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The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

# Re-opening the debate

**Inquiry into the arrangements for the opening day of Parliament**

House of Representatives  
Standing Committee on Procedure

October 2008  
Canberra

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## Foreword

The opening of Parliament is a hugely important occasion in Australia's democracy. It is the time when the Parliament comes back together following an election; it is the time when the people's representatives are officially sworn in and take their place in the chamber; and it is the time when the Government—through the Governor-General—announces its agenda for the ensuing parliamentary term. The practices and procedures for the opening of Parliament are, not surprisingly, largely borrowed from the British Parliament at Westminster. Ceremony is an integral part of the proceedings.

Previous Procedure Committees have conducted specific inquiries into the opening of Parliament on three separate occasions—in 1991, 1995 and 2001. Each report reflected a desire to balance tradition and modernity. This report is formulated on the same principle—the Committee strongly believes that the ceremony and tradition of opening day should be maintained. This report does not attempt to make any fundamental changes to opening day, but instead makes recommendations for change within the sound existing framework. The recommendations of previous reports were not able to effect change. The Committee is hopeful that this report will be more successful.

The primary reason for undertaking this inquiry was to analyse the staging of the Indigenous ceremony at the opening of this Parliament. The Committee was delighted with the conduct of the 'Welcome to Country' ceremony and feels it should be a part of future openings. The Committee has also made recommendations aimed at giving significant moments in the day a higher profile.

The Committee hopes that this report will spark debate among Members about the nature of the first day of a parliament and looks forward to hearing the views of all Members on this important subject.

Julie Owens MP  
Chair



## Membership of the Committee

Chair Ms Julie Owens MP

Deputy Chair Hon Alex Somlyay MP

Members Ms Sharon Bird MP

Hon Roger Price MP

Ms Jennie George MP

Dr Mal Washer MP

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# Terms of reference

## Committee terms of reference

To inquire into and report on the practices and procedures of the House and its committees.

## Inquiry terms of reference

To review the arrangements for the opening day of Parliament.



# List of recommendations

## 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.

## 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.

## Recommendation 3

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

## 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 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.

## Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the election of 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.



### 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.

### 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.

### 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.

### Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that prior to the commencement of the 43<sup>rd</sup> 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 purpose of opening day proceedings, as well as other background information.

### Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that prior to the commencement of the 43<sup>rd</sup> 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 on available on the website.

