



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**PROGRAM OF SITTINGS FOR 2011**  
**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 24 November 2010**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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| <b>Questioner</b>                       | <b>Responder</b>    |
| <b>Speaker</b> Pyne, Chris, MP          | <b>Question No.</b> |

**Mr PYNE** (Sturt) (5.13 pm)—I rise to speak on the Leader of the House's motion that the sitting pattern be adopted by the House. In doing so, I wish to make a few comments about the sitting pattern and about its paucity of sitting days for 2011. This is the first time since the 1996 election of the Howard government, so it is the first time in about 15 years, that the parliament will sit for 17 sitting weeks. This number for 2011 is the lowest number of sitting weeks in around 15 years. It is an extraordinary admission on the part of the government that it has no agenda, no plan and no program for the future of Australia. It is also an admission that the government does not want to sit, because it does not want the public to know that while the Labor Party is in government the Greens are in power. It has no agenda other than the agenda that the Greens foist on the government on an almost daily basis. The Leader of the Opposition outlined today during the MPI debate the myriad changes that the government has introduced which are basically straight out of the Greens playbook.

The Greens are running the government of Australia. They are in power. Bob Brown is the most powerful politician in Australia and the government is singing to the tune that the Greens are playing. It is a disgrace. The sitting pattern that we are debating now in the House is a manifest example of a government that could not cobble together a program to last for more than 17 weeks in 2011. In 1997 we sat for 20 weeks, in 1999 we sat for 19, in 2000 we sat for 19, in 2002 we sat for 18, in 2003 we sat for 20, in 2005 we sat for 18 and in 2006 we sat for 18. The other years of the Howard government were election years and, of course, elections truncate the sitting pattern of the parliament. For example, since this government have been elected, in 2008 they sat for 18 weeks, in 2009 they sat for 18 weeks and in 2010 they will only sit for 15 weeks because, of course, again, the election has truncated the parliamentary schedule.

In 2011 they will sit for a record 17 weeks, the lowest number of sitting weeks in 15 years, which is a clear admission from the government that they do not have an agenda and they do not have a program. As it happens, for this last sitting week of 2010 after a recent election of a new government, we would normally be expected to sit late on Thursday, or into Friday or even into Saturday as we have in previous years because of the bunching up of the program at the end of the year with government business. There would be bills that needed to be passed, motions that needed to be dealt with and disallowance instruments that needed to be dealt with. But not in this government. In this government we will be getting up at five o'clock on Thursday. Many people will say, 'What a relief,' and people will be pleased to get home after what has been in some cases, especially for the Labor Party, a torrid year. Many members of the Labor Party are hoping that the sooner we rise the less likely there is that damaging leaks will be given to the newspapers or to the opposition. The government will be going into the foetal position over Christmas after the disastrous election result of August this year.

Usually, Mr Deputy Speaker Scott, as you would well know with your experience in this place, we would be expecting to sit late on the evening of the last day or even the next day, but there is no need to because the government does not have a program. The government does not have bills that need to be dealt with. It does not have motions that need to be dealt with. It is so bereft of ideas other than the idea of how to win elections that, in fact, we are getting up at five o'clock and as the Leader of the House admits, that is not a bad thing. Of course, he is from New South Wales Labor and New South Wales Labor's primary goal is about clinging to power and not about introducing policy.

The New South Wales Labor Party does not care about policy; it only cares about clinging to power. We have seen the impact that that has had in New South Wales. As Paul Keating said, 'Where New South Wales goes so does the federal Labor Party.' That is why we saw them butchering their Prime Minister on 24 June and saw, laid bare in the minutes of the caucus leaked to the *Australian* newspaper, the full speech of the former Prime Minister published as a transcript. I wonder who requested the full speech be published as a transcript in the minutes. It did seem unusual to members of the coalition that, in fact, the entire speech of the former Prime Minister was published in the minutes of the Labor caucus. Somebody must have requested that. I wonder if it was with an eye to leaking it at some stage in the future.

I digress. I return to the motion under debate which is the sitting schedule for 2011. It is a paltry 17 weeks with an enormous break in April and May. The public must be wondering what on earth the federal parliament is doing when we are sitting for only 17 weeks of the year. I think my time is almost up. I see I have another nine minutes to go but I have no intention of continuing for another nine minutes because I know the House has other matters to deal with. These are important points that need to be made about the government's failure to develop a program, an agenda and a plan.

The public must be wondering why the federal parliament can sit for such a short period of time. We have over a trillion dollar national economy. The budget of the Commonwealth runs to hundreds of billions of dollars, yet the government cannot find more than 17 sitting weeks to occupy the time of this parliament. The public must be wondering if they are becoming more and more like state Labor governments that hardly ever sit rather than being a national government running a serious country. We are the 14th largest economy in the world, we are an important middle power, yet this government cannot find enough business to occupy the House for more than 17 weeks of the year.

There is another reason why this sitting pattern is an embarrassment to the Leader of the House. I know it took so long for him to develop the sitting pattern because he was trying very hard to come up with more sitting weeks so that they would have a decent program, a real agenda, a real plan to demonstrate to the Australian people. Yet he has had to come in here and embarrassingly put this notice of motion on the *Hansard* record of a 17-week sitting. He will go down as the Leader of the House that had oversight over the record-breaking shortest period of sitting in 15 years.

The third reason these sitting week schedules do not really bear out truth is that the Leader of the House tells me that there is not enough time on the schedule to have private members' business votes on Thursday morning on all the matters that the opposition requests votes upon. He said that there is not enough time in government members business time to schedule votes on matters such as the national curriculum, or the motion to deal with asylum seekers being detained at Woodside or, for example, the release of insulation data, which is a matter that is close to the minister for schools heart. He says there is not enough time on the schedule for those votes to be held. Yet he has scheduled only 17 sitting weeks.

The opposition is more than happy to come back to the House throughout next year and allocate whatever time is necessary for a proper scrutiny of government policy and for the opportunity to vote on private members' business, which was of course the agreement the Leader of the House made with me and with the crossbenchers to ensure that private members' business was given pride of place. I remember those negotiations; I remember the discussions that we had. He was so reasonable in those negotiations. He managed to convince the crossbenchers that he genuinely wanted to improve private members' business, that he was absolutely committed to voting on private members' business. Yet we are here presiding over one of the shortest periods of sitting in 15 years and he uses the lack of time on the agenda to say that we cannot have votes on private members' business. That I think is the most powerful argument for why this sitting schedule should be exposed for what it is.

This sitting schedule is designed to have the parliament sit less because the government do not control the parliament. It is designed to have the parliament sit less because when the parliament sits the government are embarrassed in question time by the performance of their ministers, particularly the performance of their Prime Minister. They are embarrassed about the fact that they cannot determine every outcome on every vote. They are embarrassed by the possibility of being defeated on the floor of the House, as they have been on numerous occasions since this parliament began. So they have decided the less they sit the better the government will look.

My view is that if the parliament does not sit the Australian public will reach two conclusions. No. 1, they will decide that the government does not have an agenda and, No. 2, they will decide the government is not doing the work that members of parliament are elected to do. We should all be here, especially the new members of parliament, debating, scrutinising, holding the government to account. The government should be required to be here explaining what its agenda is for the Australian people, and the reason it is not is that it does not have an agenda for the Australian people.

The opposition will not, obviously, vote against the sitting pattern. It is a matter for the government if it wishes to be embarrassed by a short sitting pattern; we will not vote against it. I do wish to make these points on the record so that when the Leader of the House tries to pretend that the government has got an agenda and a plan we will be able to point out that we said to him right at the beginning: 'You presented this sitting schedule because of the paucity of ideas on the government side.'