



**Shadow Attorney-General
Shadow Minister for the Arts**

Lyndon

Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure

By email: procedure.committee.reps@aph.gov.au

10 June 2014

Dear Secretary,

Please find enclosed my submission, on behalf of the Labor Opposition, to the Committee's *Inquiry into the Use of Electronic Devices in the Chamber*.

We are grateful for the opportunity to participate in this Inquiry. Please do not hesitate to contact me if we can be of further assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Dreyfus QC MP

Deputy Manager of Opposition Business

Submission to the *Inquiry into the Use of Electronic Devices in the Chamber*

The use of new communications technologies has changed many aspects of Australian life in recent years, and federal politics has been no exception. More than 83% of Australian households have internet access, two thirds of Australians own a smartphone, and more than half of all Australians have a Facebook account.

In the main, these technologies have enhanced our national life. Social media, for instance, has given Members new ways to communicate with their constituents, and given Australians new ways to participate in political debate.

Use of electronic devices in the chamber

It is not clear, however, how some of these technologies fit into the practices of the House. We are pleased that this Inquiry proposes to address one such area of uncertainty: the increasingly frequent use of devices such as laptops, tablets and smartphones for public communications while in the chamber. As the Clerk of the House has noted in his submission, there are presently no standing orders which directly govern the use of electronic devices in the chamber, and their status is unclear.

The Opposition submits that it is important for the smooth operation of the House that this uncertainty be dispelled by a resolution of the House.

The use of electronic devices to be allowed in the chamber

The fundamental goal of the House's approach to the use of electronic devices in the chamber should be to clearly permit Members to communicate with the broader public about the activities of the House. Public engagement with parliamentary process is to be encouraged. In any case, as Mr Tim Watts MP notes in his submission, it would be difficult for the Speaker to enforce more restrictive rules, or to apply the standing orders to the content of Members' electronic communications.

Restrictions on the use of electronic devices in the chamber

The use of electronic devices in the chamber should be restricted only to the extent necessary to prevent disruption of or interference with the proceedings of the House. Most obviously, devices should be required to be silenced. It should be made clear that existing prohibitions on unauthorised audio and visual recording of proceedings extend to smartphones, tablets and other electronic devices. Members should be reminded that parliamentary privilege will not protect electronic communications made from the chamber, and that the usual rules on reflections on the Chair made inside or outside the chamber will apply to their electronic communications.

Conclusion

In accordance with the above observations, we endorse in principle the Resolution proposed by the Clerk.