

## Expectations

### Introduction

- 2.1 This chapter sets a broad basis from which to evaluate the operation of the Main Committee by examining expectations of it, principally on the part of those who proposed its establishment and those who put the proposal into effect. For practical purposes the latter comprise the Government of the day, as the final proponents, and individual Members as the endorsers.

### The Procedure Committee's expectations

- 2.2 The Procedure Committee's professed intention not 'to be radical, nor original, nor overly ambitious' in advocating the establishment of the Main Committee, did not mean that it lacked clear objectives then and for each of the subsequent changes it proposed.
- 2.3 When he presented the Procedure Committee's *About time* report to the House on 28 October 1993, the committee chair, Dr Blewett, noted that the Main Committee 'would handle mostly non-controversial legislation'. With two 'parallel and coincident' streams of legislation Members would have a greater opportunity to 'register personal and constituency views on uncontested measures in the Main Committee and extended opportunities for debate on controversial legislation in the House'.<sup>1</sup>

---

1 H. R. Deb. (28.10.1993) 2709-10

- 2.4 The report contained a summary of the proposals' benefits:<sup>2</sup>
- allowing Members to use their time more productively;
  - minimising the need for closures and the use of the guillotine;
  - giving the House more time; that is, allowing (i) more legislation to be dealt with in a given number of days, (ii) additional time to be spent on individual bills or (iii) fuller opportunities for debate in the House on the major and controversial items on the Government's legislative agenda;
  - providing more opportunities for backbenchers to make speeches for the record on routine bills; and
  - allowing flexibility in the use of the parallel stream.
- 2.5 In reviewing the operation of the Main Committee almost a year after its establishment, the committee reiterated its vision, acknowledging that the Main Committee had become more than a parallel legislative stream:
- The chief reason for recommending the establishment of the Main Committee was to make more time available for the consideration of legislation and allow increased opportunities for Members to contribute to debate on bills. With the addition of the ability to consider papers and committee and delegation reports it has also expanded opportunities for debate on these matters.<sup>3</sup>
- 2.6 The committee noted comments by Members that there was a distinctly different atmosphere developing from that in the Chamber. There was 'better interplay in debate' and the more intimate environment encouraged 'true debate and response to others' contributions'. The committee expressed the hope 'that this trend will continue and any sterility in the atmosphere will dissipate in time'.<sup>4</sup>
- 2.7 As was noted in the previous chapter,<sup>5</sup> a major change in the character of the Main Committee occurred as a result of the adoption of the Procedure Committee's recommendations to allow Members' statements and adjournment debate in the Main Committee. In presenting the committee's *Short speeches* report to the House, a committee member summarised the objectives of the recommendations:

---

2 *About time*, pp 11-2

3 *Time for review*, pp 12-3

4 *ibid.*, p 13

5 See para 1.33

Despite the risk of introducing this different style of procedure into the Main Committee, the committee saw a number of possible benefits apart from increasing the opportunities for members to raise issues of concern to them and relieving the pressure on the adjournment debate in the House. This step would help to mitigate the perception that the Main Committee is of lower status than the House. It might also encourage livelier, more spontaneous debate, especially given the smaller, more intimate nature of the Main Committee seating arrangements. The more members who participate in the proceedings of the Main Committee and the more people who watch or listen to it, the greater its level of effectiveness and acceptance will be.<sup>6</sup>

## The Government's expectations

- 2.8 The Government approached the establishment of the Main Committee with apparent reservations. When foreshadowing the implementation of the 'broad package' Prime Minister Keating noted that the Government had already made significant changes to improve the flow of legislation, especially by moving to three periods of sittings with legislation being introduced in one period for passage in the next; 'nonetheless' the Government had agreed to a 'trial of the procedure committee's recommendations'.<sup>7</sup>
- 2.9 Two days later the Leader of the House, Mr Beazley, when introducing the changes to the standing orders, claimed that the new body was 'highly experimental' and would be 'difficult to organise'. He also emphasised an intention that the 'informal mode of operation should not extend to ready tolerance of disorder'. There seemed no explicit expectation of the benefits argued by the Procedure Committee and an implicit expectation that the Main Committee might be more trouble than it was worth.<sup>8</sup>
- 2.10 Nevertheless, the lack of clearly stated expectations perhaps reflected a cautious optimism which sought not to culminate in dashed expectations. There was no sense of the Government disowning the Main Committee before it had even begun:

If the main committee is to work as envisaged by the Blewett committee and by the government, it ought to have before it

---

6 H. R. Deb. (20.10.1997) 9178

7 H. R. Deb. (8.2.1994) 541

8 H. R. Deb. (10.2.1994) 810-2

legislation which is effectively non-controversial but which does require a bit of detailed attention from the House, in the spirit of bipartisan cooperation.<sup>9</sup>

- 2.11 The Government's willingness to support the new venture is perhaps illustrated by the fact that the first debate in the Main Committee was led by the Leader of the House and Minister for Finance, and the second, on the same day, by the Attorney-General.

## Members' expectations

- 2.12 One of the Members who contributed to the dissenting report in *About time* anticipated that the introduction of the second chamber would be 'at the expense of the relative importance of the contributions to debate by private members'. Their contributions would be devalued by legislation being shunted off to the 'backwater of the main committee' and it was unlikely that there would be 'any improvement in the quality of the debate or any lessening of the point scoring or partisan nature of the discussions'.<sup>10</sup>
- 2.13 As noted in the first chapter, the Opposition did not oppose the establishment of the Main Committee, indicating that it was prepared to 'give it a go'. However it did express reservations about the detail. In particular the minimal quorum could lead to ineffective debate and the prospect of it not meeting in the main committee room but in a less grand setting would demean the standing of debate. Other backbenchers generally endorsed the committee's expectations.<sup>11</sup>

## The media's expectations

- 2.14 Not surprisingly the focus of media attention was on the committee's recommendations about rostering Ministers for question time and on the Government's implementation of a somewhat different system. The *Canberra Times* editorial, noting 'that the House's time could be saved' and 'the present heavy use of the guillotine avoided' judged the Main Committee to be 'a sensible reform, one hard to argue against'.<sup>12</sup> The

---

9 H. R. Deb. (10.2.1994) 812

10 H. R. Deb. (28.10.1993) 2713

11 H. R. Deb. (10.2.1994) 810 ff

12 *Canberra Times, Parliamentary reform a mixed political bag*, 30 October 1993

editorial in the *Australian* concluded that the ‘new legislation committee ... should allow proper scrutiny and debate of more Bills, whether controversial or uncontested’.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

2.15 Two groups stood to benefit in the first instance from the establishment of a parallel stream of business: those charged with husbanding the business of the House and those whose opportunities to participate were curtailed because of the limited time available in the House. Their expectations could be summarised as follows:

- minimal use of the guillotine;
- more time available for debate on each bill, controversial or not;
- more debate on committee and delegation reports and government papers; and
- more opportunity for private Members to participate.

---

13 *Australian, The trouble with our Parliament*, 29 October 1993

