

History of current arrangements for media coverage

- 2.1 The current consolidated guidelines (dated February 2002) replaced a number of separate guidelines covering different aspects of media access, publication and broadcasting. They bring together all the rules concerning members of the press gallery. The guidelines are reproduced in Appendix A.

Source of information

- 2.2 This account of the history of media access to proceedings, the guidelines covering this access and the subsequent broadcasting and reporting on proceedings, is largely taken from a presentation by the Serjeant-at-Arms, Mr David Elder, to House staff in June 2003. Extracts are published here with his permission.
- 2.3 The reference to current “conditions” in this chapter refers to the current guidelines for filming.

Television and the chamber

- 2.4 Regular access to live footage of all proceedings in the chamber for television channels preceded regular access by still photographers. It will therefore be considered first in this chapter.

Television coverage – a short history

- 2.5 Despite television commencing in Australia in the 1950s, it was a considerable time before there was any television coverage of parliamentary proceedings.
- 2.6 There may be a number of reasons for this. Although the power of television has been recognised for communicating with a wide audience, there has been a concern amongst politicians about whether they would be fairly represented by the television medium. The actual experience with televising has shown it is a double-edged sword.
- 2.7 The first televising of the proceedings of the Australian Parliament was of the Joint Sittings of both Houses in 1974. The telecasts took place under the same act that covers radio broadcasting of proceedings which was amended specifically to enable televising of the sittings. The Act only provides for the televising of joint sittings, not the television of the proceedings of the individual Houses.
- 2.8 It was not until the mid 1980s that the House authorised televising of the Budget speech and Leader of the Opposition's reply each year. There was also occasionally provision for the televising of other major speeches.
- 2.9 The real impetus for the televising of proceedings came with the move to the new Parliament House where cameras were installed in the fabric of the chamber (and some committee rooms) and there was provision for the television coverage to be conveyed to every office in the building
- 2.10 Televising of the House of Representatives commenced on a trial basis from 12 February 1991. A review of the trial period was conducted by a Select Committee on Televising during 1991. This committee recommended continuation of televising and the establishment of a Standing Committee on Televising to monitor arrangements and to review the arrangement again in 1993.
- 2.11 The features of the televising arrangement were:
- there were guidelines for DPRS (now DPS) staff in relation to camera coverage of proceedings; and
 - there were guidelines for television stations relating to the use of television footage, and particularly of the rebroadcast of material

- 2.12 The guidelines for camera operators have never created a problem and have remained unchanged from those introduced in 1991.

Liberalising of guidelines for television broadcasters

- 2.13 The conditions for broadcasters have been more controversial. The trend over time has been for a relaxation of the conditions. For example, coverage of the adjournment debate originally was not permitted but this was changed when the trial arrangement was confirmed.
- 2.14 More controversially, points of order and withdrawn comments were not able to be rebroadcast. The media claimed that points of order in particular were a vital part of proceedings during question time and that their inability to rebroadcast points of order did not allow them to cover question time in their news and current affairs programs in an accurate and balanced way.
- 2.15 When the arrangements for the televising of House of Representatives proceedings were reviewed again in 1993, the Standing Committee on Television recommended that the conditions no longer prevent the rebroadcast of points of order and that withdrawn comments be able to be rebroadcast if the withdrawal was also rebroadcast. As the committee at that time was able to determine the conditions, when it reported with its proposed changes, these came into effect immediately.
- 2.16 However, that evening the Leader of the House gave notice to revert the conditions to their original form so that the rebroadcast of points of order and withdrawals were not permitted.
- 2.17 These remained the conditions until 1996 when the Howard government came to power and the conditions were simplified in the way recommended by the Standing Committee on Televising in 1993. The conditions have remained unchanged since then.

Still photography in the chamber

- 2.18 While arrangements for the televising of the Parliament are not unlike those applying in many parliaments around the world, more unusual is the arrangement for still photographs from the major Australian newspapers to have access to the chamber to take photographs of proceedings. No other major comparable parliament, (such as the

United Kingdom or the Canadian House of Commons) permits access to chamber proceedings by still photographers.

- 2.19 In 1992 the then Speaker received a request from a photographer in the press gallery for photographers to have regular access to the chamber. The request was made on the basis that the print media was disadvantaged vis-a-vis the electronic media in reproducing images of the proceedings of the House to illustrate its stories. The Speaker agreed to the arrangement subject to conditions that had been framed around those applying to the televising of the House.
- 2.20 The arrangement permits five (originally four) photographers from the press gallery to take photographs during question time each day and during other “significant” debates in the House. The operation of the arrangement has been the subject of considerable tension over the years between the press gallery and the Speaker. Much of this tension has focussed on one aspect of the original conditions. The conditions provided that the member with the call should be the focal point of all photographs with the exception of general photographs of the chamber in which both sides of the floor of the chamber are shown.
- 2.21 The photographers were unhappy about this restriction from the start, arguing that the television coverage did not have the same restriction of focussing only on the member with the call. The photographers tried to push the boundaries on this restriction from the start.
- 2.22 In 1995 the conditions were reviewed by Speaker Martin. This followed a concern that photographs were seeking reaction shots rather than focussing on the member with the call. First, the Serjeant-at-Arms wrote to the press gallery advising that to meet the condition photographs would have to focus on the member with the call and be taken from the front.
- 2.23 The change in interpretation caused an outcry among the media and the Speaker promised to review it. Following the review the condition was changed to:
- The member with the call must feature as the central figure in all photographs and must be in focus, with the exception of general photographs of the chamber in which both sides of the floor of the chamber are shown.
- 2.24 The condition applied whether shots were taken from in front or behind.

2.25 This situation remained until the election of the Howard government which promised a liberalisation of the rules. In 1997, Speaker Halverson agreed to remove the restriction, allowing photographers to shoot anywhere in the chamber. Following yet a further review the following condition was adopted:

Photographs and associated captions and editorial comment published under these arrangements should relate directly to the circumstances in the chamber when the photographs were taken. Where photographs are not published in context (for example are used in non-specific reports), captions should identify the original general context in which the photographs were taken [1998].

2.26 In 2001 Speaker Andrew indicated he was proposing to bring the conditions for the House of Representatives in line with those of the Senate (back to original conditions of focussing on the member with the call) in the 40th Parliament. This led to an outcry from the media and Speaker Andrew decided not to proceed with the changes.

How the current arrangements work

Television coverage

2.27 The guidelines restrict video filming to parliamentary staff who work for the Broadcasting section of the Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS). The section was previously known as the Sound and Vision Office and the department was formerly the Department of the Parliamentary Reporting Staff. These outdated terms are still used in the guidelines.

2.28 The rules for camera operators are similar to those applying to still photographers and are quite liberal. Subject matter can include the member with the call, panning shots of members listening to debate, members' reaction shots and wide angle shots. The "feed" is produced by an operator working in a Production Control Room (PCR) in the basement of the building. The operator can switch between any of the eight cameras mounted in specially built alcoves in the chamber wall. The cameras are operated by a remote camera control system and can pan, tilt and zoom in and out to provide the corrected framing. This ensures that everything happening in the chamber can be filmed and broadcast.

- 2.29 During some special events such as joint sittings, the number of cameras has been augmented. For example, in October 2003 at the time of the presidential visits, an additional video camera was used both as a back up for the installed cameras and to ensure good coverage, given the additional numbers in the chamber and the importance of the event. This camera was mounted on a tripod placed next to a seat in the front row of the southern public gallery at the western end. An “illegal” camera was smuggled into the chamber on the occasion of the address by President Bush. It was operated from a similar position in the northern gallery.
- 2.30 From the perspective of the Speaker and House officers, the Broadcasting staff do an excellent job of providing coverage of proceedings. The eight video pictures are mixed into a single feed which is broadcast on the House Monitoring System on channel 1. This program is also available to various government departments and to Transact subscribers. It is used by the ABC to televise question time, by Sky News for its extended parliamentary coverage and by other television bureaus who rebroadcast excerpts as part of various news and current affairs programs.
- 2.31 The housing for the eight “live” cameras is also used for eight fixed cameras. These cameras are known as “whips” cameras. They focus on a particular area of the chamber and can be used by the whips to locate members in most areas of the chamber. The whips cameras are not broadcast quality and are not operated by a camera operator. The eight fixed television images are available for members and staff via the in-house television coverage on channels 33 to 40.
- 2.32 The “feed” (the composite mix of images from the eight operating video cameras) is provided free of charge to the press gallery for live broadcast or rebroadcast. The feed can also be used to create still photographs. If the print media want to publish a photograph of an event in the chamber when there was no still photographer present, the Broadcasting unit of DPS can provide the footage on video or as an electronic still image of a single frame of footage.
- 2.33 It is interesting to note that all photographs of the United States Senate which are published in the print media originated from the video footage taken of proceedings. High resolution video filming allows good quality prints to be produced and no still photographers are allowed in the U.S. Senate chamber.
- 2.34 Broadcasting staff have the capacity to film additional footage as well as the normal “feed”. On request, the camera operators can produce

an isolated feed (known as an “iso feed”) for a special purpose. For resource reasons, this is difficult for camera operating staff and the director during busy times such as question time, when they are fully occupied in covering the usual activity.

- 2.35 The television bureaus are not satisfied with the feed because it lacks drama and “newsworthiness”. Proposals to improve television coverage from the perspective of the bureaus include getting a feed from each of the eight cameras so they can chose their own angles rather than relying on the mix put together by the Broadcast unit editor.¹ Mr Bongiorno’s preferred position is that the television news crews should be allowed to enter or exit the galleries at will.² Mr Meakin from Channel 7 supported this approach, telling the committee

I would like more freedom, certainly as much freedom as the stills photographers enjoy in parliament.³

- 2.36 Sky News expressed dissatisfaction with television coverage of committees.⁴ Because committee coverage is such a small part of current arrangements, it will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter which addresses proposals for change.
- 2.37 In summary, the guidelines for camera operators have not caused any difficulties from the perspective of implementing the guidelines and producing good coverage of proceedings. The camera operators are well trained in relation to the guidelines prohibiting coverage of protests in the galleries or unparliamentary behaviour in the chamber. From the perspective of the television bureaus, the television coverage is bland and too focussed on the member with the call. While parliamentary proceedings might be defined as the output by the member with the call, this does not necessarily make “good” television.
- 2.38 From the perspective of re-broadcasting excerpts, changes in technology mean that video footage no longer needs to be provided

¹ Suggestion by Mr Bongiorno from Network 10, *Transcript of evidence of Round Table Conference*, p. 3.

² Mr Bongiorno, submission 3.

³ *Transcript of evidence of Round Table Conference*, p. 5.

⁴ Mr Frangopoulos, op. cit. p. 4.

by the Broadcasting unit. This takes some control away from parliamentary staff and gives greater autonomy to television bureaus. However, because the footage itself represents fair and accurate coverage of proceedings, the potential for “damage” is limited to using footage out of context.

Radio broadcasts

- 2.39 The committee is not aware of dissatisfaction with the guidelines or implementation of the guidelines on radio broadcasting. There have been some issues of context largely caused by the use of audio extracts when a remark later withdrawn is broadcast but the withdrawal is not broadcast.

Still photography

- 2.40 From the perspective of the Speaker and House officers, the twelve year history of opening question time to still photographers has been fraught with difficulty. For the purposes of fair and accurate portrayal of proceedings, each day’s print media is a litany of “stretched” guidelines. The record of still photographers obeying the prohibition on photographing disturbances in the gallery has not been good. This has created a climate of distrust although the Speaker understands the position of photographers who are employed to take photos of “news” rather than to educate the public about the Parliament.
- 2.41 Mr Farr confirmed the approach of still photographers when he told the committee
- ... if someone jumps over that wall, all bets are off. We are going to report it.⁵
- 2.42 Mr Farr’s point was that extraordinary events are “news”. The gallery is more willing to respect the policy of not photographing protests in the chamber because this encourages other people to protest. Mr Bowers also acknowledge that the distinction between an extraordinary event and a protest would dictate the action of the still photographers present, agreeing that
- ... where someone jumps over. That to me crosses the line. There is a story element to that ... We understand the

⁵ *Transcript of evidence of Round Table Conference*, p. 13.

sensitivities of not creating copycats, because we are the last ones that would want to see that happening all the time.⁶

- 2.43 From the perspective of the print media and still photographers attached to the press gallery, there are many unsatisfactory aspects of the guidelines and their administration. First, even to gain access to question time the photographers need to give the correct names to the Serjeant-at-Arms' office before the security attendants will admit them. This is a problem when a photographer needs to be replaced by someone from the same company when a new job arises suddenly.
- 2.44 Outside of question time the permission of the Speaker must be obtained (by first contacting the Serjeant-at-Arms' office). By the time permission is obtained it may be too late. If the desired photograph is of a division, there are usually only five to ten minutes in which to get permission and get to the chamber.
- 2.45 There have been misunderstandings about what constitutes access during question time. Mr Grubel told the committee that security staff did not allow photographers to take shots of a censure motion against the Prime Minister which occurred during question time. The Serjeant-at-Arms has since confirmed that this photograph should have been allowed. Solutions for these problems will be considered in the next chapter.

⁶ Op. cit.

