

No. 128

for the sitting period 15-18 February 1999

22 February 1999

ELECTIONS FOR THE SENATE

On the first day of the 1999 sittings, the Senate, without a division, agreed to the following motion for a matter of urgency under standing order 75:

The need for the Senate to express clearly and firmly its opposition to any attempt to manipulate the Senate voting system in order to advantage the government of the day.

The motion was prompted by a suggestion from Senator Coonan (Liberal, New South Wales) that the government might consider legislation to alter the Senate voting system in order to eliminate the minor parties and gain a majority in the Senate.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

The Senate disallowed on 16 February regulations which sought to implement the government's policy of exempting small businesses from the unfair dismissal laws. This was stated to be the fifth occasion on which the Senate has considered this move. In the last Parliament the Senate twice rejected a bill with the same purpose, thereby providing the government with a "trigger" for a double dissolution, a "trigger" which was not utilised.

The notice of the disallowance motion was given on the first day of the sittings immediately after the regulations had been tabled (the notice was given by leave because the regulations were tabled after the time for giving notices). The Labor Party wished to give notice of a disallowance motion at the earliest opportunity, but had to wait until after the regulations were tabled (see *Odgers' Australian Senate Practice*, 8th ed, electronic update, pp 334-5).

ORDER FOR THE PRODUCTION OF DOCUMENTS

An order for the production of documents was passed on 18 February, calling for all documents relating to the Jabiluka uranium mine proposal generated since 1 October 1998. The order is directed to Senator Hill as Minister for the Environment and Heritage.

LEGISLATION

The Electoral and Referendum Amendment Bill (No. 2) 1998 was considered over several days and extensively amended in relation to such questions as voting by persons in gaol and assisted voting by disabled persons.

The Year 2000 Information Disclosure Bill 1999 was amended on 18 February, particularly to require reporting to Parliament about progress by Commonwealth agencies in relation to year 2000 remediation.

WITNESSES

During its hearings on the unfair dismissals laws, the Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education Legislation Committee was disturbed to discover that the expenses of private witnesses had been paid by the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business. Although there appears to be no evidence that the witnesses' testimony was tainted by the payment of expenses or that the committee was misled, the committee decided to ask the President to refer the matter to the Procedure Committee.

COMMITTEES

An extra extension of the time for the Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Legislation Committee to report on the Telstra (Transition to Full Private Ownership) Bill 1998 was made on 15 February, contrary to the wishes of the government. The non-government parties wished to give the committee an extra two weeks to report.

The first committee report on the government's taxation proposals, by the select committee (see Bulletin No. 127, pp 1-2), was presented on 18 February. The committee gathered a considerable volume of independent evidence on the effects of the proposals.

The following committee reports were presented during the period:

Date tabled	Committee	Title
15.2	Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Legislation	Interim Report—Paragraph 160(d) of the <i>Broadcasting Services Act</i> 1992
“	Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education Legislation	Report—Workplace Relations Amendment (Unfair Dismissals) Bill 1998
17.2	Legal and Constitutional Legislation	Report—Human Rights Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 2) 1998
“	Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Legislation	Report—Paragraph 160(d) of the <i>Broadcasting Services Act</i> 1962
18.2	Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References	Report—Landcare Policies and Programs
“	New Tax System	First Report

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