

Down and out

Less sitting days leads to less opposition pressure for accountability

FOR years, Anthony Albanese has spoken passionately of accountability and transparency in government and the role of the parliament in holding governments to account.

Whether it was calling for more sitting days in April 2020 as Covid hit, or expressing furious indignation in the 2016 election year that the parliament would sit for only 51 days, it has been a consistent theme.

But now he is Prime Minister, it seems that “Accountability Albo” is just a distant memory.

After all of his indignation that parliament was sitting for “only” 51 days in 2016, Mr Albanese has just produced a timetable, which sees the parliament sit for a mere 40 days in 2022.

This is a dramatic drop from 67 sitting days in 2021 and 58 in 2020.

It is true that in election years parliament normally sits for fewer days than in other years.

But across 2013, 2016 and 2019, the parliament sat for an average of 48 days – much longer than Mr Albanese’s 40.

Mr Albanese keeps telling us he does not want to waste a day in government. So why has he been so slow in convening parliament, with the first sitting day not until July 26?

This only barely meets the constitutional requirement that the first sitting day must be within 30 days of the “return of the writs”. (The latest day for return of the writs was Wednesday.)

At the last transition of government, the Coalition government wasted no time in reconvening parliament. In 2013, the first sitting day (November 12) was a mere 11 days after the writs were returned



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(November 1). The effect of Mr Albanese’s sitting timetable is to minimise the role and work of the parliament – work which is critical to delivering transparency and accountability.

This is not the only disturbing development.

Leader of the House Tony Burke

says he plans to change question time in a way that would take questions away from the Opposition.

In the last parliament, there were typically 11 questions allocated to non-government members during question time. The third question was reserved for crossbenchers, meaning the Opposition generally received 10 questions.

These arrangements applied for all three terms of our Liberal National government, including 2013 to 2016 when Labor had 55 members in the House.

Today the Liberal/National Opposition has 58 seats – so it is hard to see the basis for having fewer questions than Labor had.

Mr Burke says this is about fairness because there is now a bigger crossbench than in the previous parliament.

Perhaps Mr Burke is motivated by less high-minded considerations, such as reducing the intensity and effectiveness of the question time scrutiny that government ministers face. The Opposition has shadow ministers closely tracking the work of each government minister.

Many Opposition MPs are former ministers.

When a particular issue about the government’s conduct needs to be scrutinised, a sustained focus on that issue in a series of questions from the Opposition can be an effective way to get at the truth.

There is a direct link between the Opposition having fewer questions, and the government facing less scrutiny and being less accountable.

Mr Burke’s proposed changes to question time should raise concerns for any Australian who values government accountability.

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