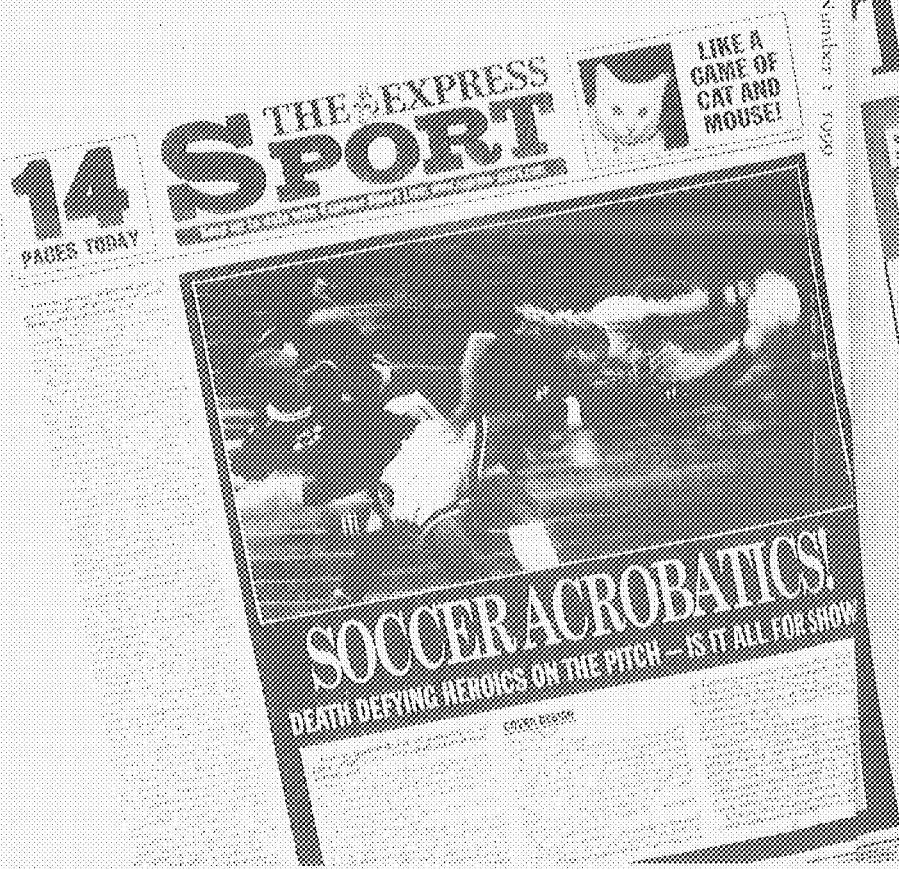
tish
rnalism
view

British Journalism Review Volume 10 Number 1 1999

British Journalism *Review*



to be free to dish it out, we've got to be quick and clear about things when we get them wrong or overstep the mark, otherwise we are not going to keep the public on side. There's always going to be tears, because one of the essential roles of a newspaper is to uncover the goings-on in the establishment, to reveal hypocrisy, to reveal behaviour inconsistent with the position of the people [involved]."

It is an almost proprietorial address from a man who, many feel, will not be wholly fulfilled until he is celebrated as a fully-fledged press baron, a title, I remind him, usually not bestowed upon those who administer rather than largely own newspapers. "I don't own this business," he says, without a smile. "If we look at three companies, News International, Associated Newspapers and the Telegraph Group, they are owned or controlled by an individual or family. These are people who would tell us how to run our lives or tell us what we should be doing; who actually, by and large, are not citizens of the UK. I *am* a citizen of this country. I pay taxes here and I am passionately concerned about the press. Whether that makes me a media baron or not I leave up to you."

When he was elevated to the peerage, Clive Hollick's choice of location for his title was that which more recently attracted the full glare of publicity as the district where Peter Mandelson chose to buy the expensive home he borrowed extravagantly and unwisely to afford. An *Express* columnist just days previously had written: "The area has attracted the *creme de la creme* of Cool Britannia. *Arrivistes* abound, therefore, and rest assured that fellow residents will have no genuine talent or ability whatsoever." This does make Baron Hollick of Notting Hill smile. "Ed Docx is a very good writer," he says. "And I have to tell you I moved into Notting Hill Gate long before it became fashionable."

Bill Hagerty is a former deputy editor of the Daily Mirror *and subsequently editor of* The People. *He is now a freelance writer and broadcaster.*

In 1993 Jack Straw MP, then Shadow Environment Secretary, wrote an article for British Journalism Review *[issue 4/4, 1993] "Democracy on the Spike" which was based on original research he conducted and to which he refers in what follows below. These are his reflections five years on as he views the scene from his position as Britain's Home Secretary.*

Wanted: one bold editor

Jack Straw

"What worries me" wrote John Cole the BBC's former Political Editor in his 1996 autobiography "is that collectively we may all ... have spoiled the public appetite for serious politics, delivered comparatively straight". He went on: "... If you produce cream cakes at the beginning of a meal, children are unlikely to take much interest in their bread-and-butter or meat and vegetables. Have we tried so hard to make public affairs appetising that we have destroyed the palate of adults for more nourishing fare?"

Five years ago I published a detailed survey charting the sudden decline of systematic reporting of Parliament. In the 55 years between 1933 and 1988 "gallery" reporting of debates in the Chamber had remained pretty constant - at between 400-800 lines each day in *The Times*, and 300-700 lines in *The Guardian*. But five years later coverage was less than 100 lines in each paper. *The Daily Telegraph* halved its coverage, whilst the *Financial Times* chose to abandon its parliamentary page altogether. Five years further on, this article looks at the current state of parliamentary reporting, and whether or not a campaign for its reinstatement is a lost cause.

For my 1993 survey I sent an assiduous young researcher (in a calmer age *he* might have been called an "intern") off to the National Newspaper Collection at Colindale, armed with a pencil and ruler. There, for set days in each decade, he laboriously measured the column inches of parliamentary

For Distribution to CPs

coverage. For this article, no such science has been applied, nor is it necessary. The near-absence of systematic coverage is palpable.

The news is not however all bad. Occasionally, for special debates, *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* do report debate – as they did for the emergency session of Parliament in September 1998, when both Houses were recalled to consider additional anti-terrorism legislation in the light of the Omagh and East African bombings. Others have experimented with dedicated pages on political debate. A couple of years ago *The Guardian*, for example, included a selected extract of the week's most interesting parliamentary contributions which made for interesting reading. This soon was scrapped, however.

Mercifully, the parliamentary sketch writers continue to flourish – and receive a prominent position in their papers. Matthew Parris in *The Times* can have me in tears (of mirth) over breakfast. He, Quentin Letts in the *Telegraph*, and Simon Hoggart of *The Guardian* each play a rather important rôle beyond the entertainment of their readers – of debunking the pompous and the vacuous, and of applauding those MPs of interest, especially new members. Reporting of Select Committee hearings, and of these committees' reports themselves, has almost certainly improved (though it would be worth sending someone off to Colindale to do a proper check). When the present system of select committees – one for each government department – was established by the then Leader of the Commons, Norman St John Stevas, in late 1979, there was considerable suspicion as to whether these committees really would assert some independence of spirit and judgement. But they have. Few individual Ministers spend more than 10 minutes a month answering oral questions, a relatively easy wicket compared to the barrage of artillery which a Minister may receive during a two and a half hour session before a Select Committee. Certainly in my field – Home Affairs – the Select Committee's reports are influential in both government and public.

The other better news is in the field of electronic media – television, radio and the internet. The argument about "Yesterday in Parliament" (YIP) touched a nerve in the BBC as well as in Parliament. The BBC's reply to the criticism is that it is serious about its parliamentary coverage, and that coverage overall is growing. "BBC Parliament" launched in the autumn of 1998 aims to provide live "gavel-to-gavel" coverage of the Commons. Initially, it will do no more than replace the current cable-only parliamentary channel. If, however, the BBC keeps its pledge, it will be extended in audio to digital satellite and digital cable within a year and, they claim, to digital terrestrial television available to 75 per cent of the population within 10 years.

It was the televising of Parliament itself in 1989 which was probably the trigger for broadsheet editors to reassess and then reduce their own coverage of debates. But this has never been a satisfactory explanation for the change. In a functioning democracy citizens should be able to watch parliamentary proceedings whenever they wish. In practice, however, the number who can do this is bound to be limited. Live TV or radio coverage of events is no substitute for one of the particular skills of newspaper journalists – that of distilling and summarising debate in relatively digestible form. It is this which has been almost lost to the readers. When my 1993 report was published, a number of arguments were advanced to justify the change. They have been repeated since with some regularity. It is worth examining each in turn.

Esoteric

The first and most potent argument is that the readers did not want the more esoteric parliamentary coverage which existed before the early 90s. Simon Jenkins, former editor of *The Times*, confirmed in his evidence to the Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life that it had been his decision to stop Parliamentary reporting. "I couldn't find anyone who read it except MPs" he claimed. But the claim is one which was never put seriously to the test. Newspapers do conduct "traffic surveys" of each page and section of their paper. But in all the extensive argument about parliamentary coverage no editor has yet produced to me (and I've discussed the matter with many of them), the traffic surveys of before and after they abandoned gallery reporting.

Nothing can be shown in favour of the change from overall circulation figures. Between 1989 and 1998, *The Guardian* has lost one in nine copies (down from 447,000 to 396,000); *The Independent* two in five (from 379,000 to 220,000); *The Daily Telegraph* about one in 20 (from 1,129,000 to 1,069,000), while the *Financial Times* has put on over 75,000 readers (up from 282,000 to 358,000). *The Times* has shot up 320,000 readers (from 440,000 to 760,000). Newspaper editors, and their marketing managers, know that in any event

MOD300006668

For Distribution to CPs

their readers' interests are not uniform. I never do crosswords. I devour obituaries. And while I always make a point of reading the law reports, I suspect most readers merely offer them a glance. Recognising this, papers have in fact expanded their overall reach, with review and lifestyle sections. (Someone must read these, I guess, though seeing how many are left unread in railway carriages I wonder by whom.) All the broadsheets have many more pages than they did 10 years ago – some devoted to the most extraordinary minority issues. Why doesn't one of the papers try systematic gallery reporting – and see? After all, the newspapers do have the journalists in Parliament to do this work (and with the benefit of television, reporters no longer have to be glued to the gallery seats) – 247 journalists these days have passes for the Parliamentary Lobby and the Gallery and another 83 for the Press Gallery only. Their number has not declined since the late 80s – and is significantly greater than in the 50s and 60s when reports of proceedings were extensive.

These days parliamentary journalists do a different job, and one which seems to me altogether less satisfactory for readers and journalists alike. The focus has shifted from reporting debate to reporting gossip, intrigue, and the alleged clout of personalities. This was confirmed in a separate study in 1996 by Robert Franklin of Sheffield University. In this study the author said that "stories concerning scandal or alleged misconduct by individual MPs emerge as the third most popular subject from a list of 40, ... and seem more likely to be reported than significant policy concerns such as education, local government, or race/immigration issues". Franklin also said that "scandal" stories had grown five fold since 1990, across all newspapers [Montfort Press Ltd 1996, *An Obituary for the Press Gallery*].

It is also true is that parliamentarians have adjusted to the decline in the reporting of Parliament by increasing reliance on the press release – for individual backbenchers – and on briefings, by front benchers on both sides. This in turn has, it seems to me, made the craft of the parliamentary journalist a far less satisfactory one - from their point of view. The second argument used by editors to justify the abandonment of parliamentary reporting is that attendance of Members in the Chamber, their behaviour and the quality of speeches have all declined – and that the press are simply following, rather than leading a shift away from the Chamber of the House to other fora of debate, not least the radio and television studio. Disproving these assertions in any scientific way is virtually impossible. I have seen no research on the attendance of members for debates, and no counts are taken. But in my nearly 20 years of membership of the Commons, I do not think that attendance overall in the Chamber has gone down. It has always varied – according to the subject matter, the time of day and the size of the Government's majority. What is true today – as a browse through Hansard for the 50s and 60s may remind us – is that MPs are far more assiduous in asking parliamentary questions, oral and written, and since the 50s have post bags which have increased by a factor of 10. Records kept by the Commons' Postmaster show that in the 50s the average member received between 12 and 20 letters a week; by 1967, 50 a week; by 1986, to between 100 and 150. It will be more now. It also needs to be remembered that until the 80s it was normal for backbench members on both sides to have other jobs. Conservatives traditionally had occupations in the City, but many Labour as well as Tory members practised at the Bar, or were active journalists, whilst many trade union members continued to work for their trade unions. And in those days, the other responsibilities of members in the Commons – for example on Select Committees – were far fewer.

Myth

The idea that there was some golden age of attendance is something of a myth. Edmund Burke was one of the greatest parliamentarians of all time. But one of George Canning's biographers, Sir Charles Petrie, said of Burke that "he generally emptied the House of Commons when he rose to speak", adding that Wilkes had claimed that Burke's oratory was reminiscent of "whiskey and potatoes" [*George Canning*, Petrie, p. 25]. Dennis MacShane, the current MP for Rotherham, has recalled a conversation with Sir Martin Gilbert, Winston Churchill's biographer, who on a walk round the Commons chamber remarked: "Do you know that when Winston Churchill made those memorable speeches warning of Nazism in the 1930s, the House was empty?"

Overall, I think that the behaviour of members in the chamber has improved a little. It was significantly worse in the 70s and early 80s. Two examples come to mind. The mace waving incident in 1977, when then shadow cabinet member Michael Heseltine seized the mace; and in late October 1980, when a group of Labour MP's sought to prevent the prorogation of Parliament in a protest over the Housing Bill. With the influx of so many more women members in this Parliament, there is less of the boorish,

MOD300006669

For Distribution to CPs

"yaboo-sucks" politics than there was. The paradox is that the one part of each week's proceedings which is reported widely is Prime Minister's Questions, which despite the best efforts of the Prime Minister usually generates more heat than light.

Newspapers operate in a highly competitive environment. The battle for circulation is ruthlessly fought, and the market is strewn with the legacies of editors and executives who have failed to put on readers. Yet rather than encourage diversity, this struggle has produced a high degree of conformity in the nature of the product provided to the customer. All broadsheets now have the same style sections, consumer sections, health sections, as well as the staple news, features and sports pages. This "flock mentality" rather than any proper research into readers' tastes best explains why all newspapers have cut back on parliamentary reporting in the last 15 years.

The removal of "Yesterday in Parliament" from BBC Radio 4's Today Programme on its FM wavelength provides something of a warning and an encouragement for both print and broadcast media. Far from this change helping to capture a larger audience, ratings between 8.30 a.m. and 9.00 a.m. slid by 12 per cent in its first months [*Sunday Times*, November 1998].

It seems that John Cole was correct: the British public *do* have a better appetite for serious politics than they have been credited with by the press. Perhaps, therefore, one bold editor may wish to take a risk. Perhaps he (for it is usually a he) might wish to buck the trend and provide a slot for dedicated parliamentary reporting to go alongside the homecare section or the fashion page. You never know, it might even lead to a boost in circulation.

The Rt. Hon. Jack Straw, Home Secretary, is MP for Blackburn. Before being elected to the Commons in 1979 he was called to the Bar, and from 1977 to 1979 was a member of Granada's "World in Action" team.

Brussels with the blinkers on

Stephen Bates

There are periods when the wearing of tin hats is essential for covering the European Union for the British Press from Brussels. Now that Tony Blair has tamed the Labour Party, the Loony Left is banished and the Tories have been consigned to outer darkness, no other issue is so capable of provoking newspapers to wrath, inducing paranoia, and causing not just misunder-standing but also a bias against establishing any approximation to the truth for readers. The cheery willfulness with which this is done, the sheer reluc-tance to grapple seriously with Europe or even find out much about it, not only deliberately skews the debate but contributes to the ignorance with which it is mostly conducted in Britain. It is alarming that such a crucial political issue should be handled in such a deliberately purblind fashion. This is no way – whichever side of the argument you happen to be on – to discuss the country's future.

Several features characterise how the EU is reported. First and most obvious is the sheer level of ignorance about the place. Even names and numbers cause problems. It happens across the media and all the time. The BBC producer, sent over from London for the launch of the single currency on New Year's Eve, was not unique in saying that Britain was the only coun-try not taking part because the other 11 were all in – actually four member states have not joined EMU. I've seen that mistake in my own paper too. Even the initials can cause problems: EC is still common usage as far as newspapers are concerned for both the European Union and the European Commission, though the European Community became the EU with the Maastricht Treaty in 1991. And, for the assistance of more venerable sub-editors, it has not been the Common Market for a very long time.

The most pervasive example is the mix-up newspapers always get into over the various European courts. The Court of Justice in Luxembourg is

MOD300006670