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PRIME MINISTER

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

PARLIAMENTARY SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
PARLIAMENTARY REFORM
21 FEBRUARY 1991

Mr Speaker

Parliament stands at the centre of our nation's public affairs. Reform of Parliament is reform of the central institution of Australian public life. This motion therefore is of the highest importance, seeking as it does to help ensure the continuing relevance and efficiency of this institution and its members. It is a particularly significant motion given that it comes so soon after the introduction of the televising of the proceedings of this House.

Let me say at the outset that I fully endorse the words of Alan Browning in House of Representatives Practice: "It is important that the people know and understand, at least in broad terms, what the Parliament is, and what it does, how it works, what happens there and what is said there".
(p 734)

The business of Parliament is indeed best conducted in the full light of public scrutiny.

Our decision to televise the proceedings of the House of Representatives has brought Parliament closer to the Australian people and has made them more fully aware of the scope and significance of the activities that take place here.

In historical and in contemporary terms, it is highly appropriate that it should be a Labor Government that introduced the televising of Parliamentary procedures. It was, after all, a Labor Government that introduced the broadcasting of Parliamentary proceedings by radio in 1946. And it has been a recurring theme of this Government that public access to Parliament should be facilitated and encouraged wherever possible.

It was this Government that established the Parliamentary Education Office in 1988 to prepare information about Parliament for dissemination to schools throughout Australia. More than 100,000 Australian school students visit Parliament House each year, and many of them take part in learning programs in the Parliamentary Education Centre in this building. In the same vein, it was this Government that established the Citizenship Visits Program to assist children from remote schools visit Parliament.

Mr Speaker

A complementary theme of the Government's reforms to Parliament has been our concern that the procedures of this House be clear, rational and efficient, so as to allow Members of Parliament to fulfil their responsibilities to those whom they represent.

This Government has accordingly introduced significant procedural reforms to enhance the quality of Members' parliamentary role.

We introduced the Thursday morning debates on private members' business - a popular and successful innovation that has brought a very considerable range of issues to Parliament's attention. We revolutionised the sitting hours of this Chamber to make them more rational and more humane; they now allow a much better balance to be struck between members' parliamentary and electorate responsibilities.

I now wish to inform the House that the Government proposes to introduce another reform to the procedures of this House that will further widen the scope of Members' parliamentary role. Following consultation with the Opposition Leader and the Manager of Opposition Business, and subsequently with you, Mr Speaker, the Government now proposes, with this motion, to amend standing orders to allow an Advisory Debate to be held once or twice each Parliamentary session.

The purpose of an Advisory Debate will be to allow Members of the House of Representatives the opportunity to offer their advice to the Government on significant matters of public interest before the Government.

I want to see constructive and wide-ranging debates, not restricted to particular pieces of legislation as is the case with many debates in this House, nor overshadowed by a partisan, adversarial atmosphere. The topics of Advisory Debates will be determined by the Government, since it is the Government that is seeking Parliament's advice. It is proposed that the relevant Minister or Ministers will be present during the debate but that Ministers will not contribute to the debate except for a brief summation, as the final speaker. This is to allow Government backbenchers and the Opposition the maximum opportunity to make their views known.

It is proposed that an Advisory Debate be held on a Wednesday; that it commence at 10 am; and that it run up to, if necessary, but not beyond, the 2 pm commencement of Question Time. Each speaker should be restricted to 10 minutes to allow the maximum number of participants in the debate.

The Government is genuine in its desire that the views of Parliamentarians on significant issues be made known to it. I propose that the first Advisory Debate be held on Wednesday 6 March on the topic of Ecologically Sustainable Development.

I envisage that debate will cover - but of course need not be restricted to - topics such as the Ecologically Sustainable Development working groups that are currently conducting their inquiries and the role of the Resource Assessment Commission and its inquiries. I trust Honourable Members will support this initiative and participate actively in the first and subsequent Advisory Debates.

Mr Speaker

Last year the Government raised two other issues of Parliamentary reform with the Opposition.

The first, dealing with possible changes to Question Time, failed to elicit either support or an alternative proposal from the Opposition. Consequently, this matter will lapse.

The second, dealing with the possible introduction of electronic voting, does have the in principle support of both sides of the House. It may be that the Procedures Committee will wish to consider which of the range of options would be most suitable. However, I am advised by you, Mr Speaker, that a system of electronic voting would cost between \$1 million and \$2 million to install and perhaps another \$0.5 million a year to operate. In view of the likely cost, I do not believe that Parliament should start down this track at the present time. It is certainly not a matter to which the Government attaches any immediate priority.

Mr Speaker

The Government will remain open to any further proposals that may be put that genuinely and constructively seek to facilitate Members' parliamentary performance. This proposal for Advisory Debates, coming as it does in the wake of the decision to televise Parliament, shows our concern to ensure Parliament remains relevant and accessible to our masters, the people of Australia.

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