

Pointers on how to make the already dull duller

Michael Fullilove
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A new report is out from the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure. Such a document might not ordinarily find its way to the top of your Christmas reading pile. If it sounds innocuous, however, its contents are alarming. So far as parliamentary reports go, this one is a wolf in sheep's clothing.

The report labours under the baffling title 'Encouraging an interactive chamber'. The Chair of the Committee, Margaret May MP, begins her foreword to the report by noting carefully: 'It is often said that debates in the House of Representatives can be dull, characterised by lengthy speeches to an almost empty chamber.'

That is undoubtedly true. Plant yourself in the public gallery of one of our parliaments for a few hours outside of Question Time and you will emerge glassy-eyed and slack-jawed. How should we fix this? If, as Mrs May implies, our MPs' speeches are long, boring and poorly attended, then we should change the rules to keep them short and punchy and discourage parliamentary truancy.

Furthermore, we the people should make it clear to our elected representatives that there is a constituency for speeches: that there is electoral advantage to be had from decent speeches, and a price to be paid for hopeless speeches. If the occasional mumbler has to make way at election time, well, the Hansard reporters will thank us for it.

The Committee proposes some less drastic solutions to the problem, and they are not all bad. One suggestion is that the standing orders be amended to allow interventions from other MPs fifteen minutes into a second reading speech. This seems like a reasonable way to increase the quality of the debate and promote a little back-and-forth. But having hit on a good idea, the timid souls on the Committee immediately shrink from it, proposing that MPs should have the right to opt out of answering such questions.

Why should parliamentarians be allowed to ignore tough questions? Such a courtesy is not extended to public servants in Senate Estimates hearings. Surely MPs should be able to hold their own while they are on their feet – and be judged on their performance? Is this a debating chamber or a support group?

By far the worst idea, though, comes from the Clerk of the House, Ian Harris, who proposes in his submission that consideration be given to allowing the use of PowerPoint and other audiovisual technologies in the chamber. This would 'improve the impact or absorption of information', claims Mr Harris, and 'would be consistent with the approach of many other persons, such as teachers and university lecturers.' Finally, he deploys the 'yoof' argument: 'To younger people especially, the experience of observing parliamentary proceedings might therefore not appear to be so foreign.'

It's hard to think of a polite response to this suggestion. I have not observed in young Australians of my acquaintance a thirst for new Microsoft business applications. Generation Y seems to be more interested in ending poverty than starting PowerPoint. If some young people are more sanguine about PowerPoint than the rest of us (and Mr Harris provides no evidence for this), that can only be because they've had to sit through fewer wretched audiovisual presentations.

PowerPoint is ubiquitous, but it is also deadening. It privileges form over content, and it cannot compute subtlety. It reduces complex ideas to simplistic bullet-points. It teaches laziness. It eliminates surprise. Far from 'encouraging interactivity', as the Committee would like to do, it enables monologues. In other words, it is a very unparliamentary piece of software.

Sir Robert Menzies didn't need PowerPoint to dominate the Parliament. Gough Whitlam and Paul Keating didn't need pictures to skewer their opponents in Question Time. Menzies, Whitlam and Keating had the advantage of other technologies for the communication of ideas, such as preparation, logic and wit. The best of today's parliamentarians are also comfortable with these technologies.

If the general standard of debate in our parliaments is to improve, this will not come about as a result of the introduction of new gadgets or rule changes, but from a determination on the part of MPs to write and deliver better speeches.

Back in 1998, Margaret May MP began her first speech to the House with an over-used phrase: 'There are no words to adequately describe the feeling of standing in the chamber as a representative of the community you have lived in for many years.'

Actually, there are words to describe that feeling, and most other feelings. One of the tasks of parliamentarians is to find those words and use them. No PowerPoint slide is going to help with that.

Michael Fullilove is the editor of a recent collection of Australian speeches, *'Men and Women of Australia!' Our Greatest Modern Speeches* (Vintage).