The contract renewed: ceremony, ritual and the democratic promise

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Introduction

The ceremonies and rituals that mark the beginning and end of a Parliament are an important expression of Australia's constitutional arrangements. They reinforce democratic legitimacy by making *visible* the constitutional relationship between the people, their elected representatives and the institution of Parliament. Participants and observers are reminded that while *a* Parliament is temporary, *the* Parliament endures. Today, 24-hour news coverage and social media make these ceremonies more accessible than ever before, extending their reach and public visibility. At a time when trust in institutions is declining, ceremony and ritual communicate important principles of democratic renewal, legitimacy, and continuity.

We begin by considering the constitutional foundations of representative democracy, which enable the Australian people to directly choose their representatives and then reevaluate that choice at regular intervals through general elections. We then turn to the opening of Parliament, a ceremony that, apart from the addition of a Welcome to Country, has retained its essential features since Federation. This is not to say that there have not been proposals for reform, and we consider some of the more contested aspects of the opening proceedings. Next, we discuss the ceremonies to formally prorogue the Parliament and dissolve the House of Representatives, heralding the end of a Parliament. Finally, we consider the audience for these ceremonial occasions, and the messages they convey to the broader public.

We use the terms 'ceremony' and 'ritual' broadly, and at times interchangeably, here to describe traditional parliamentary practices characterised by repetition, symbolism and performance. While they have common features[1], it is useful to note the distinction. A suitable definition for the parliamentary context is that ceremony is "a formal act or series of acts prescribed by ritual, protocol, or convention"[2] whereas ritual has been defined as "symbolic behaviour that is socially standardised and repetitive".[3] Thus, ceremonies usually comprise one or more rituals.

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[1] S. Rai, 'Representing Democracy: Ceremony and Ritual in the Indian Parliament,' in S. Rai and R. Johnson (eds), *Democracy in Practice: Ceremony and Ritual in Parliament*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014, p. 24.

[2] "Ceremony." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster. Accessed at: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ceremony.

[3] Kertzer, D., 1988, *Ritual, Politics and Power*, Yale University, p. 9.

The constitutional context

The Australian Constitution, passed as part of a British Act of Parliament in 1900, took effect on 1 January 1901, providing a framework of basic rules for the new nation, based on representative and responsible government. As explained by the Australian Government Solicitor in 2010:

> *Since that time, Australia has become an independent nation, and the character of the Constitution as the fundamental law of Australia is now seen as resting predominantly, not on its status as an Act of British Parliament, which no longer has any power over Australia, but on the Australian people's decision to approve and be bound by the terms of the Constitution.*[4]

Notably, the decision-making and approval process, which comprised the conventions and debates in the 1890s when the Constitution was being drafted, and the series of referendums held between 1898 and 1900 when the voters in the six colonies approved the terms of the Constitution, excluded certain categories of Australians. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were not included in the conventions, nor were they at any point consulted. Further, at the time, neither women (except in South Australia and Western Australia) nor Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were allowed to vote. Nevertheless, the Constitution is the fundamental law of Australia, binding everyone, as well as the Commonwealth Parliament and the Parliaments of each State. The Constitution is of, and for, all Australian people. Its legitimacy rests on the people's decision to have approved and to be bound by and – subject to any approved alteration– to continue to be bound by the provisions it contains across its eight chapters.

By providing their approval for the Constitution, the Australian people agreed to the establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia as a nation with characteristics defined by the terms of section 1. This provision establishes (and vests legislative power in) the Parliament of the Commonwealth as a tripartite body, whose elements – the Queen, a Senate and a House of Representatives – in combination make Australia a constitutional monarchy, a parliamentary democracy and a federation.[5] The democratic promise – made by the people to themselves at Federation – is the guarantee, within this system, that the provisions of Chapter I operate to simultaneously provide: both permanence and impermanence. While the section 1 institution endures, parliaments themselves are temporary, their duration being directly tied to that of the House of Representatives, which, as mandated by section 28, can only continue for three years

[4] Australia's Constitution pocket edition: with overview and notes by the Australian Government Solicitor, 17th edition (2026) p. iv.
[5] D.R. Elder (ed.), 2018, *House of Representatives Practice*, 7th edn, Department of the House of Representatives, Canberra, p. 1.

from its first meeting, and no longer, but may be sooner dissolved by the Governor-General.

For over 125 years, public renewal of the democratic contract has been expressed through the electoral cycle, which is a recurring demonstration of legitimacy derived from the people. As then Governor-General, Sir William Deane, reminded parliamentarians on the Centenary of Federation, "the ultimate source of all government power and authority in this land is the people – all the people – of our Commonwealth."[6]

Opening of parliament

The opening of Parliament serves as an important site for shaping the relationship between the people and their Parliament.[7] The practices and procedures associated with the opening of the Australian Parliament are largely derived from those of the British Parliament and, as in the State Opening at Westminster, ceremony and ritual are central to the proceedings. While the opening of Parliament in Australia does not rival the elaborate pageantry of its British counterpart, it nonetheless fulfils an important symbolic and constitutional function. Through "a combination of traditional and ceremonial elements of parliamentary custom and practice,"[8] it makes visible the authority of Parliament, the legitimacy of elected representatives and the constitutional relationships that underpin Australia's system of government.

The opening of the first Parliament on 9 May 1901 was considered a pivotal moment in the nation's modern history, where those in attendance witnessed "an event the like of which has never been known before and which may never occur again".[9] The occasion included a procession through the streets of Melbourne, where the Parliament was first convened, by the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York, accompanied by a 116-strong Royal escort, a fanfare of trumpets from the Royal Australian Artillery; and an orchestral performance of *God Save the King*.[10] Yet the opening was more than a display of imperial pageantry. It incorporated ritual elements that expressed important constitutional provisions and traditional practices inherited from Westminster, including the convention that neither the Sovereign nor the Governor-General enters the House of Representatives.

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[6] Text of address by Governor-General Sir William Deane to the Joint Commemorative Meeting of the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, http://australianpolitics.com/2001/05/09/william-deane-speech-centenary-of-federation-sitting.html, accessed 28 August 2026.
[7] Rai and Johnson (eds), *Democracy in Practice*, p. 252.
[8] Elder, *House of Representatives Practice*, p. 221.
[9] Sydney Morning Herald, Friday 10 May 1901, p. 7. Accessed at: https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/1342384.
[10] Sydney Morning Herald, Friday 10 May 1901, p. 7. Accessed at: https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/1342384.

Today, the events in connection with the opening of Parliament are provided for in the standing orders of both Houses, the rules for conducting business, which themselves are constitutionally derived.[11] Through adherence to the standing orders for proceedings when Parliament is called together[12], all three elements – House, Senate and Sovereign – are physically united, temporarily, in time and place. This is most evident during the two occasions over the course of the day when members of the House of Representatives attend the Senate Chamber: first, when the Parliament is formally declared open by a Deputy of the Governor-General (usually, the Chief Justice of the High Court), and second, when the Governor-General gives the opening speech: the formal declaration of the causes of a calling Parliament together, and an outline of the Government's proposed legislative program. These proceedings, in this setting, are perhaps the day's most significant: when the Parliament in its entirety is physically present in one place, an appreciation of what the Parliament *is* emerges from its three parts being seen in the context of their relationship with one another.

Throughout the opening, ceremonial and procedural aspects of proceedings unequivocally convey to the Australian people on whose behalf the Parliament is assembled that the occasion is fundamentally different from ordinary sitting days. This is demonstrated through elements such as the formal processions of members across Members' Hall, as well as the 19-gun artillery salute outside the building that marks the conclusion of the Governor-General's speech, and the Welcome to Country ceremony, discussed below. It is also evident in the very visible roles played by senior parliamentary officials, particularly the Clerk of the House, who, supported by the Deputy Clerk and senior staff, is responsible for overseeing the fulfilment of key constitutional requirements: the swearing-in of members and the election of a Speaker. As set out in the standing orders, the Clerk reads to the House the justice of the High Court's authorisation to administer the oath or affirmation of allegiance and tables the returns to the writs which indicate the member elected for each electoral division, and calling members to the Table in groups to swear an oath or make an affirmation and to sign the oath or affirmation form. Acting as Chair, the Clerk facilitates the election of the Speaker, Deputy Speaker and Second Deputy Speaker, which may include overseeing a ballot, and she is required to declare which Member is elected Speaker.

Symbolism also features heavily. When members first assemble in the House to hear the Clerk read the proclamation calling Parliament together, the Mace (the symbol of authority of the House and Speaker) is placed below the Table by the Serjeant-at-Arms, an officeholder of historic significance. This shows that the House is not properly constituted, because it has not yet elected a Speaker. Once elected, members uphold

[11] Section 50 of the Constitution provides that 'Each House of the Parliament may make rules and orders with respect to … (ii) the order and conduct of its business either separately or jointly with the other House.'

[12] Provided for in Chapter 2 of the standing and sessional orders of the House of Representatives

tradition by 'dragging' the new Speaker to the Chair. The customary show of resistance by a newly elected Speaker has its origin in the "genuine reluctance with which early Speakers accepted the office"[13] for fear of being imprisoned or executed. The Serjeant-at-Arms places the Mace on the Table. Finally, standing orders require that some formal business is transacted in the House, before the Governor-General's speech is reported. This is usually the presentation and first reading of a bill. The transaction of formal business that is not part of the legislative program outlined by the Government in the Governor-General's speech is the symbolic declaration by the House that it is master of its own program of business.

Since 2008, a Welcome to Country ceremony, in which traditional custodians of the Canberra area welcome members, senators and their guests to the Country on which Parliament House stands has been included in the opening. Together with the smoking ceremony on the Forecourt of Parliament House, the Welcome to Country (required by the standing orders since 2010)[14] is a tangible reminder of the absence of First Nations voices at Federation. But it is also a very public indication of the evolving relationship between the British institution and the First Nations peoples on whom it was imposed. As generously expressed by Aunty Dr Matilda House-Williams, Ngambri (Kamberri) Wallabalooa (Ngunnawal) and Wiradjuri Elder, at the Opening of the 42nd Parliament in 2008:

> *A Welcome to Country acknowledges our people and pays respect to our ancestors, the spirits who created the lands. This then allows safe passage to all visitors. For thousands of years our peoples have observed the protocol… On behalf of the first people of this land, Prime Minister, I now return this honour. On this occasion of the opening of the first Parliament of the new Australian Government, I welcome you, the elected representatives of every part of this nation. I acknowledge the trust given to you on behalf of all Australians, to represent our interests, to make wise and just decisions and to honour the ancestors in whose footsteps you will follow.*[15]

In this extract, two elements stand out. The first is the characterisation of parliamentarians as visitors, which reinforces and helps to communicate to the broader

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[13] P. Laundy, *The office of Speaker*, Cassell, London, 1964, p. 16.

[14] In 2001, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure recommended in its report, *Balancing tradition and progress*, that the Parliament adopt procedures for the opening of Parliament that would include 'a brief ceremony – comprising an indigenous welcoming and a message from the Australian people'. The recommendation was not accepted by the Government. In 2010, in addition to the amendment made to the standing orders to include a Welcome to Country, both Houses further amended their standing orders to include an Acknowledgement of Country to be made by the presiding officers at the beginning of each sitting day.

[15] Parliamentary Education Office, Department of the Senate, 'Opening of Parliament begins with Welcome to Country', 12 February 2008. Accessed at: https://peo.gov.au/understand-our-parliament/history-of-parliament/history-milestones/australian-parliament-history-timeline/events/opening-of-parliament-begins-with-welcome-to-country.

public the purpose of their visit to the meeting place in Canberra: to fulfil their representative and legislative function on behalf of the communities they represent. The second is the reference to the observation of protocol, as it relates to First Nations. The subsequent incorporation of the Welcome to Country in the opening day demonstrates that parliamentary protocol – which gives structure to and underpins the day's transactions – is an adaptive rather than restrictive concept, reflected in the Houses' ability to amend their standing orders as required.

Support for ensuring that the day's proceedings unfold in accordance with standing orders is provided by parliamentary officers, who take very seriously their shared responsibility for stewardship of the institution. In the House of Representatives, procedural scripts for members are produced for opening day, as they are for all sitting days. Staff take a great deal of care to ensure that the forms of words used on procedures conform exactly with the requirements of the standing orders, so that proceedings will be in order. Standing orders in relation to the opening of Parliament are themselves infrequently amended. This results in extreme consistency, from one Opening to the next – obvious to close observers – in terms of both format (what happens, and in what order) and in language used by members in the House.

Constancy of language is also reflected in the Votes and Proceedings, the official record of proceedings and decisions of the House, drafted by House staff and approved for publication by the Clerk. Through the rigorous application of precedent in the recording of each item – known as 'Votes style' – changes to forms of words are minimal.
A proposed change in style or a proposed new style is adopted only if necessary, and only after careful consideration, for example where standing orders have been amended, or because of an unusual occurrence in the House. This has resulted in an internally coherent voice that has been maintained across the series over 125 years, such that the Votes and Proceedings should be properly regarded as a single, cyclical, text whose hallmark is the regular refrain of turns of phrase.

Ritual, in this sense, emerges from the very requirements of the standing orders themselves, and endures as staff over many generations have recognised that predictability – essential to the institution's stability – flows from consistency of language in the documents they produce, for use in the House and as the record of its transactions. As stewards, then, parliamentary staff play a critical role in the preservation of culture, which is imparted, in turn, through the advice and support they provide to the parliamentarians they serve.

Proposals for change

While many aspects of the Australian Parliament have changed since Federation, the fundamental structure of the ceremonial opening described above has remained largely intact. This is despite the Parliament having doubled in size, moved to a new physical

home twice, and adapted its practices and procedures regularly to meet the needs of a modern legislature. This is not to suggest, however, that the ceremonial opening has remained beyond debate. Various proposals for reform have been advanced over the years, particularly in the decades around the turn of the century, and these are considered in this section.

Criticism of the more lavish ceremonial elements of the opening can be traced as far back as the early 1920s when the Labor member for Dalley, William Mahony MP, suggested that the House, in preparing its Address in Reply, use the opportunity to point out to the Governor General that much of the "flummery and ceremonial" associated with opening should be abolished.[16] He told the House:

> *Fancy us, a democratic community, having our Governor-General drawn through the streets in a State carriage with uniformed postillions in powdered wigs and with outriders on prancing, fiery steeds!*[17]

One of the more contentious issues surrounding the opening of Parliament has been the venue for the Governor-General's opening speech. From time to time, the argument has been made that the delivery of the speech in the Senate chamber fails to reflect the equal constitutional status of the two Houses. In 1988, shortly before Parliament moved to the new Parliament House, the House of Representatives unanimously agreed to a motion calling for the speech to be delivered in Members' Hall, or in "an equivalent location in the new Parliament House", a reference that was generally understood to mean the Great Hall.[18] The Governor-General was advised accordingly, and the resolution was transmitted to the Senate with a request that it take similar action. No action was taken by the Senate. The issue resurfaced in 1993 when the Keating Government sought Opposition support for the opening speech to be delivered outside the Senate chamber at the opening of the 37th Parliament. When it became evident that the Opposition would not agree, Prime Minister Keating announced that the opening ceremony would "go ahead as before", remarking that the Government had "better to do than spend its time coaxing the Opposition into the late 20th Century".[19]

The House Procedure Committee has reviewed the procedures for the opening day of Parliament on several occasions. In doing so, it has consistently acknowledged the opening as an event of major significance for the country and those elected to serve. Accordingly, it has expressed support for the retention of traditional and ceremonial elements befitting the occasion, proposing only changes "within the sound existing

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[16] House of Representatives Debates, 13 June 1923, 38.
[17] House of Representatives Debates, 13 June 1923, 38.
[18] House of Representatives Debates, 24 March 1988, 1298.
[19] Statement by the Prime Minister, The Hon P. J. Keating MP, Opening of Parliament, 21 April 1993. Accessed at: https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-8847.

framework".[20] In reports handed down in 1991 and 1995, the committee made recommendations largely aimed at introducing efficiencies in the opening proceedings. Proposals included having the Governor-General appoint two Deputies to open the Parliament simultaneously in both Chambers and discontinuing the procession to Members' Hall for the presentation of the Speaker to the Governor-General. The Government responded that it did not propose to seek any changes to the traditional proceedings for the opening.[21]

In a 2001 inquiry, the Procedure Committee invited submitters to comment on the proposals of its predecessor and, perhaps not surprisingly, received contradictory evidence. Former Governor-General, the Hon Bill Hayden AC, for example, cautioned strongly against "casually jettisoning" elements of the opening, noting the wealth of seminal anthropological research supporting the importance of ceremony.[22] He further stated:

> *If the procedures related to the Opening of a new Parliament were founded on efficiency and simplicity of understanding alone, it could be reduced to a series of simple steps which would take, at most, a few hours. But there would be neither inspiration nor any sense of awe in, and certainly no reason for respecting, such a diluted ceremony.*[23]

In contrast, then Clerk of the Senate, Harry Evans, drew the committee's attention to a series of what he described as constitutional anomalies in the opening proceedings, all of which, he argued, should be eliminated, thereby allowing proceedings to be streamlined and to more accurately reflect Australia's constitutional arrangements.[24]

The committee's report gave increased attention to the symbolic aspects of the opening procedures. It found, among other things, that the ceremonial opening failed to sufficiently recognise the pre-eminent role of citizens in choosing their representatives and, ultimately, their government.[25] The committee proposed that a formal statement on behalf of the Australian people be delivered by an appropriate representative, such as the incumbent Australian of the Year.[26] The message would be delivered to members

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[20] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, 1991*, The standing orders governing: General rule for conduct of business and procedures for the opening of Parliament*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, p. 1; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, 2010, *Re-opening the debate: Inquiry into the arrangements for the opening day of Parliament*, Canberra, p. v.

[21] House of Representatives Debates, 24 June 1997, 6133.

[22] Hon. B. Hayden AC, Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, received 27 March 2001, p. 1.

[23] Hayden, Submission to Standing Committee on Procedure, p. 1.

[24] Mr Harry Evans, Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, received 9 March 2001, pp. 1-2.

[25] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, 2001*, Balancing tradition and progress*, Canberra, p. 27.

[26] Standing Committee on Procedure, *Balancing tradition and progress*, p. 52.

and senators assembled on the forecourt of Parliament House, following a welcome ceremony by traditional owners of the land. The committee envisaged that the form of the statement would remain the same for each subsequent opening of parliament, eventually acquiring ritual significance.[27] Further changes were proposed to the opening of Parliament procedures, with a view to being implemented incrementally into the future if supported. After all, "ritual and ceremony should not be tampered with lightly" and sweeping change would have been inconsistent with parliament's gradual evolution since Federation.[28] Ultimately, the committee's recommendations were not adopted, the Government seeing no need to alter the existing opening procedures which, it maintained, continued to "reflect Australia's parliamentary traditions and democratic heritage".[29]

Despite the reluctance by successive governments to implement recommendations that would alter the ceremony and ritual associated with the opening of parliament, as mentioned above, an Indigenous Welcome to Country was conducted for the first time before the opening of the 42nd Parliament in 2008. The ceremony followed consultations between the Presiding Officers and the government. The Procedure Committee again revisited opening day proceedings in 2010, recommending that the welcome ceremony be formalised through amendments to the standing orders.[30] The Government agreed to the recommendation, and the House amended its standing orders concurrent with the Senate agreeing to a resolution supporting the practice. An Indigenous Welcome to Country is now an established ritual of parliament's opening day ceremonies.

The 2010 inquiry made some other recommendations around the opening day proceedings. A proposal to replace the introduction of the privilege bill with the presentation of a "motion of commitment to the Australian People" was not supported, nor were certain recommendations aimed at creating efficiencies, such as the Governor-General appointing two deputies for the purpose of declaring open the Parliament simultaneously in each Chamber.[31]

The committee also considered that the ceremonial significance of members being sworn in, an "incredibly significant" moment, was diminished by the current practice of members first taking their pre-allocated seats in the Chamber and then coming forward in groups when called to make the oath or affirmation. It suggested that the requirement in section 42 of the Constitution that every member "shall before taking his seat" make and subscribe an oath or affirmation, although never previously interpreted literally, should be given its literal meaning. Under this approach, members entering the House

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[27] Standing Committee on Procedure, *Balancing tradition and progress*, p. 44.
[28] Standing Committee on Procedure, *Balancing tradition and progress*, pp. 40-41.
[29] House of Representatives Hansard, 23 June 2005, p. 104.
[30] Standing Committee on Procedure, *Re-opening the debate*, p. 9.
[31] Standing Committee on Procedure, *Re-opening the debate*.

for the first time would assemble on the floor of the Chamber, around its perimeter rather than in their allocated seats, and would be sworn in before taking their seats. The government rejected the recommendation on the grounds that its implementation would not be practical.

Although few proposals for change have been implemented, they provide insight into some recurring themes in debates surrounding the ceremony and ritual of the opening of Parliament and hint at the ongoing tensions between tradition and modernisation. It is not always clear from the responses of the governments of the day why particular recommendations were not taken up; however, practical considerations and a conscious desire to preserve tradition appear to have been significant factors.

Prorogation and dissolution

The Governor-General's authority to dissolve the House of Representatives – which has the effect of terminating a Parliament so that the writs can be issued for a general election – is set out in section 5 of the Constitution. By convention, the Governor-General takes this action on the advice of the Prime Minister of the day. Since 1993, the Governor-General has agreed to prorogue the Parliament (the process of formally closing a session) on the same day as the House is dissolved. Prorogation of the Parliament and dissolution of the House of Representatives are effected by proclamations – in recent years a single proclamation – published in the Commonwealth Gazette.

A change in practice, which came about because of legal advice, has had the effect of transforming the making of proclamations into a ceremonial event. Since 1963, proclamations dissolving the House of Representatives (and since 1977, proroguing the Parliament) have been read aloud from the front of Parliament House by the Official Secretary to the Governor-General, in addition to being published in written form. This was because doubts had been raised by the Attorney-General as to whether publication in the Gazette of a proclamation dissolving the House would be sufficient to proclaim it for the purposes of section 5. It was considered that section 17(j) of the *Acts Interpretation Act 1901*, which makes publication in the Gazette sufficient for the purposes of Commonwealth Acts, was not applicable as the proclamation is not made under a Commonwealth Act.[32]

The reading aloud of the proclamation takes place in the form of a short ceremony in the Parliament's Forecourt, at the front (public) entrance to the building. It concludes with the formality of a 19-gun artillery salute by the Federation Guard. Accompanying the Official Secretary, are the Clerk and Deputy Clerk of the House, in Chamber robes, together with the Serjeant-at-Arms, in full attire. Their presence, in service of the House of Representatives, underscores the legitimacy of proceedings. Following the reading of

[32] Elder, *House of Representatives Practice*, pp. 226-227.

the proclamation, a copy is physically posted by the Clerk of the House on the door of the House of Representatives chamber.

Proclamation ceremonies may be freely attended by any member of the public; they are also recorded, streamed live, and reported on. While largely an unassuming, low-key event in Australia, it nonetheless gives written constitutional requirements a physical and transparent dimension. Taking place at regular three-year intervals, they reinforce the democratic contract, as well as the rhythm of the parliamentary cycle, by marking the end of one Parliament and foreshadowing the commencement of the next:

> *To put it somewhat metaphysically, the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia dies when the House of Representatives is dissolved—the opening procedures contain the essential steps to reincarnate the Parliament. There is an echo, here, of the transfer of monarchy: 'The King is dead! Long live the King!'*[33]

The public audience

If, as we suggest, the ceremonial opening and closing of Parliament communicates principles of democratic renewal, legitimacy and continuity, the question arises as to who is being communicated to. Historically, these ceremonies have had limited reach beyond those attending in person, with others left to rely largely on media reporting. In 2001, the House Procedure Committee, while acknowledging the opening of Parliament was "primarily for the initiation of members into their service in a new Parliament", sought greater involvement of the broader community in proceedings.[34] Flowing from that suggestion was a recommendation that the opening of Parliament be shown on national television. Of course, since this time, the advent of 24-hour news channels, the growth of online broadcasting and the emergence of social media have generated opportunities to reach a significantly larger audience than even the Committee might have imagined. An examination of content relating to the most recent opening of Parliament and prorogation and dissolution ceremonies across three social media platforms: Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, provides some indication of this expanded audience reach.

The official opening of the 48th Parliament, streamed via the Parliamentary website and subsequently published in two parts, attracted audiences in the tens of thousands. Shorter clips highlighting specific rituals within the ceremonies reached substantially larger audiences. For example, a video of the Usher of the Black Rod summoning members to the Senate Chamber and the Speaker being 'dragged' to the Chair generated hundreds of thousands, and in one case, exceeded three million views. Videos of the prorogation and dissolution ceremony marking the end of the 47th Parliament have attracted smaller, but still significant, audiences. Ahead of the

[33] Standing Committee on Procedure, *Balancing tradition and progress*, p. 7.
[34] Standing Committee on Procedure, *Balancing tradition and progress*, p. 36.

opening of the 48th Parliament, the Governor-General shared via her official social media platforms a ten-minute piece to camera, filmed at the Parliament, in which she explained the significance and history behind many of the opening ceremony's ritual elements. The video attracted views in the hundreds of thousands.

View counts only tell part of the story, however, and do not necessarily indicate how the content was consumed, whether the audience appreciated its significance, or even understood the purpose or tradition behind the ritual being performed. Social media can facilitate engagement between members of the public through the ability to share content and add comments. These features enable audiences not only to observe aspects of the ceremonies themselves but also to engage with, and potentially learn about, their historical and constitutional significance. The short clip of the Usher of the Black Rod's procession across the Members' Hall to summon members of the House to the Senate Chamber attracted thousands of comments. While many were predictably sarcastic and ironic – '*This could've been an email!'* – they also demonstrated that many, of those commenting were encountering rituals that were previously unfamiliar to them and, in many cases, seeking to understand their symbolism and function.

The view count and engagement metrics discussed above are evidence that, at a minimum, "ritual continues to capture the popular imagination."[35] They also highlight the power of ceremony and ritual in connecting people to the institution of Parliament. Through the repeated enactment of rituals marking the beginning and end of a Parliament, the public is reminded of the temporary nature of Parliaments, but the permanence of the institution.

Conclusion

It is through the performance of their ceremonies and rituals that we understand institutions.[36] The ceremonial opening and closing of Parliaments give form to constitutional requirements, making tangible the promise made by the people at Federation. They convey continuity and stability in an increasingly fragmented society. Any proposal to reduce or otherwise alter the current ceremonial arrangements and their ritual elements should be considered not just in terms of efficiency or modernisation, but also in light of the important principles that the existing arrangements communicate.

[35] E. Crewe, 2005, *Lords of Parliament: Manners, rituals and politics*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, p. 235.
[36] S. Rai, 'Representing Democracy: Ceremony and Ritual in the Indian Parliament,' in Rai and Johnson, *Democracy in Practice*, p. 37.