

HOUSE REVIEW



Selected features of House of Representatives business

Sitting held on 23 March 2020 (no. 27)

The House, which was originally scheduled to sit from 23–26 March, met on 23 March only, as did the Senate. In the context of the evolving coronavirus pandemic, the focus of the House was on eight bills to implement the Government’s economic response to the pandemic and three supply bills.

Statement by the Speaker—special arrangements for the operation of the Chamber

Proceedings on 23 March commenced with the Speaker, as usual, making an acknowledgement of country and reading Prayers, followed by a statement concerning the unusual arrangements at this sitting for the operation of the Chamber. Special seating arrangements had been put in place to enable spatial distancing between Members, with additional seats placed outside the benches. These additional seats were deemed to be within the area of Members’ seats for the purposes of any formal votes (divisions). Ninety Members were present, with 30 pairs of Members not attending in order to reduce the total number of persons in the Chamber and thereby mitigate the health risk due to the coronavirus pandemic. (Pairing is a practice of longstanding, and is an unofficial arrangement, organised by party whips, reflecting agreement that certain Members are absent enabling relative voting strengths of the parties to be maintained.)

To further reduce numbers in the Chamber, the Speaker determined that, other than a small number of photographers, the press viewing gallery would be closed, with media representatives having access to the second-floor enclosed galleries, usually reserved for school students. The Speaker had previously announced that there would be no access to the galleries for schools or the general public. The Speaker thanked Members for their cooperation and forbearance during a difficult and extraordinary time.

Suspension of standing orders—consideration of bills

The Leader of the House then moved to suspend standing orders to sweep away the already scheduled business and put in place a new routine of business. He thanked the Manager of Opposition business for assistance in settling the [terms of the motion](#), which was passed unanimously, by an absolute majority.

The resolution provided for a ministerial statement by the Prime Minister and response by the Leader of the Opposition; the Federation Chamber not to meet; and the business to be restricted to the introduction and finalisation of bills in the Coronavirus Economic Response Package (Coronavirus Package), supply bills, Question Time, and any other business agreed between a Minister and the Manager of Opposition Business.

In relation to the Coronavirus Package, the resolution provided for a truncated process:

- the bills to be presented together and the first reading of each bill to be given;
- the Minister to move one motion for the second reading of all bills and make a second reading speech, and for a cognate debate to ensue;
- at the conclusion of debate, the questions necessary to complete the second reading stage;

- any messages from the Governor-General to be announced, the bills to be taken as a whole during consideration in detail and, in relation to amendments which were circulated, one question each to be put on all Government amendments and on any Opposition amendments, and single questions on any amendments moved by each non-aligned Member; and
- debate on the bills to be interrupted and consideration concluded if debate is still in progress at 5.00 pm.

The resolution provided that three supply bills would then be introduced together and the Minister would move the second reading, with a cognate debate to ensue. Any questions necessary to complete the second reading would then be put and one question on the third reading put.

The resolution also provided that, after all business had been disposed of, the Speaker would suspend the House until the ringing of the bells. This was to provide for Senate consideration of the bills. At the resumption of the sitting, any further business relating to the bills would ensue and the Speaker would then adjourn the House until a later date.

Ministerial statement and reply—Coronavirus

The Prime Minister remarked that the coronavirus represents an unprecedented challenge, describing it as ‘a once-in-100 year event, a global health pandemic that has fast become an economic crisis, the likes of which we have not seen since the Great Depression.’ The Leader of the Opposition responded that ‘in today’s emergency session of Parliament there are few of us here, but our actions today will be felt and measured for a very long time ... Today we feel the weight of our nation’s need. Never has our duty been so urgent.’ He commented that ‘we will support both stimulus packages not because they are perfect but because they are urgent. We want this package to work and to work quickly.’

Legislation

Coronavirus Economic Response Package

In accordance with the resolution agreed to earlier, the Treasurer introduced the Coronavirus Economic Response Package Omnibus Bill 2020 and seven related bills. Following his second reading speech, 20 Members made contributions during the cognate debate. The Shadow Treasurer moved an amendment to the question on the second reading and two further Opposition amendments were moved to the proposed amendments. None opposed the second reading.

At the conclusion of debate, the Manager of Opposition Business proposed that, for the votes on the second reading amendments, the questions be put so that most Members would not need to cross the Chamber and thereby minimise the risk of many Members moving about. (During divisions, Members voting ‘Aye’ sit to the right of the Speaker’s chair, the ‘Noes’ to the left. The question would normally be that ‘the [Opposition] amendment be agreed to’, which would require Government Members to cross the Chamber to sit to the Speaker’s left to vote ‘No’, and the Opposition to cross the Chamber to sit to the Speaker’s right to vote ‘Aye’.) The Speaker proposed that the questions on the second and third amendments be put in the form that ‘the amendments be disagreed to’, which meant that Government and Opposition Members did not need to move across the Chamber, and only some of the non-aligned Members needed to leave their seats to vote. The questions were put and each was carried on division. On the first Opposition amendment, the Speaker put the question using what was once the traditional form: ‘That the words proposed to be omitted stand part of the question’. The question was carried on division and again a ‘crossover’ division was avoided. One question on the second reading of all bills was put and carried on the voices.

Consideration in detail progressed in accordance with the resolution agreed to earlier and the bills were taken as a whole. Amendments proposed by the Government were agreed to on the voices. Opposition amendments were then considered and the question again put in the form 'that the amendments be disagreed to'. This question was carried on division. The question on the third reading was then put and carried on the voices. Messages from the Governor-General recommending appropriations in relation to the bills were reported.

Supply bills

The Prime Minister had announced on 21 March that the Budget bills, usually introduced in May, would be postponed to October. As a consequence, three supply bills were introduced together and the Assistant Treasurer moved the second readings. He explained that, following the Government's decision to reschedule the Federal Budget to 6 October, the bills were required to ensure funding is available from 1 July 2020, ensuring the continuity of program and service delivery. The bills proposed to fund expenditure on an interim basis until budget appropriation bills have been passed and no new measures for the 2020 Budget were included. Supply Bill (No. 1) 2020-2021 provided for appropriations for proposed expenditure on the ordinary annual services of Government based on seven-twelfths of the estimated 2020-21 annual appropriations. Following a cognate debate, in which nine Members made contributions, the questions on the second and third reading were put and carried on the voices.

Following the passage of the bills introduced that sitting and consideration of some other items of business, the House suspended to wait for a message from the Senate. When proceedings were resumed, the Speaker reported a message from the Senate returning the Coronavirus Economic Response Package Omnibus Bill 2020 with an amendment. The House resolved to consider the amendment immediately and it was agreed to after a short debate.

Question Time

As provided by the resolution adopted earlier that sitting, debate was interrupted at 2.00 pm and Question Time commenced as usual. Unusually, the focus of all questions asked, whether by Opposition, Government or non-aligned Members, was on one issue: the impact and response to the coronavirus. Also unusual was the sombre mood of the House and the fact that no points of order were taken. A Shadow Minister spoke on indulgence in support of an answer by a Minister, and the Leader of the Opposition referred to this in a statement immediately following Question Time.

Revised program of sittings and pairing arrangements

The Leader of the House presented a revised program of sittings for 2020 and moved that it be agreed to. The program schedules the next sitting day for 11 August and increases the number of sitting days later in the year. The Opposition opposed the proposed changes. The question was put and carried on division.

The Manager of Opposition Business noted that a large number of Members were paired. He sought the Speaker's indulgence for the Whips to read their names into Hansard to reflect their wish to be present. On indulgence, the Chief Government Whip and then the Chief Opposition Whip read out the names of Members who were paired and thanked them for accommodating the social distancing arrangements.

Resolution of the House—special provisions for meetings of the House

Late on 23 March the Leader of the House moved that:

- (1) the House may meet in a manner and form not otherwise provided in the standing orders with the agreement of the Leader of the House and the Manager of Opposition Business,

- with the manner in which Members may be present (including for the purposes of achieving a quorum) to be determined by the Speaker; and
- (2) any consequent changes to the rules and orders necessary to enable such a meeting to commence may be determined by agreement of the Leader of the House and the Manager of Opposition Business.

He explained that these provisions would ensure that the Parliament retained the necessary flexibility to respond to the extraordinary circumstances caused by the coronavirus. He emphasised that the resolution did not alter established requirements, such as the number of Members required for quorum, but were intended to provide a mechanism by which agreement between the Leader of the House and the Manager of Opposition Business, with the concurrence of the Speaker, could be reached to alter standing orders to the extent that may become necessary. After a brief debate, the question was put and passed.

The Senate adopted a resolution of similar effect.

Amendment to the Standing Orders

The last item of business was an amendment to the standing orders. The Leader of the House moved to amend standing order 47(c)(ii)—motions for suspension of orders—to provide for the usual requirement for such motions to be carried by an absolute majority to be replaced with a requirement for a simple majority of Members present, if the Leader of the House and Manager of Opposition Business agree.

The Leader of the House remarked that circumstances may now arise where the House is not able to form the absolute majority (76) necessary to suspend standing orders without notice and it would be prudent to have an alternative mechanism. The question was put and agreed to. A motion to suspend standing orders without notice can now be carried by a simple majority if the Leader of the House and the Manager of Opposition Business agree.

The House and Senate are scheduled to meet next on 11 August 2020.

Further information on the work of the House

[Bills and legislation](#), bills, explanatory memoranda, amendments, speeches, and a tracking option

[Live Minutes](#), a real time summary of House decisions and proceedings. When used in conjunction with the [Daily Program](#), the Live Minutes are a simple way to track the House's work each day

[Votes and Proceedings](#), the official record of the proceedings of the House of Representatives

[House of Representatives Practice](#) 7th ed., 2018, the most authoritative guide to House procedure

[House of Representatives Standing Orders](#), as at 19 September 2019, the rules of procedure for the House of Representatives