

Federal MPs want people to have more say



The Chair of an influential parliamentary committee has called for greater community involvement in the work of the House of Representatives. Christopher Pyne MP, Chair of the House of Representatives Procedure Committee, wants parliamentary committees and other parliamentary processes to be more accessible to the community as a way of dealing with community concerns about parliamentarians being remote.

Pyne was speaking prior to the tabling of a major committee report on community involvement in the work of the House. The report follows a nine month investigation by the Procedure Committee, focusing on the way in which people can have a say in the House of Representatives.

Commenting on the reasons for the inquiry, Pyne said "We wanted to overcome concerns that the community is disengaged from Members of Parliament, particularly from the work that Members do in Canberra. We felt that we could try to reduce that feeling of politicians being remote by finding ways to encourage the community to be more actively involved in parliamentary processes like petitions, questions and committees."

'do committee work that reaches out into the community'

Modernising Parliament

According to Pyne, a major focus of the inquiry was the need to update some of the existing procedures and processes of the House.

"A key thing that was identified by the inquiry was that the House of Representatives must catch up with modern ways of conducting business. I am concerned that the House has been hidebound by past practice," said Pyne.

Pyne believes that the House needs to be more flexible without being radical. He commented, "I think it became clear that there was a desire amongst Members of Parliament for innovation in how we conduct business, without some of the restrictions that have been placed on us in the past."

According to Pyne, some of the innovations raised during the inquiry included questions on notice from members of the public as well as an easier system for making petitions. Pyne said, "We looked at those sorts of things with a view to enabling those people in the community who are interested in the work of the House to be more actively involved."

At the same time, Pyne recognised that there is a debate among Members about the extent to which the community can be involved, from a practical viewpoint, in the proceedings of the House. He stated, "Different Members of Parliament have different perspectives of whether there should be active involvement of the community or

whether there shouldn't be." Pyne added, "My view is that the community expect parliamentarians to do things that members of the community feel are important and we can't really know what those things are unless we actively engage the community in our work."

Reaching out through committees

Another major focus of the inquiry was the way in which House of Representatives committees operate.

Pyne commented "Our committees weren't regarded as being sufficiently accessible, probably because they don't get the same media coverage that Senate committees get."

Pyne called for greater independence for House committees, so that they could conduct inquiries and seek out briefings of their own volition "without being too reliant on the Executive for a mandate to act". He stated, "We should be trying to do committee work that reaches out into the community and reflects what people want and gives advice to the Government about how we can better act as a Parliament and as a Government."

Report will be a catalyst

Pyne believes that the Procedure Committee report due out at the end of November will be an important catalyst for change.

He said, "I have no doubt that Members of Parliament will grab this opportunity with both hands to reach out into the community, to make House committees more relevant and to give advice to the Government and the Parliament about how we can go in the future"

Pyne added, "I think there will be opportunities created out of the report for the Government to be held more accountable, especially in the responses they give to committee reports."

On the future, Pyne also commented that the Internet will continue to develop as a tool for interacting with the community. He said, "The Internet provides us with a new point of reference about what the community is feeling on particular issues."

Copies of the report will be available after its presentation to the House from the Internet at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/proc/reports.htm or from:

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