

Introduction

Setting the scene

- 1.1 The opening of Parliament is an issue that the Procedure Committee has examined on several occasions over the years.¹ The 2001 report *Balancing tradition and progress*² gave a particularly in-depth analysis of the history of opening day procedures. This report will not duplicate the detailed information contained in the 2001 report, but those who wish to know more about opening day and the origin of many of our current practices are encouraged to read that report.
- 1.2 Current procedures for opening day are drawn from a range of sources – the Constitution, the House and Senate Standing Orders, and tradition. Most of the procedures for opening day are, not surprisingly, derived from the practices of the United Kingdom Parliament.
- 1.3 The attitude of the Procedure Committee to the opening of Parliament has been fairly consistent through each of its reports. There has always been a strong desire to maintain ceremonial traditions, as summarised in the 1991 report:

1 Standing Committee on Procedure, 1991, *The Standing Orders governing: general rule for conduct of business and procedures for the opening of Parliament*, Parliament of Australia, Canberra; Standing Committee on Procedure, 1995, *Procedures for the opening of Parliament*, Parliament of Australia, Canberra; Standing Committee on Procedure, 2001, *Balancing tradition and progress: procedures for the opening of Parliament*, Parliament of Australia, Canberra.

2 See Chapter 2 in particular.

The opening of a new parliament is an event of major significance, both to the nation and to those elected to form it. It is appropriate that pertinent traditional and ceremonial elements be incorporated into the opening procedures in recognition of this significance.³

- 1.4 At the same time, there has been an unwavering desire to modernise and simplify proceedings. The Committee's 1995 report acknowledged a problem that still exists to this day:

The present procedures are rather complex and can be confusing for both observers and participants.⁴

- 1.5 In an attempt to address this concern, successive Procedure Committee reports have made recommendations aimed at effecting change. There has been a reasonable degree of consistency in the recommendations, although each report has gone a little further in the degree of change proposed. In line with this trend, the recommendations in the 2001 report proposed a significant modernisation of proceedings.
- 1.6 While successive reports have made recommendations, change has not been forthcoming. As the 2001 report explained 'the House of Representatives, in most of its innovations, has preferred to proceed with caution.'⁵ In the case of change to opening day procedures, the House has barely proceeded at all.

Purpose of the report

- 1.7 The Committee undertook this inquiry with a view to considering the appropriateness and effectiveness of current opening day procedures. Like its predecessors, the Committee considers that the opening of Parliament must strike the right balance between tradition and modernity. Also like its predecessors, the Committee feels that the current balance is not quite right.
- 1.8 This report draws on previous Procedure Committee reports and recommendations, although it differs quite significantly in some areas. The key recommendations in this report seek to put a greater focus on what the Committee feels are the most important moments of opening day. One of these is the moment when Members leave the public spaces of Parliament House and first enter the secured space of the chamber. Another is the
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3 Standing Committee on Procedure, 1991, pp. 2–3.

4 Standing Committee on Procedure, 1995, p. 1.

5 Standing Committee on Procedures, 1995, p. 41.

moment when new Members are sworn in; yet another is the moment when Members emerge from the House for the first time as sworn parliamentarians.

- 1.9 One area of opening day where change has been implemented is in the introduction of an Indigenous welcome ceremony. This report considers the success of the ceremony that preceded the opening of the 42nd Parliament.

Structure of the report

- 1.10 Given the extent of previous work on this subject (particularly the 2001 report), the Committee felt there was little benefit in producing a long and detailed report. Instead, the following chapter will step through the current structure of opening day, providing a short discussion for each stage of the day, followed by the Committee's conclusions and, where appropriate, recommendations. The final section of the chapter will discuss the process the Committee believes is necessary to ensure the recommendations are implemented.
- 1.11 Appendix A contains copies of the three submissions to the inquiry.

