



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMITTEES

Procedure Committee

Report

SPEECH

Monday, 21 June 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Owens, Julie, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Ms OWENS (Parramatta) (9.10 pm)—On behalf of the Procedure Committee I present the committee's report entitled *Building a modern committee system: an inquiry into the effectiveness of the House committee system*, together with the minutes of proceedings.

Ordered that the report be made a parliamentary paper.

Ms OWENS—The House committee system has been operating in its current form since 1987. Some significant reforms were undertaken as a result of a 1998 Procedure Committee report, and other minor changes have taken place over time. Last year, over 20 years after the current system of committees was established, the Procedure Committee considered it timely to undertake another in-depth review, looking at issues such as the work and powers of committees and factors that influence their effectiveness.

I thank the people who provided written submissions and those who met with the committee. As part of its inquiry, the committee held two roundtable discussions with chairs and deputy chairs of House and joint committees. On behalf of the Procedure Committee, I take this opportunity to thank these colleagues for their time and contribution to the important discussions that took place at these well-attended and constructive forums. In fact, this sort of cooperative, bipartisan approach that was demonstrated at the roundtables is one of the real strengths of House committees in particular. Unlike some other committee systems, House committees tend not to be adversarial but facilitate members working together across party lines to find solutions to problems faced by the Australian public, delivering a great deal of value to the community on the way.

The committee found that, overall, the House committee system has been operating relatively effectively within the framework that has been available to it. However, some changes are necessary to strengthen the role of committees within the Australian parliament. To this end, the committee has made recommendations for structural changes to make the committee system work more efficiently and make the best use of members' time. These include reducing the number of general-purpose standing committees and reviewing the number of joint committees, reducing the number of permanent members on House committees, making better use of more supplementary members in committee inquiries and recognising and extending the significant roles performed by chairs and deputy chairs. Some other reforms proposed by the committee include increasing the number of bills inquiries carried out by House committees and giving House committees the power to initiate their own references, noting that they already have the capacity to influence their work programs by negotiating inquiry terms of reference with ministers and by conducting inquiries into annual and audit reports.

Changes in technology and in the community's expectations of members and of parliament have meant that the committee system's role has been evolving over the years. Committees act as a bridge between the parliament and the public. The Procedure Committee's recommendations therefore seek to make it easier for the community to follow and engage with committees, including ensuring that the technological tools available to committees are adequate and appropriate, including teleconferencing, videoconferencing, web based solutions and audiovisual recording and broadcasting; providing a more practical and appropriate time in the chamber and Main Committee for the presentation and debate of committee reports; and creating space in the House's schedule for a deeper narrative around committee work, starting with giving chairs the opportunity to make statements in the chamber about their committee's inquiries.

No consideration of the effectiveness of House committees would be complete without giving some consideration to the resources available to committees to carry out their work, including funding, staffing and time. While the committee appreciates the constraints of the current fiscal environment, it notes that the House has traditionally had little input into the level of funding required for it to effectively carry out its work. For this reason, one of the committee's recommendations is for the establishment of a House staffing and appropriations committee, whose role would be similar to that of its counterpart in the other place. Giving the House this sort of input is long overdue. It has been both recommended by the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit and proposed by the former Speaker, the Honourable Member for Wannon, earlier this parliament.

The report I present this evening is the culmination of a lengthy and thoughtful inquiry process. The inquiry was carried out cooperatively and across party lines, and I thank my Procedure Committee colleagues for their sustained efforts. Their experience with committees, as well as their interest in the inquiry, was invaluable. I also thank our secretariat, Catherine Cornish and Peggy Danae, for the extraordinary amount of work they did on this report. I inform honourable members that I will seek to have this report debated in the Main Committee. The report has aimed to strengthen an integral aspect of the House of Representatives, ensuring that the House committee system continues to meet the needs of the community and the parliament for many years to come. As such, I encourage my colleagues to consider the Procedure Committee's report and to contribute to the debate as they wish. I commend the report to the House. *(Time expired)*

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott)—Does the member for Parramatta wish to move a motion in connection with the report to enable it to be debated on a future occasion?