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# MPs, THE MEDIA, AND THE TELEVISIONING OF PARLIAMENT

ELINOR CHISHOLM

**Abstract:** *The advantages of television coverage of Parliamentary proceedings seem clear. The ability to see their elected representatives carry out the business of running the nation surely makes for a more informed, interested and involved citizenry. However, when the opportunity to extend and improve the facilities that allow New Zealanders to see their MPs at work in Parliament arose in 2005, nothing was clear. To Parliament, approving funding for the establishment of a high-tech remote controlled in-house camera service would be in the interests of a better democracy. To the media, however, the proposal constituted outright censorship, as following its implementation television networks would be excluded from the House and compelled to rely upon the in-house camera service for their pictures. This article examines the public debate that arose after Cabinet approved funding for the scheme in March 2005, and traces the way in which the media, by crying 'censorship', were successful in persuading Cabinet to postpone, if not abandon altogether, the in-house television proposal.*

**Keywords:** *Press freedom, parliamentary broadcasts, New Zealand television, censorship*

*'It may seem like a tedious battle, but the symbolic importance of the row over televising Parliament should not be underestimated'.<sup>1</sup> – The Press, Editorial.*

Perhaps many who followed the debate about televising Parliament in March 2005 will agree that the whole affair was tedious. For a number of journalists, however, the 'symbolic importance' of the debate stemmed from their perception that 'the core of the news media's ability to freely report and scrutinize the behaviour of our elected representatives'<sup>2</sup> was at stake.

The debate, of course, was not simply over whether Parliament could be televised; television cameras have been permitted in the House for 'Question Time' since 1986. Both TVNZ and TV3 film Question Time, and broadcast what they consider to be the most important or entertaining exchanges on their evening news programmes, while SKY television broadcasts Question Time live while the House is sitting. At issue was whether public and private television companies such as these would continue to be permitted to have their own cameras in Parliament following the installation of an in-house parliamentary television recording service that would make footage freely available to all broadcasters.

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ELINOR CHISHOLM completed an honours degree in Political Science at Victoria University of Wellington in 2005. This article is a revised version of a presentation given as part of her honours internship course at the New Zealand Parliament.

<sup>1</sup>Editorial, 'Cameras in the House', *The Press* (21 March 2005), p. A10.

<sup>2</sup>*The Press*. 'Cameras in the House'.

In about 60 other countries, including most of the OECD, all or parts of the proceedings of Parliament (or equivalent bodies) are televised.<sup>3</sup> Televising Parliament is seen to be valuable to democracy, as it allows citizens a direct window into how legislation is made and how the government of the day conducts itself. It has also been argued, however, that televising Parliament can trivialise it, turning politicians into performers, and allowing the viewing public to sink back in their chairs and turn away, convinced that the cameras are keeping an eye on their representatives instead.<sup>4</sup> And, if television companies are given free reign to film parliamentary proceedings, there is the risk that cynical or vindictive journalists, or those prioritizing entertainment values over impartial news values, will deliberately select footage that shows the institution of Parliament, and its inhabitants, in an unflattering light. Both sides of the debate in 2005 agreed that televising Parliament was beneficial for democracy. What they disagreed on was whether Parliament could be trusted to provide the kind of televised coverage of Parliament necessary for democracy.

## DEBATE ABOUT AN IN-HOUSE SERVICE

An awareness of the need for balanced reporting of Parliament is evident in the Standing Orders which govern the filming of Parliament. Standing Order 44 states that 'The proceedings of Parliament ... are available for television coverage' but that 'any broadcast of the televised proceedings of the House must maintain such standards of fairness as are adopted, from time to time, by the House'.<sup>5</sup> The most recent standards were the 'Television and still photography rules' issued by Speaker Jonathan Hunt in August 2000. These rules ban panning shots of the chamber and close-ups of Members as well as the filming of interjections and interruptions in the public galleries. To be within the rules 'coverage should be "medium range" and concentrate on the Speaker and the MP who has the call'.<sup>6</sup> Thus the *Evening Post* was banned for a week in 2000 for printing a photo of National MP Annabel Young yawning during the debates on the Employment Relations Bill, and TV1 was criticised for showing file footage of MPs laughing to the tune of *I'm in the Money* in a report of a pay rise in 2003.<sup>7</sup>

The suggestion that Parliament provide a televised service of its proceedings first came from a 'Review of Standing Orders' submitted by the Standing Orders Committee in May 2003. They recommended the installation of an in-house parliamentary service that could provide coverage of parliamentary proceedings, preferably through its own free-to-air channel. Coverage, which had been limited to Question Time, would extend to debates in the House and later to public segments of select committee hearings.<sup>8</sup> Such a service would give much greater coverage of parliament's activities, and the footage it recorded would be freely available to all broadcasters. Further, the Standing Orders Committee decided that the installation of the in-house cameras would be at the exclusion of the networks' own cameras.<sup>9</sup> This recommendation

<sup>3</sup>The Museum of Broadcast Communications, 'Parliament Coverage by Television' (7 December 2004), <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/P/htmlP/parliamentc/parliamentc.htm>.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, P. Hart, 'Easy citizenship: TV's curious legacy', in Kathleen Hall Jamieson (ed.), *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science: The media and politics*, Vol. 546 (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), pp. 110-113.

<sup>5</sup>Standing Orders of the House of Representatives, brought into force 20 February 1996, amended 2 August 2005, <http://www.clerk.parliament.govt.nz/NR/rdonlyres/A4F2FA15-FCB9-46E3-A2A4-9C15DACACD86/16122/StandingOrders2006.pdf>, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup>Rules issued by former Speaker Jonathan Hunt in August 2000, quoted in Kevin Taylor, 'MP ousted in TV film outburst', *New Zealand Herald* (18 March 2005), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>Tracy Watkins, 'Image control', *Dominion Post* (14 March 2005), p. B7.

<sup>8</sup>Office of the Speaker, 'TV live from Parliament' (9 March 2005), <http://www.speaker.parliament.govt.nz/Press-9March2005.doc>.

<sup>9</sup>Standing Orders Committee, 'Review of Standing Orders' (December 2003), <http://www.clerk.parliament.govt.nz/Content/SelectCommitteeReports/i18b.pdf>, pp. 12-14.

would prove controversial when Cabinet approved the funding for the installation of the service in March 2005.

The committee had argued that the ousting of the network cameras was necessary because 'having multiple sets of cameras in galleries is physically intrusive. It has been tolerated only because the House has not provided its own feed until now'.<sup>10</sup> In March, clerk-assistant Wynne Price of Parliament's Reporting Services<sup>11</sup> affirmed that 'the idea is not to have that constant clutter'.<sup>12</sup> Further reasoning behind the decision was that the Committee stated that they 'were aware of no other Parliament that broadcasts its proceedings and, in addition, allows television companies to set up their own facilities in its galleries',<sup>13</sup> an argument echoed by Speaker Margaret Wilson in March 2005.<sup>14</sup>

The media was quick to counter the arguments limiting their access to filming Parliament. In reply to the 'clutter' argument, the *Southland Times* said that this was 'rarely true: the public galleries are typically sparsely populated'.<sup>15</sup> Commentators questioned the sense behind the recommendation to exclude cameras, given that, according to the *Nelson Mail*, 'their presence has not posed any noticeable problems until now'.<sup>16</sup> TVNZ head Bill Ralston agreed: 'we've got a very satisfactory system at the moment and I can't see what the problem is'.<sup>17</sup> Mark Sainsbury, political editor of TVNZ, questioned whether banning non-parliamentary television cameras set a dangerous precedent, asking, 'What if they decide to have an official photographer so we don't have a myriad of press photographers?'<sup>18</sup>

Media critics also attacked the cost of the proposed system. Described as a 'deluxe edition',<sup>19</sup> the in-house system was estimated to cost \$6.2 million to set up and \$3.2 million a year after that to maintain,<sup>20</sup> which was 'roughly twice the cost independent operators have estimated for doing a balanced job'.<sup>21</sup> Questions were asked about whether the proposed system brought new benefits that 'warrant[ed] spending endless millions of taxpayer's money'.<sup>22</sup> The government, on the other hand, re-emphasised the desirability of such a service. Prime Minister Helen Clark called the idea 'direct democracy',<sup>23</sup> as 'people can actually see what their representatives are doing'.<sup>24</sup>

Broadening their attack, the media went on to accuse Parliament of lies and broken promises. Media concerns over the possible exclusion of their cameras had first been raised in Parliament when the Standing Orders Committee had submitted their review to the House back in December 2003. Soon afterwards, the *Dominion Post* published an editorial condemning the idea as 'censorship'. In response to this editorial, it is claimed that the then Speaker Jonathan

<sup>10</sup>Standing Orders Committee, 'Review of Standing Orders'.

<sup>11</sup>Reporting Services is responsible for producing the reports of the parliamentary debates and web and broadcast services.

<sup>12</sup>Wynne Price, quoted in Kevin Taylor, 'TV networks cry foul over Parliamentary cameras', *New Zealand Herald* (10 March 2005), [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/section/story.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=10114482](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/section/story.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10114482).

<sup>13</sup>Standing Orders Committee, 'Review of Standing Orders'.

<sup>14</sup>Vernon Small and Tracy Watkins, 'Snooze picture stirs camera row', *Dominion Post* (17 March 2005), p. 2.

<sup>15</sup>Standing Orders Committee, 'Review of Standing Orders'.

<sup>16</sup>Editorial, 'MPs on show', *The Nelson Mail* (18 March 2005), p. 15.

<sup>17</sup>Bill Ralston, quoted in Taylor, 'TV networks cry foul over Parliamentary cameras'.

<sup>18</sup>Mark Sainsbury, quoted in Taylor, 'TV networks cry foul over Parliamentary cameras'.

<sup>19</sup>Watkins, 'Image control'.

<sup>20</sup>Office of the Speaker, 'TV live from Parliament'.

<sup>21</sup>Editorial, 'An end to talk of MP-TV?', *Southland Times* (21 March 2005), p. 6.

<sup>22</sup>*Southland Times*, 'An end to talk of MP-TV?'.

<sup>23</sup>*Southland Times*, 'An end to talk of MP-TV?'.

<sup>24</sup>New Zealand Press Association, 'Clark defends televised house as direct democracy in action', *New Zealand Herald* (15 March 2005), [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/category/story.cfm?c\\_id=63&objectid=10115270](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/category/story.cfm?c_id=63&objectid=10115270).

<sup>25</sup>New Zealand Press Association, 'Clark defends televised house as direct democracy in action'.

Hunt gave 'his personal assurance that the matter would go no further'.<sup>25</sup> Said the *Dominion Post's* editor Tim Pankhurst on behalf of the Commonwealth Press Union, 'We were given clear guarantees by the previous Speaker that this would not occur ... They have now gone back on that'.<sup>26</sup> TV3 Head Paul Jennings, *3 News* political editor Stephen Parker and TV3 spokesperson Richard Griffin, along with TVNZ's news head Bill Ralston and Chief Executive Ian Fraser, all claimed to have been given these assurances.<sup>27</sup> The previous Speaker, Jonathan Hunt, refused to comment on the matter, but stated that 'We shouldn't believe everything we're hearing about the assurances [that] may or may not have [been] given'.<sup>28</sup> Prime Minister Helen Clark said she knew nothing of any such agreement,<sup>29</sup> while Hunt's successor as Speaker, Margaret Wilson, negated the media's claim, saying that 'There is nothing in writing to prove any such assurance'.<sup>30</sup> Such denials caused media commentators to attack the integrity of parliamentarians. Said one columnist, 'The implication, that an MP's word has no value unless it is in writing, will come as no surprise to members of the public who regularly rate politicians below used-car salesmen in trustworthiness surveys, but it does Parliament no credit'.<sup>31</sup>

The most politically charged debate, however, centered around who would get to control the television cameras inside Parliament, and, by extension, how Parliament and MPs came across on television. Some media critics claimed that if the implementation of such an in-house service meant the exclusion of network cameras, Parliament was attacking public access to their elected representatives. Some even went so far as to suggest that democracy was threatened because the 'robotic-camera feed [would be] controlled by the MPs themselves',<sup>32</sup> and that the 'politicians would get to control how they're filmed in the debating chamber and select committees'.<sup>33</sup> According to these critics, the Committee's recommendation was all about 'MPs not wanting to be shown in a bad light';<sup>34</sup> their concern was to be 'able to manipulate the images that the public sees'.<sup>35</sup> Thus excluding network cameras was judged to amount to 'state control of the public's access to our MPs' core business'.<sup>36</sup> On the contrary, Prime Minister Helen Clark argued, 'if you wanted to censor what the public saw you wouldn't have cameras in there at all'.<sup>37</sup> In fact, by having cameras in place permanently 'Parliament [was] opening itself up to a great deal more scrutiny'.<sup>38</sup>

The question of who would control the robotic cameras had been considered by the Standing Orders Committee, who recommended that 'the equipment ... be owned or leased by [a] contractor'<sup>39</sup> and the Office of the Clerk of the House call for tenders for the management of the live telecast, with criteria that emphasised 'the need for neutrality and independence'.<sup>40</sup> The

<sup>25</sup>Nick Ventor, 'Tinted image on MPTV', *The Press* (15 March 2005), p. 9.

<sup>26</sup>Tim Pankhurst, quoted in TVNZ, 'Beehive camera ban proposed' (17 March 2005), [http://tvnz.co.nz/view/news\\_politics\\_story\\_skin/479856?format=html](http://tvnz.co.nz/view/news_politics_story_skin/479856?format=html).

<sup>27</sup>Tracy Watkins, 'MPs buy fight over their TV image', *Dominion Post* (11 March 2005), <http://www.stuff.co.nz/stuff/0.2106.3213413a6160.00.html>.

<sup>28</sup>Jonathan Hunt, quoted in TVNZ, 'Beehive camera ban proposed'.

<sup>29</sup>New Zealand Press Association, 'PM says Parliament TV "direct democracy" in action' (15 March 2005), <http://www.stuff.co.nz/stuff/0.2106.3217277a6160.00.html>.

<sup>30</sup>Watkins, 'MPs buy fight over their TV image'.

<sup>31</sup>Ventor, 'Tinted image on MPTV'.

<sup>32</sup>*Nelson Mail*, 'An end to talk of MP-TV?'.

<sup>33</sup>TVNZ, 'Beehive camera ban proposed'.

<sup>34</sup>*The Nelson Mail*, 'MPs on show'.

<sup>35</sup>Paul Jennings, quoted in Taylor, 'TV networks cry foul over Parliamentary cameras'.

<sup>36</sup>*The Press*, 'Cameras in the House'.

<sup>37</sup>New Zealand Press Association, 'Clark defends televised house as direct democracy in action'.

<sup>38</sup>New Zealand Press Association, 'Clark defends televised house as direct democracy in action'.

<sup>39</sup>Report of the Standing Orders Committee, 'Review of Standing Orders'.

<sup>40</sup>Office of the Speaker, 'Televising Parliament to start next year' (13 September 2004), [www.speaker.Parliament.govt.nz/Press-.doc](http://www.speaker.Parliament.govt.nz/Press-.doc).

cameras would operate under remote direction from outside the House and would be able to be swivelled and manipulated. Whoever won the contract to operate the robotic cameras would, like the television companies, be governed by Standing Order 44, and be limited to medium range coverage focused on the Speaker and the MP who had the call. Speaker Margaret Wilson thus argued that the media was making a fuss over something that was actually to their benefit, saying that they would have access to the same footage, under the same rules, and at no cost.<sup>41</sup>

If the issue was simply whether robotic cameras could, under the same rules, provide the same footage as that gained by independent cameramen the debate may not have been quite so vociferous. What became clear, however, was that media companies felt their democratic role in Parliament was threatened by the proposal because their exclusion from the House would also limit their ability to *breach* the rules set out in the Standing Orders and detailed in Speakers' rulings – something they argued was, at times, necessary. In fact, as the debate developed, this wider question of whether it was appropriate for politicians to limit the media's ability to film whatever they wanted in Parliament was conflated with the narrower one about the capacity of robotic cameras to fill in for live news cameramen.

## CONFUSING TWO ISSUES?

On the evening of 16 March 2005, TV3 screened an image of Labour MP David Benson-Pope sleeping. The image was re-screened the following night by TV3 and also by TVNZ.<sup>42</sup> The next day TV1 and various newspapers reprinted the image. According to the Speaker, TV3's letter to her claimed that 'the decision to screen the shot was made in the context of the debate over the decision to remove television news cameras from the Chamber when Parliament's system was installed'.<sup>43</sup> The network claimed that the screening of the shot was justifiable as it was 'within the more recent liberal interpretation of the Standing Orders'.<sup>44</sup> This statement may have been referring to the fact that journalists maintain that under former Speaker Jonathan Hunt the rules were relaxed somewhat.<sup>45</sup> For example, during the debates on the Civil Union Bill, the networks were able to screen footage of emotional MPs embracing.<sup>46</sup> In reply, Speaker Margaret Wilson said, 'There's always a step too far ... [The footage] proves the point that they can film anything they like and break the rules'.<sup>47</sup> In a Speaker's Ruling she said that the item was a 'gross breach of the standing orders and a direct challenge to the authority of the Speaker'.<sup>48</sup> For this TV3 was banned from the House for a week. (The damage to Benson-Pope, however, was done. The opposition used the issue to criticise Benson-Pope's 'sleepy' handling of the NCEA issue,<sup>49</sup> and the lack of government backbenchers present in the House. Placed on the defensive, Benson-Pope said of his nap, 'I am embarrassed by it and I apologise'.)<sup>50</sup>

In justifying the network's decision to screen the shot, TV3 news' presenter Hilary Barry said that '[Benson-Pope] was asleep for so long' that the network felt the public should know,

<sup>41</sup>TVNZ, 'Beehive camera ban proposed'.

<sup>42</sup>Kevin Taylor, 'MP ousted in TV film outburst', *New Zealand Herald* (18 March 2005), [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/section/story.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=10115920](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/section/story.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10115920).

<sup>43</sup>Margaret Wilson, 'Speaker's Rulings, Television Coverage of Parliament – TV3' (31 March 2005), [http://www.clerk.parliament.govt.nz/Content/Hansard/Final/FINAL\\_2005\\_03\\_31.htm#\\_Toc103591954](http://www.clerk.parliament.govt.nz/Content/Hansard/Final/FINAL_2005_03_31.htm#_Toc103591954).

<sup>44</sup>Wilson, 'Speaker's Rulings, Television Coverage of Parliament – TV3'.

<sup>45</sup>Tracy Watkins, 'Image control'.

<sup>46</sup>*Nelson Mail*, 'MPs on show'.

<sup>47</sup>Vernon Small, 'Government rethinks camera ban', *Dominion Post* (18 March 2005), p. A2.

<sup>48</sup>Wilson, 'Speaker's Rulings, Television Coverage of Parliament – TV3'.

<sup>49</sup>This was a controversy about the government's handling of the introduction of new methods for the assessment of senior secondary school pupils. The new assessment system leads to National Certificate of Educational Achievements (NCEA) qualifications.

<sup>50</sup>Small and Watkins, 'Snooze picture stirs camera row'.



and that 'if Parliament had its way, such reporting might not happen'.<sup>51</sup> Actually, not only would such reporting not happen if the proposed changes went ahead, it generally does not happen now, being against the rules permitting a camera presence in Parliament. With the screening of the image, however, the media shifted public focus from the real issue of *who* should be allowed to film Parliament, to a broader debate about *what rules* should govern the filming of Parliament. Thus *The Press* argued that 'Parliament should be considering ... further liberalizing the controls over televising its activities, not further restricting them'.<sup>52</sup> The *Nelson Mail* agreed, saying that 'the media has been remarkably compliant with Parliament's censorship. The present system already imposes too many controls'.<sup>53</sup>

Among the commentary on the issue, three strands of argument for why the rules should be liberalised can be discerned. The first argued that this would allow for a more natural filming which would give the audience a better sense of how Parliament works. Said the *Dominion Post*, 'If you're showing somebody that's making a statement to the House and there's absolute mayhem going on around them or there's nobody in the House ... then we should be able to present a true picture of what's happening'.<sup>54</sup> One journalist gave the example from the previous week, when National Deputy Leader Gerry Brownlee had asked the Speaker about the absence of so many Labour MPs. After the question the camera obligingly showed the empty seats so that the question would make sense to the viewer at home. It was argued that this would not be possible for cameras operating under remote direction.<sup>55</sup>

The media's second justification of their position was that unrestricted filming could help bring about a better atmosphere in the House. Said *The Press*, 'Abuses of Parliament's privileges, tomfoolery, and the apparent disdain with which some MPs treat the debating chamber are regular sources of dismay to many voters'.<sup>56</sup> It was argued that only 'unfettered coverage – including off-camera shenanigans will convince MPs to improve their behaviour – not the airbrushed image they seem so desperate to send out to the world'.<sup>57</sup>

It was argued, thirdly, that relaxing the rules in this way would improve democracy. One commentator asked, 'how do such limitations contribute to democracy? Whose House is this anyway?'<sup>58</sup> The *New Zealand Herald* agreed: 'Voters deserve to see, and to hear, all that passes for public policy-making in this country'.<sup>59</sup> The *New Zealand Herald* described MPs as 'boisterous, petty, sleepy, inattentive, and, for some of the time, childish'.<sup>60</sup> Dominion Post political reporter Nick Venter said it was possible in the House to 'observe vast expanses of unoccupied seating in the chamber, MPs yawning, knitting, answering correspondence and passing bags of sweets around the chamber – a favourite pastime of the present cabinet. There is a word for stopping the media from showing that. It is censorship'.<sup>61</sup>

Each of these arguments has merit. They must, however be balanced against the need for the media to be balanced and fair in its coverage of Parliament; while it may be democratic to allow all New Zealanders to see everything their representatives do in the House, there is no guarantee that the coverage would be fair, and that camera operators would not be inclined to

<sup>51</sup>Kevin Taylor, 'Wake-up call for Parliament TV', *New Zealand Herald* (17 March 2005), <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/section/story>.

<sup>52</sup>*The Press*, 'Cameras in the House'.

<sup>53</sup>*Nelson Mail*, 'MPs on show'.

<sup>54</sup>TVNZ, 'Government backdown on camera ban' (21 March 2005), [http://tvnz.co.nz/view/news\\_politics\\_story\\_skin/480707?](http://tvnz.co.nz/view/news_politics_story_skin/480707?).

<sup>55</sup>Watkins, 'Image control'.

<sup>56</sup>*The Press*, 'Cameras in the House'.

<sup>57</sup>*The Press*, 'Cameras in the House'.

<sup>58</sup>*The Press*, 'Cameras in the House'.

<sup>59</sup>Editorial, 'When truth hurts, now it gets altered', *New Zealand Herald* (12 March 2005), p. A2.

<sup>60</sup>*New Zealand Herald*, 'When truth hurts, now it gets altered'.

<sup>61</sup>Venter, 'Tinted image on MPTV'.

focus on unattractive behaviour in some parties rather than in others. Negative and possibly false impressions of MPs may form if individual camera-people decide on a whim to film MPs only in their most embarrassing, and thus most news-friendly, moments. Currently, MPs who feel a television story has reported them unfairly or in a biased manner can complain to the company concerned, or to the Broadcasting Standards Authority. The question of whether this provides sufficient deterrent or, in the case of a breach of the Broadcasting Standards, remedy, goes to the heart of tension between politicians and the media who report on them. Clearly politicians continue to think that it does not.

Former Speaker Sir Kerry Burke described the media reaction to the proposed in-house service as 'rather frenzied' and 'little more than self-serving nonsense'.<sup>62</sup> Certainly, in discussing an issue that pits the media against Parliament, it may be difficult for the media to offer balanced coverage. But were the media critics of the proposal correct in arguing that the proposed ban on non-parliamentary cameras was tantamount to censorship? Or, by shifting focus from the question of whether an in-house service, bound by the same rules as the television companies themselves, could or would provide the same footage, to the question of whether the rules themselves were fair, were they deliberately confusing two separate issues, and hoping to summon thereby enough public sympathy to pressure Parliament into rethinking its ban on their cameras? Was it, in other words, valid for the media to argue that they had a right to breach or at least push the boundaries of the Standing Orders, on occasion, and that placing a limit on their ability to do so represented a threat to their 'freedom of speech'?<sup>63</sup>

In face of the outrage expressed in various media outlets, and before the validity of the media's case had been established, Parliament rapidly back-pedalled on its earlier decision, even if doing so meant contradicting their parties' clearly stated view, clearly visible when the Standing Orders Committee reported back to Parliament in 2003.

## POLITICAL RESPONSE TO THE DEBATE

Leader of the House Michael Cullen had served as Labour's senior representative on the committee when it recommended the installation of the in-house camera and the exclusion of the network cameras.<sup>64</sup> In March 2005, however, in reaction to the media frenzy, his colleague Prime Minister Helen Clark said that she personally was against the exclusion of television cameras and would not have agreed to the proposal if it had been pointed out to her.<sup>65</sup> On the contrary, she said that she was 'all for a practical solution which enables people to see Parliament whenever it's sitting and enables people to get shots they want within the rules'.<sup>66</sup> This reactive backtracking was echoed in the other parties. National Senior Whip John Carter, when reporting back from the committee, had spoken of the desirability of 'accept[ing] the recommendations in the report'.<sup>67</sup> Sixteen months later, however, National's leader Don Brash called the exclusion of network cameras a 'matter of press freedom'<sup>68</sup> and said that 'the National Party caucus is opposed to any such blanket ban'.<sup>69</sup> New Zealand First's Dail Jones, reporting to the House in 2003, had commented that 'the question of television coverage will have to be looked at

<sup>62</sup>Kerry Burke quoted in Mike Houlahan, 'Speaker's stance on TV footage endorsed', *The Press* (23 March 2005), <http://www.stuff.co.nz/stuff/>

<sup>63</sup>Taylor, 'TV networks cry foul over Parliamentary cameras'.

<sup>64</sup>Standing Orders (16 December 2003), [http://www.clerk.parliament.govt.nz/Content/Hansard/Final/FINAL\\_2003\\_12\\_16.htm#\\_Toc62543429](http://www.clerk.parliament.govt.nz/Content/Hansard/Final/FINAL_2003_12_16.htm#_Toc62543429).

<sup>65</sup>Ainsley Thomson, 'Media hail retreat over cameras in Parliament', *New Zealand Herald* (22 March 2005), <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/author/story>.

<sup>66</sup>TVNZ, 'Government backdown on camera ban'.

<sup>67</sup>Standing Orders (16 December 2003).

<sup>68</sup>Small, 'Government rethinks camera ban'.

<sup>69</sup>Small, 'Government rethinks camera ban'.



very carefully' only because 'there needs to be some control on how that excerpt can be used', expressing no concern for the plight of the network cameras.<sup>70</sup> In March, however, New Zealand First claimed not to know that cameras were to be banned. Supporting the networks' argument,<sup>71</sup> leader Winston Peters considered coverage from exclusively remote-controlled cameras 'as exciting, I think, as watching a video from a security camera in a bank'.<sup>72</sup>

In a similar vein, Stephen Franks of ACT had said that he was pleased with the conclusions of the Standing Orders Committee, as it 'operates by consensus ... that recognises the undesirability ... of a Government using its majority to force through changes to the Standing Orders'.<sup>73</sup> By March, however, ACT claimed to support cameras in the House and denied knowledge of the issue. The party's leader Rodney Hide said, 'I certainly wasn't consulted – I didn't know until last week'.<sup>74</sup> He declared that he believed excluding network cameras was North Korea-like,<sup>75</sup> and recommended that the Prime Minister 'guarantee TVNZ's and TV3's right to cover Parliament with their own cameras irrespective of the extra service'.<sup>76</sup>

Allies of the government, United Future and the Greens, did not contradict their previous positions in regard to the Standing Orders Committee's recommendations. United Future leader Peter Dunne described the fuss as 'a huge media beat-up',<sup>77</sup> while Greens co-leader Rod Donald accused the other parties of 'extreme hypocrisy'<sup>78</sup> for 'caving in'<sup>79</sup> to network pressure. As remedies, Donald suggested a compromise that allowed each network a camera in the press gallery alongside the parliamentary service, while Dunne thought that the media should be allowed to film particular events.<sup>80</sup>

Neither of these options, or indeed any analysis of the real issues, was pursued, given the intensity of the media attack, especially after the Opposition joined in the attack. Clark concluded that 'At that point the Government was not going to be left carrying the can when other people run away from it'.<sup>81</sup> Accordingly, Cabinet decided to defer funding approval for the in-house service until the next year's Budget. Leader of the House Michael Cullen said: 'This will allow for a fuller discussion of all the issues in a calmer environment than has obtained over the last few days'.<sup>82</sup> The Speaker said that the issue would be reconsidered by the Standing Orders Committee in the following weeks.<sup>83</sup> It was then decided that the decision be delayed until the next parliamentary term.<sup>84</sup> The media called the delaying of the issue their victory.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>70</sup>Standing Orders (16 December 2003).

<sup>71</sup>Kevin Taylor, 'Govt considers backtrack on Parliament TV', *New Zealand Herald* (19 March 2003), <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/author/story>.

<sup>72</sup>Winston Peters, quoted in 'Political dispatches', *Dominion Post* (14 March 2005), p. A2.

<sup>73</sup>Standing Orders (16 December 2003).

<sup>74</sup>Taylor, 'Govt considers backtrack on Parliament TV'.

<sup>75</sup>Watkins, 'MPs buy fight over their TV image'.

<sup>76</sup>Rodney Hide, quoted in Thomson, 'Media hail retreat over cameras in Parliament'.

<sup>77</sup>Small, 'Government rethinks camera ban'.

<sup>78</sup>Small, 'Government rethinks camera ban'.

<sup>79</sup>Small, 'Government rethinks camera ban'.

<sup>80</sup>Small, 'Government rethinks camera ban'.

<sup>81</sup>Helen Clark, quoted in Vernon Small, 'TV camera ban off agenda', *Dominion Post* (22 March 2005), p. A2.

<sup>82</sup>Michael Cullen, quoted in 'Funding for televising Parliament deferred', press release from the New Zealand government (21 March 2005).

<sup>83</sup>Office of the Speaker, 'Further discussions on televising Parliament' (21 March 2005), [www.speaker.Parliament.govt.nz/Press-21March2005.doc](http://www.speaker.Parliament.govt.nz/Press-21March2005.doc).

<sup>84</sup>Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives, 'Report of the Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives for the year ended 30 July 2005', <http://www.clerk.Parliament.govt.nz>.

<sup>85</sup>Thomson, 'Media hail retreat over cameras in Parliament'.

Of course, having the power to successfully confuse the issue while embarrassing the government at the same time (the photo of Benson-Pope that gave an opening for opposition attacks on his suitability as a minister in the NCEA debacle) meant that those media opposed to the new parliamentary television service were bound for victory. MPs certainly did not win the debate, in that they failed to oust the networks from the debating chamber, but nor did they lose it. In backing down, they managed to avoid the accusations of impeding freedom of the press. The only losers then were the public: their chance to see their representatives at work in the House continues to be limited to the few seconds networks choose to screen from time to time on the evening news, at least for those who do not have access to SKY television. The opportunity to see parliamentarians at work in select committees, and in other debates besides those at Question Time, has been postponed if not abandoned.

One critic had commented on the public's 'distrust of parliamentarians' motives, particularly when making decisions involving their own interests'.<sup>86</sup> If parliamentarians can be supposed to have had ulterior motives here, it is nevertheless worth noting that the final decision – to maintain the status quo – was certainly in the interests of the media which is not surprising, considering that it was the most influential way any information on the matter could be communicated to the public. If this 'tedious battle' can teach us anything, it is that winning can come simply by changing what the fighting is about.

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<sup>86</sup>*The Press*. 'Cameras in the House'.