



2008 Parliamentary Sitting Dates

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Commentary

(December 2007)

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The views expressed are the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Democratic Audit of Australia.

Federal parliament – 2008 Sitting days

House: 39 first half, 43 second half = 82 sitting days (18 sitting weeks)

Senate: 21 first half, 31 second half = 52 sitting days (14 sitting weeks)

Senate Estimates: 12 first half, 4 second half = 16 days (4 weeks)

(As usual, by agreement of either House, sitting days and times can be extended)

Given this is the first year of a new government, with (I assume) a great deal of legislation and new policies to be assessed and debated - both the Senate and the House probably each need to sit at least up to 100 days, or 20 to 22 weeks. Too few sitting days and too few sitting weeks lead to the sins of the later Howard years - too little time to fully debate and examine all legislation. The legislation treadmill needs to be slowed down, not speeded up. The idea that savings from having fewer sitting days is good is stupid. The whole purpose of democracy is to examine, review, consider and hold to account, and that means being in Canberra.

There are plenty of ways to do this. They are starting late (12 February) when 5 February should have been the start. It could even have been the 29th January. They are finishing early (4 December) when 11 December should have been the earliest finishing date. The April/May 'up period' is too long (7 weeks) and should be a week less. The July/August 'up period' (8 weeks) is too long and should be a week less. And the Senate can also sit a number of Fridays. It is nonsense to suggest Senate Fridays are always taken up by (all) Committees, and anyway (some) Committees already sit at the same time as the Senate sits.

Although increasing sitting days for the House through extending to Fridays has benefits, without full participation and a meaningful productive program it will be less effective than it could be. As there are no quorums and business seems to be discussing reports and the like, I very much suspect many MPs who are not involved in the Friday events (probably the majority) will leave on Thursday nights as usual.

As for the Senators work load, it is true there is Estimates, but many Senators do not attend the whole of Estimates, only their chosen Committees on the designated days, and notoriously in the past some Senators did not even attend at all.

As for the many days away involved in doing Senate Committee work, it just goes with the job.

If the Government really wants to transform the House from a gladiatorial House of the Executive, all parties should withdraw the whip on all amendments, and allow a free vote. Then we might see some of the joys of Westminster freedom of speech and action in play in Canberra. As it is, the House is virtually worthless from the perspective of correcting any flaws in legislation, as the Government numbers mean the Cabinet's decisions are rubber-stamped.

Turning to the Senate, the House of Review. It is the Senate where the real legislative work is done. It should do more, including (on the European model) having its

Committees produce their own bills. Both pre and post July 1 the Senate is in non-Government hands. The power of Committees will return, proper review and consultation will be restored, bills will be fully debated, amendments will be put and (crucially) passed. Some will even be insisted on. For the Senate to have 52 sitting days in 2008 to do all this is just plain ridiculous.