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## ‘Our House’ restored to its former glory

It saw the dismissal of one Prime Minister and is the place where another told the nation World War II was coming to an end. Now the House of Representatives at Old Parliament House (OPH) has undergone a major restoration, befitting its significant place in the history of Australia’s democracy.

At the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House (MoAD), Minister for the Arts the Hon Tony Burke MP last night officially reopened the Chamber, following the biggest conservation program in its 97-year history.

Mr Burke took part in a discussion on “Interpreting Democracy”, hosted by OPH Board Chair Barrie Cassidy. They were joined by digital artist James Hillier, also known as Nordacious, who illuminated Old Parliament House for *Enlighten 2024*, renowned musician, composer, and recorder virtuoso Genevieve Lacey, and Dr Kate Armstrong, Manager, Interpretation and Content Development at MoAD.

For more than six-decades as the nation’s federal parliament, the House of Representatives Chamber was privy to moments that shaped Australia. In May 1945, from the Chamber, Ben Chifley addressed the nation in a radio broadcast announcing the surrender of Germany, while in the aftermath of the war, Robert

Menzies, Australia's longest-serving Prime Minister, bolstered Australia's alliance with the United States and pursued stronger ties with Asia.

Dame Enid Lyons was the first woman elected to the House of Representatives in 1943. She was one of only 13 women to sit on the Representative benches over 61 years, including the first woman Speaker Joan Child.

MoAD Director Stephanie Bull said the comprehensive refurbishment and conservation project would safeguard the House's heritage values for future generations as Old Parliament House celebrates its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1927.

A highlight of the conservation program was the discovery that the Coat of Arms above the Speaker's Chair – thought to be made of metal – was in fact intricately carved timber. Descendants of the original creators, Sydney's Otto Brothers Woodcarvers, were invited to see the historic piece restored to its former glory.

The refurbishment provided an opportunity for the installation of a hearing loop to improve accessibility during verbal presentations, such as guided tours and lectures.

One the most distinctive features of the Chamber, the table and benches designed by architect John Smith Murdoch as part of the original build and fabrication, underwent a comprehensive, once-in-a-lifetime conservation program.

Mr Cassidy said visitors would be able to sit in the seats where history was made for many years to come, thanks to the meticulous work conducted on the Chamber.

“Some of the most significant moments of Australia's modern history were decided in the House of Representatives. It is testament to the great strides we have made as a democratic nation and a reminder to never take those values for granted.”

Dr Armstrong said the Museum was pleased to again share the compelling stories of the House of Representatives Chamber and give visitors an insight into a different but still relevant political era.

“This Chamber saw some of the most dramatic and rowdy scenes in Australian political history between 1927 and 1988,” she said. “But, to echo Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce at the opening of Old Parliament House, the elected politicians were passionately speaking with the voice of their electorates, with the ‘voice of the people’.”

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**Image caption:** The House of Representatives Chamber at Old Parliament House, February 2024.