

Canada's Network

C-SPAN-Type Coverage Recommended for 'House' Network

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Gary Levy, editor of the Canadian Parliamentary Review, provided C-SPAN the following article on proposed changes in the structure of televised coverage of House of Commons debate and committee hearings.

REGULAR live coverage of debates of the Canadian House of Commons was introduced in 1977 following the unanimous recommendation of an all-party committee chaired by the speaker of the House. That committee was naturally concerned about the effect television would have on its proceedings. It suggested guidelines which, among other things, provided that cameras would only focus on the person speaking. As a result, members tended to move around the chamber, sitting beside and behind the person having the floor. This game of musical chairs and the restrictive coverage give a somewhat distorted view and make it difficult for viewers to understand the setting and the context in which debate is taking place.

It was also decided in 1977 not to televise House committees on a regular basis. Since then only one, the Special Joint Committee on the Constitution, was televised following a special motion of the House.

In 1984, a Special Committee on the House was established with a wide-ranging mandate to investigate parliamentary reform. In an age of information and communication it is not surprising that one aspect it chose to examine was the televising of debates in the House and its committees.

During the course of its investigation

McGrath, visited Washington, where it took a close look at television facilities in the U.S. House of Representatives and met with executives from the House and Senate press galleries, the Library of Congress, and C-SPAN. The committee's final report, tabled on June 18, 1985, reflected this visit as well as representations from the media, individual members of Parliament, and private citizens.

On the question of television guidelines, the McGrath committee took a cautious view. Recognizing that many members, a large number of whom were elected for the first time in 1984, were wary of unlimited freedom for cameras, it recommended that the guidelines for televising debates be made the subject of a special review by the Standing Committee on Procedure and Privilege.

On the question of broadcasting committee proceedings the McGrath committee took a more active position. In its second report, published in March, it recommended that radio broadcasting of committee proceedings be allowed, but it deferred the more complicated and expensive question of television coverage until its final report.

The arguments in favor of televising committees are virtually the same as those for televising the House of Commons. In the United States, committees of the House of Representatives were actually televised long before the House agreed to permit its own proceedings to be televised. This is not surprising, given the importance of committees in the congressional system. Even if the reformed committee system advocated by the McGrath committee is adopted, parliamentary commit-

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a greater importance, and that was probably the strongest factor in recommending that some committee rooms be equipped to handle televised meetings of committees with fixed-positions cameras.

The McGrath committee also concluded that the present distribution network is not as dynamic or as imaginative as it could be. The proceedings of the House are broadcast live, but the House timetable is such that most potential viewers are away from their television sets during the broadcast period. At the conclusion of the parliamentary day the question period is replayed; then the transmission ceases and costly equipment and networks stand idle until the House resumes on the next sitting day. During summer and other adjournments the system remains dormant, with

cable companies losing the use of a channel. This is a cause of annoyance to cable subscribers and a waste of a valuable opportunity to provide information television.

One inexpensive alternative would be to repeat the proceedings of the House and committees at times when larger audiences might tune in. Another option is C-SPAN's concept, which provides full and inexpensive coverage of meetings, addresses, and phone-in programs on public affairs, as well as broadcast of legislative proceedings.

The McGrath committee concluded by recommending that fuller use be made of the parliamentary service of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. ■