsibilities for overseeing public information and engagement and are spending unprecedented amounts of time on developing the relations of their respective Houses with the public and attempting to persuade Members and Peers to join various new initiatives. Specific initiatives that have flowed from both these developments are set out during the course of this report, but it is also worth noting here that the newly elected Lord Speaker, Baroness Hayman, has a remit to promote the work of the House of Lords to the wider public.

The first GIP business plan, which John Pullinger refers to later in this report, sets out how the House of Commons board of management view their commitment to improving public understanding and knowledge of the work of the House, together with work on increasing accessibility. The plan is wide ranging and covers many of the areas of recommendations of the Puttnam Commission, such as the parliamentary website, broadcasting, young people, the media, outreach and visitors. This plan could be viewed as the first stage in a process of overhauling the communications functions in Parliament. Next should be consideration of

whether the Houses would benefit from closer working relationships, how a communications strategy would complement this, and what the role of MPs and Peers would be in taking this strategy forward.

However, all these incremental changes do not make a revolution, and that is what the Commission required.

In today's market, Parliament is forced to compete with government, local government, media, European institutions, devolved legislatures and global institutions; so it must 'up its game' to be able to continue to attract interest and attention. According to survey data, members of the public put Parliament fourth on a list of the institutions or organisations which have the most impact on people's daily lives.³ Above Westminster are cited the media, local councils and business. This makes Parliament's battle for attention much more difficult.

In the 18 months since the Commission published its report, its recommendations have been debated in the House of Lords and referred to countless times in the Commons; members of the Commission and myself gave evidence on the report to the House of Commons Modernisation Committee and received a generally favourable response; and there have been a large number of changes within both Houses, which are outlined in other parts of this report. The Hansard Society is proud to have hosted a number of Commissions over the last three decades, looking at matters of public and political interest. In my mind, the report of the Scrutiny Commission, *The Challenge for Parliament* in 2001, together with this most recent report, *Members Only?*, offer a clear way forward for Parliament, to not only operate as a more effective institution in itself, doing a better job, but also in communicating this job to the public.⁴ As Lord Norton of Louth noted in a House of Lords debate on *Members Only?*:

*For people to pay attention to what Parliament is doing, Parliament has to be seen to be fulfilling the functions expected of it. If it is fulfilling important tasks, relevant tasks, then the media will pay more attention to it.*⁵

The Challenge for Parliament considered how to fulfil these important tasks and most of its recommendations have now been adopted by Parliament. *Members Only?* set out how to ensure the media, and the wider public, can

³ Electoral Commission & Hansard Society (2004), *An Audit of Political Engagement 1* (London: Electoral Commission & Hansard Society).

⁴ Hansard Society Commission on Parliamentary Scrutiny (2001), *The Challenge for Parliament: Making Government Accountable* (London: Vacher Dod).

⁵ HL Deb 3 November 2006 c336.

better understand and engage with these tasks and we hope that in due course the Commission's recommendations will also be adopted.

The Puttnam Commission was universally welcomed for drawing attention to an important issue – but its recommendations were not universally well received. The Commission believed that organisational changes should be included in a package of recommendations; without them, only half the story would be told. Eighteen months on, their arguments are still persuasive and I would urge those in charge of organisation and strategy within Parliament to use the unique circumstances before us to look at whether the current structure is ripe for reform.

Clare Ettinghausen

Chief Executive of the Hansard Society

Comment: John Pullinger

From the outside, the organisation of parliamentary administration looks confusing. I should know. I took up my position as 14th Librarian of the House of Commons and member of the House of Commons board of management at the end of 2004. Beforehand, I had only viewed Parliament from the outside and had been warned by friends to expect a culture shock. In this piece I offer a personal view on my experience of the organisation so far, both in general terms and specifically in relation to the organisation of communications.

On arrival, the culture shock was less than billed. I received a warm welcome from new colleagues who have a passion for and pride in their work and in the significance that Parliament has in the life of the nation. I met people in my own department, and also elsewhere, with a breathtaking range and depth of knowledge and understanding, who have dedicated their working lives to the service of Parliament and its Members. I saw a culture which delivers the goods its parliamentary customers demand, without fear or favour, come what may, often to seemingly impossible deadlines. In management-speak, this gives us a huge 'soft organisational capability'. It is an asset that can transcend the 'hard' organisation charts on the wall, showing who reports to whom.

At the strategic level the work of the House of Commons board of management had been shaped by the 1999 Braithwaite review, which had called for a more corporate and business-like approach to management across the administration. As a newcomer, it was clear to me that substantial change had taken place in a short period of time, not least in the working life of the Clerk as Chief Executive.

That said, one of the features of the job advertisement for House of Commons Librarian that had caught my eye was the work to connect Parliament with the public. I have long held the view that democracy can only flourish if citizens are well informed and that here in the UK, we could do this much better. I had taken up my position at just the right moment.

One month after I arrived, on January 26 2005, the House debated the 2004 Modernisation Committee report, *Connecting Parliament with the Public*. A motion agreeing, 'that the House should make itself more accessible, make it easier for people to understand the work of Parliament and do more

to communicate its activity to the general public' was carried by 375 to 14.¹ The motion also contained a series of specific authorities from the House for action in this area. The Hansard Society Commission Report, *Members Only?*, followed shortly thereafter, with a further powerful rallying cry for urgent and serious action.

Members had given a mandate to officials to act. It was now for us to follow through. The group of senior officials known as the House of Commons Group on Information for the Public (GIP) had a distinguished track record in co-ordination and oversight of communications activities carried out by individual departments of the House, notably the Library (through the Parliamentary Education Unit and House of Commons Information Office), Serjeant at Arms Department (Central Tours Office), Clerk's Department (Publications, Bookshop and Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit) and Office of the Clerk (Media and Communications Service). With a reporting line direct to the House of Commons board of management, it was a natural choice to be the governance body to develop and deliver against the new agenda.

In recognition of the increasing emphasis on Parliament-wide communications, the Clerks of both Houses agreed that House of Lords representation on GIP should be increased to include a member of the House of Lords management board (currently Elizabeth Hallam Smith, the Director of Information Services and Librarian) as well as the House of Lords Director of Communications. They also agreed that the Chair of GIP should be a member of the House of Commons board of management and invited me to take on that role.

These were significant decisions. They recognised the need to take a more strategic approach to communications but also the value of drawing on the communications expertise which rests within each of the departments across both Houses. The Hansard Society Commission had called for a single communications department, but a more federated approach avoided the upheaval of major organisational change and also had other benefits.

Members of GIP, located in the various departments, were well placed to reach out to their colleagues and ensure that the job of communication with the public was to be seen as part of the core work of Parliament, not just the job of a separate unit within it. This aspect has been important in making things happen on the ground, especially where there have been competing interests. Notable amongst these has been the challenge of opening up Parliament to the

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¹ HC Deb 26 January 2005 c327.

public whilst ensuring that it remains an efficient and effective workplace for the conduct of parliamentary business.

GIP took the lead in developing a coherent plan based on the evidence gathered by the Modernisation Committee, Members of both Houses, the Hansard Society and others. The plan was shaped through the management boards, discussed widely across the administration, including at the House of Commons management conference in November 2005, and finally adopted in December 2005. A linked process took place in the House of Lords.

This plan established overarching aims:

- To inform: Parliament must ensure that the wider public are well informed about the work and role of Parliament;
- To promote: Parliament must promote itself as an institution and describe why it is something which people should value;
- To listen: Parliament must seek and respond to feedback in order to engage people with its work.

It also set out specific goals to be achieved by 2011:

- A well used and intuitive website;
- Young people reaching voting age understand the importance of democracy;
- The media are well informed about Parliament – projecting it as a working institution;
- Westminster is the hub of a network of outreach across the UK;
- A parliamentary visitor centre is up and running;
- Visitors to Parliament feel welcome;
- Parliament works effectively with other local institutions;
- A programme of exhibitions is in place.

With an agreed plan to follow, GIP transformed itself into a delivery body, responsible for providing assurance to the two management boards that things are on track. GIP also provides periodic and topic specific reports to the various parliamentary bodies with an interest in this area. These include the House of Commons Commission, the Modernisation Committee, the Administration Committee, the Finance and Services Committee and the House of Lords Information Committee. Linked with this work by officials has been an increasing drive from Members in both Houses to make things happen.

Progress so far has been promising. Organisational change has been undertaken where necessary to achieve the objectives of the plan. The creation of new governance and organisation for the website is the most significant example of where this has been necessary. Others include: governance and management of the development of proposals for a Parliamentary Visitor and Information Centre; the management structure of the Parliamentary Education Unit; and responsibility for the *New Voters' Guide* being taken on by the House of Commons Information Office.

Of more significance has been the rapidly rising levels of engagement by officials in all departments in both Houses with the delivery of these communications objectives. This is the first year of a five-year programme. We will be judged year by year on whether we meet the targets that we have set ourselves. We are just starting our work and there is a long way to go. We face a serious challenge, one which lies at the heart of the functioning of our democracy. It will take energy and determination, as well as a will to learn from experience and change course if necessary.

The organisational changes that have been undertaken to date have been designed to provide a structure that meets the needs of the programme. I am looking forward to the new Braithwaite review, which will provide a timely opportunity to reassess whether we have the right 'hard' organisation in place to deliver our objectives. Whatever the outcome of the Braithwaite review, at least as significant for our success, in my view, will be our 'soft' organisation. By this I mean our mutual ability to inspire and mobilise action amongst Members, staff and friends outside Parliament so that each of us supports the others in making our own unique contribution to the future of our most important national institution.

John Pullinger

House of Commons Librarian and Chair of the
Group on Information for the Public

Chapter Three

Elements of a Communication

Strategy: Patricia Hodgson

This summer, it was revealed that the Government has spent £154 million on advertising over 12 months, more than any other advertiser in Britain, except Unilever and Proctor and Gamble.¹ Add in marketing and public relations and the cost soared to £322 million; surely the biggest communications bill anywhere in the nation? The Conservative Opposition had fun with these figures. Yet they too have been criticised for electing a public relations professional to lead their party.

No wonder the electorate, who are often unable to distinguish between government and Parliament, see our political system in terms of spin. Is it possible, then, to revive an understanding of parliamentary democracy in the face of all the decision-making and slick presentation that takes place outside Parliament and the flood of money oiling those wheels? The jury is out.

Clearly the problem is more than one of communication. Power is shifting to European and to regional bodies; global business seems to negotiate on equal terms with government departments; political debate takes place on television and radio or, increasingly, online. Western nations are experiencing a shift towards bigger, more professional government machines and, in the UK at least, this seems to be accompanied by a general feeling of powerlessness amongst voters. The results include the rise of single issue politics and a wider disenchantment with traditional political processes.

Yet whatever the nature of these developments, we have not – as a nation – agreed on a better means of governing ourselves than our representative democracy; Parliament remains at the core of our system. For all the activities of Whitehall agencies and spin doctors, it is still a parliamentary majority that gives legitimacy to governments and it is to Parliament that government is formally accountable. It is Parliament that can, and just occasionally does, take the decisions that break a government.

¹ Graeme Wilson, 'Labour outspends big stores on ads', *The Daily Telegraph*, 31 August 2006, p. 2.

This being so, should we not ensure that Parliament – as an organisation, location for national debate and embodiment of our political philosophy – communicates as professionally as other organisations in the 21st century? Professionalism does not mean spending the kind of sums that are bringing government communications into disrepute. It does mean being clear about what should be communicated and why.

The Puttnam Commission contrasted the high profile given to ‘we the people’ at election time with very different forms of political engagement between elections. It argued that modern technology may have provided the means for a more fully informed electorate, but Parliament has yet to summon up the will to engage with electors to achieve this goal. This chapter will examine the progress and, in places, lack of it, around the Commission’s recommendations regarding a modern communications strategy for Parliament.

Does Parliament want a communications strategy?

The first question is whether Parliament, as an institution, wants to engage with the voters. As Parliament is made up of competing individuals and opposing parties, the answer is not always clear. The success of any communications strategy depends on clarity of vision and on clear responsibilities for delivery, and it is undoubtedly true that Parliament does have a complex message to put across.

There is certainly progress towards a shared understanding amongst many MPs that, if Parliament is to survive at the heart of our political system, it must promote an understanding of its role through information and access. Yet, as the previous chapter illustrates, there has been less success in agreeing that a single communications department and professional appointments could bring coherence to delivering that vision.

There are very proper suspicions about the risks inherent in media coverage – but the reluctance to structure parliamentary communications professionally and engage experts to manage this probably owes more to the competitive instincts of the parties than to proper consideration of such risks. If so, the reluctance is damaging. The debate between organised parties is, of course, central to parliamentary democracy. If, however, this debate degenerates into a kind of plebiscitary democracy, conducted by political ‘stars’ via the media, then parties (in the sense of organised opinion) will be marginalised along with Parliament. That way lies the destruction of our constitution and many of the freedoms it guarantees.

This may sound over-dramatic. Yet one of the most widely shared concerns in political life is evidence of disengagement by the public from parties and the traditional political process. That disengagement can be met by increasing the rate of media-friendly party initiatives and spin or by a focus on trying to communicate the essentials of parliamentary debate and decision-making. The former seems inevitable. All who believe in the potential for intellectual engagement in the true business of politics should at least give the latter their best shot.

The Puttnam Commission found evidence in poll after poll that many people do not understand the difference between Parliament and government. The same polls show that, while voters are disengaged from politics, they have more time for their own MPs than for politics in general and do prefer thoughtful debate to spin. So the onus is on MPs, individually and as a class, to ensure that Parliament finds ways of communicating why they (and it) are important in their own right, as well as being foot soldiers for their respective parties.

The need to 'promote' democracy is widely espoused. Indeed, the Electoral Commission has been given a budget and a duty to inform civic understanding. Yet, however hard they try, it will always be difficult for external agencies and bureaucrats to inspire voters with the principles of parliamentary democracy. The very attempt is an oxymoron. Only Parliament can communicate why it should be taken seriously.

Keys to a communications strategy

Progress towards a properly developed strategy, against the Puttnam Commission's recommendations, is set out in detail at the end of this report. The Commission recommended three routes to better engagement with the public: the media, the internet and classroom and community contact.

The media

Television is still the most powerful tool for reaching the general population. Radio is a formidable communicator with opinion formers. The main television evening news bulletins set the tone and agenda for popular perceptions of what is happening in the world. Governments and political parties craft their communications to fit the requirements of radio and television and, of course, the press. Parliament cannot afford to ignore them. This means:

- Scrutinising parliamentary procedures with an eye to how well they translate for the media;

- Embedding rule changes for television coverage inside the Chamber and precincts of the House to match the 'grammar' of modern television and so make clips more attractive to use and watch. Ironically, the House of Lords led with piloting changes which they have now adopted; the Commons needs to catch up;
- Most important of all, revisiting recommendations on regular opportunities for topical debates to showcase Parliament's role at the heart of democratic discussion; again, the Lords is leading the way, considering opportunities for a weekly debate on Opposition motions. However, Jack Straw's comments in the introduction to this report are a hopeful sign that the House of Commons will take forward this recommendation.

Finding appropriate solutions to show in an accessible form how the Commons considers issues and scrutinises legislation is the key to recapturing the initiative in how the media present the business of government. Much progress has been made with publicising and communicating the work of select and joint committees. But the Chamber is the heart of Parliament. Its drama is apparent whenever a major issue is debated. Popular perceptions of the role of Parliament would be transformed if debates were clearly scheduled and signposted in advance in order to help drive the media's news agenda.

The internet

The internet is rapidly becoming the preferred source of information and much communication for young people, and it is already an essential source for journalists and for professionals in major businesses. It offers Parliament a future in its own hands for informing and engaging with the public. The parliamentary website has been improved and plans are in place to continue that improvement, starting with the recent redesign of the home page. It remains true, however, that it is easier to track down a debate using the BBC's excellent website than to find it via the parliamentary site index. A quick look at both sites also demonstrates which is the more engaging. If Parliament thinks it is important in our society, this is its shop window, unmediated and direct. It is where resources and professionalism should focus and its existence should be widely publicised.

Classroom and community

The Parliamentary Education Unit is revising all its materials for the coming year and the new visitor reception centre and its guides should make a real difference to the experience of those who visit. All this is important, of course, but the numbers reached are not large. More significantly, the Education Unit has plans for outreach to schools from this year and the House authorities

are considering outreach to the wider public through a network of regional centres. Probably, however, the development which could have the most impact would be a programme of taking the kind of debates conducted in Westminster Hall to regional venues, to bring them closer to people outside the South East. There is no evidence, as yet, of such a programme being developed.

The future of our democracy is in the hands of Parliament. Its Members can choose how they want it to represent that fact to 'we the people'. MPs should take a longer view than that which they may be accustomed to taking with their party political hats on. Inevitably, 'winning' any debate on immediate issues takes priority with government and parties. They will go first to the best way of getting their point over: the press conference just before the main news; the 'inside' source; the eye-catching initiative. They will be tempted to downplay the challenges they face in Parliament. Yet, unless the forum for the hard grind of testing legislation and for the final resolution on major issues remains, and is seen by voters to remain, our Parliament, then the UK's constitution will have changed irredeemably.

Patricia Hodgson DBE

Member of the Puttnam Commission and
Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge

Comment: Greg Hurst

Journalists who are privileged to work in Parliament rightly regard the place as a treasure trove. Reporters like me, who cut their teeth on local and regional newspapers, remember keenly the depressing trend of publishing groups selling town centre sites and relocating to industrial estates. Such locations are not just dreary; they are physically cut off from communities and the readers whom journalists write for. Working for national newspapers also increasingly means spending far more time on the telephone than on the road, with fewer opportunities for face to face contact with sources of information or for eye witness reporting in the era of television-led news.

Political journalism at Westminster is different. Lobby correspondents work in close physical proximity to the political world on which they report. Most seize the opportunities this heralds. Access to the reporters' galleries of the Commons and Lords, the Members' Lobby and committee rooms enable journalists to report not simply accurately but with colour, context, authority and immediacy. Whether all manage to do so is beside the point; the opportunity is there.

Moreover, chance encounters with MPs, Peers, civil servants, staff of political parties and many of the other actors who walk the political stage provide varied and at times unexpected chances to catch up on news and to swap information. For these reasons, a communications strategy for Parliament that focused too much on the relatively few members of the media already working within the building or with access to it would, in my view, be a mistake. Yes, things could be done to make things easier for members of the Lobby. The media staff recently taken on by the Commons to publicise the work of select committees have made a noticeable impact, for instance. Yet, frankly, keeping an eye on select committee sessions and reports was a fairly straightforward business before they arrived.

The House of Commons is certainly weak in its media operation at a corporate level, for example when responding to big breaking stories such as security threats, and is behind the times with the lack of an effective out-of-hours and weekend media service. Also, as the Puttnam Commission's report identified, the strict rules on filming and photography within parts of the Palace of Westminster are both confusing and difficult to justify to those unfamiliar with the ways of Parliament. Yet journalists who work within the building, or visit it often, soon learn to find their way around. A serious attempt to find better ways of communicating the work done in Parliament might do better to cast its net wider

and draw in reporters who rarely, if ever, have the chance to set foot within its hallowed precincts.

I well remember, as a young reporter on the *Dorset Evening Echo*, wrestling with the difficulties of getting a seat in the gallery to report a Commons debate; it was about a defence review that led to the closure of a local naval base, with the loss of thousands of jobs in one small community. The system for obtaining a ticket for the gallery was unclear and my arrival in the reporters' gallery was down to luck after a friendly attendant volunteered to escort me from the Central Lobby. Once there I sat through a debate lasting several hours, unsure how I might get something to eat (I didn't) or find my way out. It was my first visit to Parliament and memorable for that, but to a visiting reporter from the provinces it was not a welcoming environment. Not much has changed on that score; the post-9/11 security requirements have made it even more difficult for non-accredited journalists from smaller newspapers or magazines and niche publications to come in to report specific debates in the Commons, or indeed the Lords.

This facade of unwelcomeness can be echoed, and indeed magnified, for members of the media working within the building. The Puttnam Commission's report rightly picked up on the hostility frequently displayed towards parliamentary journalists, which comes from both Members of Parliament and from some of its officials. The ire of MPs appears, in my experience, to be generated in many cases by a bizarre cocktail of arrogance, a wish to be reported more than is the case, anger arising from individual bad experiences at the hands of reporters or their newspapers, and resentment at the salaries of senior journalists (often wildly exaggerated by MPs).

In fairness, the media itself can also be at fault. As some contributors to the Puttnam Commission noted, an unwillingness to admit or correct mistakes is among the less attractive features of journalism. Another is a readiness, and in some cases an eagerness, to succumb to a culture of denigration of public figures for its own sake. Whatever the causes, it is not a healthy situation. A confident, purposeful Parliament would accept without question that the media should play an integral role within it. Instead, parliamentary journalists have constantly to re-make the case for their berths in the Commons to sceptical parliamentarians and officials, who give the impression that the press remain at Westminster under sufferance.

Curiously, given the impeccable credentials of the journalists who sat on the Puttnam Commission, some of its conclusions may, inadvertently or not, have played into this cocktail of resentment and hostility towards the media found in certain quarters within the Commons. It was not wise, in my view, to be so prescriptive in several of the report's recommendations on matters both small and large, given the jealousy with which MPs guard their rights of parliamentary privilege. The terms of address used by parliamentarians may be outdated, quirky or a little odd, depending on your point of view, but ultimately MPs alone will determine whether to change them. That is a small point.

Some of the much bigger points which the Puttnam Commission was, perhaps, unwise to grapple with were proposals for the House of Commons Commission to be elected by secret ballot according to the relative strength of political parties and for the appointment of a Chief Executive of the Commons. MPs bridle at the impression of being told how to run their affairs by outsiders of any kind, particularly so by senior and powerful members of the media. This may seem foolish but it is a fact; recommendations of this kind risk being counter-productive.

This leads me to one closing thought. The culture and management of the Commons depends ultimately on the Speaker, who wields enormous power as Chair of the House of Commons Commission. Michael Martin MP has, as Speaker since 2000, had a difficult relationship with the press. No meaningful change to Parliament's media strategy, let alone one as fundamental as that envisaged by the Puttnam Commission, could be enacted successfully without the active support of the Speaker. It is in the interests of all concerned that this relationship improves.

Greg Hurst

Political Correspondent of *The Times* and Honorary
Secretary of the Parliamentary Press Gallery

Chapter Four

Role of the Media: Virginia Gibbons

*Politicians and journalists both need to re-appraise our roles and the relationship with each other. The media could help with more coverage and factual reporting of our work instead of the celebrity-driven type of political soap opera that often is portrayed.*¹

Robin Cook

The Puttnam Commission's recommendations on media reporting of Parliament flow from the belief that in a democracy people have a right to understand what Parliament does and why it does it. The chief criticism of the media is that their coverage of Parliament – if they cover it at all – focuses on splits, sensation and personality; a criticism that is also aimed at political reporting in general.

The journalists' response is to point out that Parliament makes very little effort to accommodate their needs or deadlines, viewing them as potential troublemakers and deluging them with information but very little news: 'While an avalanche of paper is issued every day covering every aspect of what is happening in Parliament, the House authorities make little effort to make it digestible, accessible or relevant.'² Meanwhile, government and opposition communication teams are supplying well-packaged stories tailored to the demands and time-scales of modern media operations. Elinor Goodman, then Political Editor of *Channel 4 News*, summed up the problem when she gave evidence to the House of Commons Modernisation Committee: 'You are in a competitive news market where other people are trying to guide us and sell us stories. What you are selling us are essentially lists.'³

The conventional media remain the primary means by which most citizens are able to understand and be engaged with the work of Parliament. Personal visits and direct communication via new technology are still the preserve of the few; the vast majority of the public receive their information and understanding of what is happening in Parliament from television, radio and newspapers. The expectation

¹ *The Scotsman*, 6 January 2003.

² Hansard Society Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy, chaired by David Puttnam (2005), *Members Only? Parliament in the Public Eye* (London: Hansard Society), p 44.

³ Modernisation Committee (2004), *Connecting Parliament with the Public*, HC 368.

is that the media will enlighten the public as to the process of Parliament's work – why something is happening and what it means. This expectation is too often unfulfilled, with the consequence that the public are usually in the dark as to how Parliament works and what legislation actually means to their lives.

Westminster, the world of politics and Parliament, remain a closed book to many. The result is a lack of interest, a lack of engagement in the politics of the country and low turnout at elections. Professor Stephen Coleman, in his study comparing the House of Commons and the Big Brother House, points out that parliamentary democracy is not intrinsically tedious and reality TV is not inherently exciting – it is how they are presented that makes the difference: 'Parliament's claim to the attention of the public...needs to be spelt out clearly and regularly, in terms that are simple, attractive and engaging. Of course, politics is complex and many issues cannot be made accessible; but the process can.'⁴

Members of the public who contributed to the work of the Puttnam Commission expressed dissatisfaction with the way Parliament is portrayed by the media: 'The politicians mock each other; the media mock the politicians therefore what possible opportunity is there for the general public to be informed or take any of it seriously?'⁵

So, who is letting down the public – Parliament or the media? The Commission did not hark back to a mythical 'golden age' of reporting of Parliament – rather, it examined how Parliament should set out its stall in the age of 24/7 electronic media and unprecedented competition among newspapers. Andrew Marr from the BBC summed up the problem in a *Daily Telegraph* article: 'We live in a television-saturated age and in a parliamentary democracy which is not as noticed as it needs to be. And these two facts are somehow connected.'⁶

The beginnings of change?

The Commission concluded that implementing reforms to Parliament's communication, 'would provide a much-needed opportunity for the media to examine their parliamentary reporting and identify those parliamentary news stories which the public have a right to know and a desire to understand'.⁷

⁴ Stephen Coleman (2003), *A Tale of Two Houses: The House of Commons, the Big Brother House and the people at home* (London: Hansard Society).

⁵ Hansard Society Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy, p 73.

⁶ Andrew Marr, 'Notebook' *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 March 2005.

⁷ Hansard Society Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy, p 72.

The previous chapter outlined the steps that Parliament has taken to forge a better relationship with the media in order to improve coverage for the public – this includes a relaxation of the rules on broadcasting proceedings of the House and on filming within the precincts; additional media officers for select committees and an expansion of web casting. Some recommendations of the Puttnam Commission have made little or no progress – photographers are banned from the Chamber, passes for media outlets remain restricted – whilst others (the establishment of an advisory group of media representatives, formal induction for journalists) are being considered.

Where does this leave media coverage of Parliament? To a certain extent, measuring any degree of change has to rely on anecdotal evidence at this stage, as further research will have to wait until the new parliamentary arrangements come to fruition. The general perception is that there has been an increase of media coverage of select committee work, with the publication of select committee reports more regularly gaining coverage on radio and TV and in newspapers.

Coverage of other parliamentary work is more uneven. To a great extent, improved coverage of Parliament has been more talked about than undertaken and the debate on media reporting of politics has continued over recent months. While there has been a range of political and parliamentary events which received extensive coverage in the media, the story very often hangs on the familiar ‘who’s up and who’s down’ style of reporting. Inevitably, after an interview, a political reporter explains what the politician has just said. Is it, in Andrew Marr’s phrase, because politicians do not speak ‘fluent human’? Or is it that, in an increasingly sensationalist news culture, political reporters find it easier to speculate on the politician’s supposed deviousness rather than telling their audience what is happening, why it is happening now and how it affects them?

There is no doubt that reporting on Parliament is not straightforward. Parliament is not one united institution; 646 separate MPs, two Houses with different responsibilities, political groupings, the demands of coverage of government and opposition affairs all mean that there is very little time or space to cover other matters. Yet the public have an absolute right to know what happens in Parliament and to participate in its proceedings. The Puttnam Commission stressed that the main responsibility to communicate Parliament’s work rests with Parliament itself but urged the media to examine the way they report Parliament and how they identify news stories of interest and relevance to the public.

Action has been forthcoming from the academic community and some within the media. Oxford University recently established a Reuters Institute to examine

media practices.⁸ This followed a debate initiated largely by the publication of John Lloyd's book, *What the Media are Doing to our Politics*, in 2004. It is expected that this will ensure that the relationship between media and politics continues to be scrutinised far into the future. It is hoped that the opportunities for the media to enhance their coverage of Parliament will be considered. In addition, the London School of Economics and the London College of Communication set up Polis, a new journalism initiative, at the start of 2006. This includes not only news and journalism focused teaching and research programmes, but also a series of public lectures, seminars and debates on the changing role of the news media and the challenges they face.⁹

Yet studying journalism and delivering it are two very different things. Some evidence to the Puttnam Commission suggested that there was little point in outside bodies making recommendations to newspaper editors and journalists about parliamentary reporting. The brutal fact is that much of the media are no longer interested in the processes of parliamentary democracy – power has shifted away from Parliament and the media will report on where the key political decisions are taken.

The Commission did not accept, however, the suggestion that no-one can usefully comment on the current culture of political reporting: 'The evidence we heard suggested that journalists are themselves eager to see Parliament given greater prominence in the media and would give a warm welcome to measures which helped them to report its activities in a fresh and engaging fashion.'¹⁰ Speaking at a lecture in January 2006, Nick Robinson, BBC Political Editor, concurred with the Puttnam Commission's sentiments when he acknowledged that, 'cynicism and disinterest in politics are bad for journalists just as much as they are bad for politics'.¹¹ He recommended that the media admit more readily when they are wrong, or the limits of their knowledge. This mirrors a comment by Peter Riddell in the Commission's report, which asked for the media to be more merciless in admitting their own errors¹², the views expressed by Greg Hurst in this report and an observation by Michael White of *The Guardian* that, 'Most newspapers will apologise for error only when lawyers force them to.'¹³

⁸ <http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/>.

⁹ <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/polis>.

¹⁰ Hansard Society Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy, p 75.

¹¹ Nick Robinson, 'A troubled marriage – TV and democracy,' Philip Geddes Memorial Lecture, 27 January 2006, Oxford University.

¹² Hansard Society Commission on The Communication of Parliamentary Democracy, p 75.

¹³ Michael White, 'I'm with Clarke,' *The Guardian*, 24 April 2006, Comment is Free, <http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk>

Any assessment of the media's role in reporting Parliament has to understand the intense and growing commercial pressure on all media outlets. From the ubiquity of the internet to the remorseless rise of free newspapers, reporting of politics generally, and of Parliament in particular, is being squeezed. This is recognised by many experienced political reporters such as Michael White: 'It is difficult for us as political journalists to get things into the newspaper which we would have got in more easily ten years ago, or five years ago, or even a year ago. It is really quite a sharp curve and in general terms it arises from the marketisation of news, and what is deemed to be important is much more varied. ... I am not suggesting it is all about dumbing-down or all about loss, but it is a real problem reporting Parliament, in all its manifestations.'¹⁴

Putting forward recommendations as to how journalists could improve the reporting of Parliament is inevitably a sensitive and contentious area. The ownership of the media in Britain is concentrated in very few hands and their bottom line is commercial rather than democratic. Newspapers are not public service bodies, but they do have an enormous influence and therefore, arguably, have some form of democratic responsibility. The 2004 *Audit of Political Engagement* found that 52% of the public believe that the media have the most impact on their everyday lives – this compares to only 30% for Parliament and 25% for the Prime Minister.¹⁵ With this sort of influence must come recognition that they have obligations to the free and open democracy of which they are a part.

Recommendations as to how the media can improve their coverage of Parliament fall into four main areas:

1. The media should break out of the 'herd' mentality of the lobby and pursue parliamentary stories that affect people's everyday lives;
2. The media should focus less on personality clashes and consider if their stories provide information on the issues and future impact of legislation;
3. The media should try to 'open up' Parliament by considering the language, jargon and explanations used when conveying the work of Parliament and MPs;
4. The media must take responsibility for the coverage they produce and be willing to correct themselves when necessary.

¹⁴ Michael White, Evidence to the House of Lords European Union Committee, 14 March 2006.

¹⁵ Electoral Commission & Hansard Society (2004), *An audit of political engagement 1* (London: Electoral Commission & Hansard Society), p 48.

Public Service Broadcasting

The Puttnam Commission identified Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) requirements as essential in ensuring that appropriate coverage of Parliament continues and made several recommendations in this area. In particular, the Commission advocated that public service requirements continue to apply to the commercial public service broadcasters as well as the BBC. Members of the Commission felt strongly that engagement with politics and Parliament would suffer if commercial broadcasters were allowed to walk away from these commitments and leave the Public Service Broadcasting obligation solely to the BBC. Ofcom Deputy Chairman Philip Graf has indicated that: 'By 2012 ITV and Five may no longer be providing much public service content. The old implicit compact derived from monopoly or scarcity rent will have very largely gone.'¹⁶

The Commission would argue that this is detrimental to the process of democracy. If commercial public service broadcasters drop their commitment to provide national and regional news and current affairs, citizens' engagement with politics and with Parliament will inevitably suffer.

Many who gave evidence to the Commission felt there was the potential for much more innovation and imagination in how the PSB remit was interpreted by broadcasters including in programmes aimed at young people. One welcome development has been on BBC Radio 4's *You and Yours* programme, which encourages listeners to submit evidence to parliamentary committees via the programme – an admirable example of Parliament and the BBC working together to engage the public in the political process.

The Commission made several recommendations with specific relevance to the BBC. It argued that the BBC should continue to provide parliamentary coverage across the full range of its output – and the recent White Paper on Charter Renewal (and the Charter Framework Agreement) reaffirms the BBC's obligations in this area. The Commission further argued that the Charter Renewal process provides the opportunity for the BBC to set out a clear vision of its role and ambitions for the reporting of Parliament and recommended that the BBC be required by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Parliament to be explicit as to how it plans to report Parliament in an engaging, innovative and accessible way. The White Paper on Charter Renewal gave the BBC six new public purposes, including sustaining citizenship and civil society. Indeed, the purpose of sustaining citizenship reflects an approach increasingly adopted by

¹⁶ Phillip Graf, Royal Television Society Speech, 18 September 2006.

the BBC during the last year, and the broadcaster has expressed its desire to work with outside organisations to encourage active citizenship.

The public purpose to sustain citizenship will have an accompanying 'purpose remit' – a statement of how this purpose is to be achieved and how success will be measured.¹⁷ The Commission felt that while programmes such as *Yesterday in Parliament* and *Today in Parliament* provide an invaluable digest of the day's proceedings, the BBC should have a public service obligation which takes the Corporation well beyond simply a daily account of proceedings in its reporting of Parliament.

BBC Parliament

The Commission considered BBC Parliament to be a seriously undervalued democratic and broadcasting resource with immense potential to provide innovative parliamentary programming. It called for greater integration between BBC Parliament and the broader spectrum of BBC programming to improve cross-trailing. Since the report, adverts for BBC Parliament broadcast by mainstream BBC channels have generally been regarded as successful and have led to increased awareness of the channel. Cross-trailing has also been worthwhile, with, for example, 100,000 viewers turning over to BBC Parliament to watch the 2006 Budget speech.

The Commission also called for the remit of BBC Parliament to be broadened to permit the live coverage of other noteworthy parliamentary hearings or debates. The rules at the time dictated that the House of Commons should always be broadcast live when sitting, even if the most noteworthy event of the day was being held in the Lords or in committee. The example highlighted by the report was the Anti-Terrorism Bill as it moved from the Commons to the Lords, where BBC Parliament was unable to follow it. This change was supported by the House of Lords Information Committee and the House of Commons Administration Committee. Following a request to the Speaker, Michael Martin MP, it has been agreed that BBC Parliament will be released on a trial basis from the undertaking to carry live Commons Chamber coverage, on condition that the freedom to select proceedings in the Lords is used only sparingly, and that the Speaker should be consulted in such cases. BBC Parliament anticipates that this release will be used two or three times a year.

¹⁷ Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2006), *Broadcasting: An Agreement Between Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation*, CM 6872.

The Commission recommended that the BBC should provide a clear and substantial action plan for the development of BBC Parliament and for a targeted and ambitious increase in its impact. This has not happened, but the channel continues to publish annual reports and develop programme policy. The channel does not set audience targets, believing that audience figures are dependent on political events.

The future of political reporting

Media outlets do not score well on political reporting in general and parliamentary reporting in particular. A common complaint is that comment has taken over from straightforward reporting and the increasing prominence of political blogs has exacerbated this change as gossip and opinion come to the fore. Political bloggers such as Iain Dale claim they enhance the process of democracy: 'Blogs are allowing the public into the sometimes closed world of Westminster.'¹⁸ This is undoubtedly true, but whether they enhance the public's understanding of the democratic process (or indeed if they have an obligation to do any such thing) is open to question. Whatever their role, they have undeniably had an influence on the mainstream media, as more and more news outlets set up blogs from which their political reporters can offer their comments and opinions.

Other developments, such as the setting up of new political programming online, raise possible future challenges for the mainstream media. Impartiality rules governing politics on television do not apply to the internet, so the pressure to compete with more opinion and commentary rather than fact and explanation will increase. In addition, local newspapers are under pressure from free newspapers aimed at the all-important 18-34 demographic who regard Westminster politics as stultifying. John Hipwood, Political Editor of the *Wolverhampton Express & Star*, explained the reality of political reporting for local newspapers: 'We have more difficulty in getting serious political stories into the papers and serious parliamentary stories into the papers every day of every week. In the Commons it is easier for us to get stories in when we are reporting our local or regional MPs ... A lot of my regional colleagues now do not report the national news, they purely report what their MPs are saying about the national news.'¹⁹

Many journalists currently reporting Parliament are not happy with the current practices. Nick Robinson, BBC Political Editor, summed up the problem: 'There is an argument here that needs addressing – that we in the media are undermining faith in the very democratic institutions we claim to be holding to account and

¹⁸ *The Yorkshire Post*, 8 July 2006.

¹⁹ John Hipwood, Evidence to the House of Lords European Union Committee, 14 March 2006.

undermining the capacity of our society to have a rational debate about the choices we should make. There is undoubtedly a real challenge to those of us interested in politics to reach those who are least interested.²⁰

It remains far from clear whether and in what way the media will respond to reforms to Parliament's communications. The reforms undertaken have yet to bed in and essential changes have not yet been agreed. For example, a formal induction for journalists would avoid the present situation where even seasoned political reporters admit difficulties in finding their way round parliamentary documents and information; an advisory group of media representatives could overcome some of the apparently in-built hostility between journalists and Parliament; and an easing of restrictions on the number of parliamentary passes for media outlets would mean that, for example, a health debate could be covered by expert health journalists who could open up the public's understanding of what was being debated and how it would affect their lives.

Even if parliamentary reporting were made easier and more comprehensible for journalists, would they respond? The Commission called upon, 'MPs to act in their own interests; conscientious political reporters to act in theirs; and the owners and editors to join both these groups in discovering whether a return to factual and fuller reporting of Britain's democracy might be of interest to her citizens.'²¹ Let's watch (and read and hear) what happens.

Virginia Gibbons

Communications Manager of the Hansard Society

²⁰ Nick Robinson, 'A troubled marriage – TV and democracy', Philip Geddes Memorial Lecture, 27 January 2006, Oxford University.

²¹ Hansard Society Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy, p. 75.

Comment: Theresa May MP

The Puttnam Commission's report addressed the public's perceptions of Parliament and how better communication by Parliament can improve these perceptions. It raised a number of issues for further discussion in Westminster and beyond, one of the most significant of which regarded the media and their role with and for Parliament.

Parliament clearly has a responsibility to educate and inform not only the public, but the media as well. The Puttnam Commission's report suggested a number of ways in which Parliament can improve its communications systems in order to fulfil this role. Some of these have already been taken on board, but we must continue to ensure that Parliament is playing its part in communicating to the public through a variety of media and informing them of its role and activities.

We must be wary, however, of thinking that it is only Parliament in its corporate identity that has responsibility for informing the public about what is happening in Parliament. The public's best direct point of contact with Parliament is their local MP; so individual MPs should keep people informed at a local level about issues that interest and affect them, and how the public can contribute to a particular debate. It is vital to democracy that this contact is valued and readily used by the public.

Yet, no matter how good Parliament or an individual MP's communications skills are, the majority of the public will still obtain most of their information about what takes place in Parliament from the media. The influence this gives the media cannot be downplayed, particularly given that their position in modern culture is such that if the media choose to promulgate something as truth, it will all too often be accepted.

This is a great compliment to the power and the status of the media, so they should respect this position. Yet sadly, as the power and availability of media outlets have increased, so the reporting of Parliament has decreased. In the world of 24-hour news, the emphasis is on the breaking news story, the instant answer and the sensational headline, rather than the thoughtful debate; in the world of the celebrity, personalities are given more exposure than policies. Against this background, politicians respond with sound bites and a flurry of activity.

The media portray the parliamentary world as aggressively adversarial and encourage the Punch and Judy or the so-called 'yah-boo' image of politics. This in turn promulgates these attitudes within Parliament, since the alternative will not be reported. So we end up in a catch-22 situation. The losers are the public – not only because a less 'yah-boo' approach is likely to lead to better quality legislation, but also because this image of Westminster deters many people who could make a valuable contribution to Parliament and the political world.

Politicians feel strongly about their beliefs and it is right to portray that. Similarly, there is nothing wrong with seeking a sensational story – understandably it boosts sales and revenue. But when this is the only face of politics that is shown, then it is not surprising that people become disillusioned with politicians, political parties and the whole political process. A media obsessed with a Punch and Judy style of politics often misses the more discreet occasions when a point is won through careful argument and a real difference is made for the good of the public. We would all benefit if these events were also covered by our media. This would not only inform the public, but also show them that Parliament is working on their behalf and that politics continues to be relevant.

People want grown-up politics. Politicians have a responsibility to provide that and the media have a responsibility to show it. If the media focus solely on the negative, the public will do likewise.

Furthermore, given their central role in our lives, the media should take a positive and pro-active approach to educating the electorate. This involves informing the public about the institutions of Parliament and the political process; referring them to useful external resources, such as the parliamentary website and publications; and, most importantly, providing a fair, comprehensive and knowledgeable account of the current issues making their way through Parliament.

I am certainly not suggesting that public disengagement is the fault of the media and that if only they took a different approach we would see more interest in Parliament and politics – far from it. I fully accept the need for politicians to provide a lead in moving away from a Punch and Judy approach and to better communicate Parliament to the public. Yet I also believe that a partnership between the media and Parliament, united in the responsibility to enlighten the electorate to the workings of Parliament and their own role within this system, would not only increase voter confidence in the process, and hence involvement, but would also engender more informed and better debated pieces of legislation.

Furthermore, it would strengthen the position of Parliament and the power of our democracy.

Ultimately, greater public participation in the political process will strengthen the House of Commons – ensuring that it is not only representative of the people, but also more effective in its roles of scrutinising the Government and holding it to account. That is the goal to which we should aspire.

Rt Hon Theresa May MP

Conservative MP for Maidenhead and
Shadow Leader of the House of Commons

Conclusion: Jackie Ashley

When the Hansard Society's Commission reported back in May 2005, we were clear about the stark choice facing Parliament. Citing examples of disengagement and cynicism, disappointing electoral turnout and low voter satisfaction, we warned that Parliament was failing the public, and it needed either to modernise or face questions about its continued legitimacy. The Executive Summary laid out our fears: 'Parliament is increasingly sidelined from the centre of British life, with satire and neglect threatening to substitute for urgent or informed interest. If these trends continue the whole of our political and civil life will suffer.'¹

This review of our Commission has referred to the changes we proposed to bring Parliament into the 21st century. These were radical, involving a complete restructuring of the administration of Parliament, including a new Communications Service, a Chief Executive for the House of Commons, much greater use of modern technology, more money for communications, and a better relationship with the media.

Eighteen months on, we are heartened by the progress that has been made towards implementing many of the Commission's recommendations. In particular, we welcome the House of Commons Strategic Plan for 2006–2011, as well as the publication of the first ever corporate business plan for the House of Commons. The Group on Information for the Public (GIP) is taking the first vital steps towards raising awareness of communications issues among MPs and staff. It promises the House of Commons Media and Communications Service will provide a professional media service for journalists and will promote a better understanding of the work of the House and its committees.

There are signs of progress, too, in the merging of the range of House committees into the House of Commons Administration Committee, which now provides a clearer point of contact for communications issues. As has been noted in other essays, we expect this autumn to see a review of the Braithwaite arrangements, to look at what structural changes may be needed to improve communication with the public.

Other more immediately apparent improvements include a relaxation in the rules for broadcasters, plans for considerable investment in the parliamentary

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¹ Hansard Society Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy, p. viii.

website, and the election for the first time of a Lord Speaker, Baroness Hayman, whose duties include an educational role, to make sure the public understand the significance of the House of Lords.

There is also evidence of a more general cultural change. This is, perhaps, an inevitable result of a younger intake of MPs finding their feet, the increasing prevalence of the internet in daily life and a recognition by some parliamentarians that their lives at Westminster need to change as quickly as the society around them is changing. We are encouraged, for example, by the decision of Harriet Harman MP, Minister for Constitutional Affairs, to publish an 'easy to understand interpretation' alongside every clause of the recently published Coroners Draft Reform Bill.

It is disappointing, though, that parliamentarians have not responded to calls for the language and terminology used, along with some of the archaic procedures, to be changed. Nor have they acknowledged a failure to hold topical debates or increase the number of committee meetings outside London. The Westminster Village seems determined to remain just that: a small village which does not welcome outsiders. It is certainly not an outward looking community, seeking to interest and engage with the people beyond its walls – the voters.

Inevitably, the area in which there has been the least progress in implementing the Commission's recommendations has been relations with the media. Eighteen months ago we regretted the tendency to report splits, sensation and personality stories at the expense of explanation and information about what happens in Parliament, in particular the introduction and scrutiny of laws which affect voters' lives. With some notable exceptions, too many journalists still see politicians as 'game', while some politicians react to journalists with equal hostility. The new Reuters Institute at Oxford University will doubtless cast more light on this dysfunctional relationship, but we are not holding our breath for any dramatic improvement.

The Commission was particularly concerned about Parliament's failure to reach young people. The GIP business plan does acknowledge the importance of explaining what Parliament does and how the voting system works to young people. On the plus side, the Parliamentary Education Unit is revising all its publications for next year; a *New Voters' Guide* was launched in July, to be sent to all young people when they turn 18; the House of Lords has agreed to make its Chamber available for debating competitions for young people; and two outreach officers have been employed to visit schools. We are also pleased to

note that 17 visitor assistants have been recruited to enrich the experience of those visiting Parliament.

There is much to celebrate. Yet the Commission believed that piecemeal or incremental moves would go against our fundamental conclusions. Most of the changes that have taken place or are in progress at the moment are precisely that: piecemeal. There is some evidence that the mindset of Parliament is changing to take into account the public's point of view, but there is still a long way to go. Communication remains something to be viewed with distaste, rather than a central democratic priority. There will be no real progress until that view changes.

So where do we go from here? The Commission intends to keep up the pressure on parliamentarians on the floor of both Houses, with articles, seminars and evidence to parliamentary committees. The new Leader of the House of Commons, Jack Straw MP, has made clear his willingness to listen on this subject and we will be seeking a dialogue with him. Above all, it is for MPs and Peers themselves to recognise that it is in their own interest, as well as the public's interest, for Parliament to be run as a modern institution, and to communicate its role to the people. Our hope is that rather than sipping a little of the medicine month by month, the patient decides to take our full prescription now.

Jackie Ashley

Vice-chair of the Puttnam Commission,
journalist and broadcaster on politics

Afterword: Philip Graf

I am delighted that Ofcom have been able to support the work of Lord Puttnam and the Hansard Society Commission. This report reviews the Commission's recommendations and the progress that has been made to date. It considers how Parliament communicates its work to citizens – a key issue which, as the Commission demonstrates, deserves modernisation. In addressing the relationship between the media and parliamentarians, this report looks at how improved communication will benefit the public. As the body responsible for communications regulation in the UK, accountable to Parliament, we are especially aware of the need to regularly refresh our lines of communication with stakeholders.

Modern technology has enabled the electorate to have better access to communication. The rise of social networking websites and weblogs has allowed the public to debate issues instantly and directly without the need to involve a third party, such as their elected representatives or traditional media interlocutors. Politics is not immune to this phenomenon. Political blogs, run independently of Parliament and government, are some of the most widely read commentaries in the UK. They may point the way to how Parliament could strengthen participation in democratic processes in the future.

However, the internet inevitably places a much greater responsibility on consumers to take action to protect themselves. This is why media literacy is so important for users of the internet. Just as the growth of traditional literacy empowered previous generations, media literacy skills are now essential to be an active and empowered citizen in a society inundated by media messages. It allows people to exercise their rights: the right to informed choice over the media content they access; the right to make critical responses to media communications; and the right to use new media technologies to create and distribute their own communications and creative achievements. Ofcom is committed to supporting the development of media literacy for everyone and we encourage Parliament to do the same.

The Commission's report, *Members Only? Parliament in the Public Eye*, contained many excellent recommendations. I welcome the changes that both Houses of Parliament have implemented since its publication in May 2005 and I hope that

such progress will continue as a result of this review. I wish the Hansard Society Commission well in promoting the better communication of democracy and in bringing Parliament closer to the people.

Philip Graf

Deputy Chairman of Ofcom and Chairman
of the Ofcom Content Board

Appendix A

Members of the Puttnam Commission and Terms of Reference

The Hansard Society Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy (the 'Puttnam Commission') reported its findings in *Members Only? Parliament in the Public Eye* in May 2005.

Members of the Commission

Chair: Lord Puttnam

Vice-chair: Jackie Ashley

Patrick Barwise

Stephen Coleman

Matthew d'Ancona

Patricia Hodgson

Raji Hunjan

Andrew Lansley MP

Martin Linton MP

Lord Renton of Mount Harry

Peter Riddell

John Sergeant

Richard Tait

Paul Tyler (now Lord Tyler)

Fran Unsworth

David Yelland

Terms of Reference

The Commission was set up by the Hansard Society to examine the communication of parliamentary democracy. It had the following terms of reference:

- To examine the presentation of Parliament and how that presentation is affected by the way it conducts its business;
- To consider both the effect of Parliament's own procedures and the role of the media in explaining and publicising the work of both Houses;
- To evaluate the potential for new channels of engagement;
- To make recommendations for change.

Appendix B

Audit of the Puttnam Commission's Recommendations

The Essentials of Modern Communications

- R1. A Communications Service should be established for Parliament, bringing together within its departmental remit the various communication activities essential to a contemporary democratic institution.**

The parliamentary administration has not set up a unified Communications Service, as recommended by the Puttnam Commission. Rather, the different communication functions continue to operate under separate departments of the House. The House of Commons Corporate Business Plan states that the current arrangement is set to continue. However, as with recommendations 38 & 39, this proposed change may be considered as part of the upcoming review of the administration of the House of Commons (a review of the 'Braithwaite arrangements').

- R2. A single Joint Committee of both Houses should be established, responsible for communication matters, though MPs or Peers should be able to consider separately matters solely relevant to their respective Houses.**

A single Joint Committee of both Houses, responsible for communication matters, has not been established. More positively, however, the various House committees of the Commons have been merged into one committee – the Administration Committee. This goes some way to addressing the communication anomalies highlighted by the Puttnam Commission. A precedent has also been established for informal co-operation on communication issues between the House of Commons Administration Committee and the House of Lords Information Committee. The two committees are currently co-operating, more formally, on an inquiry into a parliamentary visitor centre.

R3. A communication strategy for Parliament should be adopted, having been arrived at through a wide-reaching and open process of consultation with parliamentarians, the media, the public and other interested bodies.

Some progress has been made towards adopting a communications strategy for Parliament. The House of Commons and House of Lords have set out their approach to communications in a range of parliamentary publications:

House of Commons Strategic Plan 2006-2011: The House of Commons has adopted a strategic plan for the period 2006-2011. One of the three primary objectives in this plan is to 'promote public knowledge and understanding of the work and role of Parliament through the provision of information and access'.

House of Commons Corporate Business Plan 2006: To accompany this strategic plan, the House of Commons published its first corporate business plan. This looks at services that are provided on a cross-departmental basis – and communication is an example of this. The business plan outlines the aims of the Commons in providing information to the public; the vision of the House in this area; a series of outward and inward goals; and a range of indicators for measuring progress.

Group on Information for the Public Business Plan: The Group on Information for the Public (GIP) has published an accompanying business plan (March 2006), which complements the House of Commons Corporate Business Plan. The GIP business plan provides additional information on a range of communication functions and includes additional targets for parliamentary communications.

Neither the House of Commons nor the House of Lords organised a wide-ranging and open process of consultation to inform a communication strategy as recommended by the Puttnam Commission.

R4. The communication strategy should take Parliament at least to 2010 with provision for a mid-term review, and it should be based on the optimum principles of accessibility and transparency; participation and responsiveness; accountability; inclusiveness; and best practice in management and communication.

The House of Commons Corporate Business Plan, referred to above, sets communication targets up to 2011. It highlights the need to inform the public about the work of Parliament; promote Parliament as an institution; and to listen to the public. The business plan states that it was influenced by the principles set out by the Puttnam Commission. It explains that public communications should be based on the needs and interests of users rather than producers and should be subject based, community based, and diverse; they should also be recognised and resourced as a core function of Parliament. The accompanying GIP business plan identifies the target audiences for parliamentary communications as: internal; Westminster Village; democratically active; democratic outsiders; and young people. It identifies teachers and the media as intermediaries.

R5. The communication strategy should be tabled for agreement by both Houses.

There are no plans in place for a communication strategy to be tabled for agreement by both Houses.

R6. The communication strategy will require regular reporting back to MPs and Peers, annual evaluation against targets, and provision for the public to take part in the evaluation process.

Neither the House of Commons Corporate Business Plan, nor the GIP business plan, set out provisions for regular reporting back to MPs and Peers or provision for the public to participate in the evaluation process. However, both include annual targets against which progress can be monitored and GIP will report formally each year to the boards of management. GIP is due to publish its first annual report this autumn.

During a recent Hansard Society seminar, parliamentary officials acknowledged that one of the biggest challenges facing GIP is raising awareness of their work amongst Members of Parliament.

R7. The communication strategy must be accompanied by the necessary and long-term budgetary commitment from the parliamentary authorities.

The GIP business plan sets out spending on communication matters for this financial year. The House authorities intend to maintain current levels of spending, although additional funding may be found for specific projects such as a visitor centre. In addition, the parliamentary website is due to receive significant investment in coming years.

Elements of a Communication Strategy

R8. A new Communications Department should set up an advisory group of media representatives.

In the absence of a Communications Department, an advisory group of media representatives has not been set up. The Commons authorities are due to decide their approach to dealing with the media by the end of this year.

R9. Parliamentary officials should do much more to draw the media's attention explicitly to matters of public interest.

Parliamentary officials remain wary about doing more to draw the media's attention explicitly to matters of public interest. However, Parliament has continued to employ select committee media officers – and five are now in place. There is a general perception among parliamentary officials that media coverage of Parliament has increased during the last 18 months, particularly of select committees. The House of Commons plans to explore the feasibility of a more proactive approach to explaining the work of the Chamber, Westminster Hall and standing committees and initiate a small scale pilot if deemed appropriate.

The GIP business plan sets out the aims of the House of Commons Media and Communications Service: to promote a better understanding of, and engagement with, the work of the House and its committees; provide a professional media service for journalists and serve as a central point of contact for media enquiries; provide media and communications advice and support to all House departments and committees; and work with officials across both Houses to improve public information and access. The House of Lords aims to make the House and its work accessible to the public.

R10. The rules of television coverage in the Chambers should be relaxed to allow, for example, appropriate reaction shots, the relevant use of close-ups, more panning shots of the backbenches and a greater range of coverage during divisions. It should be an explicit objective of parliamentary coverage to not just inform but to interest and engage the viewer.

As a result of this recommendation, the House of Lords agreed to relax the rules of broadcasting for its Chamber for a one-month trial period. This trial was held in early 2006 and the changes have subsequently been made permanent. BBC Parliament believes this will make a fundamental difference to the broadcasting of the Lords Chamber, ensuring that it looks and feels more like a normal conversation or debate.

The House of Commons has since sought to enact a corresponding relaxation of rules of coverage. The Administration Committee consulted the Speaker, Michael Martin MP, in relation to this. He has agreed to trial a wider variety of shots of proceedings in the Commons Chamber, including a greater use of reaction shots in order to illustrate the mood of the House. The trial will permit low-level atmospheric sound feed during divisions rather than the current complete silence. This will be complemented on BBC Parliament by a reporter voice-over during divisions. BBC Parliament has welcomed such changes; eventually, the channel hopes to be able to air the division lobbies when Members vote.

The trial of relaxed rules for filming in the Commons Chamber was due to begin in October 2006. The Administration Committee will decide at the end of this year whether to recommend that these changes be made permanent.

BBC Parliament believes that the changes to broadcasting will result in viewers watching the proceedings for longer and encourage other news programmes to use more parliamentary actuality. The revised rules of broadcasting will enable a sense of intimacy in coverage. In time, broadcasters may call for eye level cameras to be installed at the Despatch Box.

R11. There should be a relaxation of the rules for filming in the precincts of Parliament, permission for walking shots, interviews with relevant persons other than MPs, and a wider interpretation of parliamentary subject-matter which genuinely reflects the richness of political activity taking place at any one time within Parliament.

The House of Lords implemented a six-month trial of an interview point in the Peers' Lobby – from which broadcasters could pre-record interviews – and the changes have now been put on a permanent footing. More recently, the House of Commons Administration Committee contacted the Speaker, Michael Martin MP, in relation to relaxing the rules for filming in the precincts. He has agreed to a trial of two new interview points within the precincts: in the south west corner of Westminster Hall and on the Green in New Palace Yard. On non-sitting days, subject to a permit, filming pieces to camera of a presenter walking across Central Lobby will be permitted before 9am.

Broadcasters still face too many restrictions on locations for pre-recorded interviews within Parliament. Relaxing such restrictions could enable, for example, witnesses to be interviewed in committee rooms. The Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit states that it intends to develop relationships with TV broadcasting companies in order to take a more flexible approach to filming within Parliament, while working within the parameters set out by the House of Commons Commission.

R12. The ban on still photographs should be reconsidered in light of the communication principles set out above.

The ban on still photographs has not been reconsidered, despite a subsequent proposal by members of the Puttnam Commission that Parliament employ its own photographer, thereby protecting against the publication of pictures that may be deemed unsuitable.

It has been suggested by the parliamentary authorities that the newspapers can access decent quality pictures from broadcasting equipment.

R13. The current restrictions on the number of passes available for media outlets should be reconsidered.

There has been no formal agreement to increase the number of passes available for media outlets, but some journalists report a more flexible approach and greater willingness on the part of the House of Commons to consider granting extra passes in some cases.

R14. The parliamentary authorities should provide regular, formal induction for journalists.

The Commons authorities have consulted the Press Gallery about providing inductions for journalists. A trial induction session is due to take place in November, based on explanations of the Order Paper. If successful, the House of Commons would offer induction sessions periodically to journalists joining the Press Gallery.

R15. A new Communications Department should establish effective processes to manage, edit, develop and continually update the parliamentary website.

The authorities have set up a small unit to manage the parliamentary website, employing a web manager and a range of support staff. There are now identifiable members of staff working on the site, ensuring clearer and improved lines of accountability. The web unit sits within a new department called PICT (Parliamentary Information and Communications Technology), which services both the Commons and the Lords. The Commission recommended that a web team be based within a single Communications Department. A reorganisation of communication functions has not been forthcoming, as set out above, but PICT demonstrates that services can be provided by a department that operates on a cross-House basis.

R16. The parliamentary website should be radically improved. At a minimum it should be consultative, interactive and easily navigable.

Following the 2001-02 redesign of the parliamentary website, no development or maintenance plan was put in place. As part of the Internet Redevelopment Project, five-year plans for a redesign of the site have now been drafted, and the proposal is currently being considered by the boards of management of

both Houses. The plans would commit Parliament to a significant investment in the site over the course of five years, which has been agreed to in principle by the House of Commons Finance & Services Committee.

The parliamentary home page was redesigned in September 2006. In the longer-term, it is intended that the Internet Redevelopment Project will include:

- Targeted engagement with defined groups of people;
- A subject, calendar and news based approach to the presentation and organisation of content, rather than administrative or procedural approach;
- Content in context, including explanation of procedure;
- Cross-referenced content – the ability to link subjects, individuals and events;
- General support for interactive listening and engagement with the public.

The webcasting of Parliament has continued on www.parliamentlive.tv and demand for the service is growing.

R17. An improved website should engage the widest range of citizens, using well-designed publicity and targeted advertising to help people understand that there is a virtual route through which they have easy access to their Parliament.

The Internet Redevelopment Project sets out what an improved website could achieve. The expressed aims of the web team are: to make information easily accessible to all users; promote Parliament; and investigate tools that will allow Parliament the opportunity to listen to those who wish to communicate with Members or the administration. By summer 2006, usability testing had been undertaken with a small sample of approximately 30 people, representative of different target groups. It has yet to be seen how a redesigned site will be publicised.

R18. Parliament should consider its role in consistently developing citizenship education resources and the different curriculum approaches across the UK. It should work closely with other organisations to support more training for teachers, and more and better materials for young people.

The GIP business plan explains Parliament's corporate aim in relation to young people: 'The parliamentary service should play a full part in ensuring that all schoolchildren have a good understanding of Parliament, young people reaching voting age understand the importance of democracy, and education about Parliament is embedded in the curriculum.'

The Parliamentary Education Unit (PEU) plans to have revised all its publications for young people by 2007, and young people visiting Parliament will now receive educational material on the role and work of Parliament. The PEU has also produced new educational packs, based on the citizenship strands of education. It also plans to enhance the content of the Explore Parliament site – the parliamentary website for young people. These changes have built on previous work produced by the PEU. More significantly, the PEU has begun to build links with LEAs and schools. Further information about this is set out below.

In addition, a *New Voters' Guide* was launched by the House of Commons in July 2006. Guides are now sent to all young people when they reach the age of 18.

R19. Parliament's facilities, including the Chambers, should be made available during recess for groups of young people.

The House of Lords has agreed to make its Chambers available for debating competitions for young people. The first debate is due to take place in 2007 and, if successful, this may be widened to include groups of young people on educational visits to Parliament. The House of Commons has not formally considered this, although it was proposed by Lord Adonis, Government Spokesperson for Education and Skills, during a House of Commons Modernisation Committee evidence session in March 2006.

On a broader point, the employment of visitor assistants has improved the experience of those visiting Parliament. Seventeen visitor assistants should now be in place, and the visitor reception centre should now be completed.

R20. Parliament should take young people, including pre-voting citizens, far more seriously by involving them in its processes and decision-making.

Parliament has not developed long-term proposals to involve young people in its processes and decision-making. However, the Parliamentary Visitor and Information Centre Development Project – set up to consider the viability of a parliamentary visitor centre – may establish a young people's working group to sit alongside five other working groups feeding into the Programme Board. The key objective of this youth consultation project would be to involve young people in a meaningful way in the development of proposals for a visitor centre.

R21. In line with recent joint recommendations from the Accommodation and Works Committee and Administration Committee, the Parliamentary Education Unit should have a well resourced and dedicated teaching space with multi-media facilities.

Parliament has not allocated a designated teaching space for the PEU. The greatest likelihood of this happening is the creation of a visitor centre for Parliament. Plans for such a centre are, as indicated above, in their early stages, but it is anticipated that proposals will incorporate enhanced provision for young people.

In the meantime, the PEU has extended its autumn visits programme for 16-18 year-olds into a new year round visits programme. It plans to increase the number of young people taking part in such educational visits from 8,000 in 2005-06 to 18,000 in 2006-07.

R22. Parliament should employ more full-time and contracted staff who are fully trained and experienced in working with young people in a range of different settings.

Shortly after the Puttnam Commission reported its findings, Parliament employed two outreach officers with previous experience in the education sector. More recently, two additional education visit officers have been employed to assist young people on visits to Parliament, both of whom are trained teachers.

R23. A young persons' consultative group should be established with the right to attend and advise at key administrative meetings of both Houses.

There has been no progress towards establishing a young persons' consultative group with the right to attend and advise at key administrative meetings.

R24. More should be done to enhance the effectiveness of parliamentary outreach work.

The PEU employed two outreach officers, as set out above, who are now in the process of developing an outreach strategy. This strategy considers how the PEU can support people who work with children and young people.

A new year-round visits programme should be in place by March 2007, as should an outreach programme to schools and LEAs. A full programme for schools was due to begin this autumn, following pilot visits during the first half of the year. Outreach officers plan to undertake teacher training in regional areas and to concentrate their work in areas of political and social exclusion. Parliament is using focus groups of young people to input into the educational outreach strategy.

The House authorities have been considering outreach for the wider public, in the form of a network of regional centres. A business plan for the establishment of regional outreach centres is due in early 2007.

R25. There should be a thorough review of the language and terminology Parliament uses in accordance with our communication principles.

A thorough review of the language and terminology Parliament uses has not taken place. In the absence of this, there have been modest attempts to explain terminology to visitors, such as the House of Lords' glossary for visitors to its public gallery.

More promisingly, the Coroners Reform Draft Bill, published in June 2006, had an easy-to-understand interpretation of every clause running alongside the text. Harriet Harman MP, Minister for Constitutional Affairs, predicted that soon every bill would carry a 'plain English' translation. A recent Modernisation Committee Report on the Legislative Process indicated its

support for plain English summaries. The Committee recommended that a simple summary of the main points of each bill should be published on the front page of new legislation gateways, which should be made available to the public on the internet.

The Modernisation Committee Report on the Legislative Process also recommended that the name of Standing Committees be changed to 'Public Bill Committees' or 'Delegated Legislation Committees'. The Committee stated that it saw 'no reason for persisting with a nomenclature which is inaccurate, confusing and anachronistic'. It is hoped that this approach will encourage a wider review of parliamentary language and terminology.

R26. Parliament should hold more meetings outside London. Select committees, for example, should hold more formal proceedings and public events beyond Westminster.

There has not been an increase in the number of meetings or parliamentary proceedings held outside London.

R27. All parliamentary procedures should be comprehensively reassessed from the perspective of the communication principles we have advocated.

The Modernisation Committee reviewed some parliamentary procedures as part of its inquiry on the legislative process. The Committee reported that: 'The House of Commons should revise its procedures so that it is easier for the general public, as well as lobby groups, representative organisations and other stakeholders, to influence Parliament's consideration of Bills.'¹ The Committee called for an effective democratic legislative process to be as open as possible. It regarded this as not only a fundamental point of democratic principle, but also a prudent strategy.

This Modernisation Committee Report is an indication of some degree of willingness to reassess procedures from the perspective of the communication principles advocated by the Commission, but the report is only a first step; much more needs to be done to meet this recommendation.

¹ Modernisation Committee (2006), *The Legislative Process: First Report of Session 2005–06*, HC 1097, p. 3.

R28. Parliament should revisit and implement the recommendations on topical debates put forward both by the Hansard Society Commission on Parliamentary Scrutiny (the 'Newton Commission') and by the Liaison Committee.

Members of the House of Lords favoured the introduction of weekly one-hour opposition debates on a topical issue, and this is being actively reviewed by committees of the House. The House of Commons has not revisited earlier recommendations on topical debates and there continues to be a sense from broadcasters that topicality is missing from debates in the Commons. Jack Straw MP, Leader of the House of Commons and Chair of the Modernisation Committee, points out earlier in this report that changing the format of parliamentary questions to make them more topical may help make those sessions more attractive to the public.

R29. The authorities in Parliament as they appoint staff, and the political parties as they select candidates, should recognise the need for greater diversity if Parliament is to function well.

The House of Commons Strategic Plan sets out the importance of having a diverse workforce in Parliament. Political parties have been participating in renewed debates on the need for diversity amongst their candidates. In an attempt to increase the number of women and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) MPs in their parliamentary party, the Conservative Party has introduced new selection procedures, including primaries, and has drawn up a list of priority candidates. The Labour Party continues to be committed to the use of All Women Shortlists (AWS) – and of those Labour MPs elected for the first time in 2005, the majority were women. The Liberal Democrats' Campaign for Gender Balance is working to increase the number of women on its list of approved candidates and assist women through the local selection process. In addition to this, the Liberal Democrats recently announced a diversity fund to provide additional campaign resources to those constituencies that select women or BME candidates.

Media Coverage of Parliament

R30. A radical reform of parliamentary communication and presentation should provide an opportunity for the media to enhance their coverage of parliamentary business.

There has been ongoing debate about the media's coverage of politics, including coverage of Parliament. Views on whether the press has made recent attempts to enhance their coverage of parliamentary business are based on anecdotal, rather than statistical, evidence. The House authorities believe that there has been an increase in the reporting of select committees during this period. Broadcasting coverage is considered in further detail below.

R31. There should be a renewed commitment by the commercial public service broadcasters to provide national and regional news and current affairs.

Ofcom is required by statute to set a quota for each of the commercial public service broadcasters (PSBs). Ofcom has not changed any of the quotas it inherited in 2003 from the former regulator, the ITC, except for a minor reduction in peak-time news on Channel Five and, as part of its Public Service Broadcasting Review, a reduction in regional news on ITV in Central Scotland. Channel Five still maintains two separate evening news programmes and Channel 4 has signed an enhanced contract for news with ITN, and has increased the volume of, and investment in, peak-time current affairs. In addition to this, the new channel More4 runs a news programme every weeknight, with a brief to introduce new and challenging perspectives, as well as covering the main stories of the day.

ITV has shown some commitment to this area by giving ITN extra budgets to cover major news stories. However, since the Puttnam Commission reported its findings, ITV has also cut regional newsroom jobs and axed the ITV News Channel. In September 2006, Ofcom's Deputy Chairman, Philip Graf, warned that ITV's public service obligations should be seen as 'an opportunity to be built on', not a 'cost to be hollowed out'.² There has been a shortfall in ITV budget revenue this year and this is likely to have put pressure on their news and current affairs budget.

² Jason Deans, 'ITV gets public service caution,' *The Guardian*, 19 September 2006, MediaGuardian.co.uk

Ofcom is currently assessing the prospects for plural sources of public service news content in the 'post-switchover' era. As part of Ofcom's work in this area, it held a stakeholder seminar earlier this year on the future of current affairs.³ There was some recognition by broadcasters of the importance of current affairs as a flagship for a channel's public service broadcasting status. However, it was suggested that after digital switchover there will be less scope to impose quotas for current affairs output on the commercial PSBs, in particular ITV. The BBC, Channel 4 and a potential Public Service Publisher are all believed to have a role to play in delivering current affairs following the digital switchover.

R32. We encourage all public service broadcasters to increase the quality and amount of political programming, particularly that designed to meet the needs of young people.

Ofcom sets quotas for public service broadcasting, but content is determined by the broadcasters. Over the last five years, the BBC has refreshed much of its political programming, producing shows such as *This Week* and *The Daily Politics*. This year, ITV has revived its Sunday morning political programme, seeking to make serious politics more engaging. However, attempts by broadcasters to revamp politics on television can be – and have been – hit and miss.

Recent BARB data found that the total hours of viewing of current affairs programming per annum has increased from 13 hours in 2001 to 17.06 in 2005. The 16-24 age group was the only bracket to have decreased its total yearly viewing hours during this period.⁴ Public service broadcasters have not been explicit about plans to increase the quality and amount of political programming with regards to young people. However, the Charter Review White Paper does highlight the importance of tailored news to meet the needs of different audiences.

Next year, the BBC plans to move the current affairs programme *Panorama* to a 30-minute slot on Monday night. Consequently, it will be aired at the same time as Channel 4's flagship current affairs programme, *Dispatches*.

³ Ofcom (2006), *The Provision of Current Affairs, Report on the Current Affairs Audit 2005, Current Affairs Qualitative Viewer Research and Ofcom's Symposium on the Future of Current Affairs* (London: Ofcom).

⁴ *ibid.*

R33. The BBC must be required by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and by Parliament to be explicit as to how it plans to report Parliament in an engaging, innovative and accessible way as part of its contribution to 'democratic value'.

A new framework of public purposes for the BBC has been set out by the DCMS in its Charter Review White Paper, *A Public Service For All: The BBC in the digital age*, and reflected in the New BBC Charter and New Framework Agreement.

One of the five new BBC public purposes is defined as 'sustaining citizenship and civil society' – informing ourselves and others and increasing our understanding of the world through news, information and analysis of current events and ideas. This relates broadly to the concept of 'democratic value', which was set out in an earlier BBC paper, *Building Public Value* and referred to in the Puttnam Commission Report. The Framework Agreement states that 'in developing (and reviewing) the purpose remit for sustaining citizenship and civil society', the BBC Trust must have regard to, 'the need to promote understanding of the UK political system (including Parliament and the devolved structures), including through dedicated coverage of parliamentary matters'.

Each public purpose will have an accompanying 'purpose remit', which will be set by the BBC Trust after a process of public consultation. The purpose remit for sustaining citizenship and civil society will be a statement of how this purpose is to be achieved and how success will be measured. The Framework Agreement states that the purpose remit for 'sustaining citizenship' should require the BBC to transmit an impartial day by day account of the proceedings in both Houses of Parliament. However, concrete proposals as to how the BBC plans to report Parliament in an engaging, innovative and accessible way are not currently in place, so there is nothing specific for the BBC to be held to account for as yet.

R34. There should be greater integration between BBC Parliament and the broader spectrum of BBC programming to improve cross-trailing.

Routine cross-trailing of BBC Parliament from BBC News 24, as well as mainstream BBC channels, has continued. This included a cross-trail for the 2006 Budget speech, which resulted in 100,000 viewers switching channel to BBC Parliament. Cross-trailing has recently been complemented by

mainstream BBC channels broadcasting generic adverts for BBC Parliament. Feedback from the adverts was positive; anecdotally they were well-received and led to an increased awareness of the channel. The public service purpose behind cross-trailing is clear – despite some criticisms of this practice by BBC competitors – and should be continued.

R35. Given the availability of webcasting of all parliamentary proceedings, the remit of BBC Parliament should be broadened to permit the live coverage of other noteworthy parliamentary hearings or debates.

Broadening the remit of BBC Parliament was supported by the House of Lords Information Committee and the House of Commons Administration Committee. Following a request to the Speaker, Michael Martin MP, it has been agreed that BBC Parliament will be released on a trial basis from the undertaking that it should carry live Commons Chamber coverage, regardless of proceedings at the same time in the House of Lords. This is on condition that the freedom to select proceedings in the Lords is used only sparingly, and that the Speaker should be consulted in such cases. BBC Parliament anticipates that this release will be used on only two or three occasions a year.

R36. The ‘democratic value’ principles contained in the BBC’s own Charter Renewal document imply the need for a significant increase in resources to BBC Parliament. BBC Parliament remains a seriously undervalued democratic and broadcasting resource, with immense potential to provide innovative parliamentary programming. The BBC should, in the coming months, provide a clear and substantial action plan for its development and for a targeted and ambitious increase in its impact.

The BBC has not drafted an action plan for the development of BBC Parliament. The channel has continued to publish annual reports and develop programme policy. The BBC Parliament channel has a team of around 25, and believes it is sufficiently resourced against its objectives. The channel had identified its greatest challenge to be one of distribution – it has been severely restricted in distribution terms due to limited bandwidth on Freeview, resulting in the channel appearing in only one-quarter of the screen. This problem has now been resolved and from mid-November 2006 the channel will appear as a normal full-screen channel on Freeview. The BBC believes this will lead, over time, to a significant increase in the

channel's audience. The change means that BBC Parliament becomes the first parliamentary channel to be available around the clock on terrestrial television. The channel has not set targets for increasing audience share, believing viewing figures to be dependent on political events.

BBC Parliament is the first BBC channel to be available on the internet and broadband. BBC Parliament online had 75,000 hits for David Cameron's first appearance at Prime Minister's Question Time as Leader of the Opposition. The channel believes that it has good distribution, that it will benefit from investment in new media, and that the new rules of coverage will enhance the quality of debate on air.

R37. Resources for BBC Parliament should not be at the expense of effective funding for high quality public service broadcasting on the main BBC channels. The BBC should continue to provide parliamentary coverage across the full range of its output, where it has the power to reach mass audiences.

The White Paper on Charter Renewal reaffirms the BBC's obligations in this area. More will be known about the form of this coverage and obligation when a 'purpose remit' is drafted for 'sustaining citizenship and civil society'.

How Parliament Runs Itself

R38. We believe Parliament will communicate its own messages confidently and effectively only when it is administered independently of frontbench influence. We therefore propose that legislation be enacted to provide for the House of Commons Commission to be elected by secret ballot, with members of each party voting for a proportionate number of Commission members from among their number.

The Puttnam Commission recommended that the membership of the House of Commons Commission should be considered as part of an upcoming review of the House of Commons administration – a review that was recommended by the 1999 Braithwaite Report. The terms of reference for such a review, currently being drafted by the board of management, are likely to be narrow – thereby implying that the composition of the House of Commons Commission will not be considered. However, there may be provision to consider whether the right structures are in place to deliver effective connection with the public.

The Puttnam Commission also advocated a public engagement role for the Speaker. The new post of Lord Speaker has a representational role. This includes helping the public to understand the significance of the work of the House of Lords.

R39. We recommend that the administration of the House of Commons be headed by a Chief Executive, experienced in the management of complex organisations in the public realm, reporting directly to the House of Commons Commission.

As above, the forthcoming review of the Braithwaite arrangements could consider whether a Chief Executive, experienced in the management of complex organisations, should be appointed to head the House of Commons administration. The terms of reference were due to be considered in autumn 2006.

Parliament in the Public Eye 2006: *Coming into Focus?*

A Review of the Hansard Society Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy (The 'Puttnam Commission')

The 'Puttnam Commission' reported its findings in 2005 in
Members Only? Parliament in the Public Eye.

The Commission recommended a radical transformation of both the way that Parliament communicates its work to the public and also the way that the media covers Parliament. This report considers the progress that has been made since the launch of the Commission's findings. It welcomes the changes that have been made over the last 18 months, but issues a stark warning that an incremental approach to improving communications is insufficient to address the problem. To continue the momentum created by the Commission, the report sets out responses to the Puttnam Commission, including the views of those working within Parliament and the media.

*Contributors: Lord Puttnam • Jackie Ashley • Clare Ettinghausen • Virginia Gibbons
• Patricia Hodgson • Greg Hurst • Theresa May MP • John Pullinger • Jack Straw MP*

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