

The Senate

Procedure Committee

Hours of meeting and routine of business

Matters of public importance and urgency motions

Second report of 2022

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Procedure Committee

Second report of 2022

Hours of meeting and routine of business

- 1.1 The committee met by video conference on 15 and 29 August 2022 to discuss a proposal to vary the hours of meeting and routine of business of the Senate.
- 1.2 The matter was referred by the President at the request of the Manager of Government Business, and responds in part to recommendation 27 of *Set the Standard*, the report of the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces. That recommendation proposes a review of the sometimes long and irregular hours of meeting of the two Houses, with the intention of striking a better balance between wellbeing and parliamentary business.
- 1.3 The referral asked the committee to consider:
- Commencement times on Wednesday and Thursdays
 - Adjournment debate commencement time, speaking times and conclusion time
 - Times at which no divisions may be held
 - Consideration of private senators' bills and general business
 - Consideration of documents and committee reports.
- 1.4 The committee agreed that significant improvements could be made by adjourning earlier on Monday night (currently 10.30 pm) and by providing that no divisions may be held after 6.30 pm on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. The current arrangement for no divisions after 4.30 pm on Thursdays would also be retained. These changes reduce the need for senators and staff to attend to the Senate unless they are directly involved in the matters being debated. The details of proposed changes are as follows:

Day	No divisions	Adjournment commences	Individual times	Total time
Monday	from 6.30 pm	8 pm	5 minutes	30 minutes
Tuesday	from 6.30 pm	7.30 pm	5 or 10 minutes	n/a
Wednesday	from 6.30 pm	7.30 pm	5 minutes	30 minutes
Thursday	from 4.30 pm	5.30 pm	5 or 10 minutes	30 minutes

- 1.5 The committee also agreed that sittings should start at 9 am on Wednesdays and Thursdays, commencing with 1 hour and 10 minutes debate on private senators' bills on each day. Monday mornings would revert to government business time.
- 1.6 The committee agreed not to propose any changes to current arrangements for consideration of documents and committee reports.

Matters of public importance and urgency motions

- 1.7 The committee also considered and agreed to procedural changes for matters of public importance (MPIs) and urgency motions.
- 1.8 The committee agreed that two such matters may be proposed each day, to be discussed or debated for 30 minutes each, and that the opportunities to propose them should be allocated among non-government parties and independent senators on a proportional basis, rather than being subject to a daily ballot. The committee agreed that the allocation should be made by informal agreement between party whips and independent senators, rather than codified in the standing orders. Similar processes are used for the allocation of other time-limited debates. A change to the standing orders proposes to remove the ballot process so that, if more than two proposals are received, the President will select which proposals will proceed in consultation with the whips.
- 1.9 The standard speaking time for senators on MPIs and urgency motions will be set at 5 minutes each (currently 10 minutes), noting that informal arrangements are usually made, by leave. The committee accepted that there might be circumstances in which the whips would agree to allocate time to a matter proposed by a government senator.

Recommendation

- 1.10 The committee **recommends** that the Senate adopt the amendments to the standing orders shown in the appendix.

Senator Andrew McLachlan
Chair

APPENDIX—AMENDMENTS TO STANDING ORDERS

- (1) Standing order 55(1), relating to the **times of meeting**, to read as follows—

The days and times of meeting of the Senate in each sitting week shall be:

Monday	10 am – 8.30 pm
Tuesday	midday – adjournment
Wednesday	9 am – 8 pm
Thursday	9 am – 6 pm

- (2) Standing orders 54 and 57, relating to the **adjournment of the Senate**—

- (a) Standing order 54(5), omit the table, substitute:

Day	Commencing	Individual time	Total time
Monday	8 pm	5 minutes	30 minutes
Tuesday	7.30 pm	5 or 10 minutes	n/a
Wednesday	7.30 pm	5 minutes	30 minutes
Thursday	5.30 pm	5 or 10 minutes	30 minutes

- (b) Omit standing order 54(4).
- (c) Standing order 57(1)(a)(xi), omit “9.50 pm”, substitute “8 pm”.
- (d) Standing order 57(1)(a)(xii), omit “10.30 pm”, substitute “8.30 pm”.
- (e) Standing order 57(1)(b)(xii), omit “7.20 pm”, substitute “7.30 pm”.
- (f) Standing order 57(1)(c)(xiii), omit “7.20 pm”, substitute “7.30 pm”.
- (3) Standing order 57, relating to divisions—

- (a) Omit standing order 57(1A), substitute:

(1A) If a division is called for on Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday after 6.30 pm, or on Thursday after 4.30 pm, the division shall be taken on the next day of sitting, at a time fixed by the Senate. If the matter before the Senate cannot proceed further until the division is taken, the matter shall be adjourned.

- (b) Omit standing order 57(3).
- (4) Standing orders 57 and 59, relating to the **consideration of private senators’ bills**—
- (a) Standing order 57(1)(a)(i), omit “General business orders of the day for the consideration of bills only”, substitute “Government business only”.
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- (b) Omit standing order 57(1)(a)(ia).
- (c) Before standing order 57(1)(c)(i), insert:
 - (ia) General business orders of the day for consideration of bills only, for up to 1 hour and 10 minutes.
- (d) Before standing order 57(1)(d)(i), insert:
 - (ia) General business orders of the day for consideration of bills only, for up to 1 hour and 10 minutes.
- (e) Omit standing order 59, substitute:

59 Government and general business

Government business shall take precedence over general business, except at the times indicated for the consideration of general business under standing order 57(1).

- (5) Standing order 75, relating to **matters of public importance and urgency**—
 - (a) Before standing order 75(1), insert:
 - (1A) On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday at the time provided under standing order 57(1), up to two proposals under this standing order may be considered in an order to be determined by the President.
 - (b) Standing order 75(2), omit “12.30 pm”, substitute “8.30 am”.
 - (b) Standing order 75(3), omit “the proposal”, substitute “a proposal”.
 - (c) Standing order 75(4), omit “the proposal”, substitute “a proposal”.
 - (d) Omit standing order 75(5), substitute:
 - (5) If three or more proposals are received on any day, the proposals to be considered will be determined by the President, having regard to the advice of the whips.
 - (c) Omit standing order 75(7), substitute:
 - (7) The individual and total speaking times on a matter of public importance or urgency motion shall be 5 minutes and 30 minutes respectively. The question on an urgency motion shall be put at the expiration of the time for debate.
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