House of Representatives

Infosheet

THE FEDERATION CHAMBER

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What is the Federation Chamber?

The Federation Chamber is essentially a debating committee, established to be an alternative venue to the Chamber of the House for debate of a restricted range of business. It operates in parallel with the Chamber of the House to allow two streams of business to be debated concurrently. Since its inception in 1994 the Federation Chamber (then known as the Main Committee) has become increasingly important in managing the time allocated to House business—allowing more time for scrutinising government legislation and for private Members' business and discussion of committee reports.

All Members of the House are automatically members of the Federation Chamber and eligible to participate in its meetings. The Chair of the Federation Chamber is the Deputy Speaker. The Second Deputy Speaker and members of the Speaker's panel (see Infosheet No. 3 'The Speaker') assist in chairing meetings of the Federation Chamber.

The Chief Government Whip has primary responsibility—following consultation with Ministers, opposition whips and non-aligned Members—for determining the agenda of the Federation Chamber and organising the referral of business to it from the Chamber.

Federation Chamber business is listed in a separate section of the Notice Paper. On days the Federation Chamber meets a program is published as an attachment to the Daily Program (www.aph.gov.au/house/chamberdocs).

Meetings of the Federation Chamber are open to the public and are covered by a dedicated channel of the television monitoring system which can be viewed within Parliament House and on the Parliament's website (www.aph.gov.au/live). Its debates are recorded in Hansard and the minutes of its proceedings are included in the Votes and Proceedings of the House. The Federation Chamber meets in the largest of the House of Representatives committee rooms. This room has been dedicated to its role and is furnished as a small-scale chamber incorporating the U-shaped seating configuration used in the Chamber of the House. It also has dedicated seating for the public, the press and ministerial and opposition advisers.

What can it do?

The House may refer a range of business to the Federation Chamber—specifically, the second reading and consideration in detail stages of bills (its major role), committee and delegation business, private Members' business and documents presented to the House. The Federation Chamber can debate and resolve motions and process bills through the relevant stages, including making amendments to them, just as the House can. However, as the Federation Chamber is a subordinate body, any decision it makes on business referred to it must be later confirmed by a decision of the House.

Members' statements and adjournment debate

In addition to business referred by the House, the Federation Chamber provides additional opportunities for private Members to speak on matters of their own choosing. On Mondays, time is allocated for statements on committee and delegation business and private Members' business (motions and bills). There is also an hour allocated for the grievance debate, during which Members may speak for up to 10 minutes on any topic, and 45 minutes allocated for Members' 90 second statements which may also be on any topic. On each day the Federation Chamber meets, proceedings start with a period of Members' constituency statements lasting for 30 minutes. Members, including Parliamentary Secretaries and Ministers, may speak for up to 3 minutes on virtually any matter. On Thursdays there is a 30 minute adjournment debate, commencing at 12.30 p.m., or earlier if business is completed. (See Infosheet No. 6

‘Opportunities for private Members’). Adjournment debates can occur on other days by agreement between the Whips. If they wish, Members may also present a petition during the time for constituency statements, grievance debate or the adjournment debate.

When does it meet?

The Federation Chamber usually meets on Mondays from 10.30 a.m. to 9.00 p.m. (with a break between 1.30 p.m. and 4.00 p.m.) and on Wednesdays and Thursdays, starting at 9.30 a.m. and finishing at 1.00 p.m. The Federation Chamber may also meet on Tuesday and Wednesday afternoon and evening, if required. These hours may be extended if the amount of business necessitates—for example to consider the annual appropriation (budget) bills. Although the standing orders (written rules) permit the Federation Chamber to meet at any time during a sitting of the House, in practice it does not meet during Question Time or at other times when all or most Members might be expected to be present in the Chamber.

If the Federation Chamber is meeting at the time that the House adjourns (finishes sitting for the day), it also must adjourn immediately.

Why have the Federation Chamber?

The intention behind the establishment of the Federation Chamber is to give Members extra opportunities to speak on certain bills or reports and at the same time free the Chamber for debate on other matters. This allows the time of the House to be used more effectively, and in a sense, significantly increases the amount of time available for considering business. It also provides extra opportunities for private Members to make speeches on topics of their own choice.

It has been said that the smaller room used by the Federation Chamber has led to its debates generally being more intimate and interactive than those in the House itself. This has contributed to its popularity with many Members as a debating venue.

Federation Chamber procedures

Substantially the same as the House

Procedures in the Federation Chamber are substantially the same as those operating in the Chamber for the same type of business, with the exception of those relating to the subordinate nature of the Federation Chamber—for example, the need to report back to the House.

Guiding principle—co-operation

There is, however, the very important difference that there is no provision for division (recorded vote) in the Federation Chamber—if business cannot be progressed by general agreement it is reported back to the House as ‘unresolved’ (Infosheet No. 14 ‘Making decisions—debate and division’ provides an explanation of the voting procedures in the House). This factor perhaps best highlights the guiding principle behind the operation of the Federation Chamber—co-operation. Business is generally only referred to the Federation Chamber following agreement on the referral between government and non-government Members. Disagreements occurring in the Federation Chamber are referred back to the House for settlement; disorder in the Federation Chamber can result in the expulsion (for 15 minutes) of the Member responsible, or suspension or adjournment of the Federation Chamber.

Other details

Other details of the operation of the Federation Chamber include:

- Its proceedings are suspended while divisions are taking place in the House
- The quorum is three, to include, in addition to the Chair, one government and one non-government Member
- In cases of disorder the Chair may suspend proceedings, and on motion by any Member the Chair must do so
- Any Member may move that further proceedings on an item of business be taken in the House, or that the Federation Chamber adjourn
- Decisions are taken on the voices; even one dissenting Member makes a decision unresolved
- Proceedings on a bill may be continued regardless of unresolved questions (unless the nature of the unresolved question makes this impractical).

For more information

House of Representatives Practice, 6th edn. Department of the House of Representatives, Canberra, 2012. pp 113, 305–6, 358–9, 575–6, 640–1 (refer to the index for further references).

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Renaming the Main Committee,* 2004.

Note: Until February 2012 the Federation Chamber was known as the Main Committee.

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