

Speaker encourages spontaneous



When Neil Andrew was elected Speaker of the House of Representatives in November 1998, he indicated to Members of the House of Representatives that he wanted more civility in the House. Now he is asking Members to throw away some of their scripted speeches in order to introduce greater spontaneity in debates in the Chamber.

Being umpire in the toughest of political arenas is a challenge from which Neil Andrew does not shy away. In his first statement as Speaker, he implored Members to show "discipline, mutual respect and individual restraint" when participating in parliamentary proceedings. Now he has challenged Members to speak from the heart rather than from prepared scripts when debating issues of concern to their electorates.

"I am unhappy when I see Members reading from pre-prepared speeches in the House," said Mr Andrew. "If you are passionate about representing your electorate, then you should be able to speak about issues of concern to your constituents without just reading words that have been written in advance, and in some instances written by someone else. An exception, of course, applies to Ministers who, in the introduction of legislation, must provide details that cannot be adlibbed."

'Neil Andrew has challenged Members to speak from the heart rather than from prepared scripts.'

"I think if we had more unscripted debates in the House and less reading of speeches, the public perception of the Parliament as a rubber stamp would diminish."

The Speaker believes that, during debates in which they are participating, Members should always listen to the preceding and subsequent speakers so that they can respond or listen to points that other Members raise. "It is more than just a matter of courtesy to hear those who speak before you and after you in a debate. By responding to what others have to say, Members enhance parliamentary debate and help overcome the inaccurate public perception that Parliament is just political theatre."

The Speaker would also like to see more Members in the House during debates. "Although MPs are very busy people with many demands on their time, I think a more spontaneous debate with responses and rebuttals would encourage greater numbers of MPs to participate in the proceedings of the House."

During his time as Speaker, Neil Andrew has been keen to improve the public's appreciation of the institution of which he has been a Member for 17 years. He has supported initiatives such as the *About the House* magazine, the outreach activities of the Parliamentary Education Office that are aimed at giving people a better understanding of the work of the Parliament, and the establishment of a Liaison and Projects Office within the Department of the House of Representatives to enhance community liaison with the House.

"I am truly sorry that the House is portrayed in such a negative light by some sections of the media," Mr Andrew said. "Any objective analysis of Federal Parliament over the past two decades reveals that Governments over that time have made many courageous and unpopular decisions in the national interest. The previous Government did this with such issues as deregulation and tariff reform and the nation is the better for it. The current Government is pursuing tax reform on the same principle. I believe that Australians have enjoyed a growing level of prosperity consistent with good governance."

Neil Andrew is concerned that jaundiced reporting and unjustified lampooning of the institution could leave it permanently damaged. "There are many instances of Members foregoing benefits of office but these are rarely reported," he says. "The unrelenting focus on negative perceptions is eroding the confidence of the Australian electorate in the parliamentary system."

us debates

The Speaker believes that if we fail to address this crisis in confidence we will lose a precious system, which has served Australia well. "Future generations of Australians may then look back and wish they had the transparent system we now enjoy."

According to Mr Andrew, it is inevitable that there will be tensions and heated debate in the House. "Sometimes Members feel that they have to say something outrageous just to get their views reported. People have to realise that when two opposing political perspectives meet, sparks will sometimes fly. Regrettably the focus too often is on the sparks rather than on the bipartisan work that Members do in developing policy, getting legislation passed and conducting committee investigations."



Speaker Neil Andrew has been keen to improve the public's appreciation of the House of Representatives.

While the Speaker is happy for vigorous debate to take place on the floor of the House, he draws the line when it comes to audience participation from the public galleries that overlook the Chamber. He remains unapologetic for the recent banning of certain photographers for taking pictures of people protesting in the public galleries.

"In the Commonwealth Parliament we have an open public gallery where people can come and go as they please and can watch their elected representatives in action without having to sit behind glass barriers and the like. If we are to maintain that openness of proceedings, people who visit the House must respect the fact that it is the elected representatives of the people who have the right to participate in the forum, with the people who sent them here having the right to observe the proceedings. If any other rule applied, it would open up the possibility for all sorts of protest action in the Chamber and that would make the proper functioning of the House impossible."

'The focus too often is on the sparks rather than on the bipartisan work that Members do.'

"There are many other avenues for people to have their say, including the ability to make representations to individual Members, to Ministers and to parliamentary committees. I will not allow the Chamber to become a place of public protest. If we want to see an improvement in parliamentary standards then politicians and the public alike must accept responsibility for achieving that aim."

This is not to say that Neil Andrew has turned a blind eye to requests by the media for less stringent rules covering photography in the Chamber and elsewhere in Parliament House. He is considering the existing guidelines to ensure that they are fair and ensure appropriate access for the media.

The Speaker's approach to such issues reflects his views on how Parliament should work and develop over time. "It's more about evolution than revolution," Mr Andrew said.

Neil Andrew says that he would like to see more "discipline, mutual respect and individual restraint" but considers he is fortunate to be the adjudicator in a Chamber led by a Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition who are decent human beings and who have great respect for the parliamentary institution. "I believe that the overall standards of debate and conduct in the Chamber have improved and I wish that the media would more accurately report this fact."

"We don't need to be apologists for the traditions that we follow and the rules that we observe."

"Look around the world," the Speaker says, "and you will be hard pressed to find a better system of parliamentary government."