

Did you know?

Three months and your time is up

Three months is the agreed time for the Government to respond to reports from parliamentary committees. But statistics show that governments rarely meet this timeframe, leading to calls for stricter rules governing responses to parliamentary committee reports.

Government responses are statements made to the House by the relevant Minister detailing the Government's view on the recommendations made by a parliamentary committee. The government response generally outlines those recommendations that the Government has agreed to and the action that it has taken or intends to take to implement those recommendations. The response also includes a statement about the recommendations that are not supported and the reasons why.

A government response to a committee report closes the cycle of a committee inquiry. It enables all those who contributed to the inquiry, and who are affected by the committee's recommendations, to see the final outcome of their efforts.

Since 1990 only eight per cent of reports presented by House of Representatives and joint parliamentary committees have been responded to in the agreed three month timeframe. The average time is around 12 months. Eighteen per cent of committee reports presented have yet to receive a response.

'The House Procedure Committee wants a better response rate to committee reports.'

The Fraser Government in 1978 introduced the practice of governments responding to parliamentary committee reports by way of a statement to the House. The agreed timeframe for a response then was six months. In 1983 the Hawke Government changed that to three months, stating that the change was needed "to make the reports of committees as relevant as possible to any considerations which the Government may have to make in respect of policy matters".

Now the House of Representatives Procedure Committee wants a better government response rate to parliamentary committee reports. It has recommended that the rules of the House

(the Standing Orders) be changed so that the Government is required to present a response to a parliamentary committee report no later than four months after the release of the report.

By formalising the Government response requirement and making it a rule of the House, rather than just something the Government has agreed to in practice, the Procedure Committee hopes to ensure that the response timeframe is taken more seriously by the Government and the Commonwealth Departments that usually prepare the responses.

The Procedure Committee commented: "Regardless of whether the Government decides to implement a committee's recommendations in whole or in part, committees and the people who contribute to their inquiries expect that the report will be read and considered seriously by the Government. The presentation of a detailed response to the House is evidence that this has taken place."

One of the benefits flowing from the presentation of government responses to parliamentary committee reports is that it provides an opportunity for Members to debate the outcomes of committee inquiries and the actions that have been taken by the Government to address issues raised by the relevant inquiry. Recently, the Government's response to the rail report by the House Transport Committee (*Tracking Australia, An inquiry into the role of rail in the national transport network*) resulted in a vigorous debate about the future directions for rail in Australia.

During that debate, Transport Committee members welcomed the positive response that the Government had made to their recommendations, but also took the opportunity to widen the debate and place pressure on the Government to take more action on the rail network. Transport Committee Chair, Paul Neville, commented that while some aspects of the response heartened him, he was disappointed by other items.

"I continue to call on the Government for a greater national vision for the Australian rail system," Mr Neville said. "I commend our original report which we will follow up in the future."

Without a government response to a committee report, there is far less opportunity for the House to follow up on issues raised in that report.