



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BUSINESS

SPEECH

Wednesday, 5 February 2003

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Wednesday, 5 February 2003
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Questioner
Speaker Abbott, Tony, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Leader of the House) (10.01 am)—I move:

That, unless otherwise ordered, standing order 344 be amended as follows for the remainder of the session:

Admission of visitors

344 When a committee or subcommittee is examining a witness, or engaged in other proceedings for the purpose of gathering information, visitors may be admitted. They shall withdraw if requested by the chair or if the committee or subcommittee resolves for their withdrawal. All visitors must withdraw when the committee or subcommittee is deliberating or taking evidence in camera.

Given that the House has the ultimate question of war and peace before it today, I do not want to detain it for very long with this matter, which I see as a question of housekeeping more than anything else. The government wants to change standing order 344 to provide that individual committee members will no longer be able to force committee proceedings into camera. I believe this change is necessary because, late last year, for the first time, standing order 344 was invoked by a member of a committee against the wishes of the majority of that committee to, in the view of the chairman and the majority of that committee, stymie the workings of the committee.

The standing order in question, as it currently operates, was inherited, I believe, from Westminster. In its current form the standing order is an anachronism. Our standing order has been changed at Westminster. The clear practice of the Senate is for committees there to make these decisions by majority. The standing order, as proposed by the government today, entrenches the presumption that committee proceedings will be in public. It enshrines the principle of majority rule and it ensures that the operation of committees reflects the operation of this House, where any member may draw the attention of the House to the presence of strangers, but the decision about whether to accept their presence or to eject them is in the hands of the House as a whole.

I believe that it is important to make the change the government proposes. I believe that committees of the House of Representatives have always operated in a reasonably constructive way. They have generally been uncontaminated by a spirit of excessive partisanship. I think that, given the unfortunate precedent that was set late last year, to allow the standing order to remain as it is would seriously prejudice the good working of the committee system of this House.