

## Conclusions and recommendations

### Organisation of the conference

- 4.1 The conference held on 6 March 2001 was the direct result of a recommendation of the Standing Committee on Procedure. Because of this the committee felt it was appropriate that it organise and host the inaugural meeting. It was the intention of the committee's original recommendation that the conference become a regular feature of each Parliament. In light of this it is of value to make an assessment of the arrangements made for the first one and to propose some suggestions for the future.
- 4.2 The conference was one of the only formal gatherings allowing cross fertilisation of ideas between committee chairs and members of different committees and between committee secretaries as a group and committee members as a group. This was a valuable opportunity, not only for sharing of ideas, but to assist in understanding of issues and constraints for staff and members. It should be continued and built upon.

#### Recommendation 1

- 4.3 **The committee recommends that another conference of committee chairs, deputy chairs and secretaries be held in the first half of the 40<sup>th</sup> Parliament and similar conferences be conducted at regular intervals.**

- 4.4 While the Procedure Committee was the logical host for the first conference it is not necessarily the most appropriate body to host conferences on a continuing basis. Reasons for this include:
- the desirability of constantly refreshing the ideas and approach to promotion of committee work and the conference itself;
  - because its field of operation relates to the procedures of the House, the Procedure Committee has much less interaction with the community than most other committees; and
  - because of its specialist nature, the Procedure Committee requires little media liaison and a limited range of evidence gathering techniques and therefore its staff are less familiar with the range of issues confronting other investigative committees.
- 4.5 A suitable approach to hosting future conferences may be to rotate hosting responsibilities among different committees, perhaps selecting each time a committee which has undertaken an especially innovative process or been involved with a particular issue of community interaction which could be a focus for the conference.
- 4.6 The committee believes that the Liaison Committee of Committee Chairs and Deputy Chairs would be in a position to seek volunteers from among committee chairs and select an appropriate committee to host the conference on each occasion. It should also be responsible for determining when, in the life cycle of a Parliament, it would be most suitable to conduct conferences of this nature.

## **Recommendation 2**

- 4.7 **The committee recommends that the responsibility for coordinating and hosting future conferences be rotated to different committees and that the Liaison Committee of Committee Chairs and Deputy Chairs or similar body be responsible for selecting a host on each occasion.**
- 4.8 This approach would also help committees to build a shared sense of responsibility for improving community relations.

## Structure

- 4.9 The time of Members of Parliament is a very valuable commodity with many demands being made on it. This conference was held on the evening of a sitting Tuesday and lasted for just under 2 hours. Several Members were unable to stay for the entire duration.
- 4.10 The conference structure combined presentation of information and an open discussion among members. This blend should be continued but the arrangement and balance between the two could be fine tuned to ensure that everyone who attends, even if only for part of the proceedings, is able to have their say. It was evident that most members had put considerable thought into the issues being discussed and had valuable ideas and comments to contribute.
- 4.11 There may be value in providing more structure to the open forum segment of proceedings perhaps through separate segments for: responses to the presentations; contributions of personal ideas and comments from participants; and discussion of broader issues and priorities. Circulation of a brief issues paper before the conference may assist members in their preparation.

## Proposals emerging from the conference

### Support services

- 4.12 The conference provided a number of suggestions for enhancements to support services which the Department of the House of Representatives and committees can consider when reviewing their strategies for promotion of the work of committees. These were:
- Consideration be given to conducting *About the House* or similar seminars in regional centres. The seminars could be held in conjunction with public hearings for a particular committee.
  - A seminar tailored for press gallery and political reporters be developed.
  - Members be asked to nominate a 'free list' of schools and organisations in their electorates to receive *About the House* magazine.
  - Committees work to develop a better understanding of media deadlines and the way in which media representatives plan their time

so they can provide timely advice of activities and capture journalists' attention in the most effective way.

- Committees consider developing a structured approach to involving journalists more fully in their inquiries perhaps by having journalists travel with committees in appropriate circumstances.

## Issues

4.13 Discussion at the conference drew out a number of issues which are concerning Members and which would warrant further consideration by committees, staff, the House and the Government. These are described briefly below.

### Beyond question time

4.14 Members are concerned to find ways of increasing reporting of the constructive and bipartisan work of the House, especially its committees. There is concern that media coverage is restricted to the theatrical battleground of question time.

4.15 This concentration on one aspect of the House's activities gives an unbalanced picture of the work of the Parliament and its role in society. It hampers understanding of the importance of the parliamentary institution. Members would like to try and change the media's attitude to reporting parliamentary activities. One member remarked that 'until we start to challenge the media coverage of question time and make the committee system a very sexy system that the media is really interested in, I think we are really just going to be nibbling around the edges'.<sup>1</sup>

4.16 A recent article in the *About the House* magazine explores the views of senior journalists about why media reporting is so focussed on question time.<sup>2</sup> In the article Laurie Oakes, Nine Network Political Editor, is quoted as saying 'Parliament's lost a lot of its importance. Before it gets more coverage, it's got to start mattering more'. Another senior journalist, Paul Kelly, International Editor at the *Australian*, offers a more hopeful comment—'Committees are more important these days and certainly more interesting and valuable, and committee reports don't get the attention they deserve. The media is misjudging its audience in its approach to reporting politics.'

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1 Conference, transcript of proceedings (unpublished)

2 Peter Cotton, 'When the copy was good', *About the House*, issue no.8, May/June 2001

- 4.17 While committees, working with the new communications adviser, have begun to achieve better exposure for some committee inquiries and reports, the conference identified some key areas where improvements could be made.

### Achieving outcomes

- 4.18 A key stumbling block to convincing people of the importance of the work of committees is the slowness of achieving results. In particular the failure of the Government, in many cases, to respond in a timely manner to recommendations contained in reports. Successive Governments have undertaken to respond to committee reports within three months of tabling but this commitment seems to be honoured more often in the breach.
- 4.19 This issue was discussed in the *It's your House* report and a recommendation made to enshrine in the standing orders the requirements for a timely government response.<sup>3</sup> The Government did not support the proposal<sup>4</sup> or other similar recommendations made in earlier Procedure Committee reports.<sup>5</sup> Nor did the Government respond positively to the recommendation that committees take responsibility for disseminating government responses to their reports.<sup>6</sup> The committee believes that the Government should improve its efforts to prepare responses to parliamentary committee reports.
- 4.20 The timely production of responses would not only demonstrate the value of the work of committees but would also show that the Government was consulting and considering the views of the community in its policy development.

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3 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *It's your House: Community involvement in the procedures and practices of the House of Representatives and its committees*, October 1999, pp.66 - 68

4 Government, *Response to the report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure: It's your House: Community involvement in the procedures and practices of the House of Representatives and its committees*, 10 October 2000, p.8

5 For example, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Ten years on: A review of the House of Representatives committee system*, May 1998, p.25

6 Government, *Response to the report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure: It's your House: Community involvement in the procedures and practices of the House of Representatives and its committees*, 10 October 2000, p.8

### Recommendation 3

- 4.21 **The committee recommends that the Government strengthen its undertaking to provide a response to a parliamentary committee report within three months of tabling the report and Ministers and departments be directed to improve their performance in relation to this.**
- 4.22 The conference heard of one committee which has been regularly briefed by departmental officials on progress in responding to or implementing its reports. However this can only work with the support of the Minister concerned and even then will be ineffective unless the outcomes of the reports are publicised.
- 4.23 In its response to *It's your House* the Government suggested that committees could provide links from their Internet sites to government sites for information on the response to a report.<sup>7</sup> In light of this the committee believes that government departments should ensure that responses to committee reports are readily available through their Internet sites and committees are provided with sufficient information to find them and include links on their own pages.

### Recommendation 4

- 4.24 **The committee recommends that as soon as a government response to a parliamentary committee report is tabled in either House of the Parliament a copy of the response be posted on the Internet site of the relevant department and the committee concerned be informed of its location.**
- 4.25 The committee was also interested in a proposal put forward by Malcolm Aldons, a former committee secretary with the Department of the House of Representatives, in a recently published journal.<sup>8</sup> Mr Aldons proposed that the Government should be asked to table, at regular intervals, an action report on committee reports. This would include information on the implementation of recommendations the Government

7 id.

8 Malcolm Aldons 2001, 'Rating the effectiveness of committee reports: some examples', *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, vol 16 no.1, p.59

had accepted and the final view on recommendations the Government said needed further consideration or those that had been referred to others.

- 4.26 This type of report would have the advantage of following committee recommendations beyond simple agreement or otherwise by the Government and give information on actual implementation. Many committee reports do lead to improvements in administration or services but it is not always easy to track the connection. More exposure of these processes of continuing review and improvement in public administration would help to give a more balanced and positive picture of the work of government as well as committees.

### **Recommendation 5**

- 4.27 **The committee recommends that the Government table at six monthly intervals an action report detailing progress on implementing recommendations contained in reports of parliamentary committees.**

### **Arguing the case**

- 4.28 Another issue which was raised at the conference and has been a long running problem for the Procedure Committee and the House itself is the amount of time available for members of a committee to speak in the House on the tabling of a report. Logistically, this is a difficult matter to address because of the overall constraints on the time of the House and the variability in numbers of reports being tabled at any one time.
- 4.29 Members feel, rightly, that the amount of time and effort they put into producing worthwhile reports is not reflected in the amount of time they have to 'launch' it in the House. In addition there is only a small window of time when a report can be expected to generate interest among the media so committee members are keen to have the opportunity to argue its case as close as possible to its public release.
- 4.30 The committee urges the Government to consider favourably a recommendation it made in its report on the second chamber<sup>9</sup> which

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<sup>9</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *The Second Chamber: Enhancing the Main Committee*, July 2000, recommendation 8, p.54

would provide a block of time in the Main Committee for debate of committee reports on Wednesday evening, two days after tabling.

### **Using members' media skills better**

- 4.31 It was also suggested at the conference that better use could be made of the skills of individual members in generating interest in, and media coverage for, committee reports. Most Members of the House have considerable skills in dealing with the media and extensive contacts particularly among local media in their electorates. When planning media activities committees should consider options for tapping into the media skills of their own members.
- 4.32 The issues and proposals raised in this report are part of an ongoing process by which the House and its committees are able to constantly evaluate and improve their performance. The Procedure Committee's role is to lead the continuous review of parliamentary procedure. It is the responsibility of all committees and all Members to look beyond the internal machinery of the House to the connections between the House and the society it serves.

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Chair  
23 May 2001