

Submission to the Procedure Committee

Conduct of the business of the House

I understand the Procedure Committee is currently considering possible amendments to the conduct of the business of the House and this includes both hours of sitting and the work of House Committees. I make the following brief submission.

Currently the basic building blocs of the Parliamentary year are sessions divided into fortnightly sittings. When house is sitting the fortnight is broken into two weeks usually each of four days. I suggest that there would be considerable advantages if we kept the idea of sitting fortnights but cut each week down to three rather than four days. That would allow a reasonable time between sitting weeks for members to attend to constituency and family responsibilities even in sitting fortnights.

Presently when the House meets and breaks on the first Thursday members living any distance away from Canberra hardly get home before having to pack to return. That may exaggerate a little for those representing Sydney or Melbourne seats, but it doesn't for any member from WA or NT.

In my view almost all members (even those closer to Canberra) would prefer to trade longer sitting hours for a decent time in the interval between sitting weeks. It would not be impossible to redesign the sitting schedule on that basis so that no debating time was lost and a longer break between the end of one week and the start of the next was built in.

I also think it would be a good idea if one midweek day of each sitting fortnight was specifically set aside and dedicated to committee and party meetings—to allow those to proceed without interruption for quorums and divisions.

Both a shorter week and proper priority for the work of private members and committees could be achieved if we compressed the hours of debate we currently fit into each sitting fortnight into five days with a sixth day set aside for committee and party meetings.

To cut the sitting fortnight down to six days (one of which would be set aside for committee work not normal parliamentary business) we would need to extend the hours of sitting: perhaps to begin at 9am and end at 11 pm with adjournment to 11.30.

In each second week of a sitting fortnight we should set aside the midweek day exclusively for committee and party work. Because the day would be sandwiched between two normal sitting days members would be in Canberra routinely so that problems of quorums for committees and the inconvenience of breaks for divisions and quorums and the difficulty those impose both for members and those speaking to submissions would be avoided.

Placing the day midweek would ensure that the day was seen as respecting and facilitating a serious aspect of the work of members. Standing orders could be altered

to allow Committee reports to be tabled and spoken to in the Main Committee on that day but the House itself would not be called into session.

After twenty years I have experienced many different models of sitting patterns and sitting hours. Sadly, that has convinced me that we are unlikely to devise a perfect sitting pattern, but the trade-offs for my suggestions seem sensible. We would have to give up our current relatively early¹ evenings—but except for the Wednesdays when the House adjourns very early, most members don't and can't utilise the 'early nights' (which are really absurdly late already) for the 'family friendly' benefits they were intended to provide.

Some will object that intensifying our hours over fewer days would exacerbate unhealthy working conditions. If we treat hours of sitting in isolation that objection has some merit, but I would counter that argument by pointing out that compressing eight absurd working days a fortnight into five slightly longer absurd working days a fortnight—but with the compensating large benefit for members that would come with getting out of Canberra for a decent break in-between has more upside than down.

Having a sixth day free to allow for serious backbench committee work—a role that often suffers when committees meet when the House is sitting as a result of the priority that must be given to chamber attendance for formal votes and quorums—would add to private members' and opposition members' capacity to make constructive contributions through the work of House and Joint Committees..

On balance I think most members would find it more family friendly and more conducive to good health and sanity to get home for four days between weeks in the sitting fortnights—particularly members from WA, NT, SA and Tasmania where multiple flights are needed—instead of pretending they can use the 'early' evenings and the later starts for Parliament we have now. Most of us have no real use for that time other than work anyway.

If the House adopted this suggestion we would lose one of the early Wednesday evenings we currently can use for dinners outside the House, but in exchange we would gain a free full Wednesday for committee, office and party work—and it would leave that evening free for social contact. It would allow the committee system to be better integrated into the work life of back-bench members and allow everyone an uninterrupted work day in Canberra when crucial meetings could be scheduled.

I would be happy to meet with the Committee to enlarge on this very brief submission should members be interested in taking these ideas further.

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¹ At least they are early compared to the very late sitting hours that were still common when I entered the Parliament in 1987.