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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

COMMITTEES

Procedure Committee

Report

SPEECH

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SPEECH

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Speaker Pyne, Chris, MP	Question No.

Mr PYNE (Sturt) (11.18 am)—I thank my parliamentary colleagues who have made contributions to this debate on the report of the Procedure Committee *The Second Chamber: enhancing the Main Committee*. On Monday, we spoke in the House when the report was tabled, and I am very grateful to those people who spoke then. The member for Chifley spoke as deputy chairman and gave a speech that I probably would have given, because I was in Adelaide and was unable to be here. I am thankful for the speech that he gave. I also thank the members for Parramatta, Gilmore and Canning, who all spoke on the report.

I am pleased that the report is being considered by the Main Committee because it gives other people the opportunity to speak on it. The member for Chifley, of course, has had a second go, and I am going to speak. I am pleased to see that the Chief Opposition Whip, Mr Leo McLeay, is going to speak. He has, to his credit, been a keen follower of the Main Committee and made a presentation to the Procedure Committee during its consideration of the matter. He has made a very useful contribution to how this chamber operates.

I would like to thank the member for Batman, in particular, for the very keen interest that he took in the consideration of this report, particularly with respect to the operation and the business of the House—what he perceives to be the potential opportunities for getting useful debate in the Main Committee. Also, the member for Chifley took a very keen interest in the business and operation of this chamber and how it could be improved and enhanced to improve its status and its operation.

I also thank the deputy chairman for noting the good humour with which the Procedure Committee operates. But I do note that in the House on Monday he talked about the forbearance and tolerance of the members of the committee, which I am sure was no reflection on the chairman, simply on all members of committees who have worked with their chairmen and deputy chairmen to bring about results.

This is a very comprehensive report and the secretariat have put a terrific effort into making sure that we did a very comprehensive history of the Main Committee, the expectations that people had for it, whether those had been met and how they had been met. You will see in the report the voluminous appendices that are attached that deal with the work of the Main Committee over the time from its inception and that were very successfully put together by John Craig from the secretariat. I was very impressed with the effort that was put into this report by the Procedure Committee and particularly by the secretariat in making sure that it is the sort of useful report that can be looked at from a research point of view to see how the Main Committee has been operating and whether it has been useful.

I am a late convert to the usefulness of the Main Committee. When the report was begun, I must admit I took an old-fashioned and conservative view of the House, the main chamber, and how important that was. I was a bit concerned when the Main Committee first began that it would detract from the business of the House of Representatives. I suppose you could put me in that conservative group of people that does not like to see change to the traditions of the House of Representatives or the House of Commons. But I do note that in the last few years a number of very important bills have been sent to the Main Committee for debate and, in so doing, that has elevated the status and importance of the Main Committee. One of those bills was the euthanasia bill. At the time, I was very opposed to that being sent to the Main Committee; I believed it should have been debated in the House. But the fact that it was sent here and debated correctly and appropriately indicates how the Main Committee has come of age. Of course, most years now, the appropriations bills, after being dealt with for some time in the House of Representatives, are sent to the Main Committee for debate.

The Main Committee has evolved and has become the sort of forum where useful things are debated and opportunities are given for private members' business in a much more comprehensive fashion than is given in the House of Representatives. Most members of parliament who take their parliamentary responsibilities seriously have come to use the Main Committee as a way of representing their constituents' interests and delving in an in-depth fashion into policy issues that are of interest to them. Whereas, previously, reports from overseas delegations or parliamentary committees or even private members' bills had been dealt with peremptorily in the

House and then shunted aside, they can now be dealt with in the Main Committee and everyone gets a good chance to talk about the excellent work that they may have put in over the previous six or 12 months.

I want to talk today about the recognition of the Main Committee, because three of the recommendations coming out of the report need to be dealt with in some depth and I am sure that the other members of the committee have dealt with issues to do with business and operation during the debate in both the House and in this chamber.

The name of the Main Committee has always been a great bugbear with me and with many members of the House of Representatives because the historical situation was that the Main Committee was supposed to meet in the main committee room, but the senators objected to the use of the main committee room exclusively for the House of Representatives and its new Main Committee and opposed them moving to that room. Ever since then, of course, people have been in a state of great confusion about what the Main Committee was and where it met. Jo Gash, in her contribution on Monday, made the point that when she first got here as a member of parliament she never knew how to find this particular room because she would always go to the main committee room where she expected the Main Committee to meet. So that historical error has dogged the Main Committee ever since then, and it needs to be looked at and changed.

Also, the 'Main Committee' means nothing. This is not the main committee of the House of Representatives. There are many House of Representatives standing committees, joint standing committees and select committees; therefore, the Main Committee means very little to the average member of the House of Representatives and the public.

This room is properly termed the 'second chamber', because it is a chamber of the House of Representatives. If the House meets for a division, obviously we have to return to the House of Representatives. If there is objection in this chamber to a bill, if it goes from being a non-partisan issue to a partisan one, it has to be removed to the House of Representatives. So it is as much a house of the main chamber as the main chamber itself. To call it the 'Main Committee' has always made it seem like a sideshow alley, as some members have called it, or a tin-pot chamber, which, of course, is not the case. I think if we actually gave it the name that means something, which is Second Chamber—and that is what the committee has recommended—it would go some way to restoring some recognition of what the actual purpose of the Main Committee has been.

I note that the Main Committee in Australia has been so successful that our 'mother country', the United Kingdom, has accepted the idea of the Main Committee as part of its own set-up in the House of Commons and established a chamber just like ours and called it Westminster Hall, because it meets in Westminster Hall. It is good to see that the 'mother country' to some is adopting some of the changes of its former colony in its own House of Commons, when most people would have expected it to go the other way. Australia has now evolved to the extent where the House of Commons is adopting our practices, which is terrific to see. The United Kingdom has called it Westminster Hall, but I do not think that means very much either. I think 'Second Chamber' is clearly an accurate reflection of what this is and that is what it should be called.

The second thing that we have suggested, which is slightly different, is that interventions should be introduced into the Main Committee, or the Second Chamber. We had a briefing from Sir Alastair Goodlad, who was a Tory chief whip, and he gave a very good contribution about how interventions worked. It came from the fact that when I was in the House of Commons some time ago I watched interventions and thought that was terrific for the free flow of debate. Dare I say it, but on that well-known television serial *House of Cards*, with Francis Urquhart—which some members of the Labor Party probably model themselves on, but I am sure not the Chief Opposition Whip—I saw interventions in play, and I thought how well that worked for the free flow of debate.

One of the things lacking in the House of Representatives and in the Main Committee, I think, is that sense of free flow with argument going back and forth and real, genuine debate. There are far too many set piece speeches in both the House of Representatives and the Main Committee. Interventions, of course, would make it very difficult to continue to have a set piece speech. Sometimes they are quite appropriate but they are not at other times. I would have thought in this sort of smaller chamber it would be more appropriate to have more free flowing debate.

We have suggested that interventions be introduced. True to form, we have also suggested that, because this is a new idea, the Main Committee is the right place for it to be trialled. We are suggesting a trial of about 12 months to see whether, at the end of those 12 months, those interventions have been useful. We do not suggest that people be able to just interrupt somebody's speech willy-nilly. The way interventions work in the House of

Commons is that a person stands up and seeks the call from the chair. If the member speaking wishes to give that person the right to speak, they can say, 'I accept the intervention of my honourable friend.' If they wish to continue, they can say, 'I don't wish to be interrupted.' If the intervention is accepted, the person speaking has to ask a question. It can be put as, 'Doesn't the honourable member think that ...' and then such and such would happen.' Obviously, it can be a debating type question, but everything has to be put as a question.

We are also suggesting in this report that the chairman of the Main Committee, or the Second Chamber—as, hopefully, it will become—would have the power to deny the call to people who are continuously intervening and trying obviously to upset the flow of the person speaking. But at the end of the day, the person speaking would have the power to decide whether or not to allow an intervention. In this intimate sort of setting—

Mr Leo McLeay—Therein lies the rub.

Mr PYNE—That is exactly right: 'Therein lies the rub,' as the Chief Opposition Whip points out. It would not necessarily lead to the free flow of debate, because the person speaking could always stop the intervention. But, at the same time, I think most people would become quite used to the idea. As many of us know in giving speeches in the House of Representatives and in this place, often interjections are quite useful in changing your speech and making it more interesting for the person speaking and for the people listening. Hopefully, that would be what would happen. I would very strongly urge the government to have a trial for 12 months to see how it works in this chamber and then perhaps take it into the House of Representatives.

Finally, I would like to comment on the physical location of the chamber. As mentioned earlier, the Main Committee was never supposed to meet in this room. This is a normal committee room of the House of Representatives—a room which is needed. Members of the Department of the House of Representatives would be able to confirm that they are often unable to provide all the requirements for rooms for parliamentary committees that are meeting. They would like to have this committee room given back so that they can provide it for standing, select and party committees that meet. We were originally supposed to meet in the main committee room, which would have probably been appropriate but too large.

The committee therefore looked at particular venues around the vicinity of the House of Representatives. It settled on moving closer to the chamber, staying on this floor and probably moving to an area on the upper gallery on this side of the House of Representatives which is currently being used for offices and which could easily be renovated to become a venue for the Main Committee or Second Chamber. That would bring it very close to the House. It would also make it very easy for public access because there is a stairwell leading directly to the second floor, where the Second Chamber would be located, from the current location next to the security people on the first floor outside the Speaker's gallery. It would be very easy for people to say, 'I'd like to have a look at the Second Chamber,' and they would be able to go up the stairs. It is quite a nice staircase. It is not a dingy, dimly lit stairwell. They could then view the Second Chamber, which would give it more recognition and status and it would make it more readily accessible to the public.

It would also be located closer to members of the House of Representatives. It would have its own space with its own identity, unlike this room, which creates confusion for many members of parliament who initially do not even know where to find the Main Committee. Many of them go to the first floor, to the actual room which is called the main committee room. So we have suggested that it be moved to the location that I have referred to. We understand that that would involve some cost. We hope that the government does not falter in accepting most of the recommendations of the report just because of that aspect. We would prefer to see as many of the recommendations implemented as possible, with a view to moving the location of the committee at an appropriate time down the track.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the members of the secretariat—Robyn Webber, John Craig and Anna Gadzinski—for the excellent work that they put in to the report. I also thank the members of the committee—the members for Batman, Chifley, Mallee, Parramatta, Gilmore and Canning—all of whom have made a very useful contribution to this report. As the member for Mallee said to me yesterday, most of the recommendations of this report can be implemented without spending a dollar and without too much controversy. Therefore, he and I hope that the government moves quickly to implement this, the third report of the Procedure Committee in this parliament.