

But journalists are doing the best they can...

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PARLIAMENT. Until about five years ago the word used to have something about it that inspired awe, respect, fear and even loathing, depending on one's political leaning. Although it then denoted an unrepresentative institution from which all the nefarious and odious laws which governed our daily lives were made, the word "parliament" nevertheless had some ring of respectability about it.

I still remember only too well my first visit to parliament three years ago. Although then less important in our fast-changing politics than it used to be in the past, the institution was still a potent symbol of white hegemony over the African majority.

I remember feeling singularly unwelcome at the place, from the very moment I arrived. The police officers manning the entrance leading to the parliamentary press gallery were rude and unfriendly to darker-hued individuals seeking to gain entry into the building; there was a strict dress code for both parliamentarians and those who worked there as well as for visitors; and parliament itself was a very structured — and perhaps well run — organisation. It was also much easier for the press to cover.

Since the advent of the new South Africa, however, a lot has changed in the new bi-cameral parliament. The strict dress code has gone; there are many more MPs than

used to be the case; there are two important houses of parliament, the 400-member national assembly and the 90-member senate supposedly representing the nine provinces' interest; and there are more than 30 parliamentary portfolio committees, which are more powerful than their predecessors used to be, and whose meetings are open to the public/press. Clearly, then, covering parliament in this era of political transparency is much more difficult than it used to be in the past. Added to the complication of having to cover two houses and the 30-plus parliamentary committees, there is also the constitutional assembly (CA), the body charged with the responsibility of writing the country's final constitution. It consists of a joint sitting of the national assembly and the Senate.

How do the media cover parliament? Obviously not exhaustively, for it is not possible to do so, but well enough to give the public some idea about some of the major legislation being debated and passed by parliament.

There are at least two reasons for this inability to cover parliament comprehensively: the acute lack of adequate resources and the sheer volume of information flowing from the august institution. A paper like *The Star*, for instance, has one person in Cape Town, the political correspondent, whose brief is to cover the important developments in parliament. He cannot possibly monitor debates in the national assembly and the senate simultaneously, be at all the parliamentary portfolio committees's meetings and cover some of the press briefings usually given by ministers.

But that does not mean that there are important things happening in parliament that we do not cover because we have only one person there. Although on the major political developments of the day we use stories written by our own political correspondent, on the many other stories we do not hesitate to use other political correspondents employed by our sister newspapers in the Independent Newspapers group as well as copy from SAPA and Reuter, for which services we pay handsomely. But once we have all these stories available to us in Johannesburg, the next problem is placing them in the newspaper. Space is always at a premium, and inevitably there are stories which then get hacked and used as fillers and those that are not used at all. This is not a problem peculiar to *The Star*, but applies across the board to all newspapers — except for *The Citizen*, which has no advertising worth speaking about and therefore runs the entire SAPA service — and the electronic media. The result is that the South African public cannot claim to be fully conversant with either the parliamentary process or the developments taking place there. This is a problem which will persist for years, and to which no solution is possible. Even if parliamentary debates were to be televised throughout the day, this would still not account for the parliamentary portfolio committees' meetings.

The media, therefore, can only do the best they can, by ensuring that the public is reasonably informed about, at the very least, the major developments taking place in parliament and the decisions taken there.

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