

TELEVISING THE DÁIL




A Document for Discussion

Introduction

Fergus O'Brien and I have put down a Motion to provide for televising the Dáil. The Motion is reproduced in Appendix One. This document is being published in advance of the debate on that Motion. Its purpose is to provide background information and arguments for consideration in the debate. It is being circulated to Deputies of all Parties and to the media.

I have had discussions with RTE, BBC and ITV, in preparing this document. I have visited the House of Commons in London to discuss the matter with Government and Opposition MPs. I have also discussed it with companies involved in supplying specialised televising equipment for Parliaments in other parts of the world – Vinten Limited and Radamec Limited.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "John Bruton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "John" and the last name "Bruton" clearly distinguishable.

**JOHN BRUTON, T.D.,
Deputy Leader of Fine Gael.**

Why Televise the Dáil?

Televising the Dáil is in line with the spirit of the Constitution.

Article 8.1 of the Constitution provides that

“sittings of each House of the Oireachtas shall be public”.

With a tiny number of exceptions, all of the proceedings of the Dáil since its foundation have been so conducted. The business that the Dáil does is public business, and that is why members of the public are allowed in to see and listen to its proceedings as they happen.

Every word that is spoken in the Dáil is subsequently published in the Official Reports. These are also available in full to the public.

It was the purpose of the original framers of the Constitution that the Dáil's proceedings should be in public. If television had existed at the time the Constitution was framed it is probable that television would have been allowed into the Dáil from the first day. It is our view that this step should be taken now.

The reality is that many people have their only access to political news through television.

Because television is the main means of conveying political information, the Dáil should have direct access to it.

In the absence of direct coverage of the Dáil, television producers attempt to stage “shadow” Dáil Debates. These debates take place on programmes like *“Questions and Answers”* and *“Today Tonight”*.

Such programmes are useful. But they should not be the sole method of communication of political debate. The Dáil itself should also have direct access through television to the public.

The televising of the Dáil will enhance Ireland's reputation in the world as a functioning democracy. Television audiences in North America and the continent of Europe are familiar with seeing their Parliaments on television. This will soon be the case in Britain.

Television pictures of debates in a Parliamentary Chamber are rapidly becoming part of the worldwide public image of a functioning democracy.

In a matter of controversy between Ireland and most countries, the Prime Minister of that country will soon be capable of being seen on television from Parliament stating his or her case. At the moment, Ireland is at the disadvantage that our Taoiseach cannot be seen by world opinion replying from the floor of the Dáil.

In the eyes of many citizens, the only “work” that a T.D. does is attendance at clinics in their own local area. Speeches in the Dáil, and the preparation and research that goes into them, have little impact on many electors. Newspaper coverage of Dáil debates is diminishing. Thus if a TD is not seen to be active at his or her clinic work, voters will question his or her value as a representative. **Televising the Dáil would heighten public awareness of the debates in the Dáil Chamber.** This would allow a more balanced assessment of a TD's work to be made by the general public.

We believe the introduction of television in the Dáil should improve the quality of debates. This has been the general experience in most other countries where television was introduced. Initially there was a certain amount of “playing to the gallery”. But members who engaged in this soon found that this was counter productive with their constituents

Television has been described as a “cool” medium. Moderate language, careful delivery, and command over information come across well on television. Dramatic gestures and histrionics do not. The advent of television in other parliaments had led to speeches being better prepared. It is anticipated that a similar result will occur in the Dáil.

There could, however, be problems if television presented an imbalanced picture of the overall spread of work done in the Dáil chamber and in Committees. Parliament has been televised in Canada for the past ten years. But television coverage there is heavily concentrated on the daily “Question Period”. During this period any questions can be posed without notice to Canadian Ministers. This is in contrast to the Irish system where four working days notice of any question is required.

Not surprisingly, the Canadian system is considered by many to present a televised picture of a Government constantly under attack, on the defensive and often evasive. While an overwhelming majority of Canadian citizens (75% for, 13% against) recently favoured continued televising of parliament, a significant majority (36%) felt it had resulted in a loss of respect for and confidence in M.P.s.

This latter problem can be avoided if the Dáil

- ★ retains the more orderly form of Question Time that it now has, as against the more confrontational Canadian system.
- ★ requires in a Code of Practice that television companies give a balanced mixture of coverage each week of all types of Dáil business, rather than concentrating solely on sensational happenings at Question Time and on the order of business.

Filmed records of Dáil proceedings will be of considerable value for educational purposes and as historical archives of important events in national history. The US Congressional Research Service recently concluded that

“Classroom use of live broadcasts and tapes is quite extensive and may in fact constitute one of the most significant uses of televised coverage in terms of long-range impact”.

This will be particularly relevant in respect of the preparation of educational videos.

US studies also show that closed-circuit television within Congress itself enabled members and their staff, engaged on other assignments, to keep in much closer touch with proceedings on the floor. Facilities already exist in Leinster House for such a service to be provided here at little or no cost.

The Arguments Against Televising the Dáil

Apart from the alleged impact on the quality of debates, other objections to televising the Dáil may be advanced.

Some see television as a medium which **trivialises serious issues**. A Canadian political scientist, Austin Ranney, in his book *“Channels of Power”* probably expresses a widespread view when he argues that televised politics has often been made to fit into the stereotypes of televised entertainment.

“Entertainment television is full of drama in which a problem is set forth, fought through, and all resolved in an hour or two, minus commercials”, he says.

“One result”, he continues, *“is surely a spreading of the general assumptions that life’s problems can be understood and resolved quickly, with no messy strings left dangling, if only people with vision and courage deal with them Judged in the light of such expectations, inflated as they are by television’s presentation of life . . . real life results are likely to seem disappointing at best, and often downright disgraceful”.*

This is a critique, not so much of televising parliament, as of televising politics at all. Undoubtedly, any one television programme is likely to oversimplify issues. Any one day’s broadcasting of the Dáil is also liable to present a partial view of the issues debated. It is to be hoped that, over time, and in accordance with an agreed Code of Practice, a fuller picture will be presented.

There are other, more mundane, worries that some may have about televising the Dáil.

Unlike the House of Commons in Westminster, there is a seat in the Chamber for every Member of the Dáil. This means that, at any given time, there are more likely to be empty seats in the Dáil than in the British House. Many may fear that roving cameras might spend undue time showing **empty seats**. This might give the impression that a speaker had little support, and expose absent members to criticism.

A number of possible solutions to this problem exist.

The first is that attendance in the Dáil Chamber for debates be improved. This will almost certainly happen anyway as the result of the introduction of television. We are also proposing that the duration of individual speeches be reduced. This will improve the quality and interest of debates, and thus attract more members into the Chamber. Shorter speeches will also mean more speakers overall and a bigger attendance by those waiting to contribute.

If this is not sufficient, other safeguards in respect of the problem of empty seats could be considered by the Committee of Procedure and Privileges.

Television cameras could be restricted to shots of the Members actually speaking, and of the Ceann Comhairle. This is done in a number of Parliaments.

Television producers would argue that such restrictions would make for rather boring television. Under such restrictions, the public would be unable to see the physical context in which debates were taking place, and how Members were relating to one another. The availability of full and wide angle shots of the Chamber would give the public a much better "feel" for the House than would restricted pictures of individual speakers.

Experience elsewhere suggests that, after some initial surprise at the fact that the Dáil Chamber was not packed all the time, the public would soon come to realise that Members have other work, in Committees, and at constituency correspondence, and cannot be sitting in the Chamber all the time. All of these matters can be discussed by the Committee of Procedure and Privileges.

Another fear might be that the possibility of having his or her words reproduced verbatim on television would **restrict the full freedom of expression** of Members in debate. A Member might fear that a single sentence might be reproduced out of context, giving an imbalanced view of his argument. Much effort might be diverted into preparing "punch line" statements aimed at a 30 second clip on television.

Members might also be reluctant to put forward tentative arguments, on which they had not formed a final view, for fear that these might be reproduced as definite opinions.

Complex, convoluted or statistical arguments might also be avoided by Members on the basis that these would not come across well on television.

Such problems as this should be dealt with in an agreed Code of Practice for television companies on the use to be made of film footage of the Dáil. There should also be an experimental period, during which there would be a system of oversight by a sub Committee of the Committee on Procedure and Privileges of the way debates were used on television.

Fears might also be expressed that sensational or newsworthy speakers would get all the coverage, while others would be ignored. A Code of Practice for television should require balance between different categories of speakers, Parties, types of Dáil work and sides of a particular argument. This seems to work reasonably well in regard to the treatment of other forms of news on television.

There might be worry about contrived damage to the television impact of a particular Member's speech by the excess use of shots showing other Members visibly disagreeing with him. A Code of Practice should also deal with this.

Concern might also be expressed about the abuse of **the Privilege of the Dáil**, enabling Members to make slanderous statements on television. This would only be a problem in live debates. In edited debates, such statements would, of course, be excluded by the television producer. This is also a matter to be considered by the Committee on Procedure and Privileges.

Presenting the Dáil at its Best

How should the Dáil present itself on television?

Long speeches ought to be avoided. No member should be able to hog time at the expense of other Members. There is the difficulty that many Dáil speeches are given, not for the audience, but for the record.

The solution may be to set tighter **time limits on speeches**, and introduce a facility to circulate a limited amount of additional documentation in support of such speeches with the official Report.

The following durations of speeches might be considered:

Speeches on Second Stage of Bills — 15 minutes.

Speeches on Estimates (initial speech, not subsequent questions) — 15 minutes.

Speeches in Budget and other general Debates — 20 minutes.

Exceptions could be provided for Ministers and for the principal spokesmen of main Opposition Parties. These might allow the Minister to speak for up to twice the time allowed to an ordinary speaker, and the spokesman of a main Opposition Party for up to 150% of the time.

Some fear that the presence of television cameras would, in issues of high emotional content, lead to spectacular misbehaviour by individual Deputies seeking to obtain television publicity. The threat of being barred from the House would hold little terror for a Member when compared with the benefit of extensive high-profile publicity on television.

To avoid this, it might be appropriate to make the penalties for failure to abide by the Rules of the House or the rulings of the Ceann Comhairle more severe.

This might involve the automatic loss of salary for more than the number of days for which a Member is barred from service of the House as a result of misbehaviour.

The Practicalities of Television Broadcasting

There are a number of worries that Members might have about the practical difficulties of introducing television cameras to the Dáil Chamber.

Would the cameras be obtrusive in the Chamber? Would there be cameramen walking around the floor of the House and interfering with the normal services of the House? How would television cope with quick-fire exchanges at Question Time when the camera would need to move from one speaker to another at great speed? Would the system of lighting required for television make the Chamber overheated and uncomfortable?

Recent advances in television technology provide the solutions to most of these problems.

There is no need to have any television personnel on the floor of the House at all. Small and unobtrusive cameras can now be fixed to particular locations in the House, and be moved silently up and down and around a fairly wide angle of vision by remote control. They can also be focused on a particular speaker by remote control. These cameras would not be much larger than the conventional security camera. Only one person would be required to operate the entire system at any given time.

The lighting required for modern camera lenses is not much greater than the level of lighting that already exists in the Dáil Chamber. Certainly no uncomfortable level of lighting would be required.

In lively debates it is possible to focus the camera on individual speakers automatically. The Dáil itself already operates a system for activating and shutting off microphones on the desk of particular speakers. This happens when speakers are called upon by the Ceann Comhairle. Camera directions can be automatically linked to this microphone selection system. This would ensure immediate focus on speakers who had been called by the Ceann Comhairle. There would, of course, be a provision for manual override by the television operator.

Thought would need to be given to the physical positioning of the cameras within the Dáil chamber. To be totally unobtrusive they would need to be located quite high up over the heads of the debaters. This could make for high

angle shots, which might be bad television. The cameras would also need to be located so as to avoid giving any unduly favourable television showing members sitting in, or speaking from, any particular part of the Chamber.

Arrangements would need to be made to preclude cameras from showing the public galleries, to avoid these being used for publicity-seeking demonstrations.

The initial cost of installing cameras in the Dáil would not be very great. It is probable that three remote controlled television cameras could cover the entire Chamber.

In most European countries the national television service has provided, at its own cost, a television camera and remote control network in the Parliamentary Chambers. It has used the material itself, and has been able to sell it on to commercial stations. RTE would, we believe, be prepared to do this here.

An alternative would be for the Dáil itself to put in the cameras, and sell the material to allcomers. This would involve finding the money out of the Vote for the Houses of the Oireachtas. The initial cost would then be somewhere in the region of £400,000. It could be partially offset by savings in current costs arising from the already recommended application of modern technology to other aspects of the Dáil's work, for instance the preparation and printing of debates. This is an option to be considered in the longer term, but it is preferable to operate on the basis of the facilities being provided by RTE initially, in order to get television in the Dáil started relatively quickly. Another very longterm possibility is broadcasting the Dáil and Senate on a specialist cable T.V. channel.

Appendix

MOTION ON THE TELEVISIONING OF THE DÁIL

"That Dáil Eireann requests the Committee of Procedure and Privileges to report to it within three months with

- (a) proposals, with necessary safeguards, for the televising of Dáil proceedings, and*
- (b) proposals for a more general programme of reforms to Dáil procedures, covering limitations on the length of speeches, procedures for dealing with urgent matters and the relevancy and admissibility of Parliamentary Questions."*

John Bruton and Fergus O'Brien.