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Parliamentarians should declare: “We’re here to serve the people”

Members of Parliament should publicly declare their commitment to serving the interests of all Australians at the commencement of each new Parliament. That’s one of the key recommendations from the House of Representatives Procedure Committee following its review of the ceremonial procedures for the opening of Parliament after each federal election.

The current opening day combines traditional rituals with ceremonies that must be carried out before the Parliament can legally operate. In particular, Members must be sworn in and a Speaker must be elected to preside over the House.

The Procedure Committee notes in its report that the ceremony is a kind of initiation for Members, giving them a sense of the significance of the role they are to play. While it is particularly important for first-time Members, all Members find the opening an inspirational experience.

In the revised ceremony drawn up by the Procedure Committee a number of traditional elements inherited from Westminster have been retained. “Links with Westminster help to remind us of the long struggle to transfer power from a single person, the monarch, to the community through their elected representatives. We must not take our democracy for granted,” said the Chair of the Procedure Committee, Gary Nairn (Member for Eden-Monaro, NSW).

“But as well as recognising the historical struggle for democracy we should have a ceremony which reflects our unique Australian system and looks forward to the work we must do for Australians.”

The Procedure Committee has proposed a new element to the ceremony, which would take place in the forecourt of Parliament House before Members and Senators take their places in their Chambers. The original occupiers of the land where Parliament House stands would be asked to perform an indigenous ceremonial welcome. This would be followed by the Australian of the Year, on behalf of all Australians, reminding the Members of Parliament that they have been chosen by the people of Australia and exhorting them to carry out their duties to the best of their ability.

To complement this new feature of the opening, the Committee has proposed that the House pass a specific resolution that recognises the significance of the people to Australian democracy and that calls on Members to dedicate themselves to the service of the people of Australia.

Other changes which the Committee has proposed include giving the two Houses an equal role in the opening. This would involve simultaneously declaring the Parliament open in both Chambers, asking the Governor-General to deliver his opening speech in the Great Hall of the Parliament rather than the Senate Chamber, and involving Senators in the traditional processions and new forecourt ceremonies.

Also proposed is a review of the form of the oath of allegiance sworn by Members and Senators, and broadcasting of the opening ceremony on national television.

Full details of the proposed opening ceremony are described in the report of the Procedure Committee, which was presented to the House on 27 August.

For a copy of the report

Visit: www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/proc

Call: (02) 6277 4685

Email: Procedure.Committee.Reps@aph.gov.au

Did you know?

When a federal election is called, the House of Representatives is dissolved by the Governor-General. This means that the House ceases to exist until such time as it is summoned by the Governor-General for its first meeting after the election. The opening ceremony for the new Parliament takes place on that first day of meeting.

A federal election is due by the end of this year. When the new Parliament is summoned to meet after the election, it will become Australia’s 40th Parliament since Federation.