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The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

# **Renaming the Main Committee**

House of Representatives  
Standing Committee on Procedure

June 2004  
Canberra

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**Deputy Chair** Hon L R S Price MP

**Members** Hon B K Bishop MP

Mr M J Ferguson AM MP

Mr B W Haase MP

Mr P E King MP

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## **Terms of reference of the committee**

To inquire into and report on the practices and procedures of the House generally with a view to making recommendations for their improvement or change and for the development of new procedures.

## **Terms of reference of the inquiry**

Problems identified with the current name of the “Main Committee” and a preferred alternative name.



## **List of recommendations**

### **Recommendation 1**

**The committee recommends that the name of the Main Committee be changed in order to avoid confusion and to enhance its status as a parallel debating chamber of the House of Representatives.**

### **Recommendation 2**

**The committee recommends that an alternative name be selected which is not party political and which reflects a significant aspect of Australian culture or parliamentary democracy. The committee favours “The Federation Chamber of the House of Representatives” to be known by the short title of “Federation Chamber”.**

### **Recommendation 3**

**The committee recommends that a new name for the Main Committee should be introduced to take effect at the beginning of the 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament and should not await the building of a new venue for the Main Committee.**

### **Recommendation 4**

**The committee recommends that room 2R3 be returned to service as a committee room when the Main Committee/Federation Chamber moves to a new location.**







## **Name of the Main Committee**

### **Reason for the inquiry**

- 1.1 In July 2000 the committee's predecessor presented a report entitled *The Second Chamber: Enhancing the Main Committee*.<sup>1</sup> Amongst other things the committee recommended that the name of the Main Committee be changed to "The Second Chamber" in order to avoid confusion and enhance its status. The government response to the report was presented on 27 June 2002. The response did not support the recommendation that the name be changed to the "Second Chamber" on the grounds that:

The title "Second Chamber" could result in confusion as it can be taken as a reference to the Senate. However, the idea of a new name for the Main Committee to enhance its recognition is supported in-principle. The government is prepared to consider other alternative names for the Main Committee.

- 1.2 The current Procedure Committee has taken an active interest in the development of the Main Committee in relation to its growing importance in providing more time for a variety of House proceedings, its procedures, the venue in which it meets, and – not least – in the problems Members and others have had with its name.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Second Chamber: Enhancing the Main Committee*, July 2000.

- 1.3 In February 2004 the committee decided to follow up the offer in the government response regarding consideration of alternative names and consult with Members and others on a possible alternative. The terms of reference for this endeavour are

Problems identified with the current name of the “Main Committee” and a preferred alternative name.

- 1.4 A note on the conduct of the inquiry is included in Appendix A.

## Origin of the title “Main Committee”

- 1.5 The institution known as the “Main Committee” resulted from a recommendation of the Procedure Committee in its report *About Time: Bills, Questions and Working Hours*. The report proposed a second legislative stream to provide more time for debating legislation. It was to take the second reading and consideration in detail stages (which was also proposed in the report) of such bills as were referred to it by the House and was referred to in the report as “a Main Committee for legislation”.<sup>2</sup>
- 1.6 Examination of committee papers leading to the *About Time* report reveals that the name of the Main Committee originated in the term “Main Legislation Committee” (as opposed to the consideration of legislation by a series of legislation committees). This became “Main Committee (Legislation)” in the final report.
- 1.7 The committee’s report recommended two legislative streams. The idea of referring other business came later. “Legislation” had to be dropped from the name when committee and delegation reports and motions to take note of papers were included as matters that could be referred. This happened before the standing orders establishing the Main Committee were agreed to by the House.
- 1.8 The recommendation which led to the establishment of the Main Committee did not include a reference to a possible venue but simply stated:
- It is recommended that:
- (a) A Main Committee (Legislation) be established to take the second reading and consideration in detail stages of such bills as are referred to it by the House.
- 1.9 However, the text of the report proposed that

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<sup>2</sup> *About Time: Bills, Questions and Working Hours*, October 1993, p. 2.

The Main Committee would meet in the main committee room and would meet during sittings of the House.<sup>3</sup>

- 1.10 The main committee room is a feature of the new Parliament House. There was no comparable facility in the Old Parliament House. It fulfilled all the requirements of a second debating chamber being a large and imposing room with a high ceiling, an upper gallery and easy access to the public. The room itself is accessed from the public area on the first floor between the House of Representatives and Senate Chambers.
- 1.11 There appears to have been no negotiations with the Senate before the report proposing the Main Committee was presented, to ascertain that the use of the main committee room was acceptable to that House. However, the suitability of the room was questioned soon after. These included the fact that the room could not be permanently set up for the use of the Main Committee because it is a shared facility. Also, as a shared facility, the main committee room could not be available at any time as required by the House because other users would need a guarantee that their bookings would be honoured.
- 1.12 When the Main Committee had its inaugural sitting on 8 June 1994, it met in a refurbished committee room – room 2R3.

## **Problems with the title “Main Committee”**

- 1.13 From the early days of the Main Committee there was a need to give its venue (room 2R3) a title other than the name of the institution itself. Naturally the room became known as the “Main Committee room”. With hindsight, it is regrettable that the name of the institution (and therefore its venue) was not changed prior to its inauguration.

## **Confusing the “Main Committee room” with the “main committee room**

- 1.14 From the first it became obvious that keeping the name but not the intended venue of the same name, was unfortunate. The confusion caused by having two venues with identical sounding names is too obvious to require argument and evidence. For the purpose of this report, the venue of the Main Committee (room 2R3) is spelled with capitals while the large room on the first floor is spelled as “the main committee room”. This

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<sup>3</sup> *About Time: Bills, Questions and Working Hours*, p. 8.

convenient distinction is unhelpful when the names are spoken and, of course, not all writers preserve the distinction.

- 1.15 Despite the fact that the “Main Committee” is about to celebrate its tenth anniversary, confusion between the two venues is an everyday occurrence. The Procedure Committee addressed the problem in its report *The Second Chamber: Enhancing the Main Committee*. As part of that inquiry the committee conducted a survey of Members which revealed that there was a general feeling that the title is “unsatisfactory, inadequate and misleading”.<sup>4</sup> The responsible Government Whip reported to a round table conference on the topic that even those scheduled to speak in the Main Committee often went to the wrong venue.<sup>5</sup>
- 1.16 There is a view that despite some level of continuing confusion, after ten years it is too late to change the name and people can generally work out which venue is meant.<sup>6</sup> The committee does not support this view. Many people cannot easily determine which venue is meant or are unaware that there is a choice, and inconvenience results. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the two venues with identical sounding names may be used for similar purposes. When the House is not sitting, the Main Committee room is used for meetings, seminars and presentations. The main committee room is sometimes used for the same purposes.
- 1.17 The irony is that in the ten years since the Main Committee commenced, the main committee room is rarely used by the House of Representatives. The most prevalent use is as a classroom for school children in the programs conducted by the Parliamentary Education Office – an activity which would be more suitably carried out in former committee room 2R3. The other common use of the main committee room is to host Senate estimates committee hearings – a use which could also be conveniently housed in former committee room 2R3.

## Impact of the name on the status of the institution

- 1.18 Leaving aside the origin of the title “Main Committee”, the title now used emphasises certain characteristics of the institution at the expense of others. In particular, the name “Main Committee” highlights the fact that it is subordinate to the House itself. Of course this is a true reflection of the procedural status of the Main Committee. Its authority to act comes from

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<sup>4</sup> *The Second Chamber: Enhancing the Main Committee*, p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> Evidence given by Mrs Joanna Gash MP.

<sup>6</sup> This view was expressed at the round table conference of 25 March 2004.

the House to which it must report. Any unresolved question must be reported to the House and settled in the main chamber.

- 1.19 The name “Main Committee” also expresses the fact that among the many parliamentary committees, it is the pre-eminent one. Like the former Committee of the Whole, all Members of the House are also members of the Main Committee.
- 1.20 Other characteristics of the Main Committee are not obvious from its name. Its founders emphasised the “second legislative stream” or parallel stream element of the Main Committee’s function.<sup>7</sup> However, the name itself does not emphasise the functions of the Main Committee. Additional functions have evolved, including the use of the Main Committee for private Members to speak during 3-minute statements and adjournment debate. The graphs in Appendix C illustrate the work of the Main Committee and show its development over time. The statistics show the increasing importance of the Main Committee in allowing the House as a whole (Chamber and Main Committee) to process business efficiently.<sup>8</sup>
- 1.21 The Main Committee has also been used to test procedural innovations which might be too disruptive in the Chamber. Interventions are an example.
- 1.22 The committee considers that the emphasis in the name – Main Committee – of its subordinate status rather than its function as a parallel (but also subordinate) chamber, has a negative effect of the status of the Main Committee. While the role and acceptance of the Main Committee has undoubtedly grown over its ten year history, perhaps its acceptance might have been even greater had its name emphasised its functions.

## Conclusions on problems with the name of the Main Committee

- 1.23 The committee is convinced that even after ten years of operation, the combined problems of confusion with the main committee room and the desirability of a name which better reflects the status and function of the Main Committee are strong arguments for a change of name.

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<sup>7</sup> *About Time*, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> The committee notes that the report *The Second Chamber: enhancing the Main Committee*, explored the increasing importance of the Main Committee as a parallel stream for the conduct of the House’s business – e.g. p. 9.

## Arguments for changing the name of the main committee room

- 1.24 One of the arguments for changing the name of the Main Committee is to avoid confusion. An obvious solution to the problem of confusion is to change the name of the main committee room. This approach was discussed at the round table conference and the committee recognises that it has some merit.
- 1.25 On balance however, the committee does not support this solution because:
- The name of the main committee room is more entrenched than the name of the Main Committee. Its name predates the opening of the building and the name is used in the architectural drawings and other building documents;
  - The main committee room is not under the sole control of the House of Representatives. There would need to be support from the Senate and possibly the Department of the Parliamentary Service to change the name and this might not be forthcoming;
  - Changing the name of the main committee room would certainly remove confusion but would do nothing to enhance the status and therefore acceptance of the Main Committee.

## Arguments for changing the name of the Main Committee

- 1.26 The committee concludes that the problems of confusion and negative impact on the status of the Main Committee are powerful arguments in support of its earlier recommendation that the name of the Main Committee be changed.

### Recommendation 1

**The committee recommends that the name of the Main Committee be changed in order to avoid confusion and to enhance its status as a parallel debating chamber of the House of Representatives.**

## Finding a new name

- 1.27 The committee accepts that the name “Second Chamber” could itself cause confusion because upper houses in various parts of the world are known by that title. The parliamentary environment has become more international as a result of the Internet and it is reasonable to drop support for the “Second Chamber” option.
- 1.28 As outlined above, a new name should enhance the status of the Main Committee and suggest its functions. A most important consideration is that the new name should not be party political. This eliminates naming the room for a political leader (unless the political leader were from an era predating current party recognition).
- 1.29 There are many values which could be considered in determining a new name but the committee favours a name which recognises a significant aspect of Australian culture or parliamentary history. A possible new name was debated at the round table conference and suggestions included “Main Committee Second Chamber” and “House of Representatives Second Chamber”. Neither of these suggestions really address the objections to changing the name to the “Second Chamber” because the name would most probably be shortened.
- 1.30 The committee favours the incorporation of the name of the House into the new title for the Main Committee. In relation to whether a cultural value or a significant aspect of parliamentary history is selected, the committee favours the use of the word “federation”. It is consistent with choosing a name which would enhance the status of the institution and recognises the fundamental structure of our parliamentary system.

## Recommendation 2

**The committee recommends that an alternative name be selected which is not party political and which reflects a significant aspect of Australian culture or parliamentary democracy. The committee favours “The Federation Chamber of the House of Representatives” to be known by the short title of “Federation Chamber”.**

## Introducing the new name

- 1.31 The committee firmly supports building a new venue for the Main Committee and notes that plans are being prepared for a possible new venue. There has been discussion linking a new name for the Main Committee to this new venue.<sup>9</sup>
- 1.32 The committee does not support linking a new name to a new venue. The longer the current name is used the more difficult it will be to accept a new name. When the new venue is built it could be named the “Federation Chamber of the House of Representatives” or whatever alternative name is accepted by the House.
- 1.33 While supporting an early adoption of a new name for the Main Committee, the committee accepts that it would be practical for the change to take effect in a new Parliament. This would allow time to change standing orders and other documentation.

## Recommendation 3

**The committee recommends that a new name for the Main Committee should be introduced to take effect at the beginning of the 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament and should not await the building of a new venue for the Main Committee.**

## Conclusion

- 1.34 The committee strongly supports the building of a new home for the Main Committee but it recognises that, even if supported by the House and the Government, it will take some time because of the budget cycle and the time taken for building. The architects advising on a possible new venue consider the building stage would take eight months.
- 1.35 The committee considers that the current room (2R3) should be equipped and furnished to reflect the value that the Main Committee has come to assume. The room was refurbished in 1994 when the Main Committee commenced but its ambience remains that of an ordinary committee room. It is devoid of ornamentation and does not have the “feel” of a parallel debating chamber. Even the addition of appropriate pieces from the Parliament’s art collection would improve the room and would not be an additional expense.

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the submission from the Hon K Andrews MP supported a new name and a new venue though he did not argue that the name should await the venue.



- 1.36 While supporting a new venue for reasons associated with the operation of the Main Committee, the committee is also concerned about the lack of accommodation for committee and other meetings. The current site of the Main Committee was created at the expense of accommodating other meetings. When a new venue is built, the present site should be returned to service as a committee room to meet an increasing pressure on space for meetings in the building.

**Recommendation 4**

**The committee recommends that room 2R3 be returned to service as a committee room when the Main Committee/Federation Chamber moves to a new location.**

MARGARET MAY MP

Chair

31 May 2004





## **Appendix A**

### **Conduct of the inquiry**

The committee wrote to all Members and to the Clerk of the House asking for their views on problems identified with the current name of the “Main Committee” and a preferred alternative name.

Two submissions were received – one from the Clerk of the House and one from the Hon Kevin Andrews MP.

The submissions are at Appendix B.

The committee then organised a round table conference, held on 25 March 2004, to discuss the issue of problems with the name of the Main Committee (and other current committee inquiries).

### **Participants in round table conference**

The Hon Neil Andrew MP, Speaker

The Hon Ian Causley MP, Deputy Speaker

The Hon Tony Abbott MP, Leader of the House

Ms Julia Gillard MP (Manager of Opposition Business)

Mrs Joanna Gash MP (Government Whip)

Mr Harry Quick MP (Opposition Whip)

Mr Michael Organ MP (Greens)

Mr Ian Harris (Clerk of the House)

Mr Peter Gibson (Senior Adviser to the Speaker)





## **Appendix B**

### **Excerpt from submission by Clerk of the House, Mr I C Harris, to four Procedure Committee inquiries.**

#### **2. Alternative name for the Main Committee**

The Procedure Committee has recommended that the name of the Main Committee be changed to 'Second Chamber' - (July 2000 report *The Second Chamber: Enhancing the Main Committee*, p.33-4). In that report the Procedure Committee noted that members responding to its survey about the Main Committee were evenly divided on whether they liked the current title. It concluded that the title was 'unsatisfactory, inadequate or misleading', and referred to the problem caused by the naming of the large committee room, shared with the Senate, the Main Committee Room.

The Government response of June 2002 did not support the recommendation, referring to the possibility of confusion given the use of the term 'second chamber' to refer to the Senate. The response stated, however, that the Government was prepared to consider other alternatives.

There is little to be added to what has already been said. The Procedure Committee may feel that the longer the term Main Committee is used the greater the understanding and recognition of the name and the lower the risk of confusion in practice. The Procedure Committee may also think it worthwhile to consider whether the name of the body should in part reflect its relationship with the House – in other words, is anything gained, or lost, by a name which does not include the term “committee” , is it the “committee” or the “second chamber” aspect which is more important.

If a new meeting room is built for the Main Committee a suitable opportunity would be created to give the body a new name if some level of consensus could be reached on a new name. Alternatively, consideration could be given to finding a new and suitable name for the (large central) Main Committee Room – this would, of course, be a matter for discussion with the Senate.

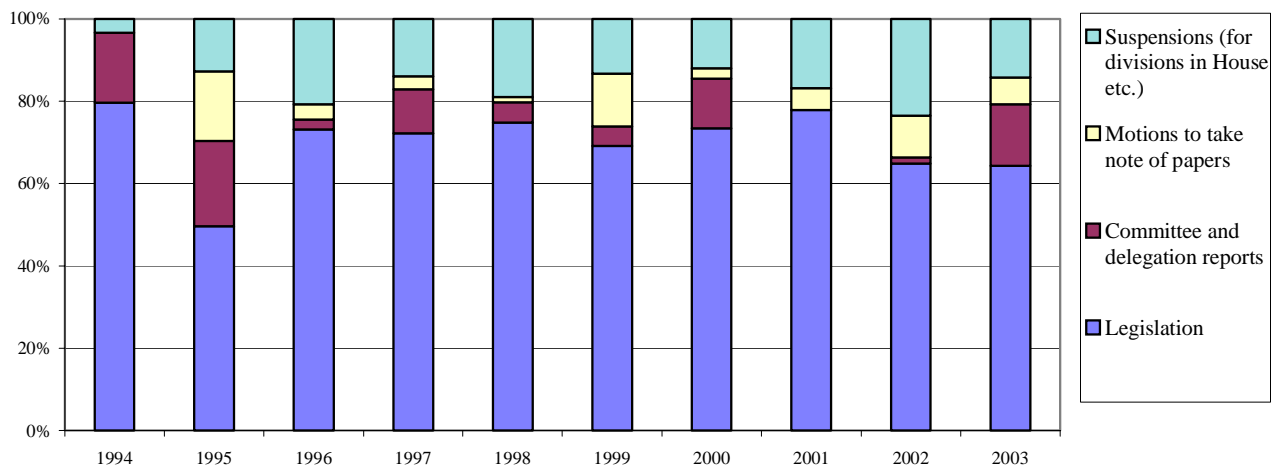
In the design brief for the Main Committee Room, provision was made for it to be a legislative Chamber, set out in the UK House of Commons style. When a more permanent location for the Main Committee was first considered, the Main Committee Room was an obvious location, as it had televising facilities, was on the perimeter of public circulation and has a public gallery. No agreed position emerged from officer-level discussions on that matter and I believe that it would be preferable for any discussion on the renaming of the Main Committee Room to occur between the Presiding Officers.



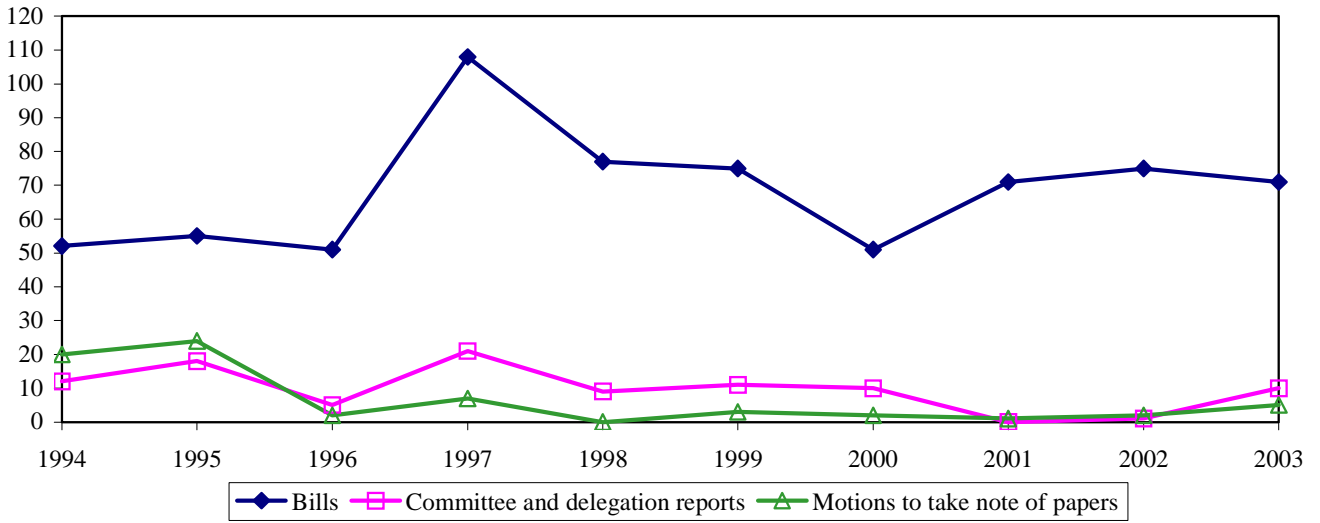
## Appendix C

### Statistics for the Main Committee

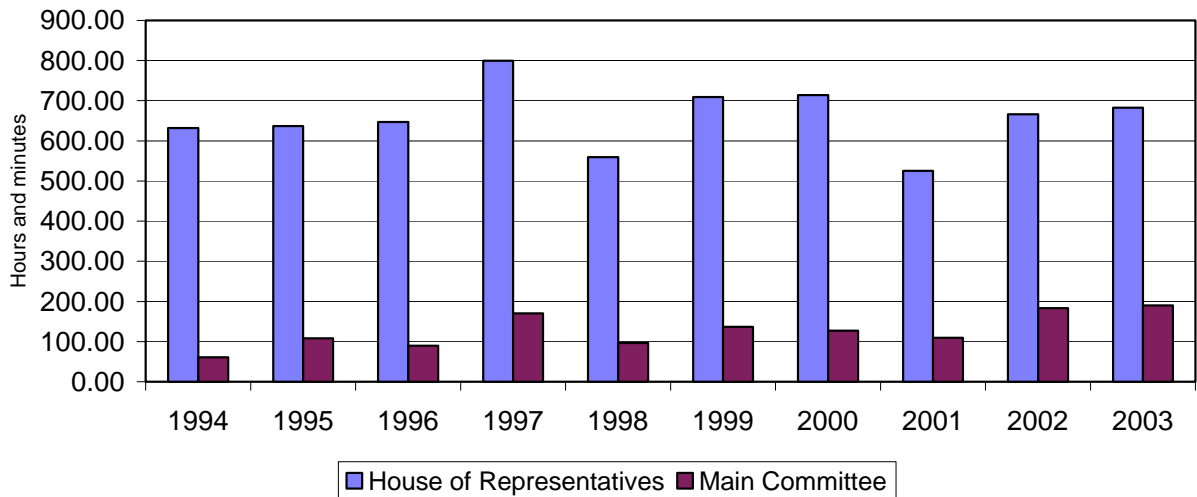
#### Percentage on time spent in the Main Committee



### Items referred to the Main Committee



### Total hours of sittings in the House of Representatives and the Main Committee





### Urgent Bills

