



PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

20 May 1979

ELECTORATE TALK

The private Member of Parliament - the Member who sits on the backbench - is a key and central figure in the Parliamentary democracy we enjoy in Australia.

The private Member is in a special position. He is able to make a unique contribution to government.

He is a barometer of public attitudes simply because of his intimate links with his constituents.

He is able to quickly sense a community need and bring that to the attention of government.

No government can afford not to heed his advice and his concerns.

For many Australians - even for most Australians - a Canberra government can be remote. It seems removed from day-to-day problems of Australian families.

"How can the politicians and public servants in Canberra understand my special circumstances and my problems", is a cry we often hear or read about.

The point is a good one. That is why the local Member in particular can bring to Canberra - the centre of government - the real concerns, hopes and aspirations of all sections of the community.

I know of many of the frustrations of the private Member, having spent some ten years working from the backbench, but that work has great intrinsic merit. The responsibility of representing all the people of his electorate can itself be a stimulating and rewarding experience. It is one of the continuing important tasks of every Member of Parliament.

While the private Member may be giving constructive service to his electorate, he still feels he has more to contribute to the central decision making process in government.

Quite plainly, the Ministry and Cabinet have no mortgage of wisdom on the hundreds of issues that pass their plate each year.

The government understands this, and that is why we have given more encouragement to our private Members to participate in this process.

For many years, committees of Parliament, made up of both government and opposition Members, have made valuable contributions in examining critical issues.

Committees have prepared reports on issues of public concern ranging from road safety, tourism, defence equipment, social conditions of Aborigines to drugs.

Unfortunately, in the past, these reports have been often pigeon-holed and forgotten, gathering dust in a library somewhere.

For the government, that situation was not good enough.

Last year I announced that within six months of tabling a committee report, the responsible Minister would make a statement to the Parliament outlining the action the government proposed to take in relation to the report.

The new system has worked well.

Just a few weeks ago for example, Mr Lynch presented the government response to the report of the Select Committee on Tourism.

That was a bipartisan committee.

The Chairman was David Jull, a Liberal Member from Queensland, and the Deputy was a long standing Labor Parliamentarian, the late Frank Stewart.

The recommendations of this committee were broadly accepted by the government. Without their work, the government could not have made the best decision in the interests of the entire community.

As Prime Minister and leader of the coalition team, I have also insisted on an effective government Members' committee system.

This enables private Members to work closely with Ministers, and provides a direct sounding board that any government must have.

I and my Ministers meet regularly with Chairmen of government committees on a whole range of policies and issues.

This kind of consultation adds to the quality of government, and the decision making process.

Today, as communities and governments around the world face up to so many complex issues it is important that the government makes the best use of all possible talent and experience available - both inside and outside the Parliament.

The local Member of Parliament is in a position to make a special contribution to the decision making process. And that is an input that the government welcomes.