

HOUSE RULES

Parallel debating

Twenty years ago, in a committee room on the second floor of Parliament House in Canberra, then Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives, Harry Jenkins, declared that a “new era in the deliberations of the parliament” had begun.

It was 8 June 1994 and the first meeting of the House of Representatives Main Committee — later renamed the Federation Chamber — was underway.

The House now had a parallel chamber for debate, allowing more opportunities for MPs to speak about bills before parliament, committee and delegation reports, and constituency issues.

The establishment of a parallel chamber was a grand experiment and provided a model which not only resonated with MPs seeking greater opportunities to contribute to debate, but would later be adapted by the UK House of Commons when, in 1999, it allowed for the House to sit in another place — a room off its historic Westminster Hall.

Twenty years on, Australia’s Federation Chamber is still going strong, meeting in the same room where it began two decades ago — a room with a layout similar to the House chamber but on a

much smaller scale and where members do not have allocated seats. This contributes to a different atmosphere and dynamics.

All members of the House are also members of the Federation Chamber and are eligible to participate in its meetings. The Deputy Speaker chairs the proceedings, assisted by the Second Deputy Speaker and members of the Speaker’s panel.

As a subordinate body, the Federation Chamber considers matters referred to it by the House and any decisions made by the Federation Chamber must be reported to and confirmed by the House. Matters routinely referred include government bills (second reading and consideration in detail stages), committee and delegation business, and private members’ business.

Currently, the Federation Chamber provides a range of opportunities for private members to speak on subjects of their own choosing through periods set aside for constituency statements and 90 second statements, as well as the opportunity to participate in weekly grievance and adjournment debates.



While the Federation Chamber operates by cooperation, it is not immune from robust debate on occasion. However, unlike the House where questions may be decided by division, if a question in the Federation Chamber cannot be determined ‘on the voices’, the matter is reported to the House as an unresolved question.

Like the House of Representatives Chamber, meetings of the Federation Chamber are open to the public or can be viewed online at: www.aph.gov.au/live

For visitors to Parliament House, the more intimate environment provided by the Federation Chamber allows the opportunity to view up close the proceedings of the federal parliament. Debates in the Federation Chamber are also recorded in Hansard and the minutes of its proceedings are included in the Votes and Proceedings of the House. ■

QUESTION TIME

Q: What is cognate debate and when is it used?

A: The word cognate may not be used in ordinary conversation much but if you’ve heard of it you’ll know it describes things that are similar in nature or quality.

Apply the word to describe a procedure in the House of Representatives and you end up with cognate debate.

A cognate debate happens when it’s convenient for the House to debate together two or more orders of the day rather than have separate debates on the individual items. Almost all cognate debates occur on related bills, although there have been occasions where motions have been debated cognately, as have committee reports.

The procedure for cognate debates is not outlined in the standing orders. Instead it is an informal practice, tentatively arranged in advance and subject to confirmation in the House.

A proposal for a cognate debate on related bills is put to the House by the Chair when the first bill of the group is called on.

This happens in the second reading stage of the bills. If there is no objection by any member, debate on the second reading of the first bill is then permitted to cover the related bills. Upon the conclusion of the debate the usual questions are put to finalise the first bill and then separate questions are put, as required, on each order of the day as they are each called on.

In addition to the informal arrangements described above, on occasion the House orders bills to be considered together – providing in effect a cognate debate. This occurs when the House agrees to a motion for the suspension of standing orders to enable closely related bills to be called on and debated together. Programming motions of this nature have also been used to limit the duration of debate during particular stages. Depending on the particular circumstances, such motions may provide for separate questions to be put on each bill at the conclusion of debate, or for a single question to be put on the group of bills together.

In the current (44th) parliament, 81 bills have been debated in cognate.