

Reflections

- 7.1 The Chair of the current formation of the Procedure Committee wrote to each of the surviving Chairs inviting them to comment on various aspects of the committee and its activities during their tenure. The responses of Messrs Mountford, Scholes and Pyne are reproduced in this chapter.

Mr John Mountford

- 7.2 Mr Mountford was the Member for Banks from 1980 until he retired before the 1990 general elections (he was succeeded by Mr Melham, a current member of the Procedure Committee).

I was a member of the Standing Committee on Procedure from February 1985 until I retired from Parliament in February 1990. I was Chairperson from October 1987. Prior to that I was a member of the Standing Orders Committee (SOC) from the time I was elected in late 1980 until October 1984.

When first elected I was keen to learn how the House operated so thought that a good way to learn would be to become a member of the SOC. Following the election of 1984, I became a member of the Procedure Committee. I was also a Deputy Chairperson of Committees from March 1983 until retiring. I had a continuing interest in the operations and activities of the House during my 10 years in Parliament.

I considered the role of the Procedure Committee to assist members have a greater participation in the proceedings and to achieve a smooth running of such proceedings in the House.

The implementation of the Procedure Committee recommendations are a decision of the government of the day. In discussions between members of the Procedure Committee and the Leader of the House I always got the impression that the interests of Members took a ‘back seat’ to those of the ministry. Many senior Ministers, I believe, would prefer to rule executively rather than having to be bothered with Parliament.

It was always a revelation to me to see the change in Members’ attitudes towards the procedures of the House when they were appointed to the ministry. Members are given very limited opportunities to express their opinions in the House on either matters electoral or of national importance because of time constraints.

I would say the government of the day is accommodating to the Procedure Committee rather than being supportive.

During the period I was a member of the Procedure Committee it functioned very effectively internally with all members having an altruistic view of how the House should function.

It is now over 15 years since I retired from Parliament so it is difficult for me to remember the impacts the Procedure Committee had during my tenure as chairperson. I would consider the implementation of our recommendation that Members have a morning session each sitting week to discuss general matters of interest to be a major achievement.

Whilst I remember many amusing episodes in the old Parliament House including the Member in the chicken suit, ping-pong balls down, and eggs thrown, from the public gallery—and a member of the public jumping down from the public gallery onto Leo McLeay, MP—I do not recall any involving activities of the Procedure Committee.

As you are aware, politicians in general are becoming increasingly unpopular with the public and I think it relates to how Parliaments appear remote and self-serving and the manner in which they behave in Parliament. Increasing the number of sitting days and opening the House to the public so as to enable them to address the House for an allotted time each sitting week may assist.

Question Time has not improved over the years with the same longwinded answers being read from prepared notes in response to ‘Dorothy Dix’ questions from government Members and the

same longwinded responses—one could not call them answers—to opposition shadow ministers and Members' questions which have largely been given to them in written form by their leader or the offices of shadow ministers. The Procedure Committee over the years, and I am sure it has under your chairmanship also, attempted to clean up Question Time to make it more relevant and meaningful, without success.

The Standing Committee on Procedure has an important role to play in this and future Parliaments and I wish you and other members every success in your endeavours.

The Hon. Gordon Scholes AO

7.3 Mr Scholes was the Member for Corio from 1967—when he was elected at a by-election following the resignation of Hubert Opperman, who had resigned—until 1993, when he did not seek re-election. He was a member of the Joint Committee on the Parliamentary Committee System until being elected Speaker of the House of Representatives in February 1975. He served on the Standing Committee on Procedure during the 35th and 36th Parliaments and presided as Chairman of the committee from 16 May 1990 to 8 February 1993.

The main reason for the emergence of [the committee was] a perceived need to augment the Standing Orders Committee and [to] establish a body less top-heavy and able to concentrate on the House as it is, and the method[s] best suited to meet the requirements and expectations placed on the House, by its members and the nation.

The traditional methods inherited from Westminster and reflected in the Standing Orders Committee that evolved through the Colonial legislatures were no longer adequate. Also, there were major shifts in the role the Parliament played in the political process.

I served on the Standing Orders Committee both as a member and as Chair and I think I could say that at no stage did it even pretend to play any role other than that of maintaining the status quo. No long term study [has been made] of the effect of changes taking place in the political process and the perception of the nation, both largely driven by events such as the Vietnam War, the call-up and the passing from the scene of Sir Robert Menzies and the

dominance of the chamber and the nation's politics—this, plus the short term of Harold Holt, and John Gorton, with roots still in the Senate where a dynamic change in role had taken place with the emergence of Lionel Murphy, the DLP and the drive of Jim Odgers as Clerk.

A change in the processes of the House was needed; but it needed to have input from the Members [and] that could not happen under the leadership of a committee structured as was the Standing Orders Committee.

Petitions—a rarity until the 1960s (22 to over 2000 in 1975) and actually presented by the Member in the chamber—had to change. Legislation reached a stage where the guillotine and the gag were part of the normal procedure at the end of each session.

These are examples of the type of changes that were making it more difficult to conduct the business of the House. A limitation on major change was the limited capacity of the then Parliament building which lacked rooms for large committees, particularly if required by both Houses, and built-in resistance of MPs on all sides.

The Procedure Committee was a necessary change which has made a valuable contribution to the functions of Parliament. There is, however, still a lot to be done to ensure that those elected to do so are able to meet their responsibilities while making sure that there is capacity for the government of the day to govern.

The Hon. Christopher Pyne MP

7.4 Mr Pyne has been the Member for Sturt since 1993 and is Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Ageing.

The Procedure Committee can be likened to the administrative workhorse of the House of Representatives. It remains one of the most powerful and significant committees residing within Canberra, and its ability to change procedural conventions has ensured that it is the driving force when it comes to ensuring the highest levels of efficacy within the House.

During my time as Chairman, the members of the committee and I committed ourselves to scrutinising the workings of the House, and in doing so attempted to fix any inconsistencies and problems that we noted during the working life of the House. In this

capacity I was able to effect change across several areas, proving the genuine worth of the Procedure Committee in the parliamentary process.

Fortunately the systems supporting and administering the work of the committee were of an encouraging nature, and to this end I would thank the Government of the day, who, under the leadership of the Hon. John Howard, allowed the committee to do its work with strong backing. Indifference towards committees is a problem that has dogged the work of many of these working groups over time. House of Representatives committees are and will remain an integral part of parliamentary life, and it must be ensured that the thrust of parliament remains behind them and the work that they do.

Most importantly we must recognise that the committee could not work without the efforts of the secretariat. The staff that have and those that continue to commit their professional lives to the Procedure Committee deserve the strongest commendations. This document is testament to their hard work.

I am proud of the initiatives that I was able to lead the committee in during my time as chairman. In 1999 the committee approached the task of making the workings of the House more accountable to community involvement. In the report *It's your House: Community involvement in the procedures and practices of the House of Representatives and its committees*, tabled 22 November 1999, the committee presented several initiatives to encourage and increase the role of the general public in the political process.

The committee and I looked at several initiatives including creating a more effective petition system based on an active reporting and acknowledgement process in the House and Main Committee. This was brought about to increase the accountability of Members in relation to petitions. We also reviewed the community's access to media of and about the parliamentary process. As such the committee identified a number of deficiencies regarding the public's knowledge of the political process. This led to, amongst other things, a strong show of support for the Broadcasting Committee in their attempts to increase the audience levels of broadcasts of parliament, as well as continued scrutiny of the education programme aimed at fostering an understanding of the political process.

Importantly the committee also looked at the utilisation of the Internet pertaining to community interaction with the House and

committees. Several ideas discussed amongst the members included the introduction of an Internet feedback system allowing the community to convey their thoughts directly to committee members. Not surprisingly the committee also assessed the customs and language of the House in a suggestion that the structure of standing orders be made more logical so as to increase their current relevance. Fortunately, and I hear a significant number of current and former Reps breathe a collective sigh of relief, no traditions were harmed in the tabling and subsequent application of the report.

In the report *The Second Chamber: enhancing the Main Committee*, produced in August 2000 and my final report on behalf of the Procedure Committee, I presented to the House the Procedure Committee's review of the Main Committee. This highlighted the past importance of the Main Committee, but also set forth a number of recommendations to ensure the future importance of a committee whose roles had created significant confusion amongst Members.

The Procedure Committee in its formal review suggested a number of cosmetic changes of note to increase the effectiveness of the Main Committee, namely in suggesting a change of the committee's title to become the Second Chamber. This change was suggested to recognise the Main Committee's true role as a forum for debating contemporary issues brought before the parliament, and for comprehensive analysis of private Members' business. Effectively a change to the Second Chamber simply sought to adequately describe the committee's role in its title, quashing any confusion caused by the existing title. Through calling for change the committee attempted to ensure the recognition of the importance of the Main Committee, to defeat the attitudes of those who labelled it, as I quoted in my speech to the House, a 'tin-pot chamber'.

In strengthening the identity of the Main Committee through the recommendations contained in the report, I believe that the Procedure Committee ensured the ongoing success of the Main Committee. Importantly most of these changes were brought about with little or even no requirement for government spending, and this is one of the underlying successes of recommendations contained in reports tabled by the Procedure Committee. The committee prides itself on effecting common sense change within the House of Representatives and its committees. Changes, that

while often small, help to ensure the ongoing efficiency and relevance of the House of Representatives.

I will always be proud of the time that I served as chairman of the Procedure Committee, and of those changes that I, along with my fellow members, was able to effect. The Procedure Committee is gaining a long and relevant history. In parting I wish all of my current and future successors just as effective and enjoyable a time on the committee as I had.

