

Speaker's response to the report by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure—*It's your House*: community involvement in the procedures and practices of the House of Representatives and its committees

SPEAKER'S RESPONSE TO THE REPORT BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON PROCEDURE—IT'S YOUR HOUSE: COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN THE PROCEDURES AND PRACTICES OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AND ITS COMMITTEES

Introduction

I welcome the Procedure Committee's report on community involvement in the procedures and practices of the House of Representatives and its committees.

I agree with the committee that in order to perform its role effectively, Members individually and collectively need to keep in touch with community views and the effects on people of legislative and government action.

The committee's report makes many positive recommendations for ways in which the interaction between the House, its Members and its committees can be enhanced. Continuing the implementation of the recommendations, and reinforcing the recommendations through further initiatives, is seen as a priority for the Department of the House of Representatives.

Overview

While welcoming the report of the Procedure Committee and recognising the positive initiatives it proposes, it should be noted that the House and its committees have been aware of the importance of increasing awareness of, and involvement in, the work of the House and committees.

The establishment of a comprehensive House committee system, the implementation of a "Right of Reply" procedure and the development of the ABC's Parliamentary and News Network are good examples of the strong interest there has been in ensuring the community can be more effectively involved in the processes of the House and its committees.

Most recently, in the last 12–18 months, a number of initiatives have been undertaken, in association with Members and committees, to lift the profile of the House and its committees. These initiatives have had some early successes, with more media coverage and significant interest being shown by the community, for example, in publications and committee processes.

Key initiatives

Establishment of Liaison and Projects Office

In July 1998, the Department established a Liaison and Projects Office to coordinate activities that would help to raise awareness of the House and its operations, and that would help to build productive relations between the House and the community. A number of those activities are detailed below. While these are not strictly within the purview of the Procedure Committee, the information provides a context for the

procedural aspects of greater community involvement in the functions and operations of the House.

Seminar program

The Department conducts a seminar and workshop program, which aims to inform people about the procedures and processes of the House and how they can best participate in and contribute to those processes. The program includes presentations on legislative and committee procedures and processes of the House of Representatives; detailed explanation of the passage of legislation and a comprehensive guide to accessing documents relating to the legislative process; an interactive workshop for those people who wish to find out how to contribute effectively to inquiries conducted by parliamentary committees; and a briefing that provides a practical insight into the procedures involved in the various stages of budget consideration. There is also scope for more specific presentation. For example, a seminar has been targeted at the special needs of Departmental finance managers.

The seminars are opened by the Speaker (when possible) and are presented by senior officers of the Department, with highlights of the About the House seminars being Members' participation in one segment of the seminar. The Members' segment deals with the political context in which the House and its committees operate.

More than 2 100 people have participated in the seminars since they first commenced in September 1997. The largest number of participants has come from the public sector, with a smaller number of participants from lobby groups and private sector organisations. Members' (including Ministers') staff also have participated.

Publications

The Department has produced a number of publications to inform people about the House. The publications include a community guide to the House and the *About the House* magazine which is published every two months to inform people about the work of the House and its committees. The *About the House* magazine has been a particular success, with 12 000 copies currently in circulation, and a readership potentially significantly in excess of that circulation as copies go to agencies at the three levels of government and to community organisations.

Parliamentary Education Office (PEO)

Committees work more closely with the PEO to increase the understanding in the community of the House of Representatives committee system with the broader goal of encouraging greater participation. As one example of this closer connection, the PEO worked with the House Economics Committee to have about 120 high school students attend the six-monthly public hearing of the Governor of the Reserve Bank.

Media Strategy

The Department of the House of Representatives has employed a media specialist to assist the House and its committees to implement a strategy to increase media coverage of their activities. The major elements of the strategy include:

- targeting of, and liaison with, relevant journalists and publications;
- improving the content, timing and distribution of media releases;
- encouraging and facilitating press conferences, and providing support for chairs and other members with advice on both content and procedure issues in dealing with the media;
- facilitating greater interaction between members and journalists;
- ensuring that the presentation of committee reports takes account of the needs of the media; and
- changing the style of advertising to ensure it has more impact and encourages contributions.

The strategy appears to be meeting with success.

An exhibition promoting the work of House of Representatives committees

Work has commenced on a proposal to stage an exhibition in a display area of Parliament House. The purpose of the exhibition will be to highlight the significance of House of Representatives committees to visitors to the building, possibly emphasising the non-Canberra locations of much committee work.

Response to recommendations

Attached is a response to the individual recommendations of the Procedure Committee. I make no response to those recommendations, separately listed, that are matters for the House to determine, such as changes to the standing orders or resolutions of the House. I envisage there will be a response from the Leader of the House to these recommendations.

THE SPEAKER'S RESPONSE TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE REPORT

CHAPTER 2 – PETITIONING THE HOUSE

Recommendation 1 (paragraph 2.30)

The committee recommends that the standing orders governing petitions (nos. 112 to 132) be amended to make them clearer, simpler and more accessible as set out in appendix B.

Speaker's position:

Agree

Comment:

As part of the task which the Clerk of the House is undertaking to revise the standing orders to make them more logical, intelligible and readable (recommendation 8), the standing orders relating to petitions will be revised in accordance with the recommendations of the Committee. The changes will, at this stage, be limited to improving clarity and simplicity. Changes of substance to the standing orders are matters for the House. No changes will be proposed without consultation with the Procedure Committee and the House.

Recommendation 3 (paragraph 2.58)

The committee recommends that an annual report to the House be prepared setting out petitions presented and ministerial responses to them. The Standing Committee on Procedure intends to implement this recommendation itself.

Speaker's position:

Agree

Comment:

I understand that the Standing Committee on Procedure intends to make arrangements in the Spring sitting period in 2000 to implement this recommendation.

CHAPTER 3 – THE RIGHT OF REPLY PROCEDURE

Recommendation 6 (paragraph 3.26)

The committee recommends that information about the availability of the right of reply process be placed on the Parliament's Internet site on the pages from which Hansard reports and live telecasts of proceedings are accessed, with links to full details on how to apply.

Speaker's position:

Agree

Comment:

This recommendation is being implemented.

Recommendation 7 (paragraph 3.30)

The committee recommends that information be added to the explanatory material about the protection of persons referred to in the House to specify what course people may take if they believe they have been adversely referred to in the published evidence of a committee.

Speaker's position:

Agree

Comment:

The resolution and guidelines regarding the protection of persons referred to in the House have been added to the explanatory material and published on the House of Representatives Standing Committee of Privileges Internet site.

A pamphlet is also being developed for distribution to those wishing to obtain information about the Right of Reply procedure.

CHAPTER 4 – THE PROCEDURES OF THE HOUSE**Recommendation 8 (paragraph 4.11)**

The committee recommends that the standing orders be restructured and rewritten to make them more logical, intelligible and readable. The committee recommends that the Clerk prepare a draft for the committee's consideration.

Speaker's position:

Agree

Comment:

The Clerk of the House has commenced the task of revising the standing orders to make them easier for Members to use. It is proposed to both restructure the standing orders in a more logical way as well as to express them in plain English where possible. A draft will be made available to the Procedure Committee later this year.

CHAPTER 5 – ACCESS TO PROCEEDINGS**Recommendation 10 (paragraph 5.28)**

The committee recommends that a link to the live broadcast of proceedings (when available) be provided on the top page of the Parliament's Internet site.

Speaker's position:

Agree

Comment:

This recommendation has been implemented.

Recommendation 11 (paragraph 5.29)

The committee recommends that a summary of the main items of business for consideration in the House and the Main Committee and scheduled public hearings of committees be shown on the House of Representatives Internet home page. The information should be updated daily and provide a link to the full daily program.

Speaker's position:

Agree in principle

Comment:

The Department of the House of Representatives is currently examining an effective way of providing summary information on the Internet home page.

CHAPTER 6 – COMMITTEES AND THE COMMUNITY**Recommendation 12 (paragraph 6.16)**

The committee recommends that a conference of committee chairs, deputy chairs and secretaries be held at least once each Parliament to discuss strategies for promotion of committee work.

Speaker's position:

Agree

Comment:

I am aware that this recommendation was discussed at a recent meeting of the Liaison Committee of Chairs and Deputy Chairs and the value of such a meeting was supported. I understand it is proposed that the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure intends to coordinate the first of these conferences during the Spring sitting period in 2000. Thereafter the Liaison Group of Committee Chairs and Deputy Chairs will assume responsibility for coordinating the conference.

Recommendation 13 (paragraph 6.21)

The committee recommends that the Speaker, in consultation with committees, investigate having a 'fly on the wall' type of documentary about committees made professionally for showing on television.

Speaker's position:

Agree in principle

Comment:

I have asked the Clerk of the House, in consultation with the Liaison Committee of Chairs and Deputy Chairs, to investigate the cost and feasibility of producing such a documentary.

Recommendation 14 (paragraph 6.26)

The committee recommends that a brochure about House of Representatives committees be published and made available on a similar basis to the brochure on the House of Representatives.

Speaker's position:

Agree

Comment:

The House of Representatives Committee Office is currently drafting a brochure about House and joint committees.

Recommendation 15 (paragraph 6.28)

The committee recommends that details of the public hearing schedules of committees be published regularly using the following vehicles:

- (a) The Daily Program of House business (the Blue);
- (b) Announcements on the parliamentary broadcast (NewsRadio). The information could be included in a daily summary of business expected to be dealt with. The Joint Committee on the Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings is asked to make any necessary changes to the standing determinations relating to the radio broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings to enable this to take place; and
- (c) The existing television coverage of Parliament provided by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation—Question time telecast and/or the *Order in the House* program.

Speaker's position:

Agree

Comment:

- (a) The Department of House of Representatives has made provision for the daily public hearings schedule to be included in the Daily Program of the House business (Blue). Notification of the daily schedules of public hearings commenced on Monday 29 May 2000.
- (b) Announcements will be made on News Radio of the public hearing schedules of committees.
- (c) The format of the ABC's coverage of Question Time and Order in the House does not lend itself easily to the incorporation of details of public hearing schedules. However, the ABC could take up this recommendation if it considered that promotion of committee activities could be included in its television coverage.

The Department is also investigating the possibility of notifying House events more prominently in the building's entry foyer.

Recommendation 16 (paragraph 6.30)

The committee recommends that:

- (a) The Department of the House of Representatives take steps to improve coverage of the House committees in educational material supplied to schools;
- (b) Video material explaining the committee process and showing House of Representatives committees be made available to schools and other groups; and
- (c) School groups visiting Parliament House be provided with information about public hearings which may be held during their visit and be encouraged to observe proceedings if a suitable hearing is expected to be held.

Speaker's position:

Agree

Comment:

As noted above, one of the initiatives being pursued is a closer connection between House of Representatives committees and the Parliamentary Education Office. It is expected that, over time, this will result in improved coverage of House committees in educational materials in schools. Where possible, these materials will include video material about the working of House committees. The Parliamentary Guides have been advised of the listing of public hearings in the Daily Program and have been asked to encourage visiting school students to attend public hearings. (See also the response to recommendation 15).

Recommendation 17 (paragraph 6.33)

The committee recommends that the Department of the House of Representatives work with committees to develop a strategy to raise the profile of committee web pages, including establishing links with other sites, promoting web addresses, reviewing design and content and developing electronic feedback facilities.

Speaker's position:

Agree

Comment:

A review of the parliamentary Internet site is currently under way. The Department of the House of Representatives will ensure the new site which develops from the review will assist with the implementation of the Committee's recommendation.

The Committee Office Printing and Publishing Working Group is currently undertaking a general review of the House Committee Office Internet site. The group will look to implement the Committee's recommendation to the extent possible through the review process.

Recommendation 18 (paragraph 6.48)

The committee recommends that the Department of the House of Representatives work with committees to develop a media strategy to improve media support for committees, including the implementation of a professional communications service to provide media support and liaison for committees.

Speaker's position:

Agree

Comment:

In November 1999 the Department of the House of Representatives recruited a Media and Communications officer to help promote the work of the House of Representatives and its committees.

As noted above in the section on key initiatives, considerable progress has been made in implementing a media strategy for the House and its committees. A series of media workshops will be held beginning June/July 2000 for Committee Office staff to further this work.

Recommendation 19 (paragraph 6.50)

The committee recommends that, as far as possible, committee titles be retained on a long term basis.

Speaker's position:

Agree

Comment:

Every effort will be made in looking to the structure of committees in the future to retain the existing titles of committees.

Recommendation 20 (paragraph 6.52)

The committee recommends that committees develop a short name and use it consistently for media liaison and public communications.

Speaker's position:

Agree

Comment:

Committee secretaries within the Department of the House of Representatives have been advised to discuss with their committees the development of a short name to use as suggested in this recommendation. A number of committees have started to use short titles in their literature, advertising and media work, eg, House Economics Committee, House Transport Committee, House Industry Committee.

Recommendation 24 (paragraph 6.75)

The committee recommends that the committees make use of the *Checklist of strategies to maximise community involvement in a committee inquiry* set out in this report and that the checklist be updated and expanded on an ongoing basis.

Speaker's position:

Agree

Comment:

Committee secretaries within the Department of the House of Representatives have been advised to refer to the checklist in developing their approaches to the promotion of committee inquiries. The approaches in the checklist are being reflected in the work practices of committee secretariats. The meeting of Chairs, Deputy Chairs and secretaries to take place at least once a Parliament (recommendation 12) will have as one of its tasks, the reviewing and updating of the checklist.

Recommendation 28 (paragraph 6.105)

The committee recommends that committees inform witnesses and other relevant people of the contents of a government response to the committee's report. Where possible the text of a government response should be posted on a committee's Internet page.

Speaker's position:

Agree

Comment:

Committee secretaries within the Department of the House of Representatives have been asked to implement this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE REPORT THAT ARE MATTERS FOR THE HOUSE TO DETERMINE

CHAPTER 2 – PETITIONING THE HOUSE

Recommendation 2 (paragraph 2.48)

The committee recommends that the standing orders be amended to allow Members to present petitions during the period of Members' 90 second statements in the House or 3 minute statements in the Main Committee. The proposed amendment to the standing orders is shown in appendix B.

Recommendation 4 (paragraph 2.62)

The committee recommends that the standing orders be amended to provide for petitions to stand referred to general purpose standing committees for any inquiry the committee may wish to make.

CHAPTER 3 – THE RIGHT OF REPLY PROCEDURE

Recommendation 5 (paragraph 3.23)

The committee recommends that the resolution of the House of 27 August 1997 concerning protection of persons referred to in the House continue in effect without alteration.

CHAPTER 4 – THE PROCEDURES OF THE HOUSE

Recommendation 9 (paragraph 4.17)

The committee recommends that the following sessional order be adopted for a period of 12 months:

Questions from citizens

148A A Member may give notice of a question in terms proposed by a person who resides in the Member's electoral division. The following conditions shall apply to notices of questions given under this sessional order:

- (a) A Member shall satisfy himself or herself that the person proposing the question resides within the Member's electoral division.
- (b) The question shall show the name of the person who proposed the question.
- (c) A Member may not give notice of more than 25 questions in a calendar year.
- (d) Questions shall conform with the standing orders.
- (e) Provided the foregoing provisions are met a Member must give notice of every question proposed to him or her up to the limit of 25 per year.

CHAPTER 6 – COMMITTEES AND THE COMMUNITY

Recommendation 21 (paragraph 6.55)

The committee recommends that the standing orders be amended to provide for tabling of committee reports at a time prior to 11 am.

Recommendation 22 (paragraph 6.61)

The committee recommends that standing order 353 be amended as follows
(*paragraph (b) added*):

Report and minutes presented

353 The report of a committee, together with the minutes of the proceedings, shall be presented to the House by a member of the committee.

Provided that a committee may resolve to do either or both of the following:

(a) if the House is not sitting when a committee has completed a report of an inquiry, the committee may send the report to the Speaker, or in the absence or unavailability of the Speaker, to the Deputy Speaker. Upon receipt of the report by the Speaker or the Deputy Speaker:

- (i) the publication of the report is authorised by this standing order; and
- (ii) the Speaker or Deputy Speaker, as the case may be, is authorised to give directions for the printing and circulation of the report.

The report shall be presented to the House in accordance with this standing order as soon as possible.

(b) to seek the approval of the Speaker, or in the absence or unavailability of the Speaker, the Deputy Speaker, to publish a summary version of its findings on a day prior to the report being presented to the House. If the Speaker or the Deputy Speaker approves the request:

- (i) the publication of the summary version of the committee's findings is authorised by this standing order; and
- (ii) Members of the House shall be advised of the publication and given access to the text of the document.

Recommendation 23 (paragraph 6.70)

The committee recommends that standing order 346 be amended to read as follows (*paragraph (iii) added*):

Publication of evidence and proceedings

346 (a) A committee or subcommittee shall have power to authorise publication of any evidence given before it or any document presented to it.

(b) The evidence taken by a committee or subcommittee and documents presented to it, and proceedings and reports of it, which have not been reported to the House, shall not, unless authorised by the House or the committee or subcommittee, be disclosed or published to any person other than a member or officer for the committee.

Provided that a committee may resolve to:

- (i) publish press releases, discussion or other papers or preliminary findings for the purpose of seeking further input to an inquiry;
- (ii) divulge any evidence, documents, proceedings or report on a confidential basis to any person or persons for comment for the purpose of assisting the committee in its inquiry or for any administrative purpose associated with the inquiry; or
- (iii) authorise any member or members of the committee to provide such public briefings on matters related to an inquiry as the committee sees fit. The committee may impose restrictions on such authorisation and in any case a member so authorised shall not disclose evidence or documents which have not been specifically authorised for publication.

Recommendation 25 (paragraph 6.87)

The committee recommends that:

- (a) the House agree to a resolution providing procedures for interaction with witnesses in the terms set out in appendix C to this report; and
- (b) a pamphlet including a summary of the procedures be provided to all witnesses prior to hearing oral evidence from them.

Recommendation 26 (paragraph 6.96)

The committee recommends that the standing orders be amended so that a motion to take note of a committee report automatically stands referred to the Main Committee for consideration and that time be made available for debate in the week following presentation of the report.

Recommendation 27 (paragraph 6.102)

The committee recommends that new standing order 354A be inserted as follows:

Government responses to committee reports

354A (a) The Government shall prepare and present to the House no later than four months after the presentation of a report from a House of Representatives or joint committee, a response to the recommendations contained in the report. This provision does not apply to reports from the following committees: House, Library, Members' Interests, Privileges, Publications (except for reports on inquiries), Selection and the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works. If the Government does not consider it appropriate to respond to a particular report, it shall inform the House giving reasons for its decision.

(b) The Speaker shall prepare and present to the House a schedule listing government responses to committee reports which have been presented and reports presented to which responses have not been presented. The Schedule shall be presented by the Speaker twice in each calendar year or as often as the Speaker deems appropriate.

Recommendation 29 (paragraph 6.111)

The committee recommends that the standing orders be amended to empower committees to undertake activities to inform themselves on issues within their portfolio areas without the necessity for a formal reference from the House or a Minister. The power to call for witnesses or documents should not extend to such activities.

Recommendation 30 (paragraph 6.165)

The committee recommends that standing order 339 be amended by inserting new paragraph (ab) as follows:

(ab) A committee may resolve to conduct proceedings using audio visual or audio links with members of the committee or witnesses not present in one place. If an audio visual or audio link is used committee members and witnesses must be able to speak to and hear each other at the same time regardless of location.

Recommendation 31 (paragraph 6.166)

The committee recommends that committees refer to guidelines for the use of audio visual or audio links when considering whether to use this technology for the conduct of proceedings. The Standing Committee on Procedure will present a set of guidelines to the House and review them from time to time. (The proposed guidelines are at appendix D.)