

Introduction

Representative democracy

- 1.1 The size and complexity of modern societies such as Australia make direct government by the people acting collectively (the ideal of democracy) a practical impossibility. Western nations, such as Australia, have all adopted a representative form of democracy. Under our system of government the community exercises its collective will to select a group of people to form the Parliament and also decides which subgroup of the Parliament will be empowered to undertake the functions of government on the community's behalf.
- 1.2 Among the functions of the Parliament are law making, monitoring government activity and feeding community views into the processes of government. *House of Representatives Practice* says 'responsible government requires that proposed laws and many other processes of government be brought into public view through the medium of the House where administration and policies may be subject to public debate and where the pressures of public opinion may be brought to bear on the Government through the collective membership'¹. This then is the job of the elected representatives.
- 1.3 Under the Constitution the House is master of its own affairs and its operations are independent of people who are not Members of the House. In accordance with this concept, the standing orders of the House make no provision for people other than Members to initiate business or participate directly in its proceedings (other than through the work of its committees).

¹ Barlin, L M (ed), *House of Representatives Practice*, 3rd edn, AGPS 1997, p. 34.

Members take their representative role very seriously and work hard to represent their constituency in the way that they consider the most appropriate.

- 1.4 Does this mean that, having voted, there is no further political role for individuals in the community? The Procedure Committee is of the view that, in order for the House to perform its role effectively, it is important for Members individually and collectively to keep in touch with community views and the effects on people of legislative and government action. If scrutiny of government administration and policies is to be effective it is also necessary for the public to be aware of parliamentary debate and action in this regard.
- 1.5 A submission from Dr Andrew Brien of the Centre for Professional and Applied Ethics at Charles Sturt University says that citizens feel an increasing sense of alienation from the institutions of government. Dr Brien says:

The consequences of community alienation from the institutions of government are potentially disastrous. Democracies—and the benefits they provide—are sustained only through the consent and participation of their citizens. Participation takes many forms from joining political parties, making submissions, voting, calling on their local members and senators, and importantly, paying taxes. If citizens withdraw that consent or diminish their participation, either directly or through apathy, then the door is opened for more repressive systems of 'government'.²

Scope of this inquiry

- 1.6 Against this background the committee decided to undertake an inquiry which would review some of the ways in which the community interacts with the parliamentary process and look for some ideas to improve the people's engagement with and knowledge of parliamentary activity.
- 1.7 The Standing Committee on Procedure was established to inquire into and report on the practices and procedures of the House. This generally restricts its area of activity to matters associated with the standing and sessional orders and how the House conducts its business.
- 1.8 Clearly the potential scope of this inquiry into community involvement goes considerably beyond the province of the Procedure Committee. The
-

2 Dr A Brien, Charles Sturt University, *submission*.

committee has excluded from its consideration matters that are not the responsibility or in the control of the House itself or its committees. For example, the work and actions of individual Members beyond their House and committee work has not been considered; nor have the activities of parliamentary or government bureaucracies in providing or promoting general educational material about the parliamentary system.

- 1.9 Nevertheless the committee has considered and made recommendations on a number of matters which are not strictly within its normal scope but which it feels are important to the inquiry and are within the competence of the House or its committees to implement.
- 1.10 There are two existing procedures of the House which touch directly upon people in the community. One of these is the ancient right of lodging petitions to seek action by the House. The other is the relatively recent provision whereby people who believe that they have been adversely reflected on by something said about them in the course of debate in the House may seek to have a response published.
- 1.11 Beyond these two specific matters the committee looked at the procedures of the House generally as well as how people can see, hear or obtain information about, the proceedings of the House. The committee considered that if people are to develop an understanding of the role of the House and its importance for them they need to be able to find out what it is doing, see it in action and understand what they see. They need to be able to see more than the excitement and political controversy of question time.
- 1.12 The committees of the House undertake the one type of House activity that actually occurs out in the community. The committee spent the major part of this inquiry looking at ways that committees could better promote their work and encourage more input from the community.
- 1.13 In summary the inquiry covered the following main areas:
 - petitioning the House;
 - the process whereby individuals can respond to critical comments made about them in proceedings of the House;
 - whether the procedures of the House are themselves a barrier to understanding what is happening in the House;
 - access to proceedings of the House; and
 - community involvement in the committee inquiry process, including the use of electronic communication technologies to conduct meetings.

- 1.14 The options and proposals canvassed in this report are by no means exhaustive but are indicative of some small steps which the House, its committees and those supporting them may take to improve the community's understanding of, and involvement with, the parliamentary process.

Conduct of the inquiry

- 1.15 The committee advertised its inquiry nationally on 27 March 1999. The views of Members, committee chairs, deputy chairs and officers of the House were sought. Submissions were invited from the community and academic institutions. State legislatures provided information on innovations in their areas of responsibility. Round table discussions were conducted with committee chairs, deputy chairs and secretaries. A list of participants in the inquiry is at appendix A.
- 1.16 It is noteworthy that while the inquiry was in progress a number of different approaches were tried, particularly by committees, towards improving community involvement. Indeed some of the recommendations contained in this report may already be implemented before the report is published. Some were stimulated by the inquiry but all indicate an encouraging recognition of the importance of melding our parliamentary institutions into the fabric of our community and culture.