
Westminster in the Information Age

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Pre-history: when old technologies were new

The Westminster Parliament has witnessed at least two previous 'information revolutions' in its six-hundred-year history. First came the rise of the printing press, with the publication of the first printed Bill in the sixteenth century. Before then, Bills had to be read aloud in Parliament; hence the procedural terminology of Bills going through 'readings'. This was not only because of the inability to distribute written information but also because of the low-level of literacy of MPs. (One sixteenth-century Bill took two hours to read aloud to Members.) In 1786 the Treasury established His Majesty's Stationery Office in New Palace Yard; this had first been considered in 1783 as a result of extravagant costs being charged to the government for printed stationery. The culmination of the contribution of print to parliamentary information was the legal acceptance of the *Official Report*, printed unofficially since 1811 by Thomas Hansard and still named after him. The freedom to print a verbatim report of the proceedings of Parliament was not accepted without much resistance from MPs, who had long considered that 'every person of the Parliament ought to keep secret and not to disclose the secrets and things done and spoken in Parliament House to any other person, unless he be one of the same House, upon pain of being sequestered out of the House, or otherwise punished as by order of the House shall be appointed' (*Order and Usage howe to keepe a Parliament*, 1571). It was not until 1878 that a Select Committee examined the question of producing an official report of the House of Commons (*The Hansard Reports*, though tolerated were not official records.) Not until 1909 was the *Official Report* legitimised as a parliamentary service. With the official record came the rise of the press lobby in 1884, comprising a select group of accredited newspaper journalists who were granted special access to report from within Parliament. The respectable newspapers published verbatim accounts of important speeches in Parliament, but such reports have declined markedly in recent years, and this has been lamented particularly by the MPs whose predecessors were once so concerned to prevent such 'intrusion'.

The second 'information revolution' to face Parliament was the rise of telegraphy, followed by radio and then television. From the outset, Parliament had a curious relationship with the BBC, which was the

sole broadcaster until 1954 when commercial TV was licensed. The BBC agreed not to broadcast discussion of any issue likely to come before Parliament within the next fortnight. This 'Fourteen-Day Rule' effectively gave Parliament priority to deliberate, closing off the channels of information and communication to the represented public until after their representatives had spoken. The establishment of ITV, with its less reverential approach to state authority, coincided with the Suez crisis: ITV covered the crisis as it happened, brushing aside the restrictions of the Fourteen-Day Rule, which was abandoned officially by all the broadcasters in 1958. Television had asserted its right to comment upon parliamentary affairs, but still the cameras were forbidden to enter the Commons and show the proceedings to the public. In 1978 radio microphones were allowed in and the public was permitted to listen in to debates; in 1985 cameras were allowed into the House of Lords; in 1989 cameras entered the Commons, initially for an experimental period, and have stayed there ever since, albeit under strict regulation. Parliament bowed to the power of the twentieth-century most ubiquitous communication technology and the result was not only to strengthen the influence of the broadcasters, with their studios at 4 Millbank, serving as a magnet to publicity-hungry MPs, but to alter some aspects of Parliament as an institution (see *Electronic Media, Parliament and the People*, Hansard Society 1999).

From these two previous 'information revolutions' can be discerned a pattern of parliamentary response to new technologies of information and communication. At first, the new technology is distrusted and regarded as an intrusion into parliamentary business. Then, with some reluctance, the new technology is accepted and regulated rigidly. Eventually, the new technology becomes an inherent part of parliamentary activity and MPs realise that they cannot operate without it. At present the latest new technologies of electronic mail, the Internet and web-based discussion hover somewhere between the first and second stage of this process: the distrust of the unknown has diminished considerably as more MPs and their staff have become not only IT-literate, but PC-dependent. Parliament has come to accept the regulated use of ICTs.

Ancient history: computers in the Commons — the origins

According to Dr Jeremy Bray, giving evidence to a Select Committee in 1983, his secretary was the first person in Parliament to use an electric typewriter, twenty years earlier. When Mrs Thatcher's first government came to power in 1979 no MP used a personal computer in Parliament; word processors were regarded as being too costly too technically demanding for most MPs to consider using them in their offices; no MP has an e-mail address, and hardly any had heard of electronic mail; there was no Parliament web-site and there were no party web-sites;

mainframe computers were still the size of the average MP's office. This was only twenty years ago.

In 1983 the Commons Select Committee on Services' Computers Subcommittee, chaired by John McWilliam, conducted an inquiry into 'the Information Technology needs of Members, with particular reference to the relevant organisational characteristics of the House'. A report on Members' needs was commissioned from the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) and its findings and recommendations were the subject of the Committee's consideration of evidence and subsequent recommendations. The EIU report examined the average workload of Members and suggested ways that then existing technologies could diminish it. A list of 15 ways were identified in which IT could reduce time spent on routine office tasks. Members surveyed reported spending an average of five hours per day dealing with correspondence and secretaries spent an average of five hours per day, including sorting the post. Most Members reported that they spent some time redrafting material, such as speeches and correspondence, and one in five survey respondents 'expressed a desire to do more redrafting, saying that the time and nuisance factors were affecting them'. Only 6% of MPs responding to the EIU survey were using word processors, and 79% had no personal experience of using one, but 20% said that they would like to use a word processor for the purpose of redrafting. Other reasons for an interest in IT included file storage (each Member was officially allocated two four-drawer filing cabinets which were hardly sufficient to store all correspondence) and 'an electronic message system' whereby Members could communicate without making telephone calls, although the EIU report considered that 'the likely levels of use of such a network would not be great'.

The Committee took oral and written evidence from, amongst others, Paddy Ashdown MP, who had adapted microcomputer software for his particular needs—both he and Dr Jeremy Bray MP favoured the use of microcomputers by Members rather than simple word processors; Gordon Brown MP, who had established a computer in his Scottish constituency which was connected to his office at Westminster; the Commons Communication Manager, the House of Commons Library, the CCTA and Stuart Randall MP who had contributed to an earlier report by the recently-founded Parliamentary Information Technology Committee (PITCOM). In addition, the Committee visited North America: in the United States it observed congressional computers which had been in use since the 1960s; in Canada it saw the OASIS project which was about to provide video and data services to all members of the House of Commons via a local area network. The Committee's report, issued on 5 December 1984, recommended that Members should be provided with microcomputers with word processing facilities rather than just word processors. Learning the lesson from the Canadian House of Commons, which had centrally procured IT equipment for its

members, the Committee noted that ‘the technical disadvantages of encouraging a piece-meal development of terminals will severely restrict the future growth and use of the system’. Presciently, the report advocated the use of e-mail: ‘Electronic mail could be used for messages now communicated by telephone or post. It could help overcome some of the problems caused by evening sittings and by the difficulties caused by Members not being able to spend time during office hours in their offices. House staff could also improve their services to Members if they had access to the system: short messages could be more directly delivered by this facility than via the Letter Board . . .’ The report was debated in the House of Commons on 12 July 1984, on a motion for the adjournment, but no action was taken. Had Parliament voted to adopt its Select Committee’s ambitious recommendations in 1984 there might from the start have been better coordination of the provision of Members’ IT equipment.

By 1988 Members were discussing in the Commons chamber their concerns about Parliament’s failure to embrace new technologies. Questioning why electronic mail had not yet been introduced in Westminster, allowing him to communicate with staff in his constituency office, David Wilshire MP stated that ‘the technological revolution of which we are so proud in Britain seems to have passed Westminster by’.

The Services Committee revisited the subject of IT in its Fourth report in 1990 and this time, rather less ambitiously, it proposed that consultants be brought in to advise on the installation of a parliamentary video and data system. Following debate in the Commons, the House of Commons Commission approved this proposal in July 1991 and the consultancy study was completed by November of that year.

Recent history: the work of the Information Select Committee

After its Fourth report the Select Committee on House of Commons (Services) was replaced by five new domestic Select Committees. Domestic committees are primarily concerned with internal affairs of the House. Reorganisation of the domestic Committees followed the publication in November 1990 of a report of a working party chaired by Sir Robin Ibbs. One of its recommendations was to establish an Information Select Committee, to reflect Members’ needs and wishes in relation to the provision of services by the Commons Library, provision of computer, TV and video services for Members, and provision of scientific and technological advice services, such as the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, which was established as an official office of Parliament in April 1993. The Information Select Committee was appointed in 1991.

The House of Commons Commission approved a pilot study on the provision of a video and data network, to be carried out in 7 Millbank

(a parliamentary annex building.) The first task of the Information Committee was to assess this study. In the 1992–93 Session the Committee decided against central procurement of IT equipment for Members.

In February 1994 the Information Committee's report on *The Provision of a Parliamentary Data and Video Network* included a survey of all Members 'inviting their opinions on information technology matters and on the services they would wish to use on a data and video network'. Over half of all Members (327) responded to the survey, with 50% expressing a wish for direct reception of the 'clean feed' of proceedings in the House, 50% requiring direct access from their computers to the text of *Hansard*, and almost as many requiring direct computer access to the Parliamentary On Line Information System (POLIS) which then contained over a million name and subject-indexed parliamentary records. POLIS had thus far been only accessible via the Commons Library, but not directly from Members' own computer terminals. The survey found that over 91% of respondents already used IT in their offices and half of the remainder planned to do so in the foreseeable future. An appendix to the report compared the Westminster Parliament with assemblies in other European countries and found that only Turkey shared the UK's lack of a Parliamentary Data Network, while only Denmark, Finland, Spain and the German *Bundesrat* lacked video networks providing live feeds of proceedings to their members' offices. The UK Parliament was manifestly behind the times in this respect, and Members seemed to be in favour of remedying this. The Information Committee recommended 'the phased introduction of a full Parliamentary Data and Video Network', justifying this by observing that: 'It is a principal function of Parliament to oversee the actions of the Executive. Members have a responsibility to represent their constituents effectively. In both these key areas we consider the provision of a full network would increase the efficiency with which the House operates and the capacity of Members to cope with increasing workloads.'

The Committee proposed the introduction of the PDVN over seven years and that the service would include the provision of e-mail and outgoing faxes, as well as access to relevant CD-ROMS and POLIS. On 30 June 1994 the House of Commons approved the Committee's recommendations. The PDVN, which has since 1994 been linked to the Internet and an in-House intranet, has become a major resource for Members, particularly as a research tool.

Parliament's interest in new technology was initially solely related to easing the workload of Members and their staff. In 1996 the Information Committee turned its attention to the use of ICTs to provide citizens with better information about the work of Parliament. Since 1989 cameras had been in the Commons, providing for greater institutional transparency, and now the Committee turned its attention to

broadening dissemination of information via the Internet—which by 1996 had reached a stage of exponential growth.

In 1995 the Board of Management of the House of Commons appointed an Electronic Publishing Group (EPG) under the chairmanship of Ian Church, the editor of the *Official Report*, to examine the possibility of making *Hansard* available to the public in electronic form via the Internet. The cost of *Hansard* was £11.70 a day and electronic access was only available commercially at prohibitive prices in the order of £2,500 a year. The Campaign for Freedom of Information complained that: ‘The public is being denied access to *Hansard* and to Britain’s laws on the Internet because of HMSO’s policy of commercially exploiting Crown and Parliamentary copyright . . . the Campaign wants HMSO to waive this unacceptable restriction and permit free on-line access to these essential materials’, (press release, 16.10.95). The issue of Crown copyright dated back to the 1880s. In 1889 the Controller of Her Majesty’s Stationery Office (HMSO) was granted Letters of Patent allowing him to decide what government materials may be published. Section 18 of the 1911 Copyright Act addressed specifically the right of officers or servants of the Crown to determine the cost of publication of protected material, including Acts of Parliament, Statutory Instruments, Command Papers, as well as the *Official Report*. A case could be made for wishing to protect such material from commercial exploitation, insofar as this would protect the general taxpayer against the use of official material, included value-added publications such as official photographs, statistical databases and mapping data, for private profit. On the other hand, the use of copyright privilege to restrict the dissemination of public documents, or to limit access to those with greater financial resources, could be regarded as undemocratic. The Information Committee, under the then chairmanship of Gary Waller MP, was particularly concerned to further the democratic principle of free dissemination of on-line information, following in the footsteps of the Australian, Canadian and New Zealand parliaments which had already adopted this principle.

The EPG concluded that ‘Parliament as well as the public has a substantial interest in making its papers available in electronic form. As a law-making body, Parliament needs to ensure that those subject to its laws have easy access to them and the law-making process, and the group believes that there is a clear *public right* to unfettered access to this material’, (emphasis added). This notion of a public right to information, which is in accordance with Section 19 of the UN Charter of Human Rights, was new for the UK Parliament. The EPG’s report recommended ‘that the full text of parliamentary publications be published free of charge on the Internet’. The working party did add two riders: firstly, that any external body wishing to use material published under parliamentary copyright for the purpose of added-value process-

ing or selling-on could only do so under licence agreements which they would have to pay for; secondly, that parliamentary papers should be made available internally to Members before they are made freely available to citizens via the Internet. The Information Committee, in its report, *Electronic Publication of House of Commons Documents*, published in March 1996, welcomed the EPG's proposals and recommended to the House that they be speedily implemented. From the autumn of 1996 *Hansard* has been published on-line at 12.30 pm the day after the proceedings it records. There is no reason, apart from the desire of Members to correct the report, why an immediate record of the proceedings should not appear on-line; after all, there is already a direct audio feed from all proceedings in the Chamber and many of the Committees. But the *Official Report* is indeed a report rather than a record: the 1907 report of the Select Committee on Parliamentary Debates defined *Hansard's* role as being 'though not strictly verbatim, (it) is substantially the verbatim report, with repetitions and redundancies omitted and with obvious mistakes corrected, but which . . . leaves nothing out that adds to the meaning of the speech or illustrates the argument'. So, immediate transcription of the parliamentary record would be performing a similar but not identical function to the present arrangement.

In the same report in which the Information Committee recommended the free electronic dissemination of parliamentary publications it also endorsed a proposal to establish a Parliamentary web-site. This has existed since the autumn of 1996 at www.parliament.uk and receives an average of approximately eight million hits per year, of which a considerable proportion come from outside the UK. The site performs a major role in providing a mass of freely available information, including the daily publication of the Commons' and Lords' *Hansard*, all Written Answers, Bills, Committee Reports, Weekly Information Digests and Explanatory Notes on Bills. Material can be searched for by name of an individual Member, by subject (including options for Boolean searches) and within specific date ranges. Since 1998 Library Research Papers, originally prepared to provide information on parliamentary issues for Members, have been placed on the web-site. Formidable though the achievement of the new information service has been, it has been open to some criticisms.

Firstly, the site is not particularly user-friendly for novice or lay users. Many people know that they need information, but lack the procedural knowledge to know what type of information it is that they require. The site has been constructed on the assumption that users possess such procedural knowledge and, although there is a very good three-web-page guide to 'Help with Searching', even this is formulated as if users possess some knowledge of how the parliamentary system works — and what separates it from other aspects of governance. The problem of organising metadata is central to the civic applications of ICTs: unless

users can not only become informed, but become aware of what they need to know in order to be informed, the 'information revolution' may well empower the already knowledgeable at the expense of leaving the less informed even more confused. The parliamentary web-site has begun to address this problem by providing simple routes to information, such as enabling users to find out who their MP is by typing their postcode. But navigational guidance in finding debate or legislation relevant to a particular theme, or the opportunity to enter Parliament as a virtual space, does not exist.

Secondly, the site lacks direct links to MPs. There is no list of e-mail addresses on the web-site. Links to MPs' web-sites do not exist, presumably because this would associate the parliament site with party campaigning rather than the simple supply of information. Users of the site, like letter writers and telephone callers to Parliament, will often want to contact not the institution as such, but their elected representative within it. Other parliaments have web-sites with direct links to members and, as Internet connectivity grows in the UK, there will surely be a need for such an official directory.

Thirdly, given the interactive character of ICTs and the broad uses of other web-sites to enable citizens to interact, the parliament site is conspicuously non-interactive. The site exists to provide raw information, but offers no scope at all for citizens to question the information, their representatives or the validity of parliamentary decisions.

Fourthly, the site is visually rather dull. It provides its service in a basic and reliable fashion, but it hardly seeks to attract or less still excite interest. Compared with some of the US legislative web-sites, particularly state-based ones, such as Florida, Massachusetts, Wisconsin and Arizona, the parliament site appears rather staid and user-unfriendly. Even local authority sites in the UK, such as Lewisham, Newham and Stirling, offer examples of what could be achieved in terms of graphics and navigation.

These criticisms should not detract from the high quality of the information service provided by the web-site. In 1999 a new educational web-site, aimed at young people, has been established (www.explore.parliament.uk) and this has a 'look and feel' much more likely to attract new users. Parliament's poorly-resourced Education Unit provides useful background material which is advertised on the site, including an introductory CD-ROM. The BBC, in collaboration with The Hansard Society, has also produced a CD-ROM about parliamentary government designed to be used by schools as an interactive educational tool. The inclusion of the study of citizenship within the national curriculum provides new opportunities for ICTs to be used to enable the next generation of citizens to practise the democratic skills of interacting with existing structures of governance. This is examined in appendix B of the Crick report on teaching citizenship and democracy in schools.

The present: how Parliament uses ICTs

Fifteen years ago, when the first Select Committee report on computers was published, few MPs possessed or used even word processors; only an advanced handful used computers. By 1994, when the Information Committee reported on PDVN, a survey of Members' use of information technology systems (to which 227 – or over half – of all Members responded) showed that the vast majority of Members used IT: 67% in their Westminster offices and 76% in their constituencies. Only half of the Members who responded used IT systems themselves: they were mainly used by secretaries and research assistants. The most common use of IT by Members within Westminster (76%) was for individual correspondence. Most Members did not use e-mail.

The 1997 general election witnessed a significant demographic change in the composition of MPs: more were from the generation that had become computer literate as part of their formal education or employment. In the summer of 1998 PITCOM and the journal, *Government Computing* carried out a survey of Members to find out about their IT use. 206 out of 659 Members responded. Approximately half of the MPs used a PC in their Westminster office, although most of their secretaries or PAs did. For MPs, the most common use for PCs was writing speeches; 78% of Members' offices used e-mail, but only 30% of Members used it themselves; 86% of MPs' PCs were used to access the Internet, but only one in five claimed to access the Internet themselves. Most used the Internet for research (32%) with only half that number using it for political projects or campaigns. 43 Of respondents 43 had set up their own web-sites, but these were mainly used to provide information rather than as an interactive medium. Most of the sites were maintained by either secretaries or web specialists. Nearly a third of Members without a web-site stated that they were planning to set one up. The survey also asked Members whether they had ever worked in the IT field, but only 21 (9%) had done so.

In mid-July 1998 the Information Committee conducted a similar survey of Members, 54% responded giving a more representative picture than the PITCOM survey; 96% of respondents used some form of IT: 89% had PCs in their Westminster offices and 92% in their constituencies; 70% of Members' computer systems were connected to the PDVN. Approximately half of the respondents claimed to be experienced computer users or basically IT literate, while a third possessed limited or poor IT skills.

The Information Committee's survey was part of a wider policy inquiry into the procurement of IT by Members. As the 1984 Members Services Committee Report had noted presciently, the piecemeal procurement of IT equipment by Members would diminish the capacity of Parliament to provide universally compatible information systems. In a Commons speech on 7 March 1995 Graham Allen MP proposed that:

‘We could do worse than use Parliament as our first model, symbolically to show that we in this place are committed to the information super-highway. Every Member of Parliament should be provided with access to the Internet, if they so wish, and facilities for sending e-mail just as they now send letters or use the telephone.’ Although there has been a noticeable change of thinking on this subject since the 1997 election, there is still strong resistance from some Members to having centrally-provided IT. The reason for this is that Parliament is, in terms of office management, less like a corporate institution than like 659 small businesses, each run from separate small offices, each seeking to arrange the best deals for their own needs. Central procurement would only be likely to be adopted as a policy if Members’ office cost allowances were effectively taxed to pay for them—and Members with their own IT equipment, often donated by their parties or other sources, would rather spend their office allowances on staff rather than information hardware. So, although the 1998 Report of the Information Committee reported that 73% of Members responding to their survey favoured ‘some form of central procurement’, 27% were opposed. The Committee concluded that ‘the time is not yet right for the House to adopt central provision’, but favoured the option of Members being given: ‘The choice of a range of IT equipment and software together with associated maintenance, support and training, which could be supplied and installed by the House and claimed against the Office Cost Allowance.’ Effectively, Members using IT equipment not within the range on offer will be denied the benefits of being part of the parliamentary intranet.

Another aspect of new technology should be mentioned, because ICTs are not simply about computers. Most MPs now possess digitally-operated mobile phones and/or message pagers. (There are no precise statistics regarding this.) This has had an important effect upon political communication, making them much more accessible to their staff, their parties and journalists wanting to set their agendas for them. This allows MPs to be more personally mobile: to arrange and alter meetings without returning to their offices; to be summoned for media interviews; and, most notably, to be kept ‘on message’ at all times. Members are not allowed to use mobile phones inside the Commons chamber or committee rooms. Pagers were being used inside the Commons chamber until the Speaker made it clear that pagers should be switched off and that electronic devices could not be used as prompts to Members. The effect of mobile phones and pagers upon the workload of Members and the culture of parliamentary life has been arguably just as significant as the acquisition of PCs.

A further influence upon parliamentary culture has been the direct feed from the parliamentary chamber into Members’ offices. The first parliamentary annunciator appeared in the New Smoking Room in 1891, an early benefit from the introduction of electricity. (The original

annunciator is displayed still in the terrace corridor.) Before annunciator screens informed Members of what was happening in the Commons chamber Members were dependent upon rumours and personal messages delivered by stewards. As annunciator screens appeared throughout the parliamentary estate Members were able to know what was being discussed in the chamber without themselves having to enter it. With the entry of cameras into the Commons in 1989 there came a demand from some Members to be able to see and hear the proceedings in their offices. In the 1993 Information Committee survey prior to the introduction of PDVN one of the main benefits desired by respondents was the chance to receive a direct feed from the chamber. Opponents of live broadcasting had warned that this would be deleterious chamber via a direct feed to their offices to Commons culture: Members, they argued, would sit in their offices and only bother to enter the chamber to speak or to vote. A Member quoted in the 1993 Report refuted this, arguing that live coverage direct to Members' offices was long overdue: 'The idea that it would keep us from the chamber is palpable nonsense. It is the sheer weight of constituency correspondence and related matters which keeps me from the chamber and then I feel cut off from what is happening. If proceedings in the chamber are the most important thing which happens here, it follows that our access to them should be improved.' Live feeds are now provided to Members via the PDVN; although some Members choose to view proceedings in a wider context by watching the BBC Parliament channel which includes coverage of the House of Lords, some committees and other assemblies as well as live coverage from the chamber. ICTs have had a particular effect in liberating MPs from the physical proximity of the chamber and this has enabled them to make more flexible use of their time.

Freedom from the chamber does not extend to voting. An archaic procedure of voting in person by filing through the Division Lobbies is still the only way that Members can register their votes. Divisions take twelve to fifteen minutes to complete and this is followed by a delay before names of the Members who have voted are made available. The Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, established by the government after the 1997 election considered in its Fifth Report (April 1998) options for electronic voting. All Members were consulted on a series of options, including the use of smart cards and non-contact readers, fingerprint readers, touch screens and infra-red handsets using remote detectors. Nothing like the push-button voting system adopted by the new Scottish Parliament (and already used in others) was offered for contemplation by the Modernisation Committee: 'Some electronic systems would in theory allow Members to vote without having to leave their rooms, or even to vote from their homes or constituency offices. However, we believe that the House would not wish to make such a radical departure from existing practice, so in all the options we put forward for consideration it is envisaged that voting

will take place either in the existing division lobbies or in the immediate vicinity of the Chamber. This will ensure that . . . divisions will continue to be occasions when Members are brought together and backbenchers can meet leading figures in their party.' This latter rationale for the existing voting system is a factor of political culture which outweighs technological efficiency: the opportunity provided by divisions for Members to exchange information and approach senior colleagues with ideas and requests is too important to backbench Members to be sacrificed for the sake of a quicker, less congested voting procedure. The party Whips probably prefer the existing voting arrangements because they can literally shepherd their flocks through the lobbies without danger of straying; electronic voting could present a greater threat to disciplined voting behaviour.

In the event, most Members who responded to the consultation wanted to stay with the present voting procedure; 64% of all Members responded (419), and 70% of Members elected since 1997 responded (so there was no question of the responses being dominated by institutionalised Members); 53% gave the present system as their first preference and 70% said that they found it acceptable. Despite the high rate of IT-use by Members and the broad commitment to creating a twenty-first century Parliament, the matter has been dropped and is unlikely to be raised again in the foreseeable future. In a Commons debate on ICTs back in March 1995 Peter Viggers MP observed that: 'It is sad that there does not seem to be as much interest in this subject in the House as there would be if the debate were taking place in a school or college.' It is certainly the case that the benefits of ICTs have not engendered much enthusiasm amongst MPs, except in relation to their own workloads. Few Members are particularly interested in issues of e-governance and e-democracy. The All-Party Internet Committee, established in 1998, represents an awakening of Members' interest in these subjects, and the 1999 inquiry by the Public Administration Select Committee into new forms of citizens' interaction with government suggests a commitment to rethinking ways of making democracy work. Most of the debates about the Internet in the House of Commons since it was first discussed in December 1988, however, have either been sparsely attended or have concentrated on such subjects as electronic commerce and on-line pornography.

Into the future: citizens and Parliament

So far, the use of ICTs within the UK Parliament has lagged behind similar developments in the corporate world. Unlike business corporations, however, Parliament exists to embody national democratic representation. If ICTs are being used to manage more efficiently the internal business of Parliament that is commendable, but has no necessary relationship to its competence as a democratic institution. In what ways might Parliament use ICTs to enhance democratic representation, and

what steps can be expected in this direction? The following are likely aspects of future development:

Public consultations on draft legislation and issues being considered by Select Committees;

The use of new technologies to facilitate long-distance evidence by witnesses to parliamentary Committees;

An extension of MPs' use of web-sites and e-mail;

More transparent provision of information on-line by the executive which can be scrutinised by Parliament;

The development of interactive broadcasting and the effects of this upon the coverage of and public participation in parliamentary affairs.

The modernisation of Parliament, including new procedures in the Commons and a reformed second chamber, is ongoing. One aspect has been a reform of the legislative process whereby more Bills are coming before Parliament in draft form, to be considered thoroughly and opened to public consultation. Varied and imaginative ways of scrutinising such draft legislation have so far been used, including the establishment of Special Select Committees. Draft legislation, such as (currently) the Financial Services and Markets Draft Bill and the Food Standards Agency Draft Bill, can only benefit by public input, particularly from experts familiar with the technicalities and effects of proposed legislation. Diverse and conflicting interest-groups can rehearse their positions in the context of such pre-legislative deliberation and this will allow politicians to reflect more intelligently upon areas of conflict and to examine options for creating consensus, where possible. Such pre-legislative consultations can benefit from being conducted on-line: more people are able to participate than those able to spend time in London; the discussion can take place over a period of weeks rather than hours (as in the case of a hurried face-to-face meeting in a parliamentary room); participants in on-line discussion may well feel freer to set their own agendas, consider information and views presented by others and even change their minds; such discussions can be archived and looked at by politicians at their leisure, and summaries of the on-line discussion can be produced for them. A pilot on-line conference of this kind was run by The Hansard Society in the summer of 1998 when an expert group of participants considered their responses to the new Data Protection legislation. The report of that e-discussion can be found on the POST section of the UK parliament web-site. The Hansard Society is now running a series of pilot e-discussions relating to draft legislation, Select Committee inquiries and (currently) the work of the Royal Commission on the reform of the second chamber (these can be reviewed at www.hansard-society.org.uk). These e-discussions are intended to improve parliamentary deliberation, not to displace it; the

objective is to strengthen representative democracy rather than introduce plebiscitary governance. Unless one accepts a strictly Burkean view that parliamentary deliberation is best when it is wholly autonomous, it would seem reasonable to expect that, in an age of increasing occupational and global complexity, citizen-input into the deliberative process is more likely to enhance rather than weaken or threaten democracy.

Although e-discussions would not constitute official evidence to parliamentary committees, witnesses called by committees could sometimes give evidence without having to attend in person. Video-conferencing has been used twice by Select Committees to question witnesses: the Foreign Affairs Committee questioned Chris Patten when he was Governor of Hong Kong, using a satellite link, but the link ended before the committee had completed its examination and it has been estimated that the cost of the satellite link was greater than it would have been to fly some of the committee members out to Hong Kong; the Trade and Industry Select Committee took video evidence at a special session held in the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre. Neither of these occasions were judged to have been particularly successful: web-based video was not as technically developed as it is now and will be as the technology improves, and some Members felt that the examination of witnesses suffered if they were not physically present. Nonetheless, as video-conferencing and web-based communications become increasingly common practices in corporate life it is unlikely that Parliament will cease to experiment further with this possibility. It has already been adopted successfully by some legislatures, such as in Edmonton, Alberta. Indeed, as the UK Parliament finds it necessary to interact more frequently and more quickly with other, related assemblies, such as the Scottish Parliament, Welsh and Northern Irish Assemblies and European Parliament, several of which will be using teleconferencing as routine procedures for the conduct of their own business, it seems likely that ICTs will increase the capacity to discuss issues of devolved responsibility via joint virtual meetings of committees from two legislatures. Barry Sheerman MP has promoted a virtual European forum, Interparle, to serve the nearly 5,000 parliamentarians within the EU states. There are other ways in which committees can use ICTs to improve their work. At the BSE inquiry all members were provided with computers which carried instant transcripts of evidence, so that they could refer back to this at any point. This could surely benefit the work of Select Committees.

At present most MPs do not have their own web-sites and do not publicise their e-mail addresses if they have them. This contrasts sharply with members of the US Congress, the Canadian House of Commons and the Irish Dail. Even where MPs do have web-sites or e-mail addresses, it is a matter of luck to find them. There is no central directory; the parliament web-site contains no list of MPs' urls or e-mail addresses and direct links to none of them. There are current plans

to create such a central network: a National Grid for Democracy. Some Members have complained that they will be overwhelmed by e-mail if they publicised their addresses, when they can hardly cope with their postbags at present. The response to this may lie in providing more appropriate office support for MPs rather than limiting convenient access to them. Another complaint is that too many e-mails would be sent to MPs from people who are not their constituents. One MP complained that when he publicised his e-mail address he was receiving countless requests from American university students who wanted him to write their dissertations. A solution to the problem of non-constituent e-mails would be to provide constituents with discrete passwords, perhaps one for each ward (this system has been tried with some success by Canadian MPs). The current position, whereby all Members have e-mail addresses, which can be worked out quite easily (surname + initial@parliament.uk), but only some use e-mail and only a few are prepared to respond to constituents' e-mails, is quite unsatisfactory. A net activist, Stefan Megdelinski, contacted 651 MPs by e-mail (he could not write to eight who had identical surnames and initials) asking them for their fax numbers and constituency surgery details; 145 (22%) responded of whom 111 (75%) gave details and 12 (8%) refused details and 12 (8%) proved to be wrong addresses. The 540 MPs who did not provide this simple information via e-mail would presumably be contacted more easily if one travelled to the Central Lobby, filled in a card and gave it to a physical messenger. MPs' web-sites tend to be dull, infrequently updated and non-interactive. This relates in part to resources for managing the sites. As the value of a political web presence becomes more evident, as may happen in some cases in the next general election, and is highly likely to be the following one when on-line penetration may have peaked, parties and individual politicians will wish to examine carefully best practices for on-line communication with those they represent.

If Parliament as a political institution is not to be further marginalised by the executive it needs to seek greater transparency from government departments. There has been a considerable use of the Internet by government as a means of placing information in the public domain. The effects of this may well be to enable backbench Members to be more personally proactive in scrutinising the executive and to allow opposition parties to be less excluded from the record of executive activities than has traditionally been the case. New legislation on Freedom of Information may well enable both representatives and citizens to place on the net material that has traditionally been confined to the inner circles. One effect of this could be to weaken the hand of those lobbyists whose 'expertise' lies in privileged access to information. This in turn could strengthen the hand of voluntary organisations and other citizens who have often been unable to afford to buy such access to information. Parliament possesses considerable power, through its

democratic legitimacy, to open up areas of the executive that have existed in splendid isolation.

Parliament needs not only to be democratic and good at its job but seen to be so. Although it should not be exaggerated, there is some evidence to suggest falling public confidence in the work of Parliament. Citizens' main exposure to Parliament is through the media, and since the arrival of cameras in the Commons it has been via TV. MPs are the first to point out that the image of their work witnessed by TV viewers does not cast a positive light. There are several reasons for this public perception which have been discussed in a recent Hansard Society report. As the move towards digital convergence takes place new platforms for the provision of political information and communication will open up—perhaps digital TV, maybe web-casting, possibly both. Whichever technical platform dominates (in the UK, DTV is expected to triumph, in the USA web-TV is seen as the more likely route), the future is likely to be much more interactive than the past. So far, interactivity has tended to be discussed in terms of teleshopping, telebanking and video-on-demand. It is unlikely that political interactivity will develop by being market-driven: public information and democratic deliberation are not commodity services. There is a strong case for the creation of a protected civic space within the new media for Parliament to be seen and discussed. At present one can either watch a Select Committee on BBC Parliament or read a Select Committee report obtainable from the parliament web-site. It is now technically possible to see any Committee that is archived by selecting it from a menu of available information and to receive its report from the same source. The feedback path made possible with digital communication will release the viewer from being a passive consumer of parliamentary deliberation and open opportunities for active deliberative engagement between citizens and with their representatives. This may mean that representation will itself become a much more interactive relationship; it will certainly limit the opportunity for citizens to dismiss parliamentary affairs as being nothing to do with them.

In the first extensive debate about the Internet, on 15 December 1994, David Shaw MP (an indefatigable proponent of the new technologies) argued that: 'The political debate will certainly be enlivened as more people have access to more information about the issues of the day.' The argument at this stage was that citizens could become better informed about Parliament and its deliberations by using the Internet. By 15 March 1995 Anne Campbell MP was envisaging a more interactive function for the Internet: 'Why not make Hon. Members' voting records available on the Internet? Why not make us more accountable and open to questioning from our constituents?' In a Commons debate on 13 January 1999 Robert Sheldon MP argued for electronic publication of all Select Committee evidence: 'When the evidence comes three or four weeks later, no one bothers with it. If one had the evidence

from the Governor of the Bank of England, the Foreign Secretary or whoever the following day, it would become part of the activity of the House.’ An institutional recognition is emerging of the need to expand both the volume and the speed of disseminated information as a means of enhancing the capacity of Parliament to perform its work effectively.

Where will this end? As Members become more IT-literate and the penetration of ICTs becomes more widespread, it is unlikely that parliamentarians will behave differently from other senior managers: they will become increasingly dependent upon ICTs, just as in times past they came (reluctantly) to depend upon print and broadcasting technologies. Such dependence need not in itself change the culture of parliamentary behaviour. A more likely force for change will be the effects of interactive technologies upon media coverage of parliament and citizens’ relations with their representatives. Political journalists, who have traditionally reported and interpreted selected political events, may find themselves reporting less as more raw information becomes instantly accessible, and devoting more time instead to guiding interested citizens through information paths. Citizens may come to regard feedback as not only integral to the new technologies that they come to use, but to their rights as citizens within a democracy. These changes are dependent less upon the onward march of technology than the appropriation of existing and new ICTs in the service of what Benjamin Barber has called ‘strong democracy’.

As Westminster edges slowly towards an accommodation to the latest ‘information revolution’, the most realistic conclusion to be drawn is that an internal institutional dependence upon ICTs is emerging, but the potential to employ these as channels of greater interaction between parliamentarians and those they represent has so far been relatively untested and regarded with traditional caution.