

Twice the action

The House of Representatives has a unique committee which it established in 1994 to help deal with the increasing workload of legislation being considered by the House. The Main Committee is not like other committees of the House – it cannot investigate policy matters or take evidence from witnesses. It operates as an extension of the Chamber of the House itself to allow two streams of business to be debated concurrently.

All Members of the House can participate in the Main Committee which operates in almost exactly the same way as the House itself. It can only deal with a limited range of business – specifically, the second reading and consideration in detail stages of bills, the debate of committee and delegation reports, and the debate of papers presented to the House. The Main Committee can debate and resolve motions and process bills through the relevant stages, including making amendments to them, just as the House can. However, as the Main Committee is a second forum, any decision it makes on business referred to it must be later confirmed by a decision of the House.

While the procedures used in the Main Committee are substantially the same as those in the House, there is one important difference. There is no provision for division (voting) in the Main Committee. If a motion cannot be agreed to 'on the voices' the question is reported back to the House for it to resolve. This is the key factor in the principle of cooperation by which the Main Committee operates. Only business on which it is hoped that agreement can be reached is referred to the Main Committee. Disagreements occurring in the Main Committee are referred back to the House for settlement. There is a surprising amount of non-controversial business. In 1999, 75 bills were considered in the Main Committee out of a total of 211 passed by the House altogether.

More details about the operation of the Main Committee can be found in *Factsheet no. 16 The Main Committee*. Factsheets can

be accessed on line at www.aph.gov.au/house/info/factsht or by requesting a copy from the Chamber Research Office on (02) 6277 4685. You can watch the proceedings of the Main Committee live on-line at www.aph.gov.au/live

The Main Committee was established to ease the pressure of business in the House and provide enough time for all Members to contribute to debates. It has been operating for just over five years. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure has commenced a review of the Main Committee and is interested to hear from anyone who has any comments or proposals to make concerning the operations of the Main Committee. The review will consider such issues as the range of business dealt with, sitting days and times, rules of operation and title and status. If you are interested in making a submission you should contact the committee secretariat or visit the committee's Internet site (www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/proc) for more information about the inquiry and how to prepare a submission. Written submissions should be sent to:

The Secretary
Standing Committee on Procedure
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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Fax: (02) 6277 4627
Email: Procedure.Committee.Reps@aph.gov.au



Proceedings in the Main Committee, chaired by Deputy Speaker Garry Nehl MP.