

## Venue of the Federation Chamber and support services

### Venue

- 4.1 There have been numerous calls over the years for the Federation Chamber to have its own, custom-built, venue close to the main Chamber, rather than remain in its present venue some three minutes' walk and two floors above the main chamber. This is not convenient, particularly for Members who have closely scheduled speaking responsibilities in both chambers.<sup>1</sup>
- 4.2 However, the likely significant cost of such a proposal has 'inhibited real progress in establishing a distinct Federation Chamber, adjacent to the Chamber itself.'<sup>2</sup> In lieu, a number of modest enhancements have been made to the existing venue over the last year including:
- Improved signage, fixed screens on the walls displaying captions about proceedings, a redesigned desk for the Deputy Speaker and Clerks, new lecterns and a central table to hold chamber documents, are some of the initial steps taken. Further enhancements, including a new Coat of Arms, some art work and enhanced lighting are anticipated.<sup>3</sup>
- 4.3 The Committee was told by some Members that, whilst the enhancements have improved the ambiance of the Federation Chamber, it still does not

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1 Standing Committee on Procedure (39<sup>th</sup> Parliament), *The Second Chamber: Enhancing the Main Committee*, July 2000, p. 35; Standing Committee on Procedure (40<sup>th</sup> Parliament), *Renaming the Main Committee: Celebrating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Main Committee*, June 2004, p. 9.

2 D. Elder, Clerk of the House of Representatives, *Submission 2*, p. 9.

3 D. Elder, Clerk of the House of Representatives, *Submission 2*, p. 9.

have the setting suitable to a parliamentary chamber. Given the importance of this venue for Members, including those raising constituency issues – and the widespread use of this footage for promotion on Members’ social media and websites – a room fitout, or ‘backdrop’, is needed that enhances the status of meetings of the Federation Chamber. This may be a change to the colour of the wall panels to mirror that of the main Chamber or the use of some prominent and relevant artworks. However, what would be appropriate remains a decision for the Deputy Speaker in consultation with the building architect.

- 4.4 Some Members commented about particular changes they would like to see made to the Federation Chamber.
- 4.5 One Member submitted that the speech timing clocks are still difficult to read<sup>4</sup> and the Committee heard comments about this possibly being because the figures on the clocks are red rather than green (as they are in the Chamber) and therefore not so visible.
- 4.6 It was also proposed by one Member that the screens in the Federation Chamber that identify the item of business under consideration also display information on business occurring in the House so that Members may be aware of pending divisions. The Committee notes that division bells in the House can also be seen and heard in the Federation Chamber and that Members have access to pagers and webcasts of proceedings in both places.
- 4.7 The Committee notes the role played by the Deputy Speaker (who presides over the Federation Chamber) in working towards further enhancing its setting and responding to Members seeking the same outcome. The Committee supports the Deputy Speaker in his endeavours and notes that although there are significant architectural heritage issues associated with potential changes to the Federation Chamber given its original designation as a committee room, it is time for its distinctive status to be demonstrated in the design and fitout of the room.

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4 Mr T. Zappia MP, Member for Makin, *Submission 1*.

## Recommendation 5

- 4.8     **The Committee recommends that the Federation Chamber be further enhanced to:**
- **provide a room fitout that distinguishes it from committee rooms and marks the status of the venue; and**
  - **ensure that speech timing clocks are the same as those in the Chamber.**

## Support services

- 4.9     Because of its lower public profile and the relatively restricted nature of its business, the Federation Chamber serves as a useful venue for professional development of new Members, new Members of the Speaker's Panel (who chair meetings), and also for party Whips and support staff from the Department of the House of Representatives.<sup>5</sup>
- 4.10    The operations of the Federation Chamber – although welcome – also increase the workload of the Government and Opposition Whips' offices. With 90 second and 3 minute statements and grievance and adjournment debates providing at least 72 opportunities<sup>6</sup> to speak each week, as well as time spent on government, committee and delegation and private Members' business, this substantially increases the coordination responsibilities for these offices. If these speaking times (many of them brief) are increased, there will be further responsibility for these offices (in ensuring that speakers are available and so on).
- 4.11    On average, the Federation Chamber has met for 26 per cent<sup>7</sup> of the time of the Chamber, effectively increasing the number of sitting hours of the House and therefore increasing the management responsibility of Whips' offices.
- 4.12    So far as the Committee is aware, the offices of Federation Chamber Whips are not complemented by additional staff resources. It does not seem reasonable that carriage of this significant responsibility could leave an office under-resourced. Moreover, it would be unfortunate if the role of Whips' offices in supporting meetings of the Federation Chamber were to

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5     Mr D. Elder, *Submission 2*, Hon. T. Burke MP, Manager of Opposition Business, *Submission 3*, Ms V. Riggio, Office Manager, Office of Nola Marino MP, *Submission 4*.

6     Mr D. Elder, *Submission 2*, p. 3.

7     For statistics on sitting hours see Appendix A.

impact on the ability of those Members to adequately serve their electorates.

- 4.13 The Committee notes that chairs of committees receive additional electoral entitlement to allow an officer to accompany them when travelling on committee business in recognition of the need for additional support to balance their parliamentary and electorate duties while performing this additional duty.
- 4.14 The Committee is of the opinion that a similar level of support should be provided to the government and opposition Federation Chamber Whips through the provision of additional staffing to support these duties.

### **Recommendation 6**

- 4.15 **The Committee recommends that additional resources be provided to the government and opposition Federation Chamber Whips through the provision of additional staffing to support these duties.**

### **Public access to the Federation Chamber**

- 4.16 Public access is permitted to the Federation Chamber and meetings are broadcast on the Parliament House website. However there is still limited public awareness of the existence and work of the Federation Chamber and its contribution to the House of Representatives. Visitors connected with business being considered during a meeting, for example, witnesses to a committee whose report is being debated, or who have a particular interest in a private Member's motion, do sometimes observe meetings but it is otherwise relatively rare to see members of the public in the visitors' gallery of the Federation Chamber.
- 4.17 Information about the Federation Chamber on the Parliament's website is limited. While there is a dedicated Department of the House of Representatives *Infosheet* on the Federation Chamber online, there is little other information about the Federation Chamber and its role in the House available.<sup>8</sup>
- 4.18 While the Parliament House tour guides provide no information material to the public specifically on the Federation Chamber, they do include discussion on it in tours. However, the venue is not available for members

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8 Parliament of Australia website, Department of the House of Representatives *Infosheet 16 – The Federation Chamber*, accessed 2 April 2015 at [www.aph.gov.au/infosheets](http://www.aph.gov.au/infosheets).

of the public to view when it is not meeting so the guides are limited in their capacity to show this chamber to the visiting public.

- 4.19 In its report *The Second Chamber*, the Procedure Committee (39<sup>th</sup> Parliament) noted:

The cost of the more intimate atmosphere in the confines of the Main Committee is that it is easier to cause inadvertent disruption. The opening and closing of the doors on either side of the Deputy Speaker's chair can be distracting and could be minimised if proceedings could be inspected briefly from the outside.<sup>9</sup>

- 4.20 The Committee recommended that glass panels be fitted to all doors which are normally kept closed during proceedings. This recommendation was supported but not implemented.<sup>10</sup> This Committee sees that there is merit in this proposal – for the benefit of Members and visitors.

- 4.21 One of the key benefits of the Federation Chamber being located where it is, is the intimate setting. The House's elevated public galleries give observers a full view of proceedings in the Chamber, whereas the floor-level public galleries in the smaller Federation Chamber allow observers to feel a closer part of proceedings. The less formal atmosphere, including the fact that Members do not have allocated seats so are not separated by frontbench or backbench roles, provide a unique parliamentary experience.

- 4.22 Visitors to the Federation Chamber have a real opportunity to see the House at work in a consensus manner as well as see debate on constituency matters of direct relevance to them or committee inquiries they may have participated in. However, the fact that this room is closed off to viewing by the public may make it feel intimidating for observers to enter for short periods as they do in the main Chamber.

- 4.23 In his submission, the Clerk noted the limited knowledge about the Federation Chamber and stated:

There may be scope for additional publicising of the sittings of the Federation Chamber to encourage visitors to the building to attend. Information material for use by visitors, similar to material currently distributed in the galleries of the Chamber, also may be of use.<sup>11</sup>

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9 Standing Committee on Procedure (39<sup>th</sup> Parliament), *The Second chamber: Enhancing the Main Committee*, July 2000, p. 46.

10 *Government response to the report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure: 'The Second chamber: Enhancing the work of the Main Committee*, June 2002, p. 3.

11 D. Elder, *Submission 2*, p. 10.

- 4.24 The distinctive work and role (albeit subordinate) of the Federation Chamber should be promoted on the Parliament of Australia website and in the information provided to visitors to Parliament House.
- 4.25 The insertion of glass panels in the doors adjacent to the Deputy Speaker's chair would also allow proceedings to be observed from outside which would minimise distractions to room occupants as well as make it more encouraging for visitors to enter and observe proceedings.

### **Recommendation 7**

- 4.26 **The Committee recommends that the role and work of the Federation Chamber be promoted on the House of Representatives section of the Parliament of Australia website and in the information given to visitors to Parliament House.**

### **Recommendation 8**

- 4.27 **The Committee recommends that glass panels be fitted to all doors that are normally closed during meetings of the Federation Chamber to allow proceedings to be observed from outside.**

## **Conclusion**

- 4.28 This report sets out both the history and future of the Federation Chamber. From an innovation in 1994, the Federation Chamber today has become an integral part of how the House manages its business.
- 4.29 As the progenitor of the Federation Chamber, the Procedure Committee has taken a close interest in its development. This report, issued to coincide with the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Federation Chamber, is the sixth Procedure Committee report specifically addressing issues related to the operation of the parallel chamber.
- 4.30 The procedures used in the Federation Chamber are sound and contribute to its effective operations. However, the Committee would like to see greater use of existing procedures which encourage a more interactive debate, such as interventions under Standing Order 66A.
- 4.31 The Committee is concerned about the decline in government business being scheduled for debate in the Federation Chamber. While the reasons behind this are unclear, the Committee strongly encourages better use of

government business time in the Federation Chamber if not for government business, then for timely debate on committee reports.

- 4.32 Despite recent enhancements, the fitout of the venue is still of some concern to Members. There have been multiple calls for a custom-built venue close to the Chamber but given the unlikely eventuation of this aim, the Committee strongly support calls for the existing venue to be fitted out in such a manner that distinguishes it from committee rooms and more closely aligns it with the main Chamber.
- 4.33 The Federation Chamber epitomises the best of the House of Representatives working in a collaborative manner and has earned its place as a permanent part of the operations of the House. The Procedure Committee will continue to monitor its functioning into the future.

Don Randall MP  
Chair  
4 June 2015

