
The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

It's your House

Community involvement in the procedures and practices of the House of Representatives and its committees

House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Procedure

October 1999
Canberra

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ISBN 0 642 36618 7



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Membership of the committee

Chair Mr C M Pyne MP

Deputy Chair Hon L R S Price MP

Members Mr R A Cameron MP
 Mr M J Ferguson AM MP
 Mr J A Forrest MP
 Mrs J Gash MP
 Ms J Gerick MP

Committee secretariat

Secretary Ms Robyn Webber

Research Officer Ms Julia Morris

House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Telephone: (02) 6277 4672
Email: Procedure.Committee.Reps@aph.gov.au



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

To inquire into the opportunities for individuals and community groups to become involved in the procedures and practices of the House and its committees.

Issues covered may include:

- the petitioning process;
- a review of the right of reply of people referred to in the House;
- the use of electronic communication by committees; and
- improving community involvement in the work of committees.



List of recommendations

2 Petitioning the House

Recommendation 1

The committee recommends that the standing orders governing petitions (nos. 112 to 132) be amended to make them clearer, simpler and more accessible as set out in appendix B.

Recommendation 2

The committee recommends that the standing orders be amended to allow Members to present petitions during the period of Members' 90 second statements in the House or 3 minute statements in the Main Committee. The proposed amendment to the standing orders is shown in appendix B.

Recommendation 3

The committee recommends that an annual report to the House be prepared setting out petitions presented and ministerial responses to them. The Standing Committee on Procedure intends to implement this recommendation itself.

Recommendation 4

The committee recommends that the standing orders be amended to provide for petitions to stand referred to general purpose standing committees for any inquiry the committee may wish to make.

3 The right of reply procedure

Recommendation 5

The committee recommends that the resolution of the House of 27 August 1997 concerning protection of persons referred to in the House continue in effect without alteration.

Recommendation 6

The committee recommends that information about the availability of the right of reply process be placed on the Parliament's Internet site on the pages from which Hansard reports and live telecasts of proceedings are accessed, with links to full details on how to apply.

Recommendation 7

The committee recommends that information be added to the explanatory material about the protection of persons referred to in the House to specify what course people may take if they believe they have been adversely referred to in the published evidence of a committee.

4 The procedures of the House

Recommendation 8

The committee recommends that the standing orders be restructured and rewritten to make them more logical, intelligible and readable. The committee recommends that the Clerk prepare a draft for the committee's consideration.

Recommendation 9

The committee recommends that the following sessional order be adopted for a period of 12 months:

Questions from citizens

148A A Member may give notice of a question in terms proposed by a person who resides in the Member's electoral division. The following conditions shall apply to notices of questions given under this sessional order:

- (a) A Member shall satisfy himself or herself that the person proposing the question resides within the Member's electoral division.
- (b) The question shall show the name of the person who proposed the question.

-
- (c) A Member may not give notice of more than 25 questions in a calendar year.
 - (d) Questions shall conform with the standing orders.
 - (e) Provided the foregoing provisions are met a Member must give notice of every question proposed to him or her up to the limit of 25 per year.

5 Access to proceedings

Recommendation 10

The committee recommends that a link to the live broadcast of proceedings (when available) be provided on the top page of the Parliament's Internet site.

Recommendation 11

The committee recommends that a summary of the main items of business for consideration in the House and the Main Committee and scheduled public hearings of committees be shown on the House of Representatives Internet home page. The information should be updated daily and provide a link to the full daily program.

6 Committees and the community

Recommendation 12

The committee recommends that a conference of committee chairs, deputy chairs and secretaries be held at least once each Parliament to discuss strategies for promotion of committee work.

Recommendation 13

The committee recommends that the Speaker, in consultation with committees, investigate having a 'fly on the wall' type of documentary about committees made professionally for showing on television.

Recommendation 14

The committee recommends that a brochure about House of Representatives committees be published and made available on a similar basis to the brochure on the House of Representatives.

Recommendation 15

The committee recommends that details of the public hearing schedules of committees be published regularly using the following vehicles:

- (a) The Daily Program of House business (the Blue);
- (b) Announcements on the parliamentary broadcast (NewsRadio). The information could be included in a daily summary of business expected to be dealt with. The Joint Committee on the Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings is asked to make any necessary changes to the standing determinations relating to the radio broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings to enable this to take place; and
- (c) The existing television coverage of Parliament provided by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation—Question time telecast and/or the *Order in the House* program.

Recommendation 16

The committee recommends that:

- (a) The Department of the House of Representatives take steps to improve coverage of House committees in educational material supplied to schools;
- (b) Video material explaining the committee process and showing House of Representatives committees be made available to schools and other groups; and
- (c) School groups visiting Parliament House be provided with information about public hearings which may be held during their visit and be encouraged to observe proceedings if a suitable hearing is expected to be held.

Recommendation 17

The committee recommends that the Department of the House of Representatives work with committees to develop a strategy to raise the profile of committee web pages, including establishing links with other sites, promoting web addresses, reviewing design and content and developing electronic feedback facilities.

Recommendation 18

The committee recommends that the Department of the House of Representatives work with committees to develop a media strategy to improve media support for committees, including the implementation of a professional communications service to provide media support and liaison for committees.

Recommendation 19

The committee recommends that, as far as possible, committee titles be retained on a long term basis.

Recommendation 20

The committee recommends that committees develop a short name and use it consistently for media liaison and public communications.

Recommendation 21

The committee recommends that the standing orders be amended to provide for tabling of committee reports at a time prior to 11 am.

Recommendation 22

The committee recommends that standing order 353 be amended as follows (*paragraph (b) added*):

Report and minutes presented

353 The report of a committee, together with the minutes of the proceedings, shall be presented to the House by a member of the committee.

Provided that a committee may resolve to do either or both of the following:

(a) if the House is not sitting when a committee has completed a report of an inquiry, the committee may send the report to the Speaker, or in the absence or unavailability of the Speaker, to the Deputy Speaker. Upon receipt of the report by the Speaker or the Deputy Speaker:

(i) the publication of the report is authorised by this standing order; and

(ii) the Speaker or Deputy Speaker, as the case may be, is authorised to give directions for the printing and circulation of the report.

The report shall be presented to the House in accordance with this standing order as soon as possible.

(b) to seek the approval of the Speaker, or in the absence or unavailability of the Speaker, the Deputy Speaker, to publish a summary version of its findings on a day prior to the report being presented to the House. If the Speaker or the Deputy Speaker approves the request:

(i) the publication of the summary version of the committee's findings is authorised by this standing order; and

(ii) Members of the House shall be advised of the publication and given access to the text of the document.

Recommendation 23

The committee recommends that standing order 346 be amended to read (*paragraph (iii) added*):

Publication of evidence and proceedings

346 (a) A committee or subcommittee shall have power to authorise publication of any evidence given before it or any document presented to it.

(b) The evidence taken by a committee or subcommittee and documents presented to it, and proceedings and reports of it, which have not been reported to the House, shall not, unless authorised by the House or the committee or subcommittee, be disclosed or published to any person other than a member or officer of the committee.

Provided that a committee may resolve to:

(i) publish press releases, discussion or other papers or preliminary findings for the purpose of seeking further input to an inquiry;

(ii) divulge any evidence, documents, proceedings or report on a confidential basis to any person or persons for comment for the purpose of assisting the committee in its inquiry or for any administrative purpose associated with the inquiry; or

(iii) authorise any member or members of the committee to provide such public briefings on matters related to an inquiry as the committee sees fit. The committee may impose restrictions on such authorisation and in any case a member so authorised shall not disclose evidence or documents which have not been specifically authorised for publication.

Recommendation 24

The committee recommends that committees make use of the *Checklist of strategies to maximise community involvement in a committee inquiry* set out in this report and that the checklist be updated and expanded on an ongoing basis.

Recommendation 25

The committee recommends that:

(a) the House agree to a resolution providing procedures for interaction with witnesses in the terms set out in appendix C to this report; and

(b) a pamphlet including a summary of the procedures be provided to all witnesses prior to hearing oral evidence from them.

Recommendation 26

The committee recommends that the standing orders be amended so that a motion to take note of a committee report automatically stands referred to the Main Committee for consideration and that time be made available for debate in the week following presentation of the report.

Recommendation 27

The committee recommends that new standing order 354A be inserted as follows:

Government responses to committee reports

354A (a) The Government shall prepare and present to the House no later than four months after the presentation of a report from a House of Representatives or joint committee, a response to the recommendations contained in the report. This provision does not apply to reports from the following committees: House, Library, Members' Interests, Privileges, Publications (except for reports on inquiries), Selection and the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works. If the Government does not consider it appropriate to respond to a particular report, it shall inform the House giving reasons for its decision.

(b) The Speaker shall prepare and present to the House a schedule listing government responses to committee reports which have been presented and reports presented to which responses have not been presented. The schedule shall be presented by the Speaker twice in each calendar year or as often as the Speaker deems appropriate.

Recommendation 28

The committee recommends that committees inform witnesses and other relevant people of the contents of a government response to the committee's report. Where possible the text of a government response should be posted on a committee's Internet page.

Recommendation 29

The committee recommends that the standing orders be amended to empower committees to undertake activities to inform themselves on issues within their portfolio areas without the necessity for a formal reference from the House or a Minister. The power to call for witnesses or documents should not extend to such activities.

Recommendation 30

The committee recommends that standing order 339 be amended by inserting new paragraph *(ab)* as follows:

(ab) A committee may resolve to conduct proceedings using audio visual or audio links with members of the committee or witnesses not present in one place. If an audio visual or audio link is used committee members and witnesses must be able to speak to and hear each other at the same time regardless of location.

Recommendation 31

The committee recommends that committees refer to guidelines for the use of audio visual or audio links when considering whether to use this technology for the conduct of proceedings. The Standing Committee on Procedure will present a set of guidelines to the House and review them from time to time. (The proposed guidelines are at appendix D.)