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Senate Committees and Government Accountability

Proceedings of the conference to mark the 40th anniversary of the Senate's
legislative and general purpose standing committee system

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Foreword

This special issue of *Papers on Parliament* contains the transcript of the conference to mark the 40th anniversary of the Senate's legislative and general purpose standing committee system which came into being on 11 June 1970. The conference was held over a day and a half in November 2010 with the first day's proceedings held in the Main Committee Room at Parliament House (where the 20th anniversary conference was held in 1990) and the final morning's proceedings in Old Parliament House where committees made their first impacts.

We were fortunate to be able to welcome back several former senators to contribute their views on their committee experiences and, now uninhibited by the constraints of office, there were some forthright and illuminating contributions. Current senators also made a major contribution to the conference and, in particular, identified some of the potential hazards ahead if there is not some brake on the number of inquiries that committees are expected to turn over in ever-diminishing timeframes. We also heard from the other side of the table, from those who assist committees in their deliberations by making submissions and appearing as witnesses. Again, these contributions were frank and illuminating.

I thank all those who contributed to the success of the conference by presenting papers, by contributing to its organisation, by recording and broadcasting its proceedings and, most importantly, by demonstrating continuing interest in and support for the Senate committee system by attending and asking questions.

Rosemary Laing
Clerk of the Senate

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Contributors

Senator the Hon. John Hogg, a Labor senator for Queensland since 1996, was elected President of the Senate in August 2008 having served as Deputy President and Chair of Committees from August 2002. The President of the Senate is the presiding officer of the Senate, whose chief function is to guide and regulate the proceedings in the Senate. The President is also responsible for the administration of the Department of the Senate in much the same way as a government minister is responsible for the operation of a government department. Senator Hogg has served on numerous Senate standing and select committees as well as joint statutory and joint standing committees. He was chair of the Senate's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee between 1997 and 2002 and chair of the Procedure Committee between 2002 and 2008. Before entering Parliament, Senator Hogg was a trade union official with the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees' Association from 1976; branch secretary and member, National Executive between 1981 and 1996; and branch president from 1996.

Dr Rosemary Laing was appointed as the 13th Clerk of the Senate in December 2009. She is the principal adviser to the President, Deputy President and Chairman of Committees, and all senators generally, on proceedings of the Senate. She is also the administrative head of the Department of the Senate, and exercises powers similar to those of a secretary of a government department. Dr Laing joined the Department of the Senate in 1990 as Director of Research after working in academia and several Commonwealth agencies. One of her first assignments in that role was the 20th anniversary Senate committee conference. Since then she has been a committee secretary, a Clerk Assistant heading, variously, the Committee, Procedure and Table Offices, and Deputy Clerk from 2005 to 2009.

Professor John Uhr is a Professor of Public Policy at the Australian National University (ANU) and Director of the Policy and Governance Program in the ANU's Crawford School of Economics and Government. He also is the founding director of the ANU's Parliamentary Studies Centre which, with the support of the departments of the Senate and of the House of Representatives, has won a three-year linkage grant from the Australian Research Council to lead a large international research project on ways of 'strengthening parliamentary institutions'. During the 1980s, after two years as a parliamentary fellow in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library, he worked for a time with the Joint Committee of Public Accounts, before joining the staff of the Senate as secretary to the Regulations and Ordinances Committee, and later the Scrutiny of Bills Committee. He was also secretary to several estimates committees.

Professor the Hon. Robert Hill is Chancellor, University of Adelaide and Adjunct Professor in Sustainability, United States Studies Centre, University of Sydney. He is also president of the United Nations Association of Australia; a member of the Asia Pacific Board, The Nature Conservancy (Hong Kong); and a member of the Advisory Board, Global Change Institute (University of Queensland). Professor Hill was a Liberal senator for South Australia between 1981 and 2006. During that time he was Minister for the Environment from 1996 to 2001, Minister for Defence from 2001 to 2006 and Leader of the Government in the Senate from 1996 to 2006. After leaving the Senate, Professor Hill became Australian Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations, New York, a position he held until 2009.

The Hon. Robert Ray served under Labor leaders and prime ministers from Bill Hayden to Kevin Rudd in a parliamentary career that spanned 27 years. He was a minister for nine years, eight of them in Cabinet. Commencing in the Home Affairs portfolio, he went on to become Minister for Immigration and, from 1990 to 1996, the longest serving Labor defence minister. Robert Ray was also Manager of Government Business in the Senate for four years and Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate for three years. He was the longest serving member of the Senate Privileges Committee and the Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security. In addition to his parliamentary and ministerial responsibilities, Robert Ray was a member of the National Executive of the ALP for 15 years and was a powerful contributor to debates on controversial issues at numerous National Conferences. He left the Senate in May 2008.

Ms Sue Knowles entered the Senate in 1984 as Liberal senator for the State of Western Australia and retired in 2005 after almost 21 years in the Senate. In that time she served on many Senate committees including as chair of the Senate's Community Affairs Legislation Committee and deputy chair of that committee's inquiries into cancer treatments in Australia, British child migrants, children in institutional care, and young people in nursing homes. Sue Knowles was at various times Shadow Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Deputy Opposition Whip in the Senate, and Temporary Chair of Committees (Acting Deputy President in the Senate). Since political retirement, she has been working on a number of private business projects, primarily in the health and tourism sectors.

Ms Vicki Bourne was a research officer and private secretary to Senator Colin Mason (1978–87) and a research officer to Senator Paul McLean (1987–90) before entering the Parliament in 1990 as an Australian Democrats senator representing New South Wales. Between 1991 and 2002 she was Australian Democrats Whip and spokesperson on many portfolios including foreign affairs and human rights, and broadcasting and communications. Vicki Bourne was also an active member of various Senate standing, select and joint standing committees, and a member and observer of numerous

parliamentary delegations to East Timor, Bougainville, Hong Kong, Vietnam and China. Since leaving Parliament in 2002, she has lectured in parliamentary procedure and practice for a Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI) seminar in Vietnam to train trainers of new MPs in the Vietnamese Parliament. She has also been a member of both the CDI Consultative Committee and the AusAID Political Governance Review Team.

Senator the Hon. Helen Coonan currently serves in the federal Opposition as a Liberal senator for New South Wales, having been first elected in 1996 and re-elected in 2001 and 2007. She also serves as chair of the Senate's Scrutiny of Bills Committee. In July 2004 Senator Coonan was appointed to Cabinet in the Howard Government as the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, having previously served as Minister for Revenue and Assistant Treasurer. In 2006 she was appointed Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate. Prior to stepping down from the Opposition front bench in December 2009, Senator Coonan was Shadow Minister for Human Services, Foreign Affairs, and Finance, Competition Policy and Deregulation. She is the Parliamentary Patron of the Mental Health Council of Australia and supports the council's work by promoting greater awareness and commitment to understanding and addressing mental health concerns.

The Hon. Amanda Vanstone worked as a legal practitioner and ran small retail and wholesale businesses before entering federal parliament in 1984 as a Liberal senator for South Australia. She was re-elected in 1987, 1993, 1998 and 2004. She served as a minister from 1996 to 2007, including as Minister for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (1996–97), Minister for Justice (1997–98), Minister for Justice and Customs (1998–2001), Minister for Family and Community Services (2001–03), Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (2003–06) and Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (2006–07). Amanda Vanstone is the longest serving female cabinet minister since Federation. She also served on many Senate standing and select committees, including the Regulations and Ordinances Committee and the Scrutiny of Bills Committee, and joint statutory and joint standing committees. After leaving the Parliament, Amanda Vanstone was Australian Ambassador to Italy from 2007 to 2010 and is a Permanent Representative to the Food and Agriculture Organisation and the World Food Programme.

Mr Andrew Bartlett represented Queensland as an Australian Democrats senator from 1997 to 2008, having previously worked as an electorate officer to Senators Kernot and Woodley between 1990 and 1997. He was leader of the Australian Democrats from 2002 to 2004, deputy leader and whip between 2004 and 2008, and spokesperson on a large range of policy issues. Andrew Bartlett was also an active member of various Senate standing, joint standing and select committees, including A Certain Maritime Incident, Ministerial Discretion in Migration Matters and the Scafton Evidence. Since leaving

Parliament he has been a consultant and volunteer for various not-for-profit organisations on advocacy policy and campaigning strategy. He is also a research fellow for the migration law program at the Australian National University focusing on migration agents and the overall operation of Australia's migration system.

Ms Dee Margetts was elected to the Senate in 1993 for the Greens (WA) where, along with Senator Christabel Chamarette, she held the balance of power until 1996. She served on a range of Senate standing and select committees as well as the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Joint Committee. After completing her Senate term in 1998, she was elected in 2001 to the WA Legislative Council for the Agricultural Region, where she shared the balance of power with four Greens WA colleagues, until completing her term in 2005. Since 2006 Dee Margetts has been researching a PhD on the outcome of national competition policy with the University of Western Australia's new Australian Global Studies Research Centre.

Associate Professor Cheryl Kernot was a senator for Queensland from 1990 to 1997, leader of the Australian Democrats from 1993 to 1997, and the Member for Dickson (Qld) and a Labor shadow minister from 1998 to 2001. Her political portfolios included Indigenous Affairs, Treasury, Employment, and Women's Policy. She played a major parliamentary role in the introduction of compulsory superannuation and in the introduction of native title. In 1994 she introduced legislation to legitimise parental leave and in 1998 she introduced trial social inclusion projects to the Labor Party's employment platform. She was a member of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation from 1991 to 1997. Following her political career, Cheryl spent the five years working in the UK as a program director at the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship at the Saïd Business School at Oxford University and as the Director of Learning at the School for Social Entrepreneurs in London. She is currently Director of Social Business at the Centre for Social Impact.

Senator the Hon. George Brandis SC entered the Senate in May 2000 when appointed by the Queensland Parliament to fill a casual vacancy. He was appointed as Minister for the Arts and Sport in January 2007. Following the change of government in 2007, Senator Brandis was appointed Shadow Attorney-General and Shadow Minister for the Arts. In May 2010 he was elected Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Senate. Senator Brandis' committee work has included the Joint Committee on Electoral Matters, Senate select committees on A Certain Maritime Incident, the Scafton Evidence and the Free Trade Agreement between Australia and the United States of America and numerous Senate standing committees including as chair of the Economics Legislation Committee. A trade-practices barrister prior to entering the Senate, Senator Brandis was appointed Senior Counsel in November 2006.

Senator Claire Moore took her position as a senator for Queensland on 1 July 2002. She has served on numerous Senate committees including as chair of the Community Affairs Legislation Committee, deputy chair of the Community Affairs References Committee and a member of the Regulations and Ordinances Committee and select and joint committees. Before entering Parliament she worked for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs for 12 months before transferring to the Department of Social Services. In 1994 she was elected as branch secretary of the Community and Public Service Union, a position she held until entering the federal parliament as a senator. Claire Moore is a proud unionist whose activism from 1996 to 2001 also includes vice-president, chair of the Women's Committee and chair of the Arts Committee of the Queensland Council of Unions. She is also a keen member and supporter for APHEDA, the trade union overseas aid program.

Senator the Hon. Nick Minchin has served as Liberal senator for South Australia since 1993. He served in the Howard Cabinet for nine years, including as Special Minister of State and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister from 1997 to 1998; Minister for Industry, Science and Resources from 1998 to 2001; and as Australia's longest serving Minister for Finance from 2001 to 2007. Senator Minchin was Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate from 2003 to 2006 and Leader of the Government in the Senate from 2006 to 2007. Following the 2007 election he was elected as Leader of the Opposition in the Senate. In March 2010 Senator Minchin announced his decision to stand down from the Opposition front bench and as Leader of the Opposition in the Senate and that he would not recontest the 2010 federal election.

Dr Phil Larkin is senior lecturer in public policy, Acting Associate Dean (International) and convenor, Master of Public Administration Programs, Faculty of Business and Government, University of Canberra. He was previously Principal Research Officer for the Senate Select Committee on Fuel and Energy, and a research fellow for the Democratic Audit of Australia, Australian National University. Before coming to Australia in 1995, he worked as a trade and industry committee specialist with the Committee Office of the House of Commons in the United Kingdom. His main research interests include parliaments and their impact on policy, including parliamentary committee systems, party systems in comparative perspective and public policy.

Mr Francis Sullivan has been Secretary-General of the Australian Medical Association since February 2008, having been Chief Executive Officer of Catholic Health Australia for nearly 14 years. Between 1979 and 1990 Mr Sullivan was a schoolteacher and deputy principal at Catholic high schools and colleges in Perth. In the early 1990s he worked as the Chief of Staff for then WA Labor Health Minister, Keith Wilson, before moving to Canberra in 1993.

Senator Christine Milne was elected to represent Tasmania in the federal parliament at the 2004 election after a distinguished career in the Tasmanian Parliament where she served as leader of the Tasmanian Greens from 1993 to 1998. Until recently she was one of four global vice-presidents of the International Union for the Conservation for Nature and represented the IUCN at the Conference of the Parties to the Climate Change Convention at Montreal in 2005, Nairobi in 2006 and Bali in 2007. In November 2008 she was elected as deputy leader of the Australian Greens and is currently Australian Greens spokesperson on climate change. Senator Milne has been a member of the Senate's Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport legislation and references committees, and the Agricultural and Related Industries and Climate Policy select committees.

Senator Trish Crossin has represented the Labor Party in the Northern Territory since 1998 and is the first woman to be elected to the federal parliament from the territory. Senator Crossin is currently chair of the Senate's Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee and a member of the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories. Senator Crossin served as Deputy Opposition Whip in the Senate from 2001 to 2004. Before entering the Senate, she worked as an industrial officer with the National Tertiary Education Union and the Australian Education Union. She plays an active role in various organisations and groups including the Asthma Foundation of the Northern Territory, the Working Women's Centre, Emily's List and the Australian Republican Movement.

Senator Gary Humphries was chosen to fill a casual vacancy in the Senate in 2003 and has served as a senator for the ACT ever since. In December 2009 Senator Humphries was appointed to the coalition frontbench as the Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Families, Housing and Human Services and for Citizenship. In September 2010 he was appointed as Shadow Parliamentary Secretary to the Shadow Attorney-General and for Defence Materiel. He has served on more than half of the committees in the Senate and as chair of the Senate's Community Affairs Committee and the Education, Employment and Workplace Relations References Committee. Before entering the federal parliament, Senator Humphries served as a minister in the ACT Government after being elected to the ACT Legislative Assembly upon self-government in 1989. He went on to lead the ACT as chief minister in 2000.

