

## **Access to proceedings**

- 5.1 An important part of helping people to understand and become involved in the workings of the House and its committees is enabling them to see, hear and read the proceedings and obtain information about the business which has been or is to be conducted. This entails the provision of audio and video transmissions of proceedings and making available as widely as possible the program and records of the House.
- 5.2 These issues are not strictly within the scope of the Procedure Committee's normal sphere of activity but are relevant to the present inquiry. This chapter summarises the current arrangements and makes some comments in relation to a few matters. Some proposals are put forward in connection with the presentation of material on the Internet.
- 5.3 The Joint Committee on the Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings (the Broadcasting Committee) is responsible for overseeing arrangements for audio and video transmissions of the proceedings of the House. Most of the information given here about broadcasting and televising has been supplied by the Broadcasting Committee and this committee is grateful for its assistance.

## **Broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings**

- 5.4 Parliament conducts its proceedings, with the rarest exceptions, in public. This is now taken for granted but it has not always been the case. People may view the proceedings of the House from the public galleries. Access to the proceedings of the House for televising has been permitted since 1991. Radio broadcasts have occurred since 1946. Trials have also taken place of sound and video broadcasts of proceedings over the Internet.
- 5.5 Parliamentary proceedings need to be accessible to as many people as possible. While new technologies are opening up new audiences and are

the way of the future, many people will continue to rely on the inexpensive traditional technologies of radio and television. The needs of these people should not be neglected.

### ***Parliamentary Proceedings Broadcasting Act 1946* and the Joint Committee on the Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings**

- 5.6 The *Parliamentary Proceedings Broadcasting Act 1946* sets out statutory requirements for radio broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings and for the televising of joint sittings. It lays down the powers and responsibilities of the Joint Committee on the Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings and requires the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) to provide radio coverage of the Senate and the House of Representatives, and the televising of joint sittings pursuant to section 57 of the Constitution. Absolute privilege is provided in the Act for required radio and television broadcasts.
- 5.7 At the commencement of the first session of every Parliament, a Joint Committee on the Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings is appointed in accordance with the Act. The Act requires the committee to report to each House on general principles for radio broadcasting of the proceedings of each House. The committee then decides, in accordance with the general principles, the days and times the proceedings of either House or of a joint sitting are to be broadcast. These are known as standing determinations.

### **Radio broadcasts of proceedings**

- 5.8 Radio broadcasts are made and controlled under the *Parliamentary Proceedings Broadcasting Act 1946*. The radio broadcasting of the proceedings commenced on 10 July 1946 in the House of Representatives. The Parliament of Australia was the second national Parliament of the Commonwealth to introduce the broadcasting of its proceedings, the radio broadcast of proceedings in New Zealand having commenced in 1936. Since November 1988 the broadcast has been made from a network established especially to carry the broadcast of proceedings and related material only.
- 5.9 Now called NewsRadio (formerly PNN), the network broadcasts 24 hours a day, seven days a week and provides what is termed a 'rolling news' service together with live coverage of the Australian Parliament. The rolling news service provides access to a range of international services including CNN, the BBC, Deutsche Welle and Radio Canada. Transmitters are located in all State capitals, Canberra, Darwin and Newcastle and coverage is estimated at 50–70% of the Australian population.

- 5.10 The ABC commenced 'audiostreaming' NewsRadio on the Internet in August 1998. This means that, via the ABC's website, people can listen to NewsRadio and its broadcasts of parliamentary proceedings if they have access to the Internet.<sup>1</sup>
- 5.11 Since the parliamentary broadcast has been carried on a dedicated network its coverage has been limited mainly to metropolitan and surrounding areas. People living in rural areas, for the most part, are denied the opportunity to listen to live broadcasts of proceedings. The Broadcasting Committee notes that it considers the extension of radio coverage to all Australians to be a priority issue.<sup>2</sup>
- 5.12 This committee agrees that it is extremely important that coverage be extended to all areas. While radio might be considered an old technology which is being overtaken by other media, it has the advantage that receivers are cheap and portable. Both these factors are particularly important in the rural setting. Newer technologies such as digital radio cannot be expected to be within the reach of the mass of population for some considerable time. The committee believes that the ABC and the Broadcasting Committee should investigate options for improving the access of rural people to live broadcasts of proceedings.

## Televising of Parliament

- 5.13 Guidance on the televising of the Australian Parliament is provided separately by the House of Representatives and the Senate. Each House authorises the televising of its proceedings by means of resolutions and sets its own conditions on broadcasters.
- 5.14 Separate to the guidance role performed by the Broadcasting Committee and the two Houses, the Department of the Parliamentary Reporting Staff provides the means for video signals to be fed to a number of television broadcasters. These include the ABC, commercial networks, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), and other commercial news services such as SkyNews and Reuters Financial Services Television. There are no fees for the provision of these signals.
- 5.15 Two video channels (one for each House) are provided to a number of Commonwealth government departments and a limited number of other organisations such as the headquarters of the major political parties, the National Press Club and some industry bodies. This service is soon to be replaced by an updated one supplying more channels enabling the Main

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1 The ABC's website is located at [www.abc.net.au](http://www.abc.net.au).

2 Joint Committee on the Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings, *submission*.

Committee proceedings and committee hearings to be broadcast as well as the proceedings of the two Houses.

- 5.16 The House imposes conditions on the live television broadcast and rebroadcast of the proceedings and excerpts of proceedings of the House and the Main Committee. These include such things as broadcasts being used for fair and accurate reports and not for political party advertising, satire or commercial advertising. The Broadcasting Committee investigates breaches of the conditions and is able to impose penalties on stations or programs.

### Future directions

- 5.17 The information provided by the Broadcasting Committee lists a number of anticipated developments in the area of broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings. The most notable of these in relation to this inquiry are:
- **Internet broadcast**—Live video broadcasts of proceedings via the Internet are being trialled. Implementation of the webcast is expected to commence from 22 November 1999. It is expected to provide up to eight channels to cover both Houses, the Main Committee, parliamentary committees (four channels) and special events such as press conferences (one channel). This will provide world wide coverage but only to those with Internet access. Initially sound quality will be good but video images will be poor quality.
  - **Digital radio**—Digital radio broadcasting is due to become available in Australia next year and potentially will enable high quality Australia-wide coverage. The Broadcasting Committee cautions, however, that because of initial high costs it will be some time before the technology is generally accessible.
- 5.18 The Procedure Committee commends these developments and encourages their implementation. The Internet is still a long way from being universally affordable. Other new technologies similarly will not be within the reach of the mass of the population for some time.

### Access to records of House activity

- 5.19 As well as watching or hearing the proceedings people need to be able, if they wish, to find out what has happened in the House and what issues it is expected to deal with in the future. Most people gain this type of information through media reports whose coverage of different types of parliamentary business is limited. While demand may not be high for

more detailed, comprehensive or accurate information it needs to be available to those who seek it if the House and its Members are to be accountable for their work.

- 5.20 Paper copies of parliamentary documents including Hansards, Votes and Proceedings, Notice Papers and Daily Programs are limited mostly to immediate users in Parliament House and government agencies. Large public libraries also usually hold copies. Hansard is the most widely available document but the cost of printing and distribution means that access to hard copy has been shrinking rather than expanding. The parliamentary departments have been using internet technology to make this information available more widely.

### Online access to Chamber-related documents

- 5.21 Hansard is available on the Internet at [www.aph.gov.au/hansard](http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard). Other publications about the House of Representatives can be accessed at [www.aph.gov.au/house/pubs](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/pubs).
- 5.22 During 1997-98 a uniform approach to the provision of parliamentary information on the Parliament's Internet site was implemented covering both Houses and the other departments supporting the Parliament. This approach aimed to provide a consistent appearance and a logical structure and navigation approach across the site. A simple search facility is available for the Parliament's web site.
- 5.23 During 1997-98 there were 2.254 million direct Internet access requests for Hansard material, nearly twice as many as in 1996-97. One analysis showed that 75 per cent of access requests were for committee transcripts, 13 per cent for House of Representatives pages and 11 per cent for Senate pages.<sup>3</sup>

### Parliament's Internet site

- 5.24 Issues of information and services provided through the Internet, beyond direct broadcast of proceedings and official records of the House's activities, have not been covered comprehensively in this inquiry as they fall outside the Procedure Committee's terms of reference. However, a number of suggestions were made in submissions for new services or ways to present information on the web. Some of these have been covered in other chapters of this report.
- 5.25 The committee does not intend to comment on the general presentation of material on the Parliament's Internet site but it does wish to make two

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3 Department of the Parliamentary Reporting Staff, *Annual Report*, 1997-98, p. 22.

proposals. Both the following items should be displayed prominently on the top level pages indicated.

- A direct link should be provided from the top page to the live broadcast when it becomes available.
- At the top page for each House there should be some brief information about what is to be debated in the House that day including scheduled committee hearings. This need only be fairly abbreviated so users can pick out the highlights with a link to the full daily program. It could possibly be provided as a scrolling list.

5.26 The current design of the Parliament's Internet site is fairly bland and has been deliberately designed to allow equitable access to the widest possible range of users. Use of mostly open standards and minimal use of frames, graphics and animations is necessary to ensure those with less powerful computers or software or personal disabilities are able to access the material. This accords with comments made by the Internet Society of Australia.<sup>4</sup> This approach necessarily results in a somewhat dull and static look. The committee feels that its two recommendations will help to convey the impression that the House is active and working. It will also make it easier for casual users to see the House at work without having to spend time searching through layers of information.

5.27 The proposal that information about committee hearings be included in a summary of the day's expected business is complementary to the recommendations concerning publication of hearing details contained in chapter 6. The committee is keen to ensure that the profile of committees is lifted and that information about their activities is included wherever possible with published information about the House and its business.

### **Recommendation 10**

5.28 **The committee recommends that a link to the live broadcast of proceedings (when available) be provided on the top page of the Parliament's Internet site.**

### **Recommendation 11**

5.29 **The committee recommends that a summary of the main items of business for consideration in the House and the Main Committee and**

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4 Internet Society of Australia, *submission*.

**scheduled public hearings of committees be shown on the House of Representatives Internet home page. The information should be updated daily and provide a link to the full daily program.**

## **Parliamentary newsgroup**

- 5.30 The committee considered a suggestion that a moderated parliamentary newsgroup be established to enhance networking between the Parliament and the community.<sup>5</sup> Such a newsgroup could be used for announcing committee inquiries and seeking feedback as well as for other general parliamentary information.
- 5.31 A parliamentary newsgroup would be required to serve the needs of the Parliament as a whole in a bipartisan way and not those of any political party. It seems probable that such a newsgroup would become an avenue for political debate. The committee feels that this would be inappropriate for an official parliamentary site which would need to be moderated by a parliamentary official who is required to maintain a politically impartial stance. Other opportunities, including newsgroups, exist for political interchange. Many Members have personal Internet sites with facilities for interaction enabling them to gather political comment.
- 5.32 The committee fully supports the use of the Internet to gather input and feedback on issues of the day from people in the community. A number of recommendations and suggestions made in this report will improve interaction between committees and the community (*see* chapter 6). These include the use of electronic feedback forms, Internet chat rooms and the like. As resources permit, committees are encouraged to use their own Internet sites to facilitate two way communication. In appropriate circumstances, this could include newsgroups or bulletin boards. In the light of these opportunities, the committee has decided not to support a proposal for an official parliamentary newsgroup at this stage.

## **Video conference links between Parliament and electorate offices**

- 5.33 One proposal put forward to extend the ability of citizens to participate in the political process was the provision of video conference facilities in Members' electorate offices.<sup>6</sup> The facilities could be used by constituents to view proceedings and participate in committee proceedings.

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5 Australian Computer Society, *submission*.

6 Internet Society of Australia, *submission*.

- 5.34 While the committee is sympathetic with this idea, it considers that there are other priorities for the resources which would be required to put it in place.
- 5.35 The committee does not support a proposal for video conference to be used to hold sittings with some or all Members appearing from their electorate offices via video conference.<sup>7</sup> Apart from legal and resource considerations, the committee believes that this would impair the ability of the House and its Members to function as they are expected. Members need to interact with each other on a face to face basis, to debate issues, to negotiate positions, to learn from each other, both in and out of the Chamber. The Parliament is more than just the sum of its parts—it needs Members to come together to combine their talents and knowledge to best represent the people of Australia. The committee does not believe that this could be achieved effectively without the physical presence of Members together in the one place.

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7 Internet Society of Australia, *submission*, and Tom Worthington, *exhibit*.