

First reading

The effectiveness of Parliament in Australia and elsewhere has been the subject of a continuing debate, sometimes ill-informed, as to its present failings and past effectiveness. Parliament is, and ever has been, an imperfect institution, but it has a flexibility which enables it to change and so remain relevant and responsive to the changing aspirations and demands of the society it serves. Therefore, to advocate reform of the Parliament is not necessarily to question its worth or significance but rather to seek to ensure its continuing resilience and enhance its effectiveness as a democratic institution.

HR Practice (1st edn), 697

Introduction

- 1.1 This report is a celebration of twenty years of steadfast toil which has gone largely unremarked—even within the House of Representatives—but has delivered outcomes which in retrospect are significant. The aim is not simply to chronicle the bare facts of the committee’s establishment, catalogue its many inquiries and reports or list the roll of its members but to reveal a fundamental shift in the impetus for procedural reform in the House of Representatives.
- 1.2 The members of this, the eighth formation of the committee since it was first established in 1985, have found that the Procedure Committee has widened the focus of procedural reform from a narrow concern for supporting the passage of government business to a fuller recognition of the House’s wider interests. Before the committee’s establishment, this was not the case. Procedural reform did not have this wide focus.

- 1.3 From the outset the committee has acted in a broad arena. It has championed the right of private Members to participate more actively in the House's proceedings. It has attended to practical issues—like the conduct of divisions—and to matters of parliamentary tradition and national symbolism, like the opening procedures for a new Parliament. It has undertaken major inquiries which led to a comprehensive regime for dealing with private Members' business, the establishment of a parallel stream for debate and a fresh and complete revision of the standing orders.
- 1.4 Through all its endeavours the committee has not lost sight of the prime function of the Parliament to support the peace, order and good government of the Commonwealth.

Report outline

- 1.5 The chapters in this report comprise a detailed survey of procedural reform in the House of Representatives over the twenty years between 1985 and 2005.
- 1.6 The committee's domain encompasses the 'practices and procedures of the House and its committees'. Chapter 2 explores what these terms mean in the House of Representatives and the extent to which they determine the committee's activities.
- 1.7 The committee was established in 1985 to overcome perceived deficiencies in the existing machinery for procedural reform. Chapter 3 briefly outlines the development of the House's practices and procedures before the committee was established.
- 1.8 When its establishment was originally proposed, the committee was expected to operate in conjunction with the Standing Orders Committee. However, when it eventually came into being it supplanted that committee. Chapter 4 covers the genesis of the committee and its cautious progress to a broader exercise of its responsibilities and greater autonomy in its operations.
- 1.9 Many interests are at work in a legislature and thus different participants have their own expectations of how the House's processes should meet their objectives. The anticipated role of the Procedure Committee is examined from a number of perspectives in Chapter 5.
- 1.10 The committee has met at the very least one of the early expectations which supported its establishment: it has been far more active than the

Standing Orders Committee was at any time during the eighty-four years of its existence. Chapter 6, which is essentially a chronology of the Procedure Committee, examines in some detail the work of the committee and provides the evidence for an evaluation of its part in procedural reform over two decades.

- 1.11 To add a personal dimension, each of the surviving former Chairs of the Procedure Committee was invited to contribute to this report. Chapter 7 contains their comments and recollections.
- 1.12 There are many criteria by which outcomes may be judged. Drawing on the previous two chapters, an attempt is made in Chapter 8 to assess the committee's contribution to procedural reform in the House of Representatives and to consider how it has responded to some of the challenges it has confronted along the way.
- 1.13 What lies in the future for the committee? Is there sufficient evidence from its activities and impact over the last twenty years on which to base proposals for further adjustments to the machinery for procedural reform? Some of the issues are canvassed in the final chapter.
- 1.14 The body of the report is supplemented by several appendixes. Some will be particularly useful for readers navigating the more detailed chapters, like Chapters 6 and 8.¹ The appendixes include:
 - A: a table summarising the establishment of each formation of the committee, its membership and reports;
 - B: consolidated lists of chairs, deputy chairs and members of the committee;
 - C: tabulated details of the committee's reports, subsequent responses and resulting action;
 - D: tabulated details of annual activity; and
 - E: a list of principal office holders in the House.

¹ For example, Appendix E provides a 'Who's who' identifying the principal office holders in the House at any time between 1985 and 2005.

Conclusion

- 1.15 This report delivers a generally positive verdict on the committee's part in procedural reform within the House of Representatives over the last twenty years. What emerges is a clearly visible expansion of the scope of procedural change from a preoccupation with expediting government business to an appreciation of the House's roles which extend beyond passing legislation and of its interaction with the community its Members represent.
- 1.16 There will be many views on the extent to which the Executive has shared the initiative for procedural reform in the House of Representatives, especially, as may be seen in Chapter 7, among Members. The committee hopes nonetheless that there is a sufficient breadth of perspective in these pages to accommodate a range of views on the achievements of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure.