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Submission No. 3

20/8/08
Committee Secretary
Standing House Committee on Procedure
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

21 August 2008

Re: Inquiry into the conduct of the business of the House

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. I wish to offer just a few observations as a new Member of Parliament, while acknowledging that the current system – which is both a matter of written rules and unwritten conventions – has evolved over many years.

1. Electronic voting

The current system of manual counting of Members during divisions is extremely inefficient and out of step with the modern practice of electronic voting in parliaments around the world. The introduction of electronic voting would significantly decrease the amount of time devoted to divisions and the consequent disruptions to committee meetings and other business of the Parliament. If the House were to move to a system of electronic voting, Members should still be present in the Chamber to vote (i.e., they could not vote from their offices) and there should be a public display board in the Chamber reflecting the votes of individual members.

2. Question time

The contest and theatre of Question Time has a parliamentary and democratic function, but its purpose (viz. to allow Members of the House to ask questions of Ministers) may be better served, and the community's view of politics¹ might be improved, if the process and conduct of Question Time was less "confected biff", as my predecessor in the seat of Fremantle Dr Carmen Lawrence has described it, and more substantive probing and response.

With this in mind, consideration could be given to:

- (i) removing so-called "Dorothy Dixers" from Question Time, and

¹ See John Uhr of ANU, who wrote in "Reforming the Parliament": "*the community's low expectations of parliament reflect the common Australian reputation of parliaments as wastelands of adversarial partisan politics.*"

Atwell
Aubin Grove
Banjup
Beaconsfield
Beeliar
Bibra Lake
Bicton
Coogee
Coolbellup
East Fremantle
Fremantle
Hamilton Hill
Hammond Park
Henderson
Hilton
Jandakot
Kardinya
Munster
Naval Base
North Fremantle
North Lake
O'Connor
Palmyra
Rottnest Island
Samson
South Fremantle
South Lake
Spearwood
Success
Wattieup
White Gum Valley
Willagee
Yangebup

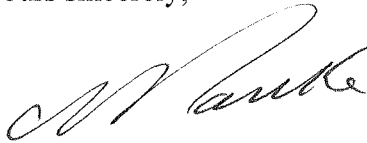
- (ii) imposing time limits on questions and answers (e.g., one minute for questions and four minutes for answers). This would allow more questions and answers and would perhaps constrain the tendency for questions and answers to be used for point-scoring. The introduction of a follow-up question, as permitted in the Senate, would be a useful reform.

3. Acknowledgement of visiting school groups

It is customary for the Speaker to acknowledge the presence in the Gallery of visiting former MPs, overseas delegations and other dignitaries. I believe it would be more inclusive of the wider Australian community – and meaningful for students as they learn about our system of representative democracy - for the Speaker to also acknowledge the presence of visiting Australian school groups.

I thank the Committee for its consideration of these matters.

Yours sincerely,



Melissa Parke
Federal Member for Fremantle