



When the copy was good

Federal Parliamentarians are back in the ornate chambers of their first home in Melbourne on 10 May for the centenary of the Opening of the Commonwealth Parliament in 1901. While the Melbourne sitting will attract considerable media attention, journalist Peter Cotton reports that, 100 years on, the Parliament in Canberra is struggling to assert its relevance.

If Australian politicians are ever to reverse the negative image that dogs them and their profession, they must first wean the media off its obsession with Question Time in the House of Representatives.

While it provides the Opposition with a valuable opportunity to pressure the Government, many people regard Question Time as little more than theatre, an often rowdy spectacle where the leaders of the major parties go head-to-head across the despatch boxes.

A sensation-obsessed media thrives on the gladiatorial nature of the contest. Increasingly, accounts of the colour and catcalls in Question Time pass for news in much daily political reporting.

The media's concentration on sensation and the sound bite is a relatively new phenomenon. The newspapers of the 1800s were so committed to detailing the goings-on in the colonial parliaments that they acted as an unofficial Hansard, transcribing and publishing parliamentary speeches in their pages, as well as providing commentary and editorial.

When the Federal Parliament opened in Melbourne on 9 May 1901, the press gallery housed 31 reporters who worked for newspapers which were mostly 'papers of record'.

A 'paper of record' saw its role as publishing everything of importance that happened in the area in which it was distributed. These papers saw themselves as recording history. If it wasn't in the 'paper of record', it didn't happen.

As recently as 30 years ago major city newspapers still regarded themselves as papers of record and covered all important events, including much of what happened in the House of Representatives. To facilitate this, major newspaper chains employed teams of journalists called sessionals who flew into Canberra to cover every sitting period.

"In the old days," says Nine Network Political Editor, Laurie Oakes, "the Gallery reporting team was in the House from the start of the day's proceedings till they finished, sometimes late in the night. There were great parliamentarians back then, like Gough Whitlam and Jim Killen, and the copy was good."

These days, political journalists generally attend only Question Time. Outside that one hour in the sitting day, their papers rely on one source for stories from the Chamber: the wire service, Australian Associated Press (AAP). "That leaves us in a dangerous situation," says Gallery veteran of 50 years, Rob Chalmers, "because if AAP misses a story, so does Australia."

Laurie Oakes agrees that the reliance on AAP is dangerous. He also believes that the public has an appetite for information on the range of things that happen in the House.

When Oakes first came to work in the Press Gallery in January 1969, his paper, the now defunct Melbourne Sun News Pictorial, sold between 600,000 and 700,000 copies a day while covering everything that mattered in the House.

"People aren't any less interested in parliamentary proceedings these days," he says. "If the stuff was in the paper, they'd read it. However, I don't think newspapers will go back to that. They decided they had to go more with comment and interpretive analysis rather than just reporting what happened in the Parliament."

The former doyenne of the Parliamentary Press Gallery, now *The Australian* newspaper's International Editor, Paul Kelly, believes newspapers are failing their readers by not effectively reporting details of the work of the House.

The media is misjudging its audience in its approach to reporting politics.

"Committees are more important these days and certainly more interesting and valuable, and committee reports don't get the attention they deserve," says Kelly. "The media is misjudging its audience in its approach to reporting politics.

"The media is far more interested in tactics than covering policy because it's easier for journalists to cover tactics. However that can lead to trivialisation," he says. "The public on the other hand is more interested in results, the things that are happening that will affect them."

There is a range of explanations for why newspapers all but obliterated their coverage of parliamentary proceedings. One reason is cost. Newspapers are in a period of decline and their margins are tight. Those who manage the purse strings in major media organisations would regard flying in extra staff to cover Parliament as economically delinquent.

Also, television is the people's preferred medium for information these days. Newspapers have reacted to this trend by jazzing up their pages and cutting the length of stories on the assumption that television's popularity means people want less detail.

There's also the prevailing opinion among senior political journalists that the House has become a duller place since the days of the sessionals, meaning there's less substance to report.

"We won't go back to reporting the nitty gritty of goings on in the House," says Rob Chalmers, Editor of the newsletter *Inside Canberra*, "because the House doesn't matter any more. The Government's got the numbers and no-one's that interested in what's said in there except for Question Time.

"We've had major government initiatives announced on the John Laws show. Everything is done live on the electronic media these days – both by the Government and the Opposition," he says. "The politicians believe it's better to hold a press conference for a major announcement. You can control it. How long it goes, how many questions you take on the matter. And you can pick the venue to provide good pictures for television."

Paul Kelly, who first came to the Press Gallery in 1971, points to the predictability of proceedings in the House as a reason for the media's declining interest in the place. "There's less spontaneity," he says, "and fewer characters in the Parliament than before. Speeches therefore tend to be greyer and more orthodox and are generally considered to be of not much account."

Laurie Oakes agrees that the House bears much of the responsibility for the media's lack of enthusiasm for reporting it.

"Parliament's lost a lot of its importance," says Oakes. "Before it gets more coverage, it's got to start mattering more. Party discipline is stronger now than it was 30 years ago so you don't get the same important debates or people crossing the floor, something that happened frequently 30 years ago.

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In the battle for the nightly news grab – members of Parliament's Press Gallery at a doorstep interview with the Member for Perth (WA) Stephen Smith at the House of Representatives entrance. Photo: AUSPIC

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"Back then, Members of Parliament mattered more individually than they do now. These days you know what's going to happen before it happens," he says. "Everyone follows the script that's been written by the executive government. Things are stage managed to the point of boredom and almost irrelevance."

Laurie Oakes also believes part of the problem is that there's a certain sameness about the people now entering politics. "The fact is, the sort of people who come into the House are a bit bland," he says. "A bit the same. Also because their stuff isn't reported these days they don't go to the trouble of making it interesting."

It's a battle for the nightly news grab.

Philip Ruddock is the Minister for Immigration, Multicultural Affairs, Reconciliation and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. He's the Member for Berowra (NSW) and carries the title Father of the House, being the longest serving Member of the House. He was first elected in September 1973.

Mr Ruddock says that back in 1973 newspapers reported almost every question asked at Question Time, as well as the response. Matters of Public Importance were well reported and he regularly met people who listened to parliamentary debates on the radio and wanted to discuss them. "I don't have anybody today who speaks to me about debates they've heard on the Parliamentary News Network," he says.

Philip Ruddock says there's some truth in Laurie Oakes' argument that debate in the House these days is staid, structured and predictable. However he says the media itself should take some of the blame for that. "The structured responses in part flow from the way in which the reporting has been undertaken," he says.

"It's a chicken and egg question really. Which came first? The decline in reporting the House, or the House becoming more predictable. I believe the deterioration of substantial reporting of events in the House, debates and the like, happened before we started seeing the more structured and managed responses in Question Time."

And Mr Ruddock says the media's failure to report much of the nitty gritty of parliamentary proceedings has not only had an effect on the quality of debate in the House, it's had an impact on our democracy.

He says: "It's reflected in a number of ways. The smaller membership of political parties. The declining quality of independent writing. Members now look for other forums in which to be heard."

The Member for Watson (NSW) and former Speaker of the House, Leo McLeay, places much of the blame for the media's lack of rounded coverage of the House on the decision back in the early 1990s to allow the televising of Question Time.

"Since Parliament became televised," says Mr McLeay, "most television networks take their daily story from whatever footage they get from Question Time, and the Government and the Opposition use Question Time to get their agenda up. It's a structured operation now, a battle for the nightly news grab."

As Speaker in 1991, Mr McLeay opposed televising Parliament. "I knew it would take away from the role of ordinary MPs, and it has," he says. "Television's focus on Question Time means that backbenchers now have much fewer opportunities to ask a question that affects their electorate."

Laurie Oakes agrees that television is partly responsible for declining press coverage of the House in recent decades. "Papers have decided that to match television they have to be entertaining, rather than just reporting news," says Oakes. "But I also think politicians have changed the way they perform in the House to suit television. Great witty speeches don't have much of an impact on television."

"The Sunday morning television interviews are more important in setting the political agenda these days than the Parliament," he says. "The viewing audience is small but it is important, made up of the elite, the opinion makers, and the transcript of these interviews is circulated to all newspapers and stories often result."

Leo McLeay says that both sides of the House have attempted to increase the opportunities for backbenchers to have a say in recent years, but the media has all but ignored these moves. "You now have more adjournment debates and 90-second statements, but no-one reports them," he says.

"It's like the old philosophical conundrum, 'If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, did it actually happen?' As far as anyone out there in voter land is concerned, nothing happens in the House outside Question Time because it's never reported and so they never hear about it."

And what of the future? The most pessimistic forecast comes from the Press Gallery's longest serving member, Rob Chalmers: "I don't see much future for the House," he says. "The Members could all stay home and vote on the Net and file their speeches the same way and we'd all save a lot of money."

Paul Kelly says the fact that backbenchers seeking to make their mark use media outlets such as talkback and television to get exposure highlights the decline of Parliament as a forum for debate and influence in Australian society.

"The media in one sense is an instigator of the decline of Parliament in that it provides opportunities outside Parliament for politicians to be heard," Kelly says. "Most people don't tune in to Parliament on the radio, but they do listen to Alan Jones and John Laws and watch Kerry O'Brien."

"I don't think there's much scope to change the way media covers the Parliament while the House operates the way it does," he says. "There is scope for change in the way the media covers politics, but Parliament is only a small part of the overall coverage of politics."

Laurie Oakes sees a future in which the media will expand its coverage of the House, but it's not a scenario that will gladden the major parties.

"I see more independents being elected and more people voting for independents and minor parties," says Oakes. "The more the big party system breaks down, the more relevant the Parliament will become and then it'll be worth reporting. It might bring on gridlock and that won't help a government run the country. But at least it'll be interesting."

Article by Peter Cotton, a freelance journalist from Canberra.