

ADDRESS AT THE JOINT SITTING TO MARK THE
SESQUICENTENARY OF THE TASMANIAN
PARLIAMENT
BY
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LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
HOBART – FRIDAY 1 DECEMBER 2006

Legislative Council Past, Present and Future

Today's ceremonial joint sitting of Parliament to mark the sesquicentenary of responsible government in Tasmania is an important way for us to remember our democratic history and preserve it for generations to come.

By bringing the two Houses of the Tasmanian Parliament together today we are celebrating our past, making it relevant to our present, and appreciating it in designing our future.

The Legislative Council has met in this chamber since 1856 and it is fitting that we meet here again today 150 years on.

As Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council it is my privilege to address you on behalf of the Legislative Council.

We are not only celebrating 150 years of Responsible Government but also the establishment of a bicameral Parliament.

A vital component of a bicameral Parliament is the Upper House. Under the model of Parliament we inherited from Westminster, the government is formed in the Lower House and the Upper House acts as a house of review, predominately intended to scrutinize legislation and monitor the actions of the Executive Government.

These roles are important as they provide another opportunity for the people of Tasmania to interact with the processes of government and to influence the political process.

Goal 14 of the Tasmania Together vision states “Ensure there is greater cooperation at all levels of government and among political parties to improve the lives of Tasmanians”.

The Legislative Council embodies this goal.

Although we are celebrating 150 years of the current Legislative Council as part of a bicameral Parliament we should be aware that a body with the same name pre-existed the current Legislative Council.

Beginning in 1825, with Van Diemen’s Land’s administrative separation from New South Wales, the Legislative Council consisted of six members who were appointed by the Governor.

Even at that time, there was considerable agitation by the people indicating a strong wish for self-government and for elected representatives.

In 1851 the process began when Van Diemen's Land achieved a 'Blended' Council of 8 appointed or 'official' members and 16 elected members from around the island.

The election of members marked a change in British colonial policy. A policy that had previously blocked elected politicians was in part due to the high number of convicts incarcerated on the island.

A spirit of change was sweeping the colony and in 1853 a Legislative Council select committee of elected Members was established with Terms of Reference to prepare a new Constitution.

One of its recommendations included the establishment of a bicameral Parliament.

However it still took until October 1855, before responsible government was finally achieved following a Bill to implement these changes, received Royal Assent.

The preamble to the Tasmanian Constitution contained the following:

“...in place of the said Legislative Council there should be one Legislative Council and one House of Assembly, constituted as therein provided, which should exercise all the powers and functions of the then existing Legislative Council,...”

This illustrates that the new Tasmanian Parliament was an evolutionary development from the previous Legislative Council, rather than a completely new institution.

The first elections for the new bicameral Parliament were held between September and October of 1856.

And on 2 December, 150 years ago the first meeting of the bicameral Parliament occurred comprising a Legislative Council of 15 members and a House of Assembly of 30 members.

Interestingly, although the Legislative Council numbers have varied considerably over the last 150 years, today there are 15 elected members the same number as in 1856 and the electoral divisions of Huon, Pembroke and Derwent still carry their original names.

The changes over the 150 years within the Legislative Council have been considerable.

Some may have wished that the pace of electoral change had been faster, however change has occurred.

Now the Legislative Council has electorates with equal number of electors, full adult franchise and increased gender balance in its membership.

As the Legislative Council is never dissolved like the House of Assembly is when it faces a general election.

The Legislative Council provides a degree of continuity and stability to the Tasmanian political environment that

the House of Assembly can not, due in part, to the possibility of a potentially high turnover at an election.

The Legislative Council has always had a majority of independent members.

However during the last 50 or so years there has been an increasing representation by members affiliated with major political parties.

The Legislative Council has considerable power, including the ability to send the lower house to an election by rejecting supply, however it has only exercised the full extent of this power on two occasions.

The Legislative Council has generally attempted to reach a compromise with the lower house, although not always successfully.

Support for the Legislative Council over the past 150 years has fluctuated with the major parties, and the wider

community; having oscillated from strong support to occasional calls for reform.

The Legislative Council currently enjoys the support of most sectors of the political landscape, including most importantly, the people of Tasmania.

The Legislative Council will continue to strive to be a valuable and effective component of a bicameral Parliament.

Our democratic institutions are created for the people of Tasmania and it is the people of Tasmania who elect their government representatives, and who ultimately determine the structure of the Parliament and the government of Tasmania.

The Legislative Council has been an important part of our political landscape for more than 150 years and remains an effective house of review today.

It will continue to play its role in supporting and maintaining responsible government in our system of parliamentary democracy.

At this, the ceremonial joint sitting to mark the sesquicentenary of responsible government, I commemorate the role of the Legislative Council in our past, I commend its vital role in our present and I trust that it will be an enduring component of Tasmania's political future.