



Andrew Wilkie MP
INDEPENDENT MEMBER FOR CLARK

3 JUN 2020

Mr Ross Vasta MP
Chair of Standing Committee on Procedure
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Chair *Ross*

Thank you for the invitation to contribute to the inquiry into procedures and practices put in place by the House during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are a number of measures I urge the Committee to recommend to Parliament.

Alternate voting arrangements

Parliament should always function as close as possible to normal. That is clearly the community's reasonable expectation, an expectation dashed in recent months which resulted in widespread public consternation. Yes the use of numerous pairs allows some limited sittings, but this is only a short-term solution, fundamentally flawed in that it leaves vast swathes of the country unrepresented.

We need to learn from this and consider all options for the future. For instance remote electronic voting could be implemented if, or more likely when, social distancing requirements and the impediments of domestic travel to Canberra again become problematic. Of course even this would be of limited value and not allow members to fulfill their other parliamentary roles in Canberra. But in extremis it would be infinitely better than the House not sitting.

Private Members' business

Private Members must be given sufficient opportunity to represent their constituents and communities. Hence the convention has always been that approximately one third of the House's time is awarded to such Members, committee reports and other non-government matters. Traditionally, time on Monday has been the main opportunity for private Members.

But recent sittings have centred largely on Government business. Now I accept that to an extent this was necessary in order to pass essential legislation to deal with the pandemic. But this should be the exception and not become the rule, as suggested by the revised sitting calendar for 2020 that shows three of the remaining 12 sitting weeks are weeks without a Monday sitting. This is addition to the single sitting week in May which lacked a Monday.

Consultation with the crossbench

I do welcome the level of bipartisanship from the Government and the Opposition which has been on display, but there has been very little effort to include the views of the crossbench. For example, the inadequacies of the revised sitting calendar may have been avoided if the crossbench was consulted prior to its release.

Better use of the Federation Chamber

It would be productive and beneficial for the Federation Chamber to be utilised more, with appropriate social distancing measures in place if and when necessary, so that Members have further opportunities to represent their community.

Need for an effective integrity commission

The Government has been awarded extraordinary powers during the pandemic and that means effective parliamentary scrutiny is more important than ever. But if that parliamentary scrutiny is in any way diminished, as it clearly has been during the pandemic, then the need for a strong, well-funded, wide ranging and independent national integrity commission is even more important than normal. I suggest this argument is relevant to the Committee, and the matter shouldn't be ignored in the Committee's deliberations and report.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Wilkie', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Andrew Wilkie MP
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