

**PRIME MINISTER****STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P. J. KEATING MP****OPENING OF PARLIAMENT**

I have received a letter this week from the Leader of the Opposition, Dr Hewson, rejecting the Government's proposed modernisation of the ceremonial opening of the 37th Parliament on May 4.

I find it disappointing that Dr Hewson, who sought to make the reform of Parliament an election issue, should mulishly resist such a sensible reform proposal so early in the new Parliamentary term.

Some of the existing procedures in the ceremonial opening are unnecessarily time consuming. For example, Members of the House of Representatives are required to move from their chamber three times in the course of the day, twice to the Senate and once to the Members' Hall.

The Government's proposal that the Governor-General's Speech be delivered in the Great Hall reduced the amount of traipsing through the building but, more importantly, would provide a better reflection of the Constitutional equality of the two houses in our system, and emphasise the unity of Parliament. The Government believed all Members and Senators would want the opening ceremony of Parliament to be seen as relevant, modern and meaningful to all Australians.

But the Government has more to do than spend its time coaxing the Opposition into the late 20th Century. Whatever the importance of ceremonial arrangements, the Government is determined that they will not interfere with the real business of the nation, so therefore the ceremony will go ahead as before.

Contrary to Dr Hewson's assertion in his letter, the proposed changes were hardly "the result of some last minute initiative."

I remind Dr Hewson that he was a member of the Opposition in March 1988 when it supported a motion of the House calling for the opening and the Governor-General's speech to be moved from the Senate.

The Opposition also participated in, and agreed with, the recommendations of the House of Representatives procedure committee report in June 1991 on which the proposed changes are closely based.

It was always intended that the Great Hall in the new Parliament House should be used for important ceremonial occasions. It was the forum for the official opening of the building by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth in 1988.

According to Dr Hewson, the Opposition is not opposed in principle to sensible and responsible changes to the existing arrangements for the opening of Parliament. The Government intends, therefore, to provide an early opportunity for the Opposition to express such support by moving a motion in each chamber to amend standing orders to allow the opening ceremony to take place in the Great Hall for the 38th Parliament and beyond.

The point of all this is that at the first hurdle of Parliamentary reform Dr Hewson and his Opposition have baulked.

CANBERRA
21 April, 1993

Leader of the Opposition



20 APR 1993

The Hon P J Keating MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister

I understand that your Office contacted mine on 15 April 1993 to advise that the Government is reviewing arrangements for the Opening of Parliament on 4 May and to seek agreement to changes which would include the location for delivery of the Governor-General's speech.

I wish to note at the outset that I regard the way in which the Government has consulted with the Opposition on this issue to have been quite inadequate and inappropriate. In view of the significance of some of the proposed changes, the appropriate channel for preliminary communications about possible changes to the Opening of Parliament is directly between you and me (rather than at staff level between our offices), and the proper forum for consideration of any proposed changes is the Parliament itself.

I should also add that I regard the briefing paper titled "Opening of Parliament" which your Office provided to be a quite misleading, incomplete and inappropriate account of existing procedures for the Opening of Parliament and an inadequate basis for the changes proposed.

The Government's handling of this issue gives every sign of undue haste. There has been inadequate provision of opportunity for proper and effective consultation. And the case for the changes proposed has not been made out.

Accordingly, the Opposition does not agree at this time to the changes in arrangements for the Opening of Parliament which were conveyed by your Office last week.

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I want to make it clear, however, that the Opposition is not opposed, in principle, to changes in existing arrangements for the Opening of Parliament where such changes are sensible and responsible. But we are opposed to changes that are the result of some last minute initiative, or that are not fully considered and approved by the Parliament, or that seek to break with Parliamentary tradition for the sake of it, or that are somehow meant to symbolise, or foreshadow, some broader constitutional change.

The fact is that the Opening of Parliament is a Parliamentary occasion and not a matter for the Government alone to change. Change should only be made with the agreement of both the Senate and the House of Representatives and only after there has been adequate opportunity for changes to be fully considered and debated in both Houses. To impose change through other means would be an abuse of Executive power.

As I have indicated, the Opposition is not opposed, in principle, to changes in the procedural arrangements for the Opening of Parliament where those changes are responsible and appropriate, and where the proper processes are observed. Accordingly, the Opposition would support a Joint Committee of the Parliament addressing in a proper way existing procedural arrangements for the Opening of Parliament. We believe that, before the possibility of any proposals for change going forward to the Parliament for deliberation, detailed and effective consideration of this kind is the only appropriate course of action.

Yours sincerely



JOHN HEWSON MP