

## Encouraging an interactive Chamber

### Introduction

- 1.1 On 10 August this year the Procedure Committee decided to undertake an inquiry into ways of encouraging a more interactive House of Representatives Chamber. The inquiry arose from concerns about the level of actual debate on legislation and other business, with comments being made all too often about the reality of Members “reading” lengthy speeches to an almost empty Chamber.
- 1.2 The committee wrote to all Members of the House of Representatives seeking comment or suggestions on ways of increasing the level of interactive debate in the Chamber. After receiving a submission to the inquiry from the Clerk of the House, the committee forwarded the submission to all Members seeking any further comment. No comments were received from Members.
- 1.3 In the process of this inquiry the committee has built on a previous inquiry into the arrangements for second reading speeches, which was tabled in the House in December 2003<sup>1</sup>. That inquiry was based on a proposal by the then Speaker, the Hon. Neil Andrew MP, that second reading speeches on bills be reduced from 20 minutes to 15

---

<sup>1</sup> *Arrangement for second reading speeches*, Standing Committee on Procedure, December 2003.

minutes, with the introduction of a 5 minute question and answer period at the end (the “15:5 option”). The committee notes that the proposal had considerable informal support from both sides of politics, but it was not ultimately supported by the Government. The committee has re-examined the proposal briefly in Chapter 2 of this report, but, in light of the successful operation of the interventions procedure in the Main Committee, has recommended the introduction of different arrangements to those originally suggested by Mr Andrew’s proposal.

- 1.4 The committee has also drawn on information gathered during its recent study visit<sup>2</sup> to other parliaments in the United Kingdom and France.

## **Other proposals to encourage interactivity**

- 1.5 In addition to the earlier proposal for changes to arrangements for second reading speeches, other proposals were also put forward to the committee in this current review. The Clerk of the House of Representatives in his submission outlined a number of options for encouraging more interactive debate in the Chamber. The options proposed in the submission can be summarised as:

- **Reduction in speech time limits**
- **Introduction of interventions in the House**
- **Categorisation of bills**
- **Greater use of the Main Committee**

- 1.6 The first option involves reducing speech time limits on second reading speeches from 20 minutes to 10 or 15 minutes. It is argued that this may lead to Members being more selective in the content of speeches, a greater sense of pace in debates and Members spending more time in the House and Main Committee so as to avoid missing the call when it is their turn to speak.

- 1.7 As detailed in Attachment 1 to the Clerk’s submission, the length of second reading speeches (aside from mover and mover in reply) in other Parliaments in Australia varies from 10 minutes in Victoria to 30 minutes in Tasmania. In some of these Parliaments Members can

---

2 *Learning from other parliaments*, Standing Committee on Procedure, August 2006.

extend their speeches by request or motion. In the New Zealand Parliament Members have 10 minutes each and there is a limit of 12 speeches for the whole debate, but the same time limits can apply for speeches on the first and third reading of government bills.

- 1.8 While the length of speeches may have some impact (see para 1.25), the committee does not support a reduction in speaking times at this stage. While debates will flow from speaker to speaker more quickly, such a reduction would not provide for Members to actually interact any more than they do at present.
- 1.9 The second proposal, the option of allowing interventions in the House, would involve simply extending the procedure already in place in the Main Committee to the main Chamber. As noted in the Clerk's submission, the interventions procedure has been successful in the Main Committee in allowing Members present to engage with a speaker, with 100 interventions having been accepted by Members speaking (out of 144 sought)<sup>3</sup>.
- 1.10 The committee sees merit in the extension of interventions to second reading debates conducted in the House, but has some concerns about the whole time of the speech being subject to such possible interruption. Instead the committee favours interventions being acceptable after 15 minutes of the speech have elapsed (ie in the final 5 minutes). This matter is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.
- 1.11 The categorisation of bills option would require informal consultation between whips after bills were introduced, with a view to setting different time limits for their further consideration based on levels of interest/importance/controversy. The Clerk's submission outlines two possible methods of categorisation. The first is that time limits would be agreed for individual speeches depending on the category of bill (eg 15 minutes per speaker for category X bills, and 10 minutes per speaker for category Y bills). The second possibility is that time limits be set for the total consideration of bills depending on their category, with individual speeches not necessarily being reduced from their normal length.
- 1.12 Categorisation of bills with varied speaking times is not supported by the committee as it would prove unduly complicated for Members, and potentially limit the time available for Members. As with the option of a simple reduction in speaking times, the

---

3 Submission from Mr I C Harris, Clerk of the House, p. 5.

committee does not believe that categorising bills would significantly improve interactivity in the Chamber.

- 1.13 The fourth option listed above is greater use of the Main Committee. The Clerk's submission notes that debates often appear to be more interactive in the Main Committee than in the House, and suggests that additional use of the Main Committee could lead to a higher level of engagement and exchange in debates. Aside from allowing more bills to be referred to the Main Committee, the Clerk notes that a further possibility could be to allow the Main Committee to meet when the House is not sitting, either to start before or continue after the House sits, or to meet on non-sitting days.
- 1.14 The committee agrees that certain aspects of the Main Committee may be conducive to greater interactivity during debates than the Chamber, but notes that shifting more debates out of the Chamber and into the Main Committee could not be expected to change the character of debates in the House itself, which is the purpose of this inquiry. The Main Committee is already sitting for more extended periods and providing more opportunities for Members to speak, and it would be difficult to argue that substituting one venue (Main Committee) for another (Chamber) would encourage greater interactivity in the latter.

### **The Matter of Public Importance (MPI) discussion**

- 1.15 The Clerk's submission also discusses possible changes to the standing orders in relation to the discussion on the matter of public importance on sitting Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Standing order 1 provides for two hours for the total discussion, with 15 minutes for the proposer and Member next speaking, and 10 minutes for any other Member.
- 1.16 The submission notes that in practice the discussion usually only lasts for 50 minutes, with two Members speaking for 15 minutes each and two speaking for 10 minutes each, and suggests that the discussion be limited to one hour, and that speaking time limits be reduced to allow more Members to speak to each MPI.
- 1.17 The committee notes the suggestion in the Clerk's submission, but believes that the current arrangements for the MPI are adequate, as they allow for expansion on the usual four speakers where necessary. It is also worth noting that while it is not technically a debate, the MPI discussion often seems to be one of the most

interactive parts of a sitting day, with usually the highest number of Members present in the Chamber besides question time and divisions.

## Audio visual aids

- 1.18 The potential use of audio visual aids is also canvassed in the Clerk's submission. It is noted that in a number of Parliaments Members have access to technology such as Powerpoint to supplement their speeches, and that the House may at some stage need to consider such concepts. The Clerk observes that the use of audio visual materials adds another dimension to presentations and may appeal to younger people observing proceedings, but also notes that these technologies are typically used by a person addressing an audience rather than by people engaged in a debate.
- 1.19 It is clear to the committee that the possible use of audio visual aids in the delivery of speeches raises a number of technological and procedural issues beyond the scope of this inquiry. The committee has an ongoing interest in the use of technology in the parliamentary environment and proposes to consider the use of audio visual equipment in that wider context.

## Other parliaments

- 1.20 During a study tour of parliaments in the United Kingdom and France, the committee was impressed by the extent to which other Chambers encourage and experience a higher level of interaction during debate than that experienced in the House of Representatives. The subject was discussed first with the UK House of Commons Modernisation Committee. Any Member wanting to participate in a debate in the Commons is expected to come to the opening of the debate. The call is in the hands of the Speaker in reality (as opposed to being in the hands of the Speaker but subject to the arrangements put in place by the Whips). For major speeches, Members are expected to write to the Speaker requesting the opportunity to speak. The Speaker then consults his own list in allocating the call and is unlikely to call a Member who has not been listening to the debate in the Chamber. Further, Members are not expected to leave the Chamber as soon as they finish speaking. Such

behaviour would not be conducive to the member getting the call on a future occasion.

- 1.21 It was not clear whether the practice in the House of Commons was a deliberate attempt to encourage an active debating Chamber. It appears to have survived from a time when Members did not have so many other calls on their time. At the same time, Members of the Commons could see the advantages of the practice. One senior member expressed the view that the combination of a pre-arranged Speaker's list and a rule against interventions in the Chamber might lead to a "sterile debate".
- 1.22 Interactive debate in the smaller parliaments is also to some extent a function of the practice of expecting Members to be present in the Chamber if they want to participate in a debate. In the small parliaments (the Tynwald on the Isle of Man, and the National Assembly of Wales) Members are generally present during all proceedings – a discipline encouraged by the relatively short number of sitting days and hours and the fact that committee meetings are generally scheduled for times when the plenary is not sitting.
- 1.23 In the Scottish Parliament there is a convention that Members should be in the Chamber for the whole debate but more strictly, that they must be in the Chamber at least for the preceding and following speaker. It is not unusual for Members to be in the Chamber for three hours for a debate. The Scottish Parliament uses a list of speakers but they are not called in order.
- 1.24 The Scottish Parliament also allows interventions – another practice which encourages an interactive debating Chamber. Like the practice in our own Main Committee, interventions may be accepted or rejected by the Member with the call. The practice seems to be common, with one member estimating that about half the speeches in the Chamber have an intervention. The House of Commons also allows interventions. When asked if interventions encourage unruly behaviour, it was pointed out that a Member who abused the right to intervene would have a lot of difficulty "catching the eye of the Speaker".
- 1.25 The committee found that the length of speeches may have an impact on the extent to which debate is lively and interactive. Most Members of other legislatures found it greatly surprising that in the House of Representatives, Members are permitted to speak on the second reading of bills for 20 minutes without interruption and that

further, Members are permitted to read their speeches – generally to an all but empty Chamber. The average length of a speech on legislation in Scotland is about six minutes. In France speech times are allocated to a political group which then allocates the time amongst its members. Members may have to share as little as 15 minutes.

- 1.26 Despite the higher level of interactivity in other Chambers, the committee did not find total satisfaction with proceedings. Reportedly, in Wales, although a lot of Members are in the Chamber most of the time and there is “quite a lot of interaction”, the Presiding Officer would like to see more interaction.