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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Principal Private Secretary

2 November 1987

The Lord President may wish to see, before tomorrow morning's meeting with the Prime Minister, the article attached, from the Canadian magazine 'Maclean's', about the televising of the proceedings of the Canadian Parliament.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Steven Wood (Lord Privy Seal's Office) and Murdo Maclean (Chief Whip's Office).

(N.L. WICKS)

Mike Eland, Esq.,
Lord President's Office.

The first decade of the TV MPs

By George Bain

Among the misconceived enterprises I have been involved with, a notable one was the writing in 1972 of *Canada's Parliament*, a layman's guide to parliamentary procedure. If Information Canada (R.I.P.), which commissioned the booklet, thought I was a master of the subject, it did not get the idea from me. At best, I had a working knowledge of the rules—and, in fact, my fee aside, the one benefit that occurred anywhere was a marginal improvement in my own knowledge of procedure from reading and talking to people who were experts.

What rouses this perhaps less-than-gripping reminiscence is an imminent anniversary. On Oct. 17, no doubt with bonfires on Parliament Hill—10 years of *Hansard*, with *Votes and Proceedings* as kindling—television's first decade in the House of Commons will be observed. My small treatise was undertaken in anticipation of television's coming, which, in fact, didn't happen for five years, during which time the manuscript, or the finished booklets, for all I know, lay mouldering in a closet. It has to be remembered that the House of Commons was not at all sure that admitting the cameras was A Good Thing. (A poll taken today might show that many MPs still aren't sure.)

In any case, the plan was to distribute *Canada's Parliament* widely around the country. I think a seating plan of the House was to be included so that avid viewers would have the names and numbers of all the players—and a stylish, perceptive, succinct, admirably clear, witty account of how the game is played to enhance, as the saying goes, their viewing pleasure.

Today, not that I would want to bet on it, somewhere perhaps a fanatic sits, huddled before a TV set turned permanently to the parliamentary cable channel, bemusedly flipping through a dog-eared copy of Bain on Parliament, trying to relate what he sees to what he reads. Possibly what was written in 1972 made an idealized picture, but it is also true that changes have occurred, and that the introduction of the cameras contributed in no small way.

The changes go deeper than MPs having given up banging their desk lids to signify approval, which they did not long after the cameras first came,

out of fear that they would look like unruly school kids. Polite hand-clapping took its place. They also started clustering together to disguise a sparse attendance, like a nearly bald man raking the last strands across his dome in hopes of creating the illusion of a head of hair.

But what television most notably has helped happen is to make Question Period, always a focus of the parliamentary day, become in the public eye almost the whole of it. This has happened because it is all that is covered by television news reporters, with their print counterparts, more and more, weak-mindedly following. Deputy Prime Minister Don Mazankowski was talking about media bias when he complained in a recent speech about concentration on the sensational and damaging to the neglect of the substance of the government's perform-

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ance. Undoubtedly a case can be made that the government has suffered bias—I think it has—but if government accomplishments (his government's, or any other's) have been buried, part of the blame belongs simply to preoccupation with Question Period, which is (a) essentially trivial, and (b) essentially an opposition forum—a preoccupation TV coverage has made near-total.

Art Buchwald once said a columnist is in danger when he starts stealing from others, but is really in trouble when he starts stealing from himself. A fig for Buchwald and his philosophizing. In 1972 I wrote about Question Period that among questions that were inadmissible were questions that were flagrantly argumentative. If that were still the case, Sheila Copps, the shrill Liberal lady from Hamilton East, would remain another new and unknown MP. Instead, success in getting herself on television with questions that are argumentative and that give information in the guise of seeking it, another criterion of the inadmissible in parliamentary questions, have led to

her being mentioned—improbably, but mentioned—as a possible future Liberal leader in such supposedly rational quarters as the CBC's *Journal* and *Saturday Night* magazine.

Parliamentary manners, which supposedly bar calling opponents liars, as well as attributing bad motives, have become worse. Television hasn't done that alone, but it has helped. Because Question Period has become Show Time, the people with the best lines—which, for impact, often are the most abusive or outrageous—have the best chance of getting on. And as getting on is nearly the only way the ordinary MP has of being noticed, because so little of what else he or she does or says is ever covered, the competition to find arresting things to say is tough. It is not a situation that favors the quietly responsible MP, and it accounts for the rise of such political/zoological phenomena as the Liberal Rat Pack.

A recent scan of the indexes of a month's worth (24 copies) of *Hansard*, August-into-late-September, showed three charter members of the Rat Pack—Copps, John Nunziata and Don Boudria—between them with 27 citations for questions and supplementaries, 17 for "Statements pursuant to Standing Order 21," a sort of parliamentary equivalent of a free toss in basketball, and just four—two for Boudria, one each for Copps and Nunziata—under what might be called substantive debate. In a 282-member House, that made a high collective batting average in the first two, publicity-making categories, compared with where the work is done.

Nor was the burden of their committee assignments heavy. Copps was on one standing committee, Health and Welfare, and one committee studying a particular bill—Bill C-204, the non-smokers' health act, scarcely one of the biggies. The other two had a standing committee each; some opposition MPs have three. Yet the Rat Pack members, all new, have become household names in the three years of this Parliament, mainly via Question Period, and that mainly via television.

What particularly made *Canada's Parliament* a misconceived enterprise is that Information Canada's underlying notion, in commissioning it, was that the cameras were about to be turned on the whole of Parliament. Ten years later, barring Question Period, broadcast television continues to avoid the substance like the plague.