
The Federation Chamber at 30: From Main Committee to much more

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Abstract: June 2024 marked 30 years since the first meeting of what is now known as the Federation Chamber—that is, the second chamber of the Australian House of Representatives. While it does not have the same profile as the House, the Federation Chamber now meets almost every day that the House sits and is the forum for members to make a variety of contributions, from constituency statements to considering bills in detail. As the role of the Federation Chamber has evolved, it has come to contribute to a wider range of the work of the House. The article traces the evolution of the second chamber of the House of Representatives over the last 30 years and considers how it has grown to support the House in its legislative, scrutiny, budget-setting, representative and grievance functions.

INTRODUCTION

In 1994, the Australian House of Representatives established the Main Committee, a second debating chamber, intended to reduce legislative pressure by providing an additional venue for certain debates on bills. This ‘creation of the House’² started as ‘modest ambitions’ of a secondary chamber that met only when required and with a very limited scope of business.³ Thirty years later, the Federation Chamber, as it is now known, has grown into a flexible forum which not only facilitates debates on legislation

¹ The author would like to thank Jessica Butler and Glenn Worthington for their advice and assistance in the preparation of this article.

² Hon Bruce Scott MP, ‘The Federation Chamber of the Australian House of Representatives: 20 years on’, 45th Presiding Officers and Clerks Conference, Samoa, July, 2014.

³ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *The Second Chamber: Enhancing the Main Committee*, Canberra, 2000, p. 4.

but also allows members to speak about the concerns of their constituents. What had initially been little more than the ‘Committee of the Whole’ considering bills now provides opportunities with a range closer in scope to that found in the House itself.

The role of the House—and of its members—can be defined as simply as ‘being the house of government and making laws’. Hazell articulates a more comprehensive framework:

- legislation
- deliberation
- scrutiny
- budget setting
- representation
- redress of grievances; and
- making and breaking governments.⁴

As Coghill, Holland, Kinyondo, Lewis and Steinack note, these capture the themes common to many parliaments⁵; they also align closely with the functions of the House as outlined in *House of Representatives Practice*.⁶

This article traces the evolution of the second Chamber of the House of Representatives over the last 30 years and considers how it has grown to support the House in most of these seven functions.

There is one key exception. It is important to understand from the outset that the second chamber was established as a creature of the House. It can meet only when the House is sitting and must suspend when the House divides, so that members may attend divisions. Matters are referred to it on motion of the House, by declaration by

⁴ Robert Hazell, ‘The Challenges facing our Parliaments: How can we improve their performance?’ *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 16(2) 2001, pp. 23-4. This article presents the functions in a different order from Hazell.

⁵ Ken Coghill, Peter Holland, Abel Kinyondo, Colleen Lewis and Katrin Steinack, ‘The functions of Parliament: reality challenges tradition’. *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 27(2) 2012 pp. 56-8.

⁶ David Elder (ed), *House of Representatives Practice*, 7th edn, Canberra: Department of the House of Representatives, 2018, pp. 37-41.

the Leader of the House or Chief Government Whip and by decision of the Selection Committee. Unless otherwise provided, the rules of the House apply to it.⁷

Further, decisions in the Federation Chamber can only be made ‘on the voices’. If there is any dissent from a result announced by the Deputy Speaker, the question is unresolved and is reported to the House. The House can then decide the matter. Decisions taken in the Federation Chamber are also reported to the House. The House then considers the report.⁸

Given this subordinate position, the Federation Chamber has no direct role in the making and unmaking of governments. Such matters of confidence are decided on the floor of the House.⁹

This article examines the origins of the second chamber and its meetings before exploring how the Federal Chamber approaches the consideration of legislation, government business and private members’ business. It looks at how the Federation Chamber is seen by key actors in the parliamentary system before offering some concluding thoughts on the contributions the second chamber has made to the House’s ability to manage its workload.

THE ORIGINS OF THE SECOND CHAMBER

The second chamber began life as the recommendation of the House Standing Committee on Procedure (the Procedure Committee), which in 1993 proposed the creation of a ‘Main Committee (Legislation)’ to make more time available for the consideration of legislation and increase opportunities for members to contribute to debate on bills.¹⁰

The Procedure Committee was responding to a need to reduce legislative pressure—in particular to avoid the ‘routine practice’ of ‘guillotining’ large numbers of bills towards

⁷ See Chapter 14 of *House of Representatives Standing Orders*, (2 August 2022).

⁸ Standing order 188.

⁹ For a discussion of the making and unmaking of governments, see Elder, *House of Representatives Practice*, 7th edn, pp 37-8.

¹⁰ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *About Time: Bills, Questions and Working Hours — Report of the inquiry into reform of the House of Representatives*, Canberra, 1993 p. 7.

the end of a sitting period.¹¹ The Procedure Committee argued that additional time to debate bills would ‘open up fuller opportunities, in the House, for debate on the major controversial items of the Government’s legislative agenda’.¹²

In February 1994 the House responded by amending standing orders to provide for a Main Committee which could debate the motion for the second reading of bills and consider bills in detail.¹³ ‘Consideration in detail’ replaced the ‘Committee of the Whole’ process that the Procedure Committee had argued no longer appeared relevant.¹⁴ The Main Committee was also empowered to debate orders of the day for motions moved in relation to committee and delegation reports.

The Main Committee met only as required, with the standing orders authorising the Deputy Speaker to fix the meeting times for the Main Committee and to take the Chair. It met for the first time on 8 June 1994, when two second reading motions were moved and debated. It met a further 19 times that year.¹⁵

In 1995, the first full year of its operation, the Main Committee met 35 times, and 55 bills were referred to it. It was now on its way to becoming an institution.

By 2000, there was a ‘general feeling’ that the name of the Main Committee was ‘unsatisfactory, inadequate or misleading’, especially due to the confusion it created with the main committee room—that is, the largest committee room in the building.¹⁶ The Procedure Committee recommended changing the name of the Main Committee to the ‘Second Chamber’; however, this was not supported by the government and no action was taken.¹⁷

¹¹ *About Time: Bills, Questions and Working Hours*, p. 4.

¹² *About Time: Bills, Questions and Working Hours*, pp. 11-2.

¹³ Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 53, 10 February 1994, pp. 754-779.

¹⁴ *About Time: Bills, Questions and Working Hours*, p 7.

¹⁵ All statistics courtesy of the House Procedure Office unless otherwise indicated. All ‘to date’ statistics are as at close of business 4 July 2024—that is, the last day of the autumn/winter period.

¹⁶ *The Second Chamber: Enhancing the Main Committee*, p. 33-4. When the name was originally proposed, it was envisaged that its meetings would be held in the main committee room; however, this room’s central location in a part of Parliament House shared by both houses meant this did not eventuate (K. Sullivan, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 22 June 1995, p. 2190).

¹⁷ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *A History of the Procedure Committee on its 20th Anniversary*, Canberra, 2005, p. 157.

In 2004, the Procedure Committee again recommended renaming the Main Committee, arguing that the name did not emphasise its functions, including the additional functions that had evolved over time.¹⁸ This time the suggestion was for ‘the Federation Chamber’—a name preferred over ‘Second Chamber’, on the basis that that name might create confusion due to its use for upper houses in parts of the world, and over a party-political name, such as one honouring a former Prime Minister. The Procedure Committee favoured including the word ‘Federation’ in the title as it recognised the fundamental structure of the Australian parliamentary system.¹⁹

On 8 February 2012, the House agreed to amend standing orders to change the Main Committee’s name to the Federation Chamber, the then Leader of the House noting that this recognised ‘the importance of the House’s second chamber’.²⁰

MEETINGS OF THE SECOND CHAMBER

The Main Committee’s meeting times were initially simply to be fixed by the Deputy Speaker and notified to all members. In practice, these meetings largely took place on Wednesdays and Thursdays, although it sometimes met earlier in the week.²¹ This was eventually reflected in the standing orders through the inclusion of an order of business for the Main Committee.

In 2006, the House adopted a sessional order enabling the Main Committee to meet on Monday afternoons if required to consider orders of the day relating to committee and delegation reports; this was then adopted as a standing order later that year.²² In 2008, provision was made for the Main Committee to meet on Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons as well, if required.²³ (For a short period, when standing orders

¹⁸ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Renaming the Main Committee*, Canberra, 2004, p. 5.

¹⁹ *Renaming the Main Committee*, p. 7.

²⁰ Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 85, 8 February 2012, pp. 1177-9; A Albanese, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 8 February 2012, p. 211.

²¹ Bernard Wright, ‘Australia’s Main Committee: Sideshow or valuable innovation?’ *The Parliamentarian* 2004(2) p. 162.

²² Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 81, 9 February 2006, pp. 922-5 (sessional order); Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 141, 29 November 2006, pp. 1597-1600 (standing order).

²³ Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 1, 12 and 13 February 2008, pp. 11-26.

were amended to enable Friday sittings of the House, the Main Committee was also able to meet; however, no Friday meetings took place before this provision was removed from the standing orders).²⁴ A regular routine of business for Monday afternoons and evenings was established by amendments to the standing orders in 2009, including a mix of government business and opportunities for private members.²⁵ This was extended to Monday mornings in 2010.²⁶

Arrangements for meetings of the Federation Chamber reflect that it is subordinate to the House. It is not scheduled to meet during times when most members could be expected to be in the House, such as question time. The Deputy Speaker may set meeting times outside the pattern set by the standing orders. Since 2013, the order of business has also noted that times shown for the start and finish of items of business are approximate.²⁷ This flexibility is important given that much of the Federation Chamber's program is composed of items of business referred to it by the House.

The figure below sets out the House's hours of sitting and the hours of meeting of the Main Committee or Federation Chamber since 1994.

²⁴ Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 10, 12 March 2008, pp. 141-148 and 155.

²⁵ Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 110, 17 August 2009, pp 1233-4.

²⁶ Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 2, 29 September 2010, pp. 31-43.

²⁷ Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 2, 13 November 2013, pp. 47-66.

Figure 1. Number of hours of sitting and meeting by year²⁸

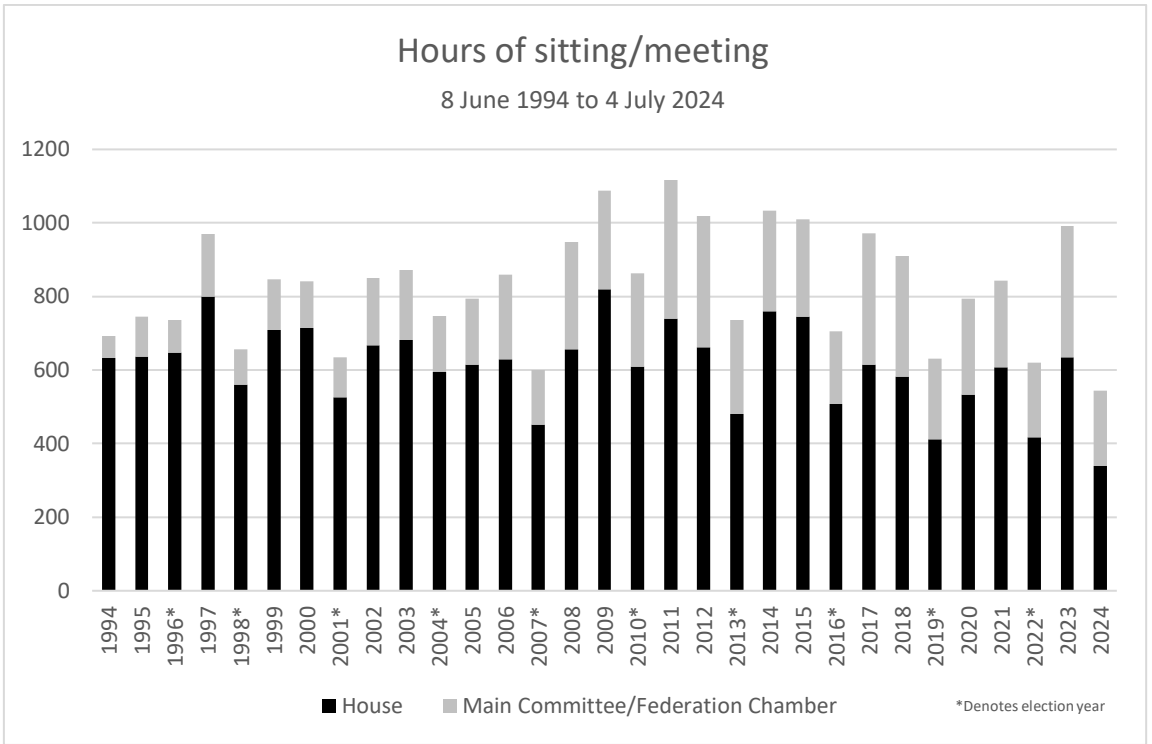


Figure 1 shows that the Federation Chamber now makes a proportionally larger contribution to the total amount of time available to the House than the Main Committee did initially. In its first 10 full calendar years of operation (1995-2004) the Main Committee’s meetings constituted 17.3 per cent of the total hours available in both chambers. In the most recent 10 full years (2014-2023), the Federation Chamber’s meetings constituted 31.6 per cent of total hours, meeting for close to half the time (46.3 per cent) that the House was sitting.

²⁸ Source: House of Representatives Procedure Office

CONSIDERATION OF LEGISLATION

The effects of establishing the second chamber to allow more time for debate on legislation was already observable in its first year of operation. Prior to its establishment in June 1994, over 100 bills were ‘guillotined’ each year between 1991 and 1993. In 1994, 14 bills were guillotined, all in the first half of the year.²⁹ In 1995, the Procedure Committee considered the Main Committee had significantly relieved pressure and competition for House time,³⁰ although it later noted:

Not all of this can be attributed to the establishment of a second legislative stream: restructuring the parliamentary year in to three periods and the discipline of introducing legislation in the period of sittings preceding that in which it is intended to be passed, have also contributed.³¹

Taking into account both the use of the guillotine and debate management motions limiting the time available for consideration of bills, on average fewer than 10 bills per year have been subject to some form of limitation of time since 2000, far fewer than the 100-plus bills being ‘guillotined’ each year from 1991 to 1993.

Time spent on consideration of legislation has increased. Between 1995 (the first full year of operation of the Main Committee) and 2023, the two chambers of the House spent, on average, a combined total of 388.2 hours on first, second and third readings and consideration in detail each year.³² By comparison, in each year from 1988 to 1993, the House had spent an average of 272.3 hours on these stages.

²⁹ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Time for Review: Bills, questions and working hours—Report of the review of procedural changes operating since 21 February 1994* Canberra, 1995, p. 13.

³⁰ *Time for Review: Bills, questions and working hours*, p. 14.

³¹ *The Second Chamber: Enhancing the Main Committee*, p. 23. Amongst the changes were amendments to the Senate deadlines for receipt of bills from the House. *Odgers’ Senate Practice* notes that the adoption in 1986 of a deadline for legislation to be received from the House was criticised for aggravating the evil it was intended to remedy; in 1993 there was agreement to a ‘double deadline’, under which bills had to be introduced earlier in the House and received by a later deadline in the Senate to avoid an automatic deferral to the next sittings. See Rosemary Laing (ed), *Odgers’ Senate Practice* 14th edn. Canberra: Department of the Senate, 2016 pp. 307-8 for more detail.

³² The first and third readings take place in the House.

Since its inception, a total of 1,583 bills have been referred to the second chamber. This includes 40 private members' bills referred for debate.

The second chamber's flexibility has allowed it to contribute to the House's legislative workload and function as a 'pressure valve' when appropriate to allow the House to maximise the work it does without necessarily extending the span of hours members spend in Parliament House.

Consideration of appropriation bills

One specific role the Federation Chamber now customarily plays in the consideration of legislation is as the venue for most of the debate on the second reading of Appropriation Bill (No. 1)—that is, the 'budget debate'.³³ After the Treasurer has introduced the budget and the Leader of the Opposition has made their speech in reply, it is normal practice for the appropriation bills to be referred to the Federation Chamber, where a cognate debate may continue over a period of several weeks.

Debate on the main appropriation bill is exempt from the usual requirement in the standing orders for the second reading debate to be strictly relevant to the bill. Rather, debate on appropriation bills may cover matters relating to 'public affairs'—interpreted to mean any matters concerning government policy or administration.³⁴ This means the scope of discussion in the budget debate is almost unlimited and provides members with an opportunity to speak about matters of particular interest to them and their constituents.

When, after the second reading has been agreed to, the main appropriation bill is considered in detail, the Federation Chamber first considers the schedule to the bill which contains the proposed expenditure for government departments and agencies. In 2023 and 2024, both the dates for consideration in detail and the times for each portfolio were agreed to by the House when it agreed to a broader debate

³³ *House of Representatives Practice* (7th edn), p. 790, notes this practice began in 1995.

³⁴ Standing order 76(c).

management motion.³⁵ In previous years, the Federation Chamber has agreed to the order.³⁶

The conduct of consideration in detail of the main appropriation bill has varied over time. In earlier years, the Deputy Speaker encouraged a question and answer format, and an expectation that members' speeches would contain a question continued for some time.³⁷ Ministers might respond to questions individually or wait until several members had spoken before responding.³⁸ Since 2008, government backbenchers have also regularly participated. At times this meant that a minister was given the call immediately after a government backbencher had posed a question, in the same way as occurs during question time—a departure from the regular practice of alternating the call during debate.³⁹ Procedure Committee reports in 2015 and 2016 noted the lack of specific rules in the standing orders for consideration in detail of the appropriation bills and in 2016 the committee recommended the adoption of sessional orders to trial shorter, question and answer style contributions by members.⁴⁰ These recommendations were not supported by the government of the day, led by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, and no changes were made.⁴¹

The call now alternates between government and non-government members, with the practice taking a similar form since 2017. Expectations of how consideration in detail will be conducted are articulated by the Deputy Speaker at the beginning of the debate. As the Deputy Speaker reminded members before debate began on 4 June this year:

³⁵ Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 120, 28 May 2024 pp. 1556-8; Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 55, 22 May 2023 pp. 701-2.

³⁶ See for example Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 123, 15 June 2021 p. 1981.

³⁷ David Elder, Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure's Inquiry into the consideration in detail of the main appropriation bill, 9 September 2015, p. 3.

³⁸ Bernard Wright (ed.), *House of Representatives Practice* (6th edn), Canberra: Department of the House of Representatives, 2012, p. 432.

³⁹ Elder, Submission to the Inquiry into the consideration in detail of the main appropriation bill, pp. 3-6.

⁴⁰ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Role of the Federation Chamber: Celebrating 20 years of operation*, Canberra, 2015, pp. 27-9; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Consideration in detail of the main appropriation bill*, Canberra, 2016, pp. 18-20.

⁴¹ Australian Government response to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure report: Consideration in detail of the main appropriation bill, September 2017.

Consideration in detail is a debate, and the call will be alternated between government and non-government members as always. Even though this debate sometimes takes the format of questions and answers, this is not question time.

... Members are required to be relevant to the portfolio being examined, but there is no requirement for direct relevance to any questions asked... Each minister and member will have up to five minutes to speak each time they are called, but they may wish to speak for a shorter time.⁴²

Once the main appropriation bill has been considered in detail and returned to the House, the remaining appropriation bills in the budget package are called on one by one. This includes Parliamentary Departments (Appropriation) Bill No. 1, which provides for a separate appropriation for the parliamentary administration as distinct from agencies supporting executive government.⁴³ It is less common for these bills to be considered in detail, and no timetable is set.

The now standard practice of scheduling much of the second reading debate on the main appropriation bill as well as consideration in detail of the budget bills in the Federation Chamber allows the budget package to be debated over a number of weeks while the House continues to consider other legislation as well.

OTHER GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

It is not just legislation that may be debated during government business time. Since 2004, the Federation Chamber has also been able to consider orders of the day for resumption of debate on any motion when referred by the House.⁴⁴ Since 2013, the standing orders have made explicit provision for the referral of further statements on

⁴² S Claydon, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 4 June 2024, p. 99.

⁴³ See Michael Sloane, 'The role of the separation of powers and the parliamentary budget setting processes' *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 29(2) 2014 for a more detailed discussion of this process.

⁴⁴ Standing order 183, first adopted 24 June 2004 (Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 184, 24 June 2004, p. 1744).

a matter when statements have commenced in the House and for items of government business referred from the House by a programming declaration.⁴⁵ In 2024 alone, items referred have included the resumption of debate on condolence motions, further statements on the 10th anniversary of the MH17 tragedy and motions to take note of the National Apology for All Australians Impacted by the Thalidomide Tragedy, the Annual Climate Change Statement 2023 and the 2024-25 budget papers.

Another debating opportunity is the ‘grievance debate’. This derives from the centuries-old financial procedures of the UK House of Commons. Originally, the question ‘That Mr Speaker do not leave the Chair’ was debated in Committee of Supply as a way of giving expression to the traditional insistence of the Commons on considering grievances before granting supply to the Crown.⁴⁶ In 1963 the procedure was modernised in the House of Representatives to become ‘That grievances be noted’ and was set as the first order of the day for alternate Thursdays in the House.⁴⁷ While the procedural origins of the grievance debate mean that it is listed as an order of the day under government business, it is an opportunity for a wide-ranging debate, as in practice the matter raised does not necessarily need to be a ‘grievance’.⁴⁸ Any member may speak to the motion; however, it is unusual for a minister to raise a grievance. There is no expectation that a minister will speak in response.

In 2008, standing orders were amended so that the order of the day stood referred to the Main Committee, as it then was, and became the final item on business on Mondays.⁴⁹ Since 2016, the grievance debate has been the final item of business in the Federation Chamber on Tuesdays, when up to an hour is allowed for debate each week.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 2, 13 November 2013, pp. 47-65.

⁴⁶ Elder, *House of Representatives Practice* 7th edn, p. 586.

⁴⁷ JA Pettifer, *House of Representatives Practice* 1st edn, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1981, p. 524.

⁴⁸ Elder, *House of Representatives Practice* 7th edn, p. 587.

⁴⁹ Standing order 192B; see Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 10, 12 March 2008, pp. 141-148 and 155.

⁵⁰ Standing orders 192 and 192B.

COMMITTEE AND DELEGATION BUSINESS

Since its establishment, the second chamber has been empowered to debate orders of the day for motions moved in relation to committee and delegation reports. While its use has varied over the years, it has at times afforded a welcome ability for members to speak to reports when time in the House was otherwise very limited.⁵¹

Members are also able to present committee and delegation reports in the Federation Chamber. However, only one committee report has been presented there—the Procedure Committee’s report celebrating 20 years of operation of the Federation Chamber, with the Chair and the Deputy Chair both making statements in connection with the report.⁵² The report noted that committee chairs may not be aware that they can seek a Selection Committee determination their report be presented in the Federation Chamber.⁵³ While the committee hoped that greater awareness of the standing order might facilitate increased debate in the Federation Chamber, a sustained increase does not appear to have materialised.

The table below sets out the reports referred to, debated in and presented in the Main Committee or Federation Chamber from the beginning of the 42nd Parliament to the end of the autumn/winter 2024 sittings in the current Parliament.

⁵¹ Wright, ‘Australia’s Main Committee: Sideshow or valuable innovation?’ p. 162.

⁵² D Randall and M Danby, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 22 June 2015, pp. 7147-9; see also standing order 247.

⁵³ *Role of the Federation Chamber: Celebrating 20 years of operation*, p. 24.

Figure 2. Consideration of reports in the Main Committee/Federation Chamber⁵⁴

	Parliament					
	42nd (12.2.0 8 to 19.7.2 010)	43rd (28.9. 10 to 5.8.2 013)	44th (12.1 1.13 to 9.5.2 016)	45th (30.8.2 016 to 11.4.2 019)	46th (2.7.20 19 to 11.4.2 022)	47th (26.7.2 022- [4.7.20 24])
No of reports presented in House	187	449	318	374	368	219
No of reports referred to Main Committee/Federation Chamber	70	95	67	78	85	38
No of reports debated in Main Committee/Federation Chamber	52	72	34	51	40	9
No of reports presented in Main Committee/Federation Chamber	0	0	1	0	0	0

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Although Norton has remarked that there is 'no official job description' for a member of parliament,⁵⁵ Gallop observes that, while the 'most understood' role of a member is that of legislator, a member is also a 'representative of the community and all of its activities'.⁵⁶ The expansion of the role of the second chamber has increased the opportunities for members to fulfil this role as a representative of their constituency. The next section describes the specific opportunities for private members in the Federation Chamber, particularly in regard to making statements, moving motions and presenting petitions.

Opportunities to make statements

In 1997, the Main Committee began to expand opportunities for private members beyond speaking on bills and committee reports. Earlier that year, the Procedure

⁵⁴ Source: House of Representatives Procedure Office

⁵⁵ Philip Norton, 'The Growth of the Constituency Role of the MP'. *Parliamentary Affairs* 47(4) 1994, pp. 705-720

⁵⁶ Geoff Gallop, 'The role of a Member of Parliament'. *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 24(2) 2009, p. 5.

Committee had conducted an inquiry into whether members needed more opportunity to make short speeches on unspecified matters of concern to them and, if so, whether the Main Committee could be used for this purpose. This had been prompted by a letter from a member highlighting the limited opportunities for members to speak in the adjournment debate in the House; further, a different member had moved a private member's motion proposing additional meetings of the Main Committee for the purposes of constituency statements.⁵⁷

The Procedure Committee noted that extending opportunities beyond the consideration of legislation to provide for short statements 'would result in some change in the Main Committee's nature'.⁵⁸ The Procedure Committee's dual objectives in the inquiry were to consider the demand for such statements and 'consider how appropriate provision for them might best be made without compromising the functions of the Main Committee'. In the end, the Procedure Committee recommended a once-weekly adjournment debate like that occurring daily in the House and a trial in the Main Committee of an additional period for 90-second statements. It was at pains to specify that this should not take away from time available for the consideration of legislation but rather that the Main Committee should meet 15 minutes earlier.⁵⁹

Ultimately, the motion put to the House by the Leader of the House, Mr Reith, was for three-minute statements, with Mr Reith indicating that he had received representations that longer statements were preferred. The trial was proposed to apply for the autumn and winter sittings in 1998.⁶⁰ The changes were adopted first as sessional orders and then as standing orders. An adjournment debate on Thursdays was also added at the same time.⁶¹

In 1999, the period of members' statements was extended to Wednesday mornings. This meant each meeting (on Wednesdays and Thursdays) began with approximately

⁵⁷ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Provision for Members to make short speeches in the Main Committee*, Canberra, 1997, p. 1.

⁵⁸ *Provision for Members to make short speeches in the Main Committee*, p. 1.

⁵⁹ *Provision for Members to make short speeches in the Main Committee*, p. 7.

⁶⁰ P Reith, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 4 December 1997 p. 12031.

⁶¹ Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 137, 4 December 1997, pp. 2641-4 (sessional orders); Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 173, 30 June 1998, pp. 3170-1 (standing orders).

20 minutes of three-minute statements and an adjournment debate brought Thursday's meeting to a close.⁶²

Changes made in 1999 also extended the right to make three minute statements to parliamentary secretaries.⁶³ This was extended further in 2008 when standing orders were amended to change the name to 'three minute constituency statements' and to permit ministers to make statements as well.⁶⁴ This allowed ministers, who would not otherwise have the opportunity to do so, to put forward issues of concern to constituents in their electorates.⁶⁵ On occasion, the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker have taken the opportunity to make constituency statements in the Federation Chamber.⁶⁶

Since 2004, the standing orders have specified that constituency statements may continue for 30 minutes 'irrespective of suspensions for divisions in the House'.⁶⁷ This guarantee of 30 minutes of statements each day suggests the importance placed on the opportunity.

In 2014, a 45-minute period of 90-second statements was added to the Federation Chamber's order of business.⁶⁸ Only private members may make 90-second statements.

When the adjournment debate was introduced in 1997, its duration of 30 minutes was specified in the standing orders. While changes in 2002 meant that the duration was no longer fixed, in practice 30 minutes remained the expectation. When the standing orders were substantially revised in 2004, the order of business included a 30-minute adjournment debate.⁶⁹ This provision remains in place.

⁶² Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 34, 31 March 1999, p. 486.

⁶³ Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 34, 31 March 1999, p. 486.

⁶⁴ Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 32, 24 June 2008, pp. 422-3.

⁶⁵ A Albanese, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 24 June 2008 p. 5791.

⁶⁶ See the *Role of the Federation Chamber: Celebrating 20 years of operation*, p. 25; for a more recent example of the Deputy Speaker making a constituency statement see S Claydon, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 25 March 2024, pp. 2261-2.

⁶⁷ Standing order 193.

⁶⁸ Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 18, 13 February 2014, pp. 297-9.

⁶⁹ The order of business is indicative and times are approximate.

Today a total of 3 hours 15 minutes is set aside in the Federation Chamber each week for members to make statements—that is, 76 spots:

- Two hours of three-minute constituency statements (that is, 40 speaking opportunities);
- Forty-five minutes of 90-second statements (that is, 30 speaking opportunities, not available to ministers); and
- Thirty minutes of adjournment debate (that is, six five-minute speaking opportunities).

Private members' motions

In 2016, amendments to the order of business for the Federation Chamber meant that Mondays became dedicated entirely to opportunities for private members.⁷⁰ There are periods for three-minute constituency statements and 90-second statements, while the remaining time is set aside for committee and delegation business and private members' business.

Since 2004⁷¹ the Selection Committee, a standing committee of the House, has arranged the timetable and order of committee and delegation business and private members' business for each sitting Monday.⁷² This includes selecting private members' notices and other items of private members' and committee and delegation business for referral to the Federation Chamber. Private members' motions are vehicles for debate, and it is usual practice for the Selection Committee to determine that consideration is to continue on a future day.⁷³ Prior to 2004, only the House could refer business to the then Main Committee.

⁷⁰ Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 5, 13 September 2016, pp. 129-142.

⁷¹ The exception is during the 42nd Parliament, when a Selection Committee was not appointed; its functions were managed by whips (see Elder, *House of Representatives Practice* 7th ed, p. 574).

⁷² Selection Committee reports are adopted by the House and taken therefore to be orders of the House.

⁷³ The practical effect of this is that private members' motions selected for consideration on Mondays are not voted on.

Petitioning the House

The centuries-old right to petition parliament for redress of grievances offers ‘the only formal avenue by which community concerns can be conveyed directly to Parliament outside elections’.⁷⁴ There has always been a mechanism for members to present petitions to the House. Initially, members presented petitions themselves after the Clerk had certified they were in accordance with the standing orders. Following reforms in 1972, the Clerk announced the petitions that had been lodged for presentation, with no opportunity for debate.⁷⁵

In 2000, standing orders were amended to allow those members who wished to present petitions themselves during 90-second statements or three-minute statements in the Main Committee to do so, with the Manager of Opposition Business noting at the time that this would ‘enable people to make some contextual remarks in the presentation’.⁷⁶ Members may now present petitions in the House or in the Federation Chamber during members’ statements, constituency statements, the adjournment debate or the grievance debate.⁷⁷

In 2019 the Standing Committee on Petitions recommended that petitions with at least 20,000 signatures be considered for debate during a dedicated period for petitions debates in the Federation Chamber;⁷⁸ to date no action has been taken in response.

PERCEPTIONS, PUBLICITY AND THE PUBLIC

The Federation Chamber, and the Main Committee before it, has not been viewed with unalloyed enthusiasm across time. Responses to a 1998 questionnaire sent to members by a researcher suggested that many members felt that the Main Committee

⁷⁴ Daniel Reynolds and George Williams, ‘Petitioning the Australian Parliament: Reviving a Dying Democratic Tradition’. *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 31(1) 2016, p. 60.

⁷⁵ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Responses to petitions: Report*, Canberra, 1990, pp. 3-5.

⁷⁶ R McMullan, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 6 December 2000, p. 23542; Commonwealth, *Votes and Proceedings*, No. 160, 6 December 2000, pp. 1982-5.

⁷⁷ Standing order 207. Members may also present petitions in the House, and the Chair of the Petitions Committee presents any other petitions received in the House on Monday mornings.

⁷⁸ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *Your voice can change our future: Inquiry into the future of petitioning in the House*, Canberra, 2019, p. 49.

was ‘a Chamber where Members simply put their views on the record’.⁷⁹ Six years later the Procedure Committee suggested that ‘most Members see the Main Committee as having a lesser but nonetheless unique status’ and tried to balance ‘appropriate recognition’ of it as a subordinate body.⁸⁰ Procedure Committee recommendations in 2000 and June 2015 recommended ways to improve the visibility and perception of the House’s second chamber, whether that be through better promotion on the Parliament House website or through enhancements to the Chamber itself.⁸¹

From its inception, the Main Committee was fitted out in a formation mirroring that of the House. Desks formed a horseshoe shape, with the Chair in the centre.⁸² At the first meeting of the Main Committee, the Manager of Opposition Business, Mr Howard, remarked:

*There might be some consideration given to placing an Australian coat of arms behind the Deputy Speaker’s chair ... I like the full-blown one with the wattle in its complete lustre and bloom.*⁸³

Over time, a plaque with the crest has been added to the décor, first on a temporary basis in front of the Chair and then more permanently above the Chair; a table has been added to the centre of the horseshoe, as in the House; and the desk for the Chair and clerks has been redesigned.⁸⁴

The proceedings in the Federation Chamber are open to the public—there is a public gallery on each side of the floor—and can be viewed online.⁸⁵ For each meeting,

⁷⁹ Sonia Palmieri, ‘Cooperation or consideration: An analysis of the Main Committee in the Australian House of Representatives’. *Legislative Studies* 13(1) 1998, p. 72.

⁸⁰ In *The Second Chamber: Enhancing the Main Committee*, p. 31.

⁸¹ *The Second Chamber: Enhancing the Main Committee*, pp. xii-xv; *Role of the Federation Chamber: Celebrating 20 years of operation*, pp. xi-xii.

⁸² At its first meeting, archival footage shows only one Clerk present; these days both a Clerk and a Deputy Clerks work in the Federation Chamber on a roster.

⁸³ J Howard, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 8 June 1994, p. 1728.

⁸⁴ See B Scott, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 24 November 2014, p. 12923; and David Elder, submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure inquiry into the role and operations of the Federation Chamber, 4 December 2014, p. 9.

⁸⁵ In 1995 the Procedure Committee recommended investigating ways to encourage visitors to Parliament House to observe proceedings. See *Time for Review: Bills, questions and working hours*, p. 18.

minutes of proceedings are produced and included at the end of the House Votes and Proceedings, and a Hansard transcript is printed at the end of the House Hansard.

The Procedure Committee mooted in 2015 that artwork could enhance the status of the Federation Chamber, after some members told the Committee during a private roundtable that it still did not have a setting suitable to a parliamentary chamber.⁸⁶ While historic photos show that busts and prints were on display for a brief period, the room remains largely undecorated.⁸⁷ The Australian, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags have been displayed since July 2022, the beginning of the 47th Parliament, when the three flags also began to be displayed in the House.⁸⁸

Arguments have been made over time that the location of the Federation Chamber—two floors above the House and closer to the centre of the building—was too far away and that it should be moved nearer the main Chamber.⁸⁹ However, it continues to meet in the same venue where the Main Committee first met. The costs of such a move have previously been cited as an inhibiting factor.⁹⁰

MORE THAN A MAIN COMMITTEE

In 2004, Hon Bruce Scott, the then Deputy Speaker, expressed his wish that the work of the Federation Chamber be better recognised, in remarks celebrating its 20th anniversary. He noted the ‘valuable contribution’ it had made to the work of the House.⁹¹ Indeed, within a year of its establishment, the Main Committee had already been considered to be a ‘outstandingly successful’.⁹² A member who dissented from the original recommendation to establish a second chamber pronounced himself ‘a fan’

⁸⁶ *Role of the Federation Chamber: Celebrating 20 years of operation*, pp. 31-2.

⁸⁷ These are held in the Procedure Office’s pictorial collection.

⁸⁸ C Madden, ‘Flags in the Chambers’, *Flagpost*, Parliamentary Library, 22 June 2023. Accessed at: <https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/Research/Flagpost/2023/June/Flags_in_the_Chamber>.

⁸⁹ *The Second Chamber: Enhancing the Main Committee*, p. 35; *Renaming the Main Committee*, p. 8.

⁹⁰ *Role of the Federation Chamber: Celebrating 20 years of operation*, p. 31. *Renaming the Main Committee*, p. 8, also noted that architects suggested at the time that the building stage would take eight months.

⁹¹ Scott, ‘The Federation Chamber of the Australian House of Representatives: 20 years on’, p. 8.

⁹² R Brown, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 22 June 1995, p. 2185.

a year later.⁹³ The fall in the use of the guillotine was one of the ‘striking indicators’ of the Main Committee’s success in allowing more time for consideration of legislation.⁹⁴

While legislation was the stated focus from the beginning, the routine referral of the appropriation bills from 1995 allowed the Main Committee to play a role in budget setting as well. Debates on government documents have also contributed to deliberation and oversight of government policy. The increasing opportunities to make members’ statements and constituency statements and the weekly adjournment debate have offered members the chance to raise issues affecting the communities they represent. Further, the weekly grievance debate and the ability to present petitions in the Federation Chamber are avenues for grievances to be raised for redress.

Ultimately, however, the biggest contribution that the House’s second debating chamber has made to the work of the House is time. In 1994, its first year of operation, the Main Committee contributed an additional 10 per cent to the hours available to the House. In recent years, this has averaged 46 per cent. The House faces the competing pressures of making the most of the time members have in Canberra and the impact of long hours on members, their staff and parliamentary staff during sitting weeks.⁹⁵ The Federation Chamber is one of its options to assist in balancing these. It has enabled the House to increase the time available for debates and other contributions without expanding its span of sitting hours each day.⁹⁶

This article has tracked the origins of the second chamber, its evolving approach to meetings and its facilitation of both government business and private members’ business. It has aimed to shed some light on the key historical milestones and influences that have shaped the modern Federation Chamber and that contribute to

⁹³ P Filing, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 22 June 1995, p. 2196.

⁹⁴ *Time for Review: Bills, questions and working hours*, p. 13.

⁹⁵ See Australian Human Rights Commission, *Set the Standard: Report on the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces*, Sydney, 2021, pp. 268-9; K Pitt, submission to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure inquiry into recommendations 10 and 27 of *Set the Standard*, 21 October 2022, p. 3.

⁹⁶ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Raising the Standard: Inquiry into recommendations 10 and 27 of Set the Standard: Report on the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces*, Canberra, 2023, p. 36.

the opportunities it presents and challenges it now confronts as a forum for some of the most important functions of the Australian legislature.

Over the last 30 years, the legislatively focused Main Committee has evolved into the Federation Chamber, a microcosm of the House. While it has a relatively low public profile, its capacity to significantly increase the time available to the House when it meets, as well as its flexibility, means that it can contribute to different facets of the work of the House as and when required.