

Standing Committee on Procedure

Reports on Arrangements for Second Reading Speeches / Trial of Additional  
Tellers, 1 December 2003

Chair's tabling statement

Mr Speaker, I present two reports of the Standing Committee on Procedure — “Arrangements for second reading speeches” and “Trial of additional tellers”.

The first of today's reports — “Arrangements for second reading speeches” — proposes a change which will affect all Members.

The Speaker asked the Procedure Committee to consider a proposal for changing the arrangements for second reading speeches to provide a short period at the end each Member's speech for other Members to ask questions about the speech.

The Committee organised a round table conference so that interested parties could discuss the issue. The Speaker, Deputy Speaker and Second Deputy Speaker, Leader of the House, the Manager of Opposition Business, Government and Opposition Whips, the Member for Calare representing independent Members, and the Clerk of the House—all very busy people—came to the conference, and the Procedure Committee is grateful that they all found time to discuss the proposal with us. This report is largely based on the views expressed at the conference.

The new arrangement would involve cutting the maximum time allowed for a speech on a second reading of a bill from 20 minutes to 15 minutes, and using the 5 minutes saved for questions to the Member speaking, relating to his or her speech.

The procedure would not apply to Ministers' speeches or to the main speech in reply by the opposition spokesperson, but otherwise any Member could be questioned at the end of his or her speech on the second reading of a bill, by other Members. Questions must be short and directly relevant to the Member's speech. Members can opt out of the process by declining to respond to questions, but if they do so they will still be limited to 15 minutes.

The Speaker's objective in making the proposal is to enliven debate on legislation. In preparing their second reading speeches Members should be encouraged to become advocates for a particular position on the bill's policy. The combination of having a shorter time to communicate their views and the possibility of having to defend them during a question and answer period could be expected to return to the chamber the sort of interactive, sometimes passionate debate that appears to be less common than in previous times.

Most Members who participated in a round table meeting to consider the Speaker's proposal were critical of the current standard of debate. Members also raised the matter of Members attending to make their speeches and then departing, with the result that the chamber appears almost empty for a great deal of the time. We understand how busy Members are, but an empty chamber is not what the community expects of its Parliament.

If the proposed arrangements do indeed invigorate debate, more Members might remain in the chamber to listen to their colleagues' speeches as well as to ask questions. In turn, this would enhance the public's perception of the significance of parliamentary proceedings.

The Committee recommends a trial of the Speaker's proposal.

This trial will be in addition to the trial of interventions in the Main Committee, which is still continuing.

I commend the report to the House.

I now come to the second report—“Trial of additional tellers”.

On 18 August 2003 I presented our report ‘Review of the conduct of divisions’. One of the recommendations in that report was that the House undertake a trial of a change to its division procedures, with a view to seeing if the time taken by divisions could be reduced.

The Speaker and the whips agreed to the trial, which commenced on 9 September.

The trial involved doubling the number of tellers in divisions. Eight tellers were appointed for each division—two pairs of tellers to count each side—each pair of tellers to count a specific block of seats.

The second of today’s reports is the Committee’s evaluation of the trial.

I haven’t enough time today to go into the detail—this is all described in the report, along with the statistics. I will just come right to the core of the issue.

The trial did indeed turn out to save time—by an average of 2 minutes per division. In other words, divisions normally taking an average of 10 minutes could take place in about 8 minutes. The saving was only on 4 minute divisions—the difference with 1 minute successive divisions was negligible.

However, the Committee came to the conclusion that while the trial was successful in saving time, there was an unacceptable level of errors in recording attendance at divisions.

The Committee concluded that the problem was not attributable to individual tellers but was systemic, due to the fact that it was necessary to use two division sheets to record each side—that is, four tellers sheets in all.

The committee recommends that the House return to the traditional method of marking off one division list for each side.

In reaching this conclusion the committee would like to place on record its appreciation of the support for the trial from the Speaker and the whips. It was a worthwhile exercise.

I commend the report to the House.