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Parliament TV: the new reality television experience

JUSTIN HENEHAN looks at changes to the way Parliament is covered.

On July 27, Parliament began streaming proceedings in the debating chamber live on its website.

Excitement buzzed around the boardrooms of television production companies.

The whisper on the wind was all about the new sensation in reality television: Parliament TV – a combination of the inane vulgarity of Big Brother and the modern opera of Jerry Springer.

All production company creatives need now is a "hidden immunity idol" and a way of voting MPs off that doesn't take three years.

But for the time being the public will have to be content with the sparkling oratory of democracy in action at two in the afternoon on sitting days.

In an act rich with irony, journalists say, the move came complete with a raft of new rules and restrictions on the use of the footage.

The new restrictions include a prohibition on using images of MPs for satire, ridicule and denigration.

New protocols have also been created for how the debating chamber is to be televised.

Under the new rules, the remote control television cameras will be able to show wider shots of the chamber and appropriate interjections.

This apparent relaxation of coverage rules will not extend to press photographers.

Any behaviour considered disruptive will result in the coverage being automatically switched to a default shot and sound feed of the speaker of the house restoring order.

Parliament presented the change as an opening up of the chamber, with all the action of question time now just a mouse click away.

The rule that images or footage of Parliament should not be used for "satire, ridicule or denigration" has caused particular consternation for the media.

The media's response was immediate, labelling the move a form of censorship, petty and an unconscious act of self-satire.

Soon after the announcement TVNZ, TV3, Maori Television and Sky News announced they would ignore the new rules in the name of democratic freedom.

The press gallery, the journalists' union and the Commonwealth Press Union also protested against the lack of prior consultation and the perceived threat to free speech the new rules presented.

One month on and the $4 million endeavour has been spectacularly unpopular with viewers, its debut showing reaching a peak audience of only 350 viewers.

The media continues to defy the new rules by taking every opportunity to poke fun at politicians, the threat of contempt itself treated with contempt with the Byronesque attitude of "I'll publish, right or wrong: Fools are my theme, let satire be my song."

Satire has a long and venerable history in political reporting.

Sunday Star Times reporter Anthony Hubbard gave a short history lesson in a recent article, noting 18th Century Whig leader William Pulteney's complaint:

"To print or publish the speeches of gentlemen in this House looks very much like making them accountable without doors for what they say within."

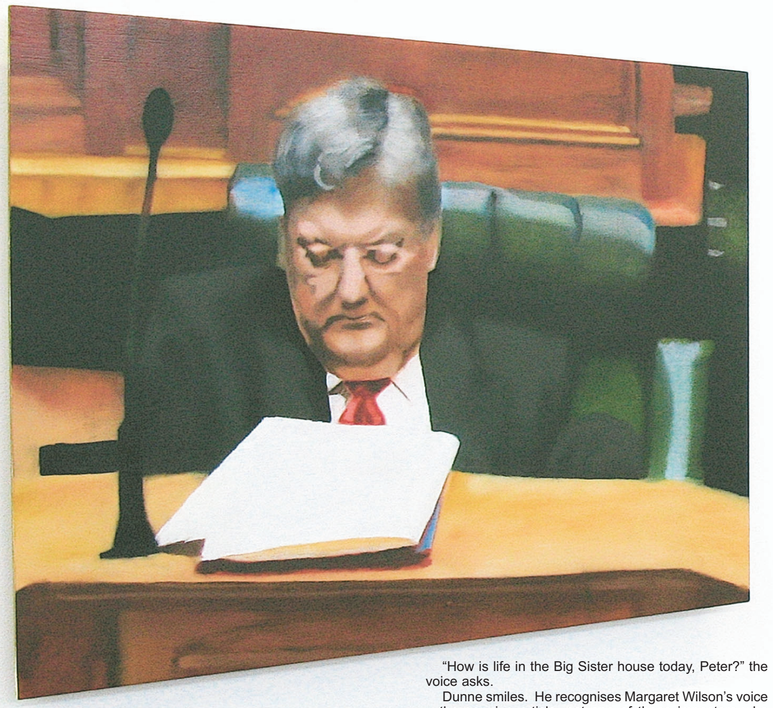
"A motion condemning reporting of debates as 'a high indignity and notorious breach of the privilege of this House' remained on the books till 1971," wrote Hubbard.

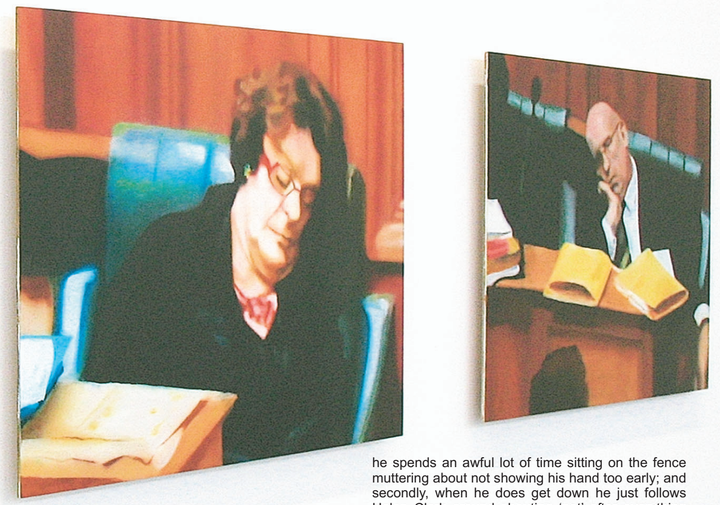
Satire offers the commentator a chance to express an honestly-held opinion through wit.

As famous Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye said: "In satire, irony is militant."

In satire, humour becomes a vehicle for serious comment, allowing the easy ironic enjoyment of a difficult topic.

Like all jokes, satire plays upon convention. This is what gives satire its universality; its ability to traverse political, social and economic differences.





***The Right Honourables*, oil on board, by Auckland artist Gabrielle Amodeo, 2007.**

The Ministry of Truth

It's a bright, cold day in July, and the clocks strike 13.

"Could Peter Dunne please come to the diary room?"

Rising from his comfy green leather seat, Dunne walks sleepily over to the wooden chair and waits for further instructions. He pats his hair down, remembering he's live on the morally-repugnant internet.

"How is life in the Big Sister house today, Peter?" the voice asks.

Dunne smiles. He recognises Margaret Wilson's voice – the genuine article, not one of those impostors who sometimes take control.

"Actually Big Sister, it's been a tough day."

"In what way?"

"Well, first Hone tried to escape again. I caught him trying to climb over the external wall. He was shouting something about John Howard."

"What did you say to persuade him to stay?"

"Stay? I stood with Gerry Brownlee waving as the buggers . . . err . . . I mean beggar climbed up."

"Oh, well how are the housemates feeling about the impending eviction task?"

"I know Winnie is particularly unhappy about it, Big Sister. He believes he's being conspired against."

"In what way?"

"I think it's something to do with the fact he's up against Big Bob Clarkson and they have to build a miniature sports stadium in the back garden."

"Big Sister would like you to remind the other housemates that eviction tasks are chosen at random. Like when David Benson-Pope was evicted last week when he failed the memory task."

"I'm also rather concerned about John Key, Big Sister."

"Why's that, Peter?"

"Well, there are two reasons actually: the first is he spends an awful lot of time sitting on the fence muttering about not showing his hand too early; and secondly, when he does get down he just follows Helen Clark around shouting 'not' after everything she says."

"And how is Helen coping, Peter?"

"Well, she seems a little better since the sleeping arrangements were finalised: the Greens were certain she'd sleep with them, but little did they know that she wanted to stay in my room with Winnie and Jim Anderton – I reckon it was the gaseous emissions that did it."

"Thank you for sharing your thoughts, Peter. As a thank you for working with Big Sister, I will arrange a minor malfunction in the internet, allowing you all to grab a few extra minutes shut-eye. Sleep tight!"

Peter loves Big Sister.

- Mike Kilpatrick
(Apologies to George Orwell.)

Ridicule, on the other hand, evokes images of pointing fingers and the sound of jeering, contemptuous laughter.

It relies on the constant attentive presence and relentless cruelty of the mob.

It is not the media who ridicule, but rather the audience.

The live web-casting of the debating seems to offer the public a much easier access to Parliament and so a greater chance for ridicule than ever before.

University of Auckland law professor Paul Rishworth expresses a specific concern over the restriction of satire and ridicule, calling them "legitimate tools in the commentator's armoury for offering robust commentary".

But Victoria University law lecturer Steven Price says political satire will continue to be covered by the qualified privilege established in the Lange vs. Atkinson defamation case, which allows media to criticise politicians when expressing honestly-held opinions.

Price says this qualified privilege could apply to satire, denigration or ridicule, depending on the circumstances "as long as it can be said to be responsible", he says.

"It's most likely to protect satire, but might protect some ridicule or denigration. In reality the categories might well overlap anyway."

Professor Rishworth says, according to the Bill of Rights, any restriction on freedom of expression ought to be "reasonable" and "demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society".

Rules to protect parliamentarians from denigration would constitute a reasonable "inroad onto freedom of expression" if the objective is the "protection of reputation and dignity", he says.

Price says denigration seems like a subset of what the courts regard as defamation. Its inclusion may have to do with the expensive, time-consuming and uncertain nature of defamation litigation and the preference for clear rules Parliament can enforce itself.

Despite the lack of definition of the terms of reference, the rules were overwhelmingly adopted, the only opposition coming from the Green Party.

The irony of the situation was not lost on Green MP Sue Kedgley:

"Ridicule cannot be banned; that is absolutely ridiculous.

"By trying to prohibit the ridicule and satire of this house, I am absolutely certain that we will encourage it," she says.

Press gallery chair Vernon Small agrees, describing the rules as an unconscious act of self-satire.

> "I'll publish, right or wrong: fools are my theme, let satire be my song."

The day after the rules were introduced, they were openly flouted by most in the news media.

Not usually one to complain, Winston Peters made his feelings clear about being shown on television apparently asleep.

"Last night on Prime Television [journalist] Barry Soper, by inference and innuendo and assertion, said that I was asleep during question time and I say it's an outright lie," Peters told the *Sunday Star Times*.

Peters says he merely shut his eyes because "in all the clamour and the noise you can hear better if you close your eyes".

Soper replied that he had no choice but to imply that Peters was sleeping, because to simply report he was asleep would be denigration.

"He was examining the inside of his eyelids – and that's not meant to be funny because that would be in breach as well," he said.

According to the Clerk of the House of Representatives, contempt of Parliament is the act of obstructing the normal functioning of the House.

If a charge of contempt is upheld, punishment would probably involve fines, censures, an apology, or restrictions on access to Parliament, but this is fairly rare, he says.

Although possible, no one has ever been imprisoned for contempt of Parliament. Jane Clifton puts it most succinctly in her recent column in the *Listener*: "The whole purpose of the new TV rules is to protect MPs from being portrayed as they really are."