

# 1936 Radio broadcasted

(Martin, 2004 v2

the consolidation of two-party government and parl.

The position became, in the words of a later Speaker, Roy Jack, a 'spoils office'.<sup>10</sup>

The Labour Speakers who followed Barnard took an active part when the House was in Committee.<sup>11</sup> For F.W. Schramm, Speaker 1944-6, this was to some extent understandable because he was also Chairman of the Statutes Revision Committee and it was useful for him to explain amendments to bills in Committee. However, he also voted with the government in divisions. R. McKeen, 1947-9, did not speak in Committee but always voted in divisions because of the government's small majority in the House. R.M. Macfarlane, Labour's Speaker 1957-60, also voted with the government in Committee to bolster its one-vote majority.

In the early 1930s the Labour Party advocated broadcasting parliamentary debates so that citizens could take an 'intelligent interest' in national affairs. The party knew that most major newspapers were conservative and biased against the labour movement. Labour saw broadcasting as providing an opportunity to bypass the conventional media and reach out directly to the people. The coalition government refused to consider broadcasting Parliament; Speaker Statham also opposed the idea.<sup>12</sup>

Before the 1935 election, Labour announced that it would broadcast Parliament in conjunction with a state-controlled national radio service, concentrating on 'important debates on matters considered to be of interest to the people - things that materially affected them'.<sup>13</sup> The new cabinet acted immediately and had the necessary equipment installed in the House before the session began. While some felt that this should have received the blessing of the House, many saw it as a significant and worthy move. As one political commentator observed, in 'the heroic



Gordon Port collection, ATL, F6411/5

Michael Joseph ('Micky') Savage was elected for Auckland West in 1919. He succeeded Harry Holland as leader in 1933 and became Prime Minister when Labour won the 1935 election. The first Labour government ushered in the social security system, and Savage was remembered fondly for this notable contribution to the welfare state after he died in office in 1940.

THE HARMONIOUS HANSARDERS.



J.C. Hill, Auckland Star, 7 August 1934

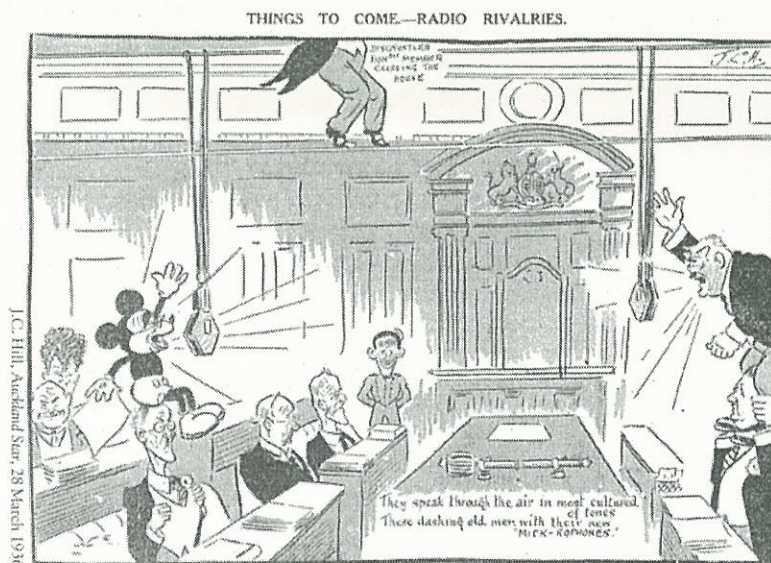
The possibility of broadcasting debates in the House arose in 1934. The coalition government was not interested, but cartoonists speculated on the likely effects.



## The House

1930s ... a national radio channel was a technological novelty and a large radio audience was deeply involved in the sharp ideological conflicts' of the day.<sup>14</sup>

When Parliament opened on 25 March 1936 the proceedings were relayed to the four national stations – the first regular broadcasting of a Parliament anywhere in the world had commenced.<sup>15</sup> The official commentator, press gallery reporter Charles Wheeler, sat behind the Opposition backbenches in the far corner of the chamber, assisted by a relay operator with headphones who monitored and mixed the sound. Next day, the formal opening of Parliament was also broadcast. Microphones were located on the steps of the main entrance, in the Legislative Council in front of the dais, and in the House. Wheeler provided continuity, 'speaking in subdued tones close to the microphone, so that the august silence might not be disturbed by this modern innovation', as all awaited the Governor-General in the Council chamber. He then sprinted to the House to resume his description as the Speaker announced that the members were returning to the chamber.



Labour's Micky Savage (as Micky Mouse), perched on Semple's head, battles with Forbes, standing on Coates' shoulders, as they go hammer and tongs at each other in the chamber.

When the House commenced business, the debates were broadcast. The intention was to reproduce the actual sense of the debates, including interjections. A number of sensitive, non-directional microphones hung from wires above the members, picking up every remark, whisper, cough or rustle of papers. When the division bells rang the technician switched off the microphones and played a record so that the 'light-hearted banter and conversation' of members going into the lobbies would not be broadcast. Red lights above the lobby doors indicated when the House was on air. The person providing continuity had to bridge the gaps, attempt to cut out any unwanted or embarrassing conversations and explain unforeseen events. Bursts of laughter over a member falling asleep in his seat had to be dealt with without giving the game away. The operators needed considerable skill to switch microphones on and off and regulate the volume. They had to master 'split second timing' and possess a 'strong knowledge of where MPs sit (and their wandering habits in the House)'. Technician