

SERIES LEVEL DESCRIPTION
TV PARLIAMENTARY BROADCASTING (T59)

Scope & Content

The papers relate to proposals to televise parliament, including parliamentary discussions on the issue, various experiments carried out in relation to such proposals, the beginning of regular broadcasts of the House of Lords in 1985, and final moves towards broadcasts of the House of Commons in 1989. In addition to correspondence, the files also include minutes of meetings; reports on requirements and procedures; copies of Hansard (the official record of parliamentary debates); submissions to parliamentary Select Committees; Select Committee Reports; press statements; budget documents; reports on experimental broadcasts; guidelines for broadcasting; archival policy; and audience research reports.

The papers include correspondence and documentation from the following sources: Director-General's office; News Editors and other newsroom staff; Parliamentary Broadcasting Experiment Committee; Working Party on the Televising of Parliament; BBC/ITV Joint Policy Group; Clerks of the House of Commons, House of Lords and various Select Committees; BBC-TV Working Party for House of Lords Experiments; Head of Parliamentary Broadcasting; National Sound Archive; Parliamentary Sound Archive; Head of Recording Services, Radio; Parliamentary Recording Unit.

Archival History

Some of the papers were originally filed at the Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit and transferred to the Written Archives Centre following an office move in 1991. The remaining papers came from the Records Centre in 1992.

Arrangement

The files are arranged in two alphabetical runs: T59/1-5 covers the period 1963-1974 and deals mainly with experiments in broadcasting parliament. T59/6-46 covers the period 1975-1989 (except for T59/9 which is dated 1966) and deals with a wider range of topics.

A complete alphabetical listing of the files in this series is available, but there are no detailed précis lists.

Related Areas

There is no equivalent Series relating to Radio broadcasts of parliament, although several files deal with this topic, including: R31/78 Broadcasting of Proceedings; R30/4122-4126 Parliamentary Broadcasting Experiments; R34/1444 Parliamentary Broadcasting; R78/1444 Parliamentary Procedures Broadcasting Experiment; R92/116 Parliamentary Broadcasting Archival Policy; R108/18 Broadcasting of Parliament.

Administrative History

The issue of televising parliament was periodically discussed in the House of Commons during the post-war period, and the State Opening of Parliament was first televised in 1958. The issue of regular broadcasts was discussed more frequently after 1965.

The House of Lords was more enthusiastic about televising parliament, setting up a Select Committee on the subject in June, 1966. In February, 1968 the BBC and the Independent Television Authority (I.T.A.) conducted a closed circuit experimental broadcast of House of Lords proceedings, providing continuous coverage of various debates. They also prepared a variety of edited versions of the same debates. The BBC and Independent Television (I.T.V.) decided that the cost of permanent installations was not justified, but broadcast could be provided on an occasional basis. The Select Committee Report was debated in March 1969, but no decision was taken.

The House of Commons set up its own Select Committee on the issue later in 1966, having already begun discussions in 1965 as part of the Select Committee on Publications and Debates. At this time the BBC also made specimen sound recordings of speeches in relation to forming a special House of Commons Broadcasting Unit. The Committee report was submitted in November, 1966, and in the subsequent parliamentary debate the proposal to televise the Commons ended up being defeated by one vote, with M.P.s from both parties, having been allowed a free vote, split on the issue.

The matter was debated again in the House of Commons in November 1971, with a proposal for a staged introduction of broadcasting of proceedings, with radio broadcasts (which would require less equipment) beginning before television and then only after closed circuit experiments had taken place. No vote was taken. Sound only broadcasting of the Commons did begin in April 1978, by the BBC and Independent Radio News.

In 1985 the House of Lords finally allowed experimental television broadcasts of its proceedings, initially for six months. This experiment was pronounced a success, and was allowed to continue permanently.

In 1988 the House of Commons voted to have its own experimental broadcasts. A Select Committee was set up, which recommended that broadcasters form a House of Commons broadcasting unit, which would award the contract to an independent operator selected by tender. Proceedings were to be televised according to strict rules of coverage. Broadcasts began on an experimental basis in November 1989 and became permanent in July 1990.

The proposed Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit Ltd was formed jointly in 1991, with the directors drawn from both Houses, the broadcasters and parliament's Supervisor of Broadcasting. The company's function is to finance the staff and equipment for the television coverage of both Houses on the basis of the shareholdings taken by the participating broadcasting organisations and any revenue from the sale of the signal.

A group of cable television operators launched a dedicated Parliamentary Channel in January 1992. This was taken over by the BBC in 1998 and is now known as BBC Parliament. It transmits continuous live coverage of the Commons, and highlights of the Lords.

c. 2,500 items
74 files
1963 - 1989