



Ms Margaret May, MP
Chair
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Received 5/1/2007 gm.

Submission No. 6

Dear Ms May

Inquiry concerning Question Time

My attention has been drawn to the submission made by Ms Gillard, then Manager of Opposition Business, to the Committee in connection with its inquiry concerning the standing orders applying to Question Time.

Under the heading 'Discussion of the changing role of the Clerk' (page 8) Ms Gillard states that the role of the Clerk has changed in recent years, and refers to the use of e-mail and other real-time technologies which allow instantaneous communication between the Speaker and the Clerk.

While I do not believe that the role of the Clerk has changed as a result of such developments it may be of assistance to the Committee to have some background information on them.

To my knowledge there has been interest in the use of emerging technologies in parliaments around the world for well over ten years. In the case of the House, the introduction of the Main Committee in 1994 provided an opportunity – an opportunity welcomed by the Chair – to trial such technology. The first initiative was taken there, with the provision of Apple Newtons, to the then Deputy Speaker (Mr Jenkins) and the Clerk and Deputy Clerk. This was a small cordless communication system that enabled text messages to be sent and received

While some occupants of the Chair in the Main Committee began taking their own laptops in, the next significant stage culminated in the provision of laptops for use by the Deputy Speaker in the Main Committee and by the Clerk and the Deputy Clerk in the House and in the Main Committee. A laptop was also provided for use by the Serjeant on duty in the House. These facilities are employed by the various users for many purposes, including email, checking on earlier proceedings, checking precedents and references, advice about the plans and possibilities for the day, information about security issues, information about visitors, checking on proceedings in House itself/Main Committee as appropriate, and checking on relevant proceedings in the Senate.

Unfortunately, because of the limitations imposed by the design of the Speaker's Chair it has not been practicable to provide a normal laptop for use by the Chair in the House. The most recent development has therefore been the provision of a smaller wireless device (currently a Toshiba Libretto) to link the Speaker and the Clerk.

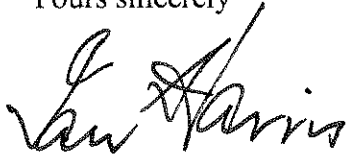
I believe that such developments should be seen as part of normal and healthy evolution and development and not as evidence of some sort of change in the role of any of those involved. This view is reinforced by the knowledge that similar modest

technical initiatives have been considered and proceeded with as appropriate in other comparable legislatures.

I hope this information is of assistance to the Committee.

In the circumstances I have taken the liberty of making a copy of this letter available to Ms Gillard.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ian Harris', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Ian Harris

5 January 2007