

Parliament sittings should be video-streamed live on internet – Franco Debono

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Nationalist MP Franco Debono (picture) is convinced that the attendance level of MPs in Parliament would improve dramatically if parliamentary sittings were video-broadcast live via the internet.

A proposal made by Dr Debono last year for such broadcasts was discussed last Wednesday at a meeting of the House Business Committee, and a report is being drawn up to consider the feasibility of the idea, the MP said.



Dr Debono was contacted by *The Malta Independent on Sunday* in the wake of an article in this newspaper's sister daily last Friday, highlighting a notable absenteeism from the House of Representatives.

The article said that only four of the 34 Opposition MPs attended the four sittings held on Monday and Tuesday, morning and evening. The government members did better, as 17 of them – just half, including Dr Debono – were present for the

four sittings in question. On one occasion, the Tuesday morning sitting, fewer than half of the MPs were present in the House.

It must be pointed out that MPs are marked as being present even if they are in the House for just one minute of the three-and-a-half hour sitting.

It is understood that, in a letter to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi expressed support for the idea floated by Dr Debono last year for

parliamentary sittings to be broadcast on the internet.

Asked to explain why he thought such a move would help improve attendance, Dr Debono remarked that one simply had to look at what happens during the three times that parliamentary sittings are shown on TV – the budget presentation and the speeches on the budget delivered by the Opposition Leader and the Prime Minister.

"Those sittings are well-attended because the cameras are there, and MPs know that their absence would be noticed. If cameras are present for all sittings, and if the sittings are streamed live on the internet, more MPs would make the effort to be present in the House," Dr Debono insisted.

While acknowledging that the attendance for normal sittings cannot be as high as it is for the three mentioned above, Dr Debono is sure that MPs would make a point of attending more often than they do at present if sittings were video-streamed live.

He added that records show only 0.1 per cent of the Maltese population follows the radio transmissions of parliamentary sittings. "This number will certainly increase if the sittings are shown on the internet. In this way, Parliament would be giving itself a bigger voice among the people, and interest in what goes on in the House would multiply."

Dr Debono referred to what he has said consistently over the past months, that a country's democracy cannot be strong unless its Parliament is strong. By showing what goes on in the House of Representatives – which is, after all, where the country's lawmakers decide the country's future – Parliament would be closer to the people and people would be able to better understand Parliament's role, Dr Debono said.

He believed that MPs' performance should not be exclusively assessed on attendance, but on performance and contributions in the House, as well as outside. When MPs address the House it is because they have a message to convey and a contribution to make, and so the House must have adequate ways of conveying that message. Live video streaming is one such way, he said.

It is in the interests of the electorate, too, that they are able to follow in the best possible manner what the people they have elected are contributing in the House, and this requires better means of communication and facilities.

The Nationalist MP would like to see House committee hearings being broadcast as well. Take, for example, the Public Accounts Committee hearings on the power station extension contract, which has dominated the news for several months, said Dr Debono. Such sittings would attract many viewers, and at the same time it would keep MPs on their toes.

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