

# Parliament TV



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Following your recent editorial on Parliament TV, allow me to share my views with your readers.

It was stated quite rightly that, even though at times parliamentary debates are lively and make good listening, at other times they are really dull. The editorial suggested that having Parliament shown on television would bring it closer to the people and increase interest. However, having it shown on TV would mean a ripple effect that would be bound to affect other factors, as I will try to explain.

## Ask those 410...

From an extrapolation made in the editorial, there are 410 people who listen to Parliament on the radio. I am fascinated and eager to know what they have to say about the parliamentary debates they listen to. They have a wealth of information and feedback to give us. These 410 lend us their ears. Parliamentary debates broadcast on radio are not really an entertaining show to which someone listens while doing the daily chores at home. So these 410 give us their attention. Most people would rather tune in to a music station but 410 people stop to listen to what we have to say, at least! Therefore, since these people listen attentively they must have an opinion about the nature and level of the debates. However, probably my curiosity will rest here.

## ... from where do the others get their information?

Another question put forward by the article that needs answering is: 'Where do the other citizens get the information from?' We all form our opinions after being bombarded by a multitude of media. Radio is just one medium. Newspapers and television stations only give limited coverage to Parliament. This might be because the time allotted for one parliamentary member is too long and only about five speakers a day are possible. Therefore, the exchanges are rare, resulting in parliament information having low news value.

I am not very worried when told that the citizens form each other's opinion. That is a feather in the cap for the Nationalist Party in government, which flung wide open the doors of freedom of expression with a revolution in broadcasting. Opinion forming is at the very heart of true democratic living.

What worries me are collective terms that bundle together all parliamentarians under terms such as "inconsistent", "acting to be rivals when in fact all are friends", "just there to be present and warm the seat" and worse of all "incompetent".

## More attendance

I was among the very first to air my views about the need for parliamentary debates to be aired on television. Only the general wide-angle shot of the camera would soon answer the question of attendance. More MPs would thus be present in the Chamber rather than being inside the building but opting to stay in a separate room. How frustrating it is to speak to an audience of a couple of members and a multitude of empty benches.

## More participation

If the time for a speaker were to be condensed to 15 minutes, then the number of speakers per day would be about 10. Therefore, a Member of Parliament would need to prepare a speech about once every five parliamentary days. I use the word *prepare* on purpose. Being short and to the point requires preparation. You cannot allow your time to run out without having delivered the important points. As a result, an MP is bound to come to Parliament better prepared.

It is easy for ministers and parliamentary secretaries to come prepared. They have a pool of human resources to assist them. Members of Parliament do not even have a single aide. I have been calling for an aide to be given to every MP for quite some time now. S/he will be the person entrusted with doing the research needed by the MP to form her/his message. This is the ripple effect that starts to surface when we consider Parliament TV.

## Accountability

Speaking for less time and being shown on television would also mean more accountability. The words uttered have to make sense not only in the message they convey but also in the way they are conveyed. Monotone deliveries would be a thing of the past. Up to today, there is immunity for what is uttered in Parliament. If an MP comes out with false or libellous remarks, hardly anyone gets to know – provided s/he does not follow the media station of the opposing party, which usually causes an uproar. An MP would be very cautious about what to say, knowing that what s/he is saying is being broadcast by the very powerful medium of television as opposed to the current radio medium. S/he would also be careful about consistency in his/her thoughts and actions.

## Education 22 as a medium

The editorial mentioned Education 22 as a possible channel for Parliament TV. This does not augur very well. Like Parliament and its listeners, Education 22 is not much of a success in viewing terms either! Education 22 is a very good idea but, like everything else – including Parliament with all its structures and practices – very little can be done with limited funds. In order to have a good medium with a decent following, cash needs to be available.

Using Education 22 as a medium would also lead to the usual accusation being hurled at us that parliamentarians think that they are the source of all knowledge. Getting a share of the airtime on Education 22 would surely lead to some columnist saying this. On the other hand, good parliamentary debates make for good informal learning opportunities. To add to this, citizenship education is being given paramount importance and Parliament broadcast on TV would be a step in this direction. Who knows, perhaps the twinning of two media failing in their numbers – Parliament and Education 22 – might lead to a combined resurrection through such a saprophytic relationship.

## Future possible initiatives

Using television to bring parliamentary debates closer to the people does not exclude the use of other media. There is a website for Parliament where everyone can find information at the click of a button. Parliamentary debates can also be downloaded over the internet. I am, however, aware that such practices are time consuming. An improvement to this would be to have the faculty to download the speeches of every individual member. Imagine scrolling down (or rather up!) to click on David Agius to listen to his speech delivered in November. In this way, all and sundry can keep their elected representatives on their toes. The Members of Parliament would be scrutinised throughout the legislature for what they have delivered over the five-year period. This would in turn lead to a much more informed choice based on facts as opposed to opinions based on hearsay.

I have recently suggested that parliamentary sittings should be streamed live on the internet. It would be a good start for the eventual transmission of TV parliamentary debates.

## The new Parliament building

I would like to pose a mission statement to the Speaker of the House: every attempt should be made to ensure that the new parliament building brings the Members of Parliament closer to the people. With Parliament located on the first floor of the President's Palace, with the courtyard serving as a buffer zone, parliamentary debate is happening at a very distant physical proximity. In its design, every move has to be evaluated with the question "How will this bring Parliament closer to the people?" Even physically, there needs to be free flow of the parliamentarians and the citizens.

I await eagerly the new Parliament located right at the entrance of the capital city to bring about the necessary physical and structural changes that will bring parliament as close to the people as possible. After all, that is why it is the highest democratic structure – because the Members of Parliament represent the people.

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# Strengthening democracy – the dignity of Parliament



FRANCO  
DEBONO

George Abela's first anniversary as Head of State should be celebrated by starting a debate about amending the constitutional provision, requiring just a simple resolution (not even a quorum is required) to appoint the head of state, by establishing a two thirds qualified majority, and in default, in order to avoid any potential constitutional deadlock, an absolute majority of the House in a second round of voting.

Incidentally this was the recommendation by the Select Committee of the House chaired by Prof de Marco, way back in 1987, the same committee which proposed important changes to the Constitution prior to the 1987 election, in order to avoid the perverse 1981 result.

Leaving behind the undesirable high degree of political polarization of the eighties, this country has progressed by leaps and bounds. Under successive Nationalist governments, this country has undergone radical reforms, in the economy, education, justice, the environment, to name a few, which have translated into a better quality of life, and eventually earning the privilege of European membership.

Notwithstanding this, we are now in the process of effecting further reforms in public transport, education, rent laws, local councils, Mepa, the environment, and healthcare, whilst, at the same time, bravely weathering the economic crisis.

Malta is undergoing a wide process of reforms, which must extend also to the basics of politics, the dialectics, the political parties themselves, their financing, the significance of party stations today, Parliament and the role of Members of Parliament as representatives of the people. We have gone a long way thanks to responsible and dedicated politicians in this country, but we still have some way to go. And we shoulder the responsibility to do that.

The fact that Malta's Parliament, as the highest and most representative institution and forum of discussion deserves much more dignity, much more resources, and lacks the basic media to convey its message, together with the fact that we still have no law on party financing, (reports have been drawn up in the past, but subsequently shelved) which in my opinion seriously jeopardizes democracy, were amongst the reasons I mentioned in connection with my absence from Parliament on 14 December of last year, for two minor votes which were neither money bills nor votes of confidence.

Other issues I mentioned in this context, were the huge pollution problems and consequent environmental deficit, in the southernmost south (Birzebbuga and Marsaxlokk), caused by the progressive heavy industrialisation and the lack of, or insufficient infrastructure, thereby having adverse consequences on the health and the quality of life of people and the fact that a law enforcing a fundamental human right, the right to legal assistance during police interrogations, had lain dormant for seven years after being passed unanimously through Parliament, which has, come into force, but which needs

more improvements, especially the right of disclosure, and much more fine-tuning.

According to section 51 of the Constitution, Parliament consists of the President and the House of Representatives.

I have already made reference to the need for changes in the method of appointing the head of state. Parliament too, must undergo radical reforms, it must become more autonomous, be allotted more funds, and especially a radical overhaul of the procedure is required, in order to truly fulfil its role as a forum where the People are represented, and where the most important debates take place.

Members of Parliament, coming from whichever party, should be in a position to fulfil their role as representatives of the people, always within the context of party loyalty, but with sufficient latitude to be proportionate and effective in ensuring that people's concerns and aspirations are really listened to.

Members of Parliament have dual allegiances, besides to their constituency which has returned them to the legislative assembly, obviously, loyalty to the party on whose ticket they were elected. I have always considered the Nationalist Party my natural home in political terms, since I share the party's beliefs, *inter alia*, that man is the centre of political activity, the value of solidarity and other Christian democratic values which are the backbone of our political creed, and respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms of the individual.

Political parties, have today considerably opened up, mostly owing to the considerable decrease in polarization. Parties invite each other's representative to the General Council which is considered an internal organ, and where important discussion takes place. Obviously, particular topics are, and should be debated strictly within party boundaries. Still further reform is urgently needed in this sense as well and we must ask whether their internal structures are sufficiently updated to operate in today's reality, and face the challenges of tomorrow.

Political parties organize the political will, they bring order out of the chaos of the multitude of voters. However, of necessity they bring factional divisions due to diverging positions. That is why the role of head of state is so important. It is a unifying force above partisan divisions. That is why the person occupying the office must not only have legal authority but also moral authority (Select Committee 1987).

Democratic institutions cannot be taken for granted. We must be continuously vigilant and jealous to ensure they are fit to serve their noble purpose, that they are updated. Strengthening democracy, and its institutions, the office of Head of State, Parliament, and political parties. Certain aspects can be discussed in committees and afford of some delay. Others are extremely urgent, are long overdue, and should be given priority. A law on party finance is one of them.

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