



Infosheet

THE MAIN COMMITTEE

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What is the Main Committee?

The Main Committee is essentially a debating committee. It is sometimes referred to as the 'second chamber' of the House—a title more indicative of its role. The Main Committee is an extension of the Chamber of the House, operating in parallel to allow two streams of business to be debated concurrently. Since its inception in 1994 the Main Committee has become increasingly important in managing the time allocated to House business—allowing more time for scrutinising government legislation and for private Members' business and discussion of committee reports. It does not undertake inquiries or hear evidence as the standing committees do (see Infosheet No. 4 'Committees' for more information on the role and operation of standing committees).

All Members of the House are automatically members of the Main Committee and eligible to participate in its meetings. The Chair of the Committee is the Deputy Speaker. The Second Deputy Speaker and members of the Speaker's panel (see Infosheet No. 3 'The Speaker') assist in chairing meetings of the Committee.

The Chief Government Whip has primary responsibility—following consultation with Ministers, opposition whips and independent Members—for determining the agenda of the Main Committee and organising the referral of business to it from the Chamber.

Main Committee business is listed in a separate section of the Notice Paper. On days the Main Committee meets a program for the Committee is published as an attachment to the Daily Program (www.aph.gov.au/house/pubs).

Meetings of the Main Committee are open to the public and are covered by a dedicated channel of the television monitoring system which can be viewed within Parliament House and on the Parliament's website (www.aph.gov.au/live). Its debates are recorded in Hansard and the minutes of its proceedings are included in the Votes and Proceedings of the House. The Main Committee meets in the largest of the House of Representatives committee rooms. This room has been dedicated to its role and is furnished as a small-scale chamber incorporating the U-shaped seating configuration used

in the Chamber of the House. It also has dedicated seating for the public, the press and ministerial and opposition advisers.

What can it do?

The House may refer a range of business to the Main Committee—specifically, the second reading and consideration in detail stages of bills (its major role), committee and delegation business and documents presented to the House. These types of business can be referred to the Main Committee or taken in the House, time in the Main Committee being an alternative to Chamber time. The Main Committee can debate and resolve motions and process bills through the relevant stages, including making amendments to them, just as the House can. However, as the Main Committee is a subordinate body, any decision it makes on business referred to it must be later confirmed by a decision of the House.



Members' statements and adjournment debate

In addition to business referred by the House, the Main Committee provides additional opportunities for private Members to speak on matters of their own choosing. On Mondays, time is allocated for statements on committee and delegation business and private Members' business (motions and bills). There is also an hour allocated for the grievance debate, during which Members may speak for up to 10 minutes on any topic. On each day the Main Committee meets, proceedings start with a period of Members' constituency statements lasting for 30 minutes. Members, including Parliamentary Secretaries and Ministers, may speak for up to 3 minutes on virtually any matter. On Thursdays there is a 30 minute adjournment debate, commencing at

12.30 pm or earlier if business is completed. (See Infosheet No. 6 'Opportunities for Private Members'). Adjournment debates can occur on other days by agreement between the Whips. If they wish, Members may also present a petition during the time for constituency statements, grievance debate or the adjournment debate.

When does it meet?

The Main Committee usually meets on Mondays from 10.30 am to 10.00 pm (with a break between 1.30 pm and 4.00 pm) and on Wednesdays and Thursdays, starting at 9.30 am and finishing at 1 pm. The Main Committee may also meet on Tuesday and Wednesday afternoon and evening, if required. These hours may be extended if the amount of business necessitates—for example to consider the annual appropriation (budget) bills.

Although the standing orders (written rules) permit the Main Committee to meet at any time during a sitting of the House, in practice it does not meet during question time or at other times when all or most Members might be expected to be present in the Chamber.

If the Main Committee is meeting at the time that the House adjourns (finishes sitting for the day), it also must adjourn immediately.

Why have the Main Committee?

The intention behind the establishment of the Main Committee is to give Members extra opportunities to speak on bills or reports of a relatively non-controversial nature and at the same time free the Chamber for debate on other matters. This allows the time of the House to be used more effectively, and in a sense, significantly increases the amount of time available for considering business. It also provides extra opportunities for private Members to make speeches on topics of their own choice.

It has been said that the smaller room used by the Main Committee has led to its debates generally being more intimate and interactive than those in the House itself. This has contributed to its popularity with many Members as a debating venue.

Main Committee procedures Substantially the same as the House

Procedures in the Main Committee are substantially the same as those operating in the Chamber for the same type of business, with the exception of those relating to the subordinate nature of the Main Committee—for example, the need to report back to the House. In addition, Members may make short interventions (short, relevant questions) during other

Members' speeches on any order of the day in the Main Committee

Guiding principle—co-operation

There is however the very important difference that there is no provision for division (recorded vote) in the Main Committee—if business cannot be progressed by general agreement it is reported back to the House as 'unresolved' (Infosheet No. 14 'Making decisions—debate and division' provides an explanation of the voting procedures in the House). This factor perhaps

best highlights the guiding principle behind the operation of the Main Committee—co-operation.

Generally, only business on which it is hoped that agreement can be reached is referred to the Main Committee. Disagreements occurring in the Main Committee are referred back to the House for settlement; disorder in the Main Committee can result in the

expulsion (for 15 minutes) of the Member responsible, or suspension or adjournment of the Committee. The Main Committee is intended for uncontroversial, unopposed business which is generally only referred following agreement between government and non-government Members.

Other details

Other details of the operation of the Main Committee include:

- Its proceedings are suspended while divisions are taking place in the House
- The quorum is three, to include, in addition to the Chair, one government and one non-government Member
- In cases of disorder the Chair may suspend proceedings, and on motion by any Member the Chair must do so
- Any Member may move that further proceedings on an item of business be taken in the House, or that the Committee adjourn
- Decisions are taken on the voices; even one dissenting Member can make a decision unresolved
- Proceedings on a bill may be continued regardless of unresolved questions (unless the nature of the unresolved question makes this impractical)

For more information

House of Representatives Practice, 5th edn. Department of the House of Representatives, Canberra, 2005. pp 115–6, 301–2, 348–9, 572–3 (refer to the index for further references).

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Renaming the Main Committee*, 2004

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