

## Introduction

### 'It's your House' report

- 1.1 On 6 March 2001 the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure hosted a conference of committee chairs, deputy chairs and secretaries. The aim of the conference was to share experiences and ideas on how to promote a better public understanding of the work of House of Representatives committees and joint committees of the Parliament.
- 1.2 The impetus for the conference came from recommendation 12 of a report by the Procedure Committee on community involvement in the procedures and practices of the House of Representatives.<sup>1</sup> Entitled *It's Your House*, this report was presented to the House on 22 November 1999.
- 1.3 The *It's Your House* report highlights the importance of Members of Parliament individually and collectively keeping in touch with community views, monitoring the effects on people of legislation and government action, and encouraging the public to better understand and participate in the work of committees. This is especially important in an environment characterized by community scepticism about the ability of Members to understand and respond to community needs. The *It's Your House* report reflected the view of Members that more effective community involvement is essential to maintain and build confidence in parliamentary processes.

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1 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *It's your House: Community involvement in the procedures and practices of the House of Representatives and its committees*, October 1999, p.44

- 1.4 *It's Your House* examined the opportunities for individuals and community groups to become more involved in the procedures and practices of the House. Committees represent the greatest opportunity for community involvement and, as a consequence, the report placed considerable emphasis on their work. The report discussed ways of improving community involvement in, and understanding of, committees. Thus, of the 31 recommendations made in the report, 20 concern committees<sup>2</sup>. (Report recommendations concerning committees can be found at Appendix B.)
- 1.5 Many of the actions recommended in the *It's Your House* report did not require approval by the House and were implemented speedily. Some other recommendations have since been implemented by the House. The recommendations concerning committees can be loosely grouped into four main categories, these are:
- making the committee process more open;
  - making committees more independent;
  - encouraging committees to be more flexible and innovative; and
  - improving the image and understanding of committees in the general community.<sup>3</sup>
- 1.6 The Speaker and the Government separately responded to the report on 10 October 2000 (for responses see Appendixes C and D). Both responses supported a once per Parliament meeting of committee chairs, deputy chairs and secretaries.<sup>4</sup> The conference hosted by the Procedure Committee on 6 March 2001 was the first of these meetings.
- 1.7 The aim of this report is to summarise action taken since the *It's your House* report, document the issues raised at the conference and examine in more detail some of the strategies different committees have used to promote public participation in inquiries and raise awareness of the work that committees do.

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2 *ibid.*, p.41–81

3 Robyn Webber, *Parliament 2000: Towards a modern committee system—Increasing public participation in the work of parliamentary committees*, Australasian Study of Parliament Group, National Conference 2000, p.5

4 Speaker of the House of Representatives, *Speaker's response to the report by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure—It's your House: community involvement in the procedures and practices of the House of Representatives and its committees*, 10 October 2000, p.6; Government, *Response to the report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure: It's your House: community involvement in the procedures and practices of the House of Representatives and its committees*, 10 October 2000, p.4

- 1.8 Chapter 2 discusses changes that have occurred since the *It's Your House* report, a number of issues raised at the meeting and new strategies being used by committees to promote their inquiries and gain greater public involvement.
- 1.9 Chapter 3 uses case studies to examine some of the innovative work being done by committees in this area.
- 1.10 Chapter 4 sets out the committee's conclusions and proposals for future action.

## The work of committees

- 1.11 The House of Representatives establishes committees comprising government and non-government Members to carry out investigative type work not easily conducted by the larger body of the House itself. It delegates to its committees some of its important work in scrutinising government administration and activity and in representing community and other views in the policy review process. Committees report their findings and recommendations to the House. In this way the reports are made public and the information and recommendations are fed into the policy making process, hopefully resulting in better administration and public policy.
- 1.12 The work of committees places parliamentarians in direct contact with the public and enables them to canvas a wide range of public views through written submissions, public hearings, inspections and other activities. Committees are a key conduit for the representative role of the House.
- 1.13 More than any other parliamentary activity, committee inquiries bring Parliament to the people by promoting public awareness and debate on matters being considered by the Parliament and by allowing people to directly contribute their views to the parliamentary process.

## Strategies for promoting inquiries

- 1.14 Committees have developed a variety of techniques aimed at promoting inquiries and encouraging as wide a range of input as possible. Such strategies include:
  - advertising committee inquiries in major newspapers, special interest magazines or journals related to the subject of the inquiry;

- press releases outlining the terms of reference of the inquiry and other information directed at gaining media attention and participation;
- media conferences, media interviews with the chair of the committee and other members;
- mail-outs of letters to specialists or experts in a field, academics, organisations, state and federal government agencies and departments and lobby groups;
- flyers, pamphlets and brochures detailing an inquiry;
- public meetings, seminars and round table discussions to promote interest in an inquiry;
- production of videos concerning the subject matter of an inquiry;
- electronic communication such as the Internet and email; and
- display of banners and signs at public hearings and seminars as a means of promoting the committee.<sup>5</sup>

1.15 Some of these strategies, such as advertising in major papers or mail-outs, have been in use for many years, while others such as banners and the use of the Internet are still relatively new and their value in assisting the work of committees not yet fully known. The *It's Your House* report recommended that '(r)ather than each committee working in a vacuum there is potentially a benefit in committees sharing their experiences and ideas on how to engender better understanding of their work.'<sup>6</sup> The conference of chairs, deputy chairs and secretaries was therefore recommended by the committee as a way of coordinating efforts, generating new ideas, sharing experiences and encouraging action.<sup>7</sup>

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5 Department of the House of Representatives, *Committee Office Manual of Procedure and Practice*, February 2000, pp 5-12

6 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *It's Your House: Community involvement in the procedures and practices of the House of Representatives and its committees*, October 1999, p.44

7 id.