

Government Response to the Procedure Committee Report:

Re-Opening the debate: Review of the arrangements for the Opening Day of Parliament

Opening Statement

The Government thanks the Committee for its work and the obvious care it has taken to examine the arrangements of the Opening Day of Parliament.

This response represents the position of the Government on the matters brought to it by the Committee. Where the Government accepts the Committee recommendations it will seek to implement the necessary changes but notes that it will continue to consider relevant options and to set arrangements for the 'Opening Day' of the Parliament as appropriate.

The Government's response to each recommendation is as follows:

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Standing Orders be amended to provide for an Indigenous Ceremony before the formal declaration of the opening of Parliament.

Response:

The Opening Day of Parliament underwent significant change following the introduction of a 'Welcome to Country Ceremony' at the opening of the 42nd Parliament.

Whilst the absence of a provision in the Standing Orders does not preclude a 'Welcome to Country' at the opening of the Parliament, the Government agrees that it is important to formalise the inclusion of the ceremony.

The Government supports Recommendation 1 of the Committee provided the Standing Order is general in nature and does not place specific requirements on the conduct of the ceremony.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that at the conclusion of the Indigenous Ceremony the bells ring and Members and Senators proceed directly to their respective chambers.

Response:

It is logical that the beginning of the official proceedings in both Houses of the Parliament would follow the 'Welcome to Country' ceremony.

The Government supports Recommendation 2 of the Committee report.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the Governor-General appoint two deputies for the purpose of declaring open the Parliament simultaneously in each Chamber.

Response:

The Government does not accept the following recommendation as being necessary.

The Government understands the arguments made by the committee but ultimately does not accept that such wholesale change suggested is justifiable to eliminate what is a small part of the day's activity.

As such the Government does not support this recommendation.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that when entering the House for the first time, Members be required to remain at the perimeter of the chamber. Following the declaration of the opening of the Parliament, Members should be called forward to the table in groups, swear an oath or affirmation, and then be invited to take their seats in the House. Members who are entering the House for the first time should be sworn in last, after all returning Members have taken their seats.

Whilst the Government does understand the desire of the committee to increase the significance of the swearing in for new members, it does not accept the recommendation.

Given the time it takes to swear members in, the Government maintains it would not be practical to have a large number of MPs standing around in the limited space on the perimeter of the chamber.

As such the Government does not support this recommendation.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the election of the Speaker be presided over by the longest-serving Member of the House who is not a Minister, Shadow Minister, Whip, or candidate for the Speakership. The Member should have the powers and authority of the Speaker for the duration of the election.

The Government supports the recommendation put forward by the committee, however notes that this should be subject to further discussion by members.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that following the election of the Speaker, the House is suspended and the Speaker leads a procession of Members to the Great Hall where a function is to be held with invited members of the public.

The Government supports the recommendation, but notes that participation should be voluntary as members should be able to engage in their own activities as they wish.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the order of the afternoon's proceedings on opening day be amended as follows:

- Members return to the House at 2.30pm;
- Commencement of Business: Announcement of Ministry and Opposition Front Bench and election of Deputy and Second Deputy Speaker;
- Members summoned by Black Rod to the Senate Chamber for the Governor-General's speech;
- Return to the House to conclude the election of the Speaker's deputies (if necessary), for the presentation of a 'privilege' motion, to report the speech, and then adjourn;
- Presentation to Governor-General in Members' Hall.

Response:

The Government believes that keeping the proceedings of the Opening Day of the Parliament as they are will continue to provide greater flexibility to individual Members to allow them to host a range of activities with representatives of their local constituencies and communities.

As such the Government does not support the recommendation of the Committee.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the practice of presenting a 'Privilege' Bill be replaced by the presentation of a motion of commitment to the Australian People. The motion should be moved by the Prime Minister, seconded by the Leader of the Opposition, and then put without further debate.

Response:

The presentation of a Privilege Bill is a long standing practice of most Houses of Parliament around the world that are modelled on the Westminster System of Parliaments.

While the Government does not support the recommendation, it notes that this should not preclude the presentation of a motion of commitment to the Australian People.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that prior to the commencement of the 43rd Parliament, the Department of the House of Representatives prepares an information booklet which can be distributed to members and their guests on opening day. The booklet should include material about the history and the purpose of opening day proceedings, as well as other background information.

Response:

The Government supports this recommendation and notes that the Speaker of the House currently has the necessary authority to direct any such action.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that prior to the commencement of the 43rd Parliament, information on the Welcome to Country ceremony be made available on the 'About the House' website. After the ceremony has been completed a video should be made available on the website.

Response:

The Government supports this recommendation and notes that the Speaker of the House currently has the necessary authority to direct any such action.

The Hon. Anthony Albanese MP

Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government

Leader of the House

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