



Committee Chairman Christopher Pyne (centre) with Committee members John Forrest (left) and Ross Cameron (right) – making Parliament more accessible to people.

Letting people know:

“It’s Your House”

Calls for greater community involvement in the House of Representatives (*About the House*, November/December 1999) have received a boost with the release of a report from the influential House of Representatives Procedure Committee. *It’s Your House* presents the findings of the Procedure Committee’s investigation into how Australians can have a greater say in the workings of their House.

The Procedure Committee has made a number of recommendations to change the way in which the House and its committees currently operate. The aim is to make Parliament more accessible to people.

“We want greater public participation in the work of parliamentary committees,” said Committee Chairman, Christopher Pyne MP (Member for Sturt, Liberal SA). “That can only be achieved if people know more about the work that committees are doing.”

The Procedure Committee suggests that better promotion of committee work will generate greater public interest in that work and will lead to more people contributing to committee investigations. “As awareness rises people will seek to find out more about the parliamentary system and be more willing to become involved in particular inquiries that may be relevant to them,” stated the Committee.

A better media strategy for committees is high on the list of recommendations put forward by the Procedure Committee. Recognising the important role that the media play in informing the public about issues being considered by the House and its committees, the Procedure Committee has argued strongly for broader contact between committees and the media.

‘more open and flexible committee inquiry process’

The Procedure Committee is after a more open and flexible committee inquiry process. It has proposed a loosening of the rules that govern the discussion of evidence taken by committees and the release of committee reports. “People need an opportunity to see, through the media, the whole process of an inquiry and how ideas and recommendations develop,” said the Committee.

Changes to petitions are also on the agenda in the wake of the Procedure Committee’s recommendations. Currently a petition submitted to the House is simply announced by the Clerk. The Procedure Committee wants Members to have the opportunity to speak to the petitions that they are lodging on behalf of their constituents. The Committee also wants petitions to be referred to parliamentary committees, to be used as a barometer of community concerns and as a basis for any investigation by the relevant committee.

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To improve follow up of petitions by Ministers, the Procedure Committee has recommended annual public reporting on petitions. Under the Committee's proposal, the House would receive an annual report on the petitions that are lodged and the ministerial responses presented. "It is hoped that this regular reporting may encourage Ministers to respond to petitions sent to them and report the responses to the House," said the Committee.

Another important proposal is to allow Members to lodge written questions on notice to Ministers on behalf of their constituents. While many Members already lodge questions prompted by constituents, the Committee's recommendation is that the name of the constituent asking the question would be published along with the Member's name. This would offer an important avenue for people to have a direct input to the work of the House.

Other recommendations include:

- redrafting the rules of the House (known as the Standing Orders) to make them more readable; and
- better promotion of the procedure that allows people to respond to adverse comments made about them personally in the House (known as the right of reply – see *article p. 17*).

"The Committee's recommendations respond to community concerns that Parliament is no longer relevant to ordinary people," said Mr Pyne. "Our report tapped into many Members' enthusiasm for innovation and development, including better use of technology to keep people in touch with the House and the House in touch with people."

Committees and petitions were highlighted as major targets for improvement by the Deputy Chair, Roger Price MP (Member for Chifley, ALP NSW).

"Part of the recommendations we are making go to freeing up committees," said Price. He emphasised the importance of encouraging greater access to the media by committees, allowing committees to comment on evidence prior to reporting, and enabling committees to identify issues that are troubling them.

'putting punch into petitions'

"Our recommendations also are putting punch into petitions," commented Price. "Under our proposals, petitions will not gather dust in the bowels of the Parliament but will stand referred to committees. Committees would be able to take up an inquiry on a petition."



Deputy Chair, Roger Price – encouraging greater access to the media by committees.

While the report is only recent and awaits a formal response, already measures are under way to implement some recommendations. A redrafting of the Standing Orders has commenced. The Department of the House of Representatives has appointed a media and communications adviser to work with committees in promoting their work to the media and the community. (The adviser, Sally Webster, can be contacted in the Liaison and Projects Office on telephone (02) 6277 2063 or email Sally.Webster.Reps@aph.gov.au.) In addition, new publications, such as this *About the House* bulletin and the new community guide *Your Key to the House*, are being made available broadly to the community through the Liaison and Projects Office (phone (02) 6277 2122 or email liaison.reps@aph.gov.au to order your copy).

The Procedure Committee's report is available on the Internet at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/proc. For more information, or to obtain a hard copy of the report, contact:

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