

The Address in Reply

When a new parliament is opened after a general election, the Governor-General calls the two houses of parliament together to hear an outline of what the newly sworn-in government seeks to achieve. This speech, called the opening speech, usually announces the more important laws the government wants parliament to pass and explains why they are needed.

After the opening speech, each house prepares a formal response in writing which, when agreed to, is presented to the Governor-General. The response is known as the Address in Reply and follows the custom of the British parliament. In earlier times when the sovereign addressed the Lords and Commons, the Address in Reply responded in detail to the points raised in the speech. However, by the time the Australian parliament first met in 1901, it had become simply an expression of loyalty to the crown and of gratitude for the speech.

The parliamentary procedure which surrounds the Address in Reply reflects its early history. After the House has returned from hearing the Governor-General's speech it completes some formal business as an assertion of its right to act on its own without reference to the government's proposed program. A committee is then appointed to prepare the formal response to the speech. The committee usually comprises the Prime Minister and two members of the governing party newly elected at the preceding election. This time it's the new Members for Farrer (Susan Ley) and Cowper (Luke Hartsuyker). Because the form of the address is almost always the same, the

committee's role is minor: it presents the wording of the address as a report to the House. The House then debates the question 'That the Address be agreed to'.

While the content of the address is now largely symbolic—indeed the words have changed very little in 100 years—the debate which leads up to its adoption is a vital part of a newly formed parliament. Newly elected members have the opportunity to make their mark through their first speeches. All members have the opportunity to talk about issues of particular interest or concern to them, ranging across a wide area of government administration and policy.

Debate usually lasts for several days and is virtually unlimited in subject matter—members speaking may raise virtually any issue they like. When the address has been agreed to, arrangements are made for a small ceremony to be held at Government House. The Speaker, together with certain officers of the House and members wishing to attend, personally presents the address in writing to the Governor-General. The latter replies, also in writing, indicating that the expression of loyalty in the address will be conveyed to the sovereign. The Speaker later reports the Governor-General's reply to the House. ■

The Address in Reply

May it please Your Excellency:

We, the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Australia, in Parliament assembled, desire to express our loyalty to our Most Gracious Sovereign, and to thank Your Excellency for the speech which you have been pleased to address to the Parliament.

The Address in Reply debate, including the first speeches of newly elected Members of the House of Representatives, is available at: www.aph.gov.au/hansard



Photos (top to bottom): Members making their first speeches in the House as part of the Address in Reply debate. John Cobb, Member for Parkes (NSW); Jennie George, Member for Throsby (NSW); and Steven Ciroto, Member for Moncrieff (Qld). Photos: AUSPIC.