

4. Each committee of the House of Commons shall determine whether any meeting or meetings will be open to the electronic media. Each committee may impose any arrangements that it deems necessary to ensure the decorum of the meeting. This freedom for electronic media would apply in Ottawa and throughout the country.

“Be as bold as your predecessors were 12 years ago and let the people of Canada see Parliament work in the committees.”

Stephen Bindman,
President
Centre for Investigative Journalism

Since 1977, the role and importance of the committees of the House of Commons has increased dramatically. A great deal of important work is done in both standing and legislative committees. The most important changes were ushered in on the advice of the Special Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, under the chairmanship in the Honourable James A. McGrath, which issued its report in 1985.

The McGrath Committee considered whether committee proceedings should be televised and, if so, how it should be done. The Committee concluded that “The arguments in favour of televising committees are virtually the same as those for televising the House of Commons.” Despite the adoption of most of the other recommendations in the Committee’s report, its proposals in this regard were not implemented.

A number of committees have experimented with television. The Special Joint Committee on the Constitution of Canada in 1982, and the Special Joint Committee of the Senate and of the House of Commons on the 1987 Constitutional Accord, which heard testimony regarding the Meech Lake Agreement in the summer of 1987, had their public hearings televised. More recently, the Standing Committee on Finance arranged to have several of its hearings regarding the proposed Goods and Services Tax televised, and the Standing Committee on Communications and Culture arranged for several of its hearings on Order in Council appointees to be broadcast. In all of these cases, special permission from the House was required in order to allow cameras into the committee rooms. The general consensus has been positive; both journalists and ordinary Canadians have expressed their appreciation at having electronic access to such committee hearings.

Committee work has tended to be relatively collegial, and more informal than House proceedings. Many members seem to be concerned that these attributes will be lost if cameras are allowed in. It is feared that members will play to the cameras, and engage in grandstanding, and that the adversarial and partisan atmosphere of the House will be