

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES PROCEDURES
8 FEBRUARY 1994

Honourable Members will recall that during the valedictory remarks at the end of last year's Budget Sittings, I made some comments about the reform of our procedures here in the House - especially in relation to Question Time.

The new parliamentary year is a good time for us to be acting on the recommendations made by the Procedure Committee in its report, About Time.

The title itself has a lot of merit: if we want to preserve the institutions of our democracy, if we want them to work more effectively we have to be prepared to change them where necessary. And, of course, there have been great changes since many of these institutions and procedures were first introduced.

These changes are overdue - as I said last year, the honourable Member for Bonython and the other members of the Procedure Committee have done us all a great service in the preparation of that report.

This week the Leader of the House will be tabling a detailed government response to the Committee's report and the House will be considering revised sessional orders. But there are some points that I wish to highlight.

The Procedure Committee report dealt with three main areas:

- . first, the handling of legislation - particularly the need to free up chamber time for the proper consideration of legislation by providing a Main Committee (or "second chamber") for handling routine and uncontroversial bills.
- . second, parliamentary questions, and particularly Question Time, and
- . third, when, and for how long, we sit.

The Government has given consideration to these matters over the summer recess, and I am pleased to be able to inform the House that we intend to accept, in whole or in part, the great majority of the Committee's recommendations.

Sitting times

Taking our sitting times first, it is clear the time has come to change the hours we sit. As we all know, and the Committee has confirmed, sitting late into the night, night after night, is not a productive or particularly sensible way to conduct our business.

Except at the beginning of new sittings (and public holidays), we shall from Monday 21 February sit Monday to Thursday each sitting week. So far as possible we shall stick to the 'two-on, two-off' pattern.

In the other place, Senators will also be sitting four days a week and it will be convenient for the two houses to have similar patterns of sittings.

Our normal starting and finishing times will be:

- . Monday 12.30 to 8.00
- . Tuesday 12.30 to 8.00
- . Wednesday 9.30 to 8.00, and
- . Thursday 9.30 to 6.00

Questions

Mr Speaker, the idea of reforming Question Time goes back a long way.

In an article on Question Time in the Journal of Public Administration in 1972, a scholar by the name of John Howard - John H Howard - concluded "new procedures and parliamentary institutions must be implemented". "It is no longer acceptable", he said, "to rely on conventions and precedents that were established over 100 years ago".

The Question Time he describes sounds remarkably like the one we hear complaints about today. "The modern aim of Question Time", Mr Howard wrote, "appears to be not so much to seek information as to impart it, or establish debating points".

He quotes a senior politician saying Question Time "enlists information to secure a political advantage and to embarrass the Minister concerned".

"The first concern of a member of Parliament when he is in the House", Mr Howard said, "does not lie with the conduct of public administration. It lies with the survival of his party, whether it be in Government or Opposition".

All the same criticisms are there in 1972:

fewer and fewer questions being asked

the practice of Dorothy Dixers

the intervention of broadcasting and press publicity which are alleged to have encouraged the diversion of Question Time into Dorothy Dixers and attempts to "score" by the Opposition

the lack of "tranquility" in the Chamber

the impossibility of enforcing Standing Orders - as the Liberal Party Speaker, Sir William Aston said, "it is impossible to enforce all the Standing Orders at Question Time. I believe that if I did that, possibly we would have no Question Time at all."

I know - as does the Member for Bennelong - that this Mr Howard was describing it accurately. Because I was there at the time. And, in fact, as you will see in the Hansard of 18 April 1972, I spoke on the subject.

Mr Speaker, Question Time has always been a great deal less than perfect.

As John Uhr wrote in a monograph on the subject a decade ago:

"It would be wrong to look for some golden age of Australian parliamentary affairs when questions were asked and answered in an exemplary mode of non-partisan public service."

It has never been perfect, Mr Speaker; it has always been to some degree in need of reform. But the Government of which the Member for Bennelong was a minister did not reform it. This Government will.

The Government accepts the Committee's view that Question Time can be improved and that the time has come to try some new arrangements.

The Procedure Committee recommended we should have a limited experiment with the rostering of ministers for Question Time. They proposed that ministers other than the Prime Minister, the Treasurer and the Minister for Finance would attend Monday Question Times on a roster based on half-hour segments.

The Government, however, has decided that if change is needed, there is no point in tinkering at the margins. We have decided to institute a fully rostered Question Time on a trial basis for the remainder of this Session.

With other ministers, including the Treasurer, I shall be available for Question Time on each Monday and Thursday to take questions ranging across the whole spectrum of government.

Other ministers will be rostered to answer questions relating to their portfolios and those of the Senate ministers they represent. The Leader of the House will be drawing up the roster and will consult the Manager of Opposition Business in the process.

Question Time will be at 3.00pm and will last for 45 minutes as recommended by the Committee, with a minimum of 14 questions.

It should also be remembered that because the House will on that schedule be sitting one extra day in each two week session, there will be an additional 45 minutes of opportunity for questioning the Government.

All this will mean that more homework will be needed on both sides of the House. Some Members of the Opposition's long front bench will have to think up some questions on their shadow portfolio responsibilities for the first time.

As the other Mr Howard said in 1972, "The advantage of the Westminster system is that it makes the questioner have some degree of responsibility as well as the minister who has to provide an answer".

Those, like the Member for Bennelong, who complain about Question Time being used for political purposes, at the very least ought to have the honesty to admit that the questions are as political as the answers.

Mr Speaker, our parliamentary system is based on the Westminster system of government and in my view is superior to any other. But as I have said, Mr Speaker, this does not mean it should forever close itself off from reform.

The reality of the way in which our national politics is conducted is vastly different from that which existed when the current arrangements for Question Time and sitting patterns were instituted decades ago.

The advent of television and other new technology, as well as the many points of accountability outside this place, means more emphasis is now placed on opportunities, and appearances and form as much as substance; more often than not on the theatrics rather than the seeking and provision of information.

Some Members of this place have never required an audience beyond its walls to encourage them: I think you will find, for instance, that the former Member for McKellar in the early 1950s was ejected from the House for doing imitations of a gorilla.

In fact, Mr Speaker, I hope there will continue to be room for theatre - as there has always been in this and other Parliaments. I, for one, would miss the Member for Kooyong's angry look terribly. Or the Member for New England's profound tactical observations.

But I also think the time has come for the emphasis to be reweighed in favour of substance.

Mr Speaker, these new arrangements will not diminish the Government's accountability in this place. In many ways, they will increase accountability across the breadth of the Government.

To listen to the Honourable Member for Bennelong's statements about accountability, one could be forgiven for thinking that I was under constant interrogation in this place and that these reforms were designed to protect me from the Leader of the Opposition.

Of course, Mr Speaker, this is nonsense and a quick perusal of the record of Question Time bears this out.

For instance, last year more questions were asked of me by the Government than by the Opposition.

The Leader of the Opposition asked, on average, one question of me per sitting week. Under the new arrangements he may either increase or decrease this ratio as he and the Opposition Tactics Committee sees fit.

For reasons best known, perhaps, to the Opposition, in 1993 only 87 questions were asked of me, compared with 276 in 1992.

The fact is, Mr Speaker, the Opposition, any opposition, chooses its targets according to its perceived political interests - and those on the other side really should not insult anyone's intelligence by pretending that they occupy some high moral ground.

In Opposition in 1975 the then Member for Moreton was all for changing Question Time. It was "choking" the Parliament, he said.

But did the Government of Malcolm Fraser unchoke it? No. Malcolm Fraser didn't change a thing.

Malcolm Fraser believed that Members who genuinely wanted information, as opposed to publicity, should place their questions on notice for a written answer.

The contemporary record also shows that vast areas of Government responsibility go largely unscrutinised by the Opposition. More questions are asked of a broader range of Ministers by the Government than by the Opposition.

In 1992, 70 per cent of all Opposition questions came from the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the National Party. 70 per cent of all questions in that year were asked of the Prime Minister and the Treasurer.

Those who lay claim to being the traditionalists of Parliament must agree that all this provides a distorted version of ministerial accountability to the Parliament and in no way reflects the original intentions of those who framed the existing arrangements.

Mr Speaker, the reforms we propose ensure that more ministers are questioned, and provide the opportunity for more policies to be tested and more detailed scrutiny given to Government departments and their administration.

In short, the Government's reforms will aid a return to our genuine parliamentary traditions and help make Question Time a forum not merely for leaders, but for all ministers and all parliamentarians. These changes should, in fact, be supported by traditionalists.

It's entirely consistent with our Westminster parliamentary tradition, with its emphasis on collective responsibility, that we should encourage questioning, not only of the leading ministers, but of all ministers; and not only questions from the Opposition leaders and Government backbench, but from all backbenchers.

Handling legislation

I turn to the Procedure Committee's recommendations on the handling of legislation.

The Government has already made significant changes to improve the flow of legislation, especially the move to three periods of sittings and our decision that, generally, legislation will be introduced in one sitting for passage in the next.

Nonetheless, the Government has agreed to a trial of the Procedure Committee's recommendations and has decided that the machinery should be put in place to allow uncontroversial bills to be considered by a Main Committee or "second chamber".

The Government has also agreed that there should be a Second Deputy Speaker and that he or she will be nominated by the Opposition.

It will take some time for the necessary supporting arrangements to be put in place but I would hope to see some initial use of the Main Committee system during the current Autumn sittings.

The Leader of the House will be giving notice of the necessary sessional orders and amendments to the standing orders of the House this week. The Government intends that the new sitting times and Question Time arrangements will start on Monday 21 February.

I believe these are very worthwhile improvements we are making. Again, let me express my appreciation to all honourable Members and others who have contributed to the development of these reforms - and particularly to the honourable Member for Bonython.