



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PETITIONS

**Reference: Petitions presented up to 1 December 2008**

WEDNESDAY, 25 FEBRUARY 2009

CANBERRA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
STANDING COMMITTEE ON PETITIONS**

**Wednesday, 25 February 2009**

**Members:** Mrs Irwin (*Chair*), Mr Broadbent (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Adams, Mr Chester, Ms George, Mr Hawke, Mr Neumann, Mr Simpkins, Mr Craig Thomson and Ms Vamvakinou

**Members in attendance:** Mr Adams, Mr Broadbent, Mr Chester, Ms George, Mrs Irwin and Mr Simpkins

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

Petitions presented up to 1 December 2008

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**Committee met at 10.16 am****ANTRAM, Mr Frank, Section Head, Wildlife Branch, D****epartment of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts****COSTELLO, Mr Steven, Assistant Secretary, Urban Water Security Branch, Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts****SMITH, Ms Kerry Jayne, Branch Head, Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts****TREGURTHA, Mr James, Acting Assistant Secretary, Strategic Advice Branch, Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts****WEBB, Mr Richard, Director, Ministerial and Parliamentary Services, Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts****YOUNG, Mr Peter, Assistant Secretary, Renewable Energy Branch, Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts**

**CHAIR (Mrs Irwin)**—Good morning. I declare open this public hearing of the new House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions and welcome everyone in attendance. Under the standing orders, the committee is able to examine matters relating to petitions as a way of complementing the ministerial response process. The committee has decided to conduct public hearings on issues raised in petitions. We intend to invite relevant departments to provide advice on issues raised by petitioners so that petitioners of most, if not all, petitions are able to have the benefit of expert advice of the relevant department or departments. The committee also intends to conduct similar meetings in states and territories with principal petitioners as a way of ensuring that petitioners can truly make their voice heard.

This morning we welcome representatives of the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts; the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government; and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. We also welcome several members who have personally presented the petitions being discussed today. The transcript of what is said today will be posted on the committee's website. If you would like further details about the meeting or the transcript, please ask any of the committee staff here at the hearing. The hearing is open to the public.

Before I ask representatives of the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts to the table, I need to authorise a ministerial response that we have in front of us on water security. I thank you very much for authorising that, Mr Broadbent.

Although the committee does not require you to speak under oath, you should understand that this meeting is a formal proceeding of the parliament and that the giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament.

We will tackle the petitions one at a time. Regarding water security for South Australia, a petition has been tabled. The delay on the response from the minister was pretty lengthy. We had made two follow-up letters from me to the minister regarding a response. The response was presented to the House on 16 March. Why was there a delay in providing response to this particular petition?

**Mr Costello**—I note that the minister regrets the delay in replying. There have been some iterations of this letter and some amendments made to it, but I would not like to get into blame—

**CHAIR**—What do you mean? Amendments made to—

**Mr Costello**—Drafts were submitted and returned for updates and so on.

**CHAIR**—I was hoping that Mr Southcott might be here. He was hoping to get here and I was going to ask him if he wanted to update the committee on how the issues raised in the petition are progressing. I gather he is not here, so I might pass that on to Mr Broadbent.

**Mr BROADBENT**—Mr Costello, is there anybody here that is a Murray River person?

**Mr Costello**—There is nobody with direct responsibility for the Commonwealth's involvement, but I can try to assist you.

**Mr BROADBENT**—I am asking these questions so we can just have some things on the record. It is not that I do not know, but I want them there. Firstly, who has responsibility for the Murray River as far as the Commonwealth is concerned or the Commonwealth and states? Secondly, of the things that are outlined in the minister's response that we are doing in regard to urban water, what things have begun to be implemented? Those are the two areas I want to talk about.

**Mr Costello**—In answer to the first question about responsibility for the Murray River, for most of Australia's history to date it has been the responsibility of the states to manage it under the Murray-Darling Basin agreement. It was a joint management responsibility. The body created for that was the Murray-Darling Basin Commission, but states retain considerable responsibilities in their own jurisdictions. There was some unanimous decision making required between the states for any amendments to arrangements.

More recently the states have referred their powers to some of the management over the river to the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth has established a Murray-Darling Basin Authority whose job it is to establish a new basin plan which sets a sustainable cap on diversions from the river, and also to develop an environmental watering plan to look after the environmental assets within the Murray-Darling Basin. The Commonwealth has only just recently assumed a greater part of the management responsibility from the states.

**Mr BROADBENT**—How much water is held between Albury and Adelaide that is held for recreational purposes, rather than for irrigation or town water supplies?

**Mr Costello**—In the overall scheme of the Murray system, the water that is held below Albury is quite a small amount. The major storages are above Albury, but there are a series of

weir pools and so on that are maintained along the river, which have some recreational purpose and benefit, but that is not their only purpose.

**Mr BROADBENT**—When you say above Albury, are you talking about that big dam that is nearly empty at the moment, the Hume Weir?

**Mr Costello**—Yes.

**Mr BROADBENT**—How much is that holding at the moment?

**Mr Costello**—I do not have the current numbers, it would be very low, about 8 per cent or something like that.

**Mr BROADBENT**—It is a very unusually low amount.

**Mr Costello**—Yes.

**Mr BROADBENT**—There is not a lot of water held at the moment throughout the system.

**Mr Costello**—That is correct.

**Mr BROADBENT**—When you say the Hume is 8 per cent—I am not checking you on that—what about the other storages? Are you saying that there is just not a lot of water in those other storages, that is, you get down to Yarrawonga you are saying there is a lake there but it is a shallow lake? Is that what you are saying?

**Mr Costello**—All of the data will be on the Murray-Darling Basin Authority's website, but there has certainly been a lot of interest and scrutiny in the amount of water. There have been reports published and audits of the storage capacity at the moment.

**Mr BROADBENT**—So there is not a lot of water to release if the water were released.

**Mr Costello**—That is correct. Certainly by historical records it is very, very low.

**Mr BROADBENT**—The whole of the system is very, very low.

**Mr Costello**—Yes. There are some new inflows coming into the northern basin from the recent rains in Queensland, but I think that was estimated last night by the chair of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority as 150 gigitalitres or thereabouts into the Menindee Lakes, coming down the Darling system. We are talking about a system that would normally have some 10,000 gigitalitres in it, so 150 gigitalitres is something but it is a small blessing.

**Mr BROADBENT**—I just want to make clear to committee what I am on about. I was interested to know whether there is any water in the system to be released that could get to Adelaide before we start talking about these important issues. I am a storyteller; I have got to tell the committee this story. I was in a taxi with an Eritrean and he was suggesting to us that we are not very good with water. He said to me that in his home country he had to carry water some distance, and that was salt water. They boiled that salt water and they got the vapouring off that

and that is how they got their drinking water and their water for cooking. They had a shower perhaps once every six or eight weeks—and that would be very special. I think there is a lot we could do here in this country regarding urban water, and this is a start. Are there any of these projects that are outlined by the government that we have begun?

**Mr Costello**—Yes, absolutely. If you look at the dot points in the minister's letter, there are a number of treated stormwater and waste water projects in Adelaide that are underway and some that are close to completion. There is a project called Waterproofing Northern Adelaide, which is in the Salisbury, Playford and Teatree Gully council areas, and that is a stormwater capture project which is under construction. There are a number of constructed wetlands that have been built. That collects the stormwater off the urban area, cleans it up through a series of wetlands and then injects that water into aquifer underneath the Northern Adelaide Plains. Other users, who at one time used mains water, drinking water, for, say, irrigation of parks, gardens or commercial or industrial uses, can now tap into that aquifer, and it is being recharged by the cleaned up stormwater. That project is under construction; it is well underway. There is another project listed which is for some of the major golf courses in Adelaide—the Grange Golf Club and I think the Royal Adelaide Golf Club and one other. Two of them are completed, and they are now using stormwater for their irrigation.

**CHAIR**—You might take that on notice and let us know about the golf courses.

**Mr Costello**—There are some major projects. The pipes are being laid in the Glenelg to Adelaide Park Lands Recycled Water Project; it is well underway. Similarly, there is the Virginia Pipeline Scheme, which is a wastewater scheme for irrigators in the Northern Adelaide Plain; that is nearly completed. In Southern Adelaide in the Onkaparinga area there is a big project approved. The planning is pretty much near complete and construction is starting on both waste water and some stormwater work, so things are happening.

**Mr BROADBENT**—Mr Costello, you may not be able to answer this and I am not asking you as an engineer, but to what standard is this water treated?

**Mr Costello**—Those stormwater and waste water projects are what we would call fit for purpose. They are not intended to be drinking water supplies, but they are replacing current uses of drinking water that do not need that level of treatment—watering municipal gardens, sports grounds, golf courses. It is not drinking water but it is taking the pressure off drinking water by providing an alternative source.

**Mr BROADBENT**—Is there is a resistance to treating this water to potable standard?

**Mr Costello**—That is not the South Australian government's policy.

**Mr BROADBENT**—Is it true that on the Murray we actually take the water out for a town, treat it, use it for drinking water, put it through the sewerage system and run it back into the river?

**Mr Costello**—Yes.

**Mr BROADBENT**—Then a bit further down we do the same thing and another bit further down we do the same thing. There are only two spots on the Murray where we actually recycle the whole of the water that is taken out of the Murray and put that back for other uses. Eventually, one plant is for other uses, none of it goes back to potable water, but they use the absolute whole of the water they take out and use it in the towns.

We are already using recycled water for drinking right along the length of the Murray. I wonder whether the people of Australia understand that this has been a practice for many, many years and will continue to be a practice for a long, long time to come. We are already treating water, and I am just putting on the record now that I am of the view that this water, from Brisbane to Sydney to Melbourne to Adelaide to Perth, could be treated in such a way that it could be used for potable water.

**Mr Costello**—There are national guidelines for recycled water which include guidelines for treating water to drinking standards and then it is a decision for the individual communities and jurisdictions whether they wish to do that, but that is certainly an option that is available.

**CHAIR**—Are there any further questions on the water security petition for South Australia?

**Mr ADAMS**—Just for the record, following on from the questions of my colleague Mr Broadbent, treatable water is all over the world and people drink recycled water in most parts of the world; would that be a correct statement?

**Mr Costello**—What would be called inadvertent use, in terms of treated waste water going into rivers and being extracted further down, is very common around the world. There are some potable scheme in which the recycled water is either added to an aquifer or goes directly back into a reservoir. They are less common, but there are certainly examples of that.

**Mr ADAMS**—In Australia we are now using water which is fit for purpose. We are reutilising grey water, which before we used to dump into rivers. We are now recycling a lot of what we would call grey water from sewage plants; it is going back into fit for purpose.

**Mr Costello**—In the last study that was done it was found that currently 9 per cent of waste water was being recycled but, with current projects planned and those that are on the books and underway, that will rise to about 24 per cent within the next 10 years. There is certainly rapid growth in the use of recycled water.

**Mr ADAMS**—I am not sure if you have mentioned this, Mr Costello, but in Adelaide the city of Salisbury has always reused water in certain areas.

**Mr Costello**—Yes, that is one of the projects that I have mentioned in particular. They are leaders in stormwater harvesting and reuse.

**Mr CHESTER**—In relation to the first dot point, ‘have the capacity to provide up to 44 gegalitres’ we have the proven technology to be able to do this. What are the obstacles to increasing that amount from 44 gegalitres? Is it cost? Is it geography? Is it political will? What are Adelaide’s needs and how much more of it can be met in addition to that 44 gegalitres? What is the annual requirement for Adelaide and how can it be met?

**Mr Costello**—The annual requirement for Adelaide is around 200 gigalitres of water per year. Around 30 per cent of that is for municipal and industrial users. If you were going to restrict the use of stormwater and waste water for non-drinking purposes, then are there limits on the numbers of users. It then becomes increasingly expensive to re-pipe a city to provide recycled water to individual households. Obviously the first step is to look for major users. You will get to a point—and Adelaide is not there yet but not far off—of really having met all of the non-drinking water needs that can be used in a cost effective way. The other barrier is the amount of storage, because there are strong demands for recycled water in the summer months and that drops off in the winter, when there is less irrigation, but there is a continuous supply of treated waste water in winter. So, unless you have somewhere to store it, and in quite large volumes, then you need to discharge some of it.

**Mr CHESTER**—The aquifer based storage is the solution you are pursuing.

**Mr Costello**—In Adelaide that is a very good solution. It is not a solution available to every city; it depends on the geology.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—Is the Hume Weir the biggest dam in the country?

**Mr Costello**—Between Hume and Eildon, yes.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—Is this the worst it has been?

**Mr Costello**—I believe so. The Murray-Darling Basin Authority are the experts on that, but from commentary I have heard there have been unprecedented low inflows over the last couple of years. I do not think it has ever been empty since it was built.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—There was a period in the 1940s where apparently the Murray was stagnant pools. Is it worse than that now?

**Mr Costello**—Some of the inflows into those river systems have reached historic lows, yes.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—But the Murray itself?

**Mr Costello**—We are talking about a different system because it is now regulated by a series of weirs, dams and so on. So it does not flow in the way it did before all of that infrastructure was built.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—Is there any way we can, on notice, get the figures for, for instance, the current capacity of the Hume Weir, as a bit of an indicator of where we stand with the Murray?

**Mr Costello**—Yes. The Murray-Darling Basin Authority puts out weekly updates which are available on its website. There are some reports that talk about the overall capacity of the storages and the current situation.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—I will look for that.

**Mr Costello**—They are better placed than me to answer those questions.

**Mr BROADBENT**—Mr Costello, this issue across Australia I believe is the most important issue we face in the weeks, months and decades ahead. It will rain, but until such time as it does rain this is a very important issue for this nation and therefore for this parliament. You said before that nine per cent of water is being recycled. Does the department at least have a target? I hope Ms George is listening to this conversation. Her committee might take up this letter from the minister as well and have a look at the urban water situation. Yours is also a very important committee of this parliament. Not that I am suggesting anything, Ms George.

**CHAIR**—If it is, it should be a very interesting inquiry.

**Mr BROADBENT**—Do you have a target and what sort of team do you have working on this issue?

**Mr Costello**—On the first question, the government rather than the department has a target to recycle 30 per cent of waste water by 2015. The current projection with projects already underway is 24 per cent, and there are further opportunities through programs which we administer to support more recycling projects. Of course states, territories and local government are also initiating projects.

**CHAIR**—You are quite confident you will reach that target?

**Mr Costello**—The current projection is for 24 per cent, so more projects are needed. We have some opportunities available at the moment under funding programs. We have a \$1 billion national urban water and desalination program which is calling for proposals. Once we get those proposals we will be able to reassess what they will add. One of the big challenges, it has to be said, is in Sydney, where the rate of recycling is lower. And for a whole lot of geographical reasons, major industrial users and others are not located close to the treatment works, which are in the eastern suburbs—in Manly and so on. There are not major industrial users there, so there are some difficulties for Sydney taking up recycled water to the same degree that, say, Adelaide has been able to do without considerable expense in the billions of dollars.

**Mr ADAMS**—It is working very well in my electorate, Mr Costello.

**Mr BROADBENT**—You have raised the issue of Sydney. From personal experience I see that the outflow from these sewerage authorities, or Sydney Water, is actually fouling our oceans, and it is bad. The tide and the sea drift come right into Bermagui. If you ever take a boat off Bermagui, take a nose clip with you. What structures have you got set up within the department? That is why I was asking about that. What is the physical structure of what you have got set up?

**Mr Costello**—We have an urban water policy section and we have an urban water security branch—my branch—which delivers funding programs. But fundamentally the actual management of the water supply system is done by the state trading businesses that they have set up on a commercial basis—Sydney Water, SA Water and those organisations. The Australian government has said it will help and contribute to securing Australia's water supplies, but we do not actually manage those systems, so we are providing financial support and some policy reforms. That is the limit of the Commonwealth's role at this stage.

**Mr BROADBENT**—It is a shame we are not doing a whole meeting on this.

**CHAIR**—I am hoping that Ms George's committee might take that up as a future inquiry. We will go to another petition that has been presented to the House, and we have a ministerial response from Minister Garrett. That is on hunting as a conservation tool. I think that is your area, Kerry. I want to go to the last paragraph of the minister's response, where he has stated:

You may be aware that population growth and wider sustainability issues were discussed at the recent *Australia 2020 Summit* and the Government is currently considering its response to ideas raised ...

Can the department advise how the government response to the 2020 Summit is progressing and when it might be made public? I am sorry. We might jump ahead. I apologise for that. I have jumped over hunting as a conservation tool. This is the petition on the environmental impact of human activity.

**Mr Tregurtha**—I am happy to talk to that.

**CHAIR**—You are in full flight; go for it.

**Mr Tregurtha**—As you are aware, the 2020 Summit was held last year. The final report was released and is currently available on the 2020 website. The Prime Minister has committed to provide a full government response to the 2020 Summit. The minister has been working, and the department has been working with the Prime Minister and his officers in relation to preparing that response. In terms of the timing of that response, my current advice is that the Prime Minister is seeking to respond to the summit at the earliest opportunity, but we have no further advice.

**CHAIR**—So you have no indication of when. I think the Prime Minister stated that he would have responded before Christmas last year.

**Mr Tregurtha**—Certainly. However, as we are all aware, a number of matters have arisen in the community which have required an urgent response. I am aware that the Prime Minister and his department are working on the 2020 Summit in terms of getting a response released, as I said before, in as opportune a time as possible in the current environment. However, any specific reference to timing and the procedure by which the Prime Minister will indeed respond to the 2020 Summit and release a final government response is really a question for the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet or the Prime Minister.

**CHAIR**—Can the department advise on the extent to which issues raised in the petition you would have before you were discussed by participants at the summit and what solutions, if any, were proposed and discussed?

**Mr Tregurtha**—Participants at the summit raised a range of ideas and suggestions in terms of addressing what I guess we would characterise as the environmental impact of people, in a sense—of the population, so it is sustainable populations. Certainly a lot of those ideas pertained to the water projects that Mr Costello has just been discussing with the committee. A number of ideas relate to waste and the distribution and disposal of waste products that are generated both industrially and domestically and through agriculture across the nation. All those ideas were

allocated to the relevant portfolio agencies in order for us to address them and look at them in the context of the government's current policies in terms of how they are addressing environmental issues and sustainability from a broader perspective.

**CHAIR**—Does anyone else want to ask a question on the environmental impact of human activity petition? No? Fine. Kerry, I apologise for that; I just flipped over earlier. We will go back to the petition on hunting as a conservation tool. It was paragraph 2. I am not going to read out the whole of the paragraph from the minister, but can the department provide the committee with some more information on what constitutes the IUCN and how it operates?

**Ms Smith**—The IUCN is quite a different international body to most. It is made up of over 1,000 members, most of which are non-government organisations. It has a few more than a hundred state members, country members. In large part the main body of the IUCN is what is called the World Conservation Congress. It meets every three to four years. They have a major congress where they discuss resolutions put forward by members of the IUCN. It also has a range of other bodies attached to it. It has an IUCN council, which is the principal governing body of IUCN between meetings of the World Conservation Congress. It has global commissions, of which there are six dealing with specific issues, and it has regional and national committees. In terms of Australia's situation there is an Oceania regional council and an Australian committee of the IUCN. If the committee is interested we could give you more detail on how all that operates.

**CHAIR**—That would be appreciated. Does Australia have any involvement with the IUCN?

**Ms Smith**—Yes, Australia has been a longstanding state member of the IUCN and it pays an annual membership fee for that. Some states governments are also members of the IUCN.

**CHAIR**—Are there any further questions on this petition that we have in front of us? I think the response was very good from the minister.

**Mr CHESTER**—With reference to the declared Ramsar wetlands, how does the Commonwealth meet its obligations for these international agreements such as the Ramsar wetlands and how we monitor it? Without being too crass, how seriously do we take these obligations? How are we resourcing it?

**Ms Smith**—The Commonwealth meets its obligations through the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, so it is a legislative responsibility. As the minister outlined in his letter back to the committee, in terms of the petition that is before the committee, the issues that are taken into account that the Commonwealth gets involved in is if we are exporting specimens that have been hunted or where there are potential significant impacts on what is called matters of national environmental significance. Those matters are defined in the act and one of those is Ramsar wetlands. Ramsar wetlands are listed by an international convention. There is an international convention that deals with those matters of which Australia is a member. Australia then picks up its responsibilities under that legislation.

**Mr CHESTER**—If there is degradation of a Ramsar wetland, is it a Commonwealth responsibility to intervene? If I came to the Commonwealth minister and said that this is a

recognised as a Ramsar wetland and it is degraded, does it then become a Commonwealth responsibility or is it still a state responsibility?

**Ms Smith**—I do not actually work on Ramsar wetlands. I am not sure if Mr Costello has any knowledge on water issues.

**Mr BROADBENT**—It is a state responsibility.

**Ms Smith**—Essentially the Commonwealth gets involved where an action might have a significant impact on a Ramsar wetland, so it has to be referred to the Commonwealth. That is where the Commonwealth gets involved. The states have general responsibility.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much. We will go to the final petition that we have before us today, the petition on the means test under the solar homes and communities plan.

**Ms GEORGE**—I know that a lot of the concerns that a lot of people had about the means test are now less of a concern with the changes that were recently announced. Firstly, I would like to get an update on the solar schools program and how that is going. Secondly, what is the Commonwealth's view about the feed-in tariffs and is there going to be a national approach, or is it still going to be state by state decisions? Thirdly, in relation to the greening of households, my understanding was that there was going to be provision for low interest loans of around \$10,000. I read in the paper that that program appears to be going through some difficulty. Could you just give me an update on those three issues if possible, Mr Young?

**Mr Young**—Yes, I will help to the extent I can. A couple of those are not within my direct responsibility.

**CHAIR**—Sorry to interrupt. That is not exactly what the petition that we have in front of us today is about. You might want to make it brief in your response to Ms George, but then give some further information to the committee later on in writing.

**Mr Young**—The Solar Schools Program is progressing well. We have some installations in place and a significant number of claims have been received from the schools, which we are processing. We are expecting to meet our target in terms of the number of those payments that are made this financial year.

On the question of feed-in tariffs, as some of it is the responsibility of the Department of Climate Change, I think it would be better if I take that on notice and get back to you with some advice. In relation to green loans, again, this is not within my direct responsibilities but the program is proceeding this financial year, and there was a fair bit of discussion at yesterday's estimates hearing on that issue, I can get you some more advice on that or if you wish I could refer you to the transcript of those proceedings for a more detailed information on the progress.

**Ms GEORGE**—I raised those issues because in the minister's reply he made reference—at the top of the second page—to the 20 per cent target from renewables by 2020, so I presume all these aspects that I have touched on today would be complementary to the achievement of that target. Are you aware when we are going to see the legislation that will legislate for that target?

**Mr Young**—That legislation is the responsibility of the Department of Climate Change. I know the government has announced its intention to have this legislation in place by the middle of the year.

**Ms GEORGE**—If you could take the others on notice, I would appreciate it.

**Mr Young**—Certainly.

**CHAIR**—I am just watching the time. There might be other questions that committee members might want to ask the department, so we can actually put that in writing and you can get back to us. Thank you very much for coming today.

[10.53 am]

**MAHER, Mr Jason, General Manager, South Australia and Western Australia and Local Roads Branch, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government**

**SOUTHCOTT, Dr Andrew, Member for Boothby, Commonwealth Parliament**

**CHAIR**—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to speak under oath, you should understand that this meeting is a formal proceeding of the parliament. Giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. We will proceed to questions now on the petition of the feasibility study of rail options for Adelaide.

As we have Dr Southcott present here, he may want to ask any questions on behalf of the petitioners. I believe you have the ministerial response in front of you, Dr Southcott.

**Dr Southcott**—I do not have it right in front of me.

**Mr Maher**—I might have it.

**CHAIR**—Just to give the doctor enough time to read the ministerial response, I will ask a question on the feasibility study of rail options for Adelaide. How often are feasibility studies on various types of rail use conducted?

**Mr Maher**—I am not sure I can give you a precise answer on that. I think they would be conducted on an as-needs basis.

**CHAIR**—You might want to take that on notice.

**Mr Maher**—I am happy to.

**CHAIR**—What methods exist for public involvement in such reviews? You might have to take that on notice as well.

**Mr Maher**—In the context of this study, a reference panel has been formed. The purpose of that panel is to ensure that industry, government and community views are captured by the study. That reference group has met twice so far, on 25 August and 3 February, for the study.

**CHAIR**—Thank you, Mr Maher. Dr Southcott, do you have any questions on the ministerial response?

**Dr Southcott**—I would like to ask if the terms of reference have been finalised.

**Mr Maher**—They have.

**Dr Southcott**—On what date were they finalised?

**Mr Maher**—I do not have the precise date on which they were finalised but I understand they were provided to the committee as part of the minister's response. You should have got a terms of reference document.

**Dr Southcott**—So they are the final terms of reference?

**Mr Maher**—That is my understanding, yes.

**Dr Southcott**—Have the draft report on the analysis of the east-west rail freight task along the Melbourne to Adelaide and Adelaide to Perth corridors, and the detailed assessment of the current rail alignment from Murray Bridge to Adelaide been completed?

**Mr Maher**—I would have to take that on notice.

**Dr Southcott**—On what date was the consultant GHD appointed for this feasibility study?

**Mr Maher**—The minister approved the funding for the consultancy on 22 December and the minister announced the appointment of the consultants on 19 February. There is a media release on the minister's web site.

**Dr Southcott**—Is there any reason why it took two months between appointing and announcing?

**Mr Maher**—There was some time lost over Christmas. That was the department's fault. There is a process that the department needs to go through in appointing consultants. These consultants were engaged from the department's panel of experts. There is a process that the department has to go through, so some time was lost over Christmas. The delay was the department's fault.

**Dr Southcott**—I have no further questions. Thank you very much.

**CHAIR**—Does any member have any further questions on this petition in front of us? There being none, we will now go to the petition on the intersection of Old Pitt Town Road and Boundary Road. In the minister's response of 2 February it has been stated:

Projects recommended by the Panel will shortly be submitted for my consideration and approval.

Can the department provide more specific advice about the timetable for consideration of various projects under this program, and when and how the outcomes of consideration are advised?

**Mr Maher**—Primarily, how those arrangements are advised is a matter for the minister. In terms of the timing, I expect the outcome of the process that was described in the minister's letter to occur shortly.

**CHAIR**—A very short letter.

**Mr Maher**—Yes. I cannot give you a precise date.

**CHAIR**—A month? A year?

**Mr Maher**—I cannot give you a precise timeframe.

**CHAIR**—This year?

**Mr Maher**—Shortly.

**CHAIR**—Fine. Are there any other questions on this petition that is in front of us?

**Mr SIMPKINS**—I assume by the minister's response that this is a New South Wales problem?

**Mr Maher**—It is a New South Wales project.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—I am trying to work out from that response whether the minister is saying, and the department has told the minister, that New South Wales has it in hand. It has been considered for New South Wales black spots, so the Commonwealth does not need to be involved? Is that the way?

**Mr Maher**—No. The project has been put forward by the New South Wales consultative panel as a project they are proposing to the minister for funding in the 2009-10 program, and that is a decision that the minister can take and announce as part of the 2009-10 program.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—This reference to the New South Wales Black Spot Consultative Panel is the Commonwealth black spot program but the New South Wales panel?

**Mr Maher**—Correct. The way the program works is that projects are nominated by anyone. They go through a consultative panel process which is state based. They have the state based road agency so the RTA is part of this panel process. They put forward a priority list of projects to the minister according to the program's criteria and the minister then makes decisions around what projects would be funded based on that advice.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—I am not familiar with the area whatsoever, but these are all local government roads?

**Mr Maher**—Correct.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—Does New South Wales itself have a black spot program?

**Mr Maher**—It is difficult to answer. They do not have a program called the black spots program. Does New South Wales fund projects based on safety agenda or criteria? Yes, I am sure they do. I could not comment on how large that is or how that operates.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—It would be interesting to know. I am not an expert on roads or anything like that, although in my electorate we have a lot of road issues. But it is always interesting to see whether the New South Wales government considers this a priority. I am sure it is a very important road that needs to be sorted out.

**Mr Maher**—They clearly do because of the extent to which the RTA has put this project forward to the Australian government via the black spots program. They have said that this is a priority project for us in the 2009-10 black spots program.

**CHAIR**—As there are no further questions on this petition before us, we will go to the next petition. It is regarding passing lanes on Bucketts Way. This petition, as members are aware, was presented by Mr Baldwin, the member for Paterson, on 4 December. I would really like to thank the department and the minister for such a very quick response. I feel that the minister, in his reply, has virtually covered all the concerns of the petitioners, but I would also like to stress—because this public hearing will be going upon the website—that in his response to the petition the minister stated:

The local Councils in the area may also wish to contact the Hon Michael Daly MP, NSW Minister for Roads, seeking NSW Government funding towards this project, as Bucketts Way is classified as a regional road and as such is eligible for NSW Government funding which has been provided previously for the upgrade of this road.

I hope that the petitioners will also lobby their local councils to put a bit of pressure on the Hon. Michael Daly, Minister for Roads. Do we have any questions on Bucketts Way?

**Mr BROADBENT**—Bouquets Way! No, I do not. It is a very unusual road in that it is apparently a favourite of locals—as a shortcut from somewhere to somewhere—that I was told to drive on. I would recommend to most people that they stick to the highway.

**Mr ADAMS**—What is this historical aspect of the name? Does anyone know that?

**Mr Maher**—I am afraid I do not.

**Mr BROADBENT**—It has major use for what you would call nearly a local road. Is that how you would describe it?

**Mr Maher**—I would describe it as a local or regional road.

**Mr CHESTER**—In relation to the minister's response saying that, since 2002, the Australian government has provided around \$24 million toward road improvements along Bucketts Way, can you let us know a little bit about how that was spent? Was it on these overtaking lanes, which the petitioners seem keen on? What were the time frames? Is that work completed, or is some of this money still on the way and flowing through the system?

**Mr Maher**—The money has been spent. I would like to correct the minister's response: it is actually \$22 million, not \$24 million.

**CHAIR**—That is the second paragraph?

**Mr Maher**—Yes. You will see that \$20 million has been spent over four years under the Roads of National Importance program. I do not have the figures, but that was in addition to some state government spending, as well. The contribution of the Australian government was \$20 million under the Roads of National Importance program. That work finished around two years ago. There were also several projects under the Strategic Regional Program, primarily in the Gloucester council area. Again, I do not have details of those projects with me, but I am happy to take that on notice.

**Mr CHESTER**—On the same theme: was that intended as part of a staged process where the \$20 million would get a certain amount of projects done as part of a five- or 10-year plan to upgrade the road? Is there an ongoing process planned for the improvements of this road, or was this only ever intended as a \$22-million-dollar project?

**Mr Maher**—I would be happy to take that on notice, but I could not comment on that here today.

**CHAIR**—Can you advise us of some of the improvements that have been made to Bucketts Way?

**Mr Maher**—I am happy to take that on notice and give you a list of what projects specifically fell under the \$20 million and the \$2 million. I do not have that with me today.

**CHAIR**—That would be appreciated, because that will also be going up on our website so the petitioners who signed the petition can look at it. Do we have any further questions on Bucketts Way?

**Mr SIMPKINS**—My question is broader than that. Can you provide us with figures on federal rail infrastructure expenditure over the last 15 years?

**Mr Maher**—I will have to take that on notice.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—Absolutely. I would greatly appreciate that.

**Mr Maher**—I was not expecting a rail question.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—Pull it out of your back pocket!

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much for coming before the committee today.

**Mr BROADBENT**—Jason, we are going to go away and find out the origin of the name ‘Bucketts Way’.

**Mr ADAMS**—Or maybe you could do that, Jason!

**CHAIR**—And some of the members might even go and drive down Bucketts Way!

**Mr BROADBENT**—It is a great drive.

[11.11 am]

**BEDFORD, Ms Helen, Branch Manager, Disability Policy and Coordination Branch, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs**

**BROWN, Ms Vicki, Branch Manager, Autism Spectrum Disorders Branch, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs**

**FOSTER, Ms Alanna, Branch Manager, Seniors and Means Test Branch, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs**

**HUTCHINSON, Mr Peter, Section Manager, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs**

**WILSON, Ms Michelle, Acting Branch Manager, Welfare Payments Reform, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs**

**STAWYSKYJ, Ms Michalina, Branch Manager, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs**

**CHAIR**—I welcome representatives from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. Although the committee does not require you to speak under oath, you should understand that this meeting is a formal proceeding of the parliament. Giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament.

We will go to the first petition that we have before us, disability and aged pensions. It was tabled in the House on 28 August 2008 by Mr Raguse, the member for Forde, and we do have a ministerial response to that. I want to go to page 2, paragraph 3 of the ministerial response, where the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs has stated:

Feedback received by my Department during recent consultations also made it clear that the Government needs to take urgent action to assist pensioners with the cost of living pressures they are facing now.

Can you tell us a bit more about the feedback and how that feedback was received?

**Ms Foster**—As you know, Dr Harmer, the secretary of the department, has been asked to undertake a review of pensions. That review is looking at the appropriate level of income support and allowances, the frequency of payments and the structure and payment of concessions to pensioners. That review is due to report at the end of this month, and I understand that it is proceeding on time. As part of that review, a series of public consultations have been held. I think we discussed that last time. The consultations have been held in all capital cities and Newcastle, Rockhampton and Wangaratta. The department also received over 1,800 written submissions. To follow up on those public consultations and the written submissions, the department has also undertaken a series of focus groups to further explore some of the issues that

were coming through the consultations and the submissions. They were held over October and January.

**CHAIR**—Throughout Australia?

**Ms Foster**—They were held in Perth, Sydney, Melbourne, Armidale and Devonport.

**CHAIR**—Who, mainly, was in attendance at these focus groups?

**Ms Foster**—They were drawn from a random sample of pensioners. Centrelink organised and facilitated the consultation for us. They were asked to organise a number of focus groups; they did 12. They were held in October and January of this year. They were randomly selected from age pensioners, carer payment recipients and disability support pension recipients.

**CHAIR**—You stated that the pension review is definitely on track. It will definitely be completed by the end of February?

**Ms Foster**—Yes. The report is about to be delivered to the government. It will be on time.

**Mr CHESTER**—In relation to the petition specifically, in the second paragraph on the second page of the minister's response, the minister says there are no plans to introduce food vouchers. I note the petitioners have suggested \$50 a week through some sort of scheme involving the major supermarkets. I wonder if you know whether the Harmer review has considered the issue of food vouchers and whether any research has been done on that as an option or whether it was rejected for whatever reason. Given that there has been—and there always will be, I suppose—some criticism of lump-sum payments as somewhat of a lesser value spend than they may have been if they were tied to a particular purchase, I wonder if there has been research done or if you have anything you can add to that comment.

**Ms Foster**—I cannot add to that comment. I do not know whether the review has specifically canvassed the issue of food vouchers. There was the background paper that was issued from the review in August last year. I am sorry; I cannot recall offhand if it specifically went to that issue.

**Mr CHESTER**—I am sure we will get a copy of the review and be much wiser after the event. I am interested because the petitioners are making the comment that increases in either prescription money or food vouchers would not affect their rent payments. I am interested that there are petitioners out there suggesting that as a more effective way of helping with their cost-of-living pressures.

**ACTING CHAIR (Mr Broadbent)**—We have to wait for the review. There are probably lots of questions we would like to ask you, but they probably pertain more to the process of the review. I would ask one question while the chair is vacant: was the process you talked about, with Centrelink facilitating the interactions to elicit the information for the review, taken on by Centrelink staff, or was there a professional group that organised that interaction?

**Ms Foster**—The information I have here is that Centrelink was commissioned to facilitate the 12 focus groups. I cannot specifically answer that question—I am sorry—but, from the information here, it would appear that Centrelink did the facilitation.

**ACTING CHAIR**—We do not really know, do we?

**Ms Foster**—Can I take that on notice?

**ACTING CHAIR**—It is not that important, but I find it unusual that a department, rather than a professional organisation, would be undertaking something like that. I think it would be rather important who the focus groups were and how they were chosen. They are usually done professionally.

**CHAIR**—Are there any further questions on the petition on disability and age pensions that we have in front of us?

**Mr ADAMS**—Would you like to add the experience of the departmental officers of the matters that should be in the review—the issues that you think would be assisted by your experience of what you have seen come before you—or is that outside your spectrum? Would you like to give us that? I do not want to put you on the spot or make you uncomfortable about that.

**Ms Foster**—The review had clear terms of reference, and I suspect that those terms of reference reflect the information that was feeding into the department around the issues.

**Mr ADAMS**—So you are comfortable that you have got into the terms of reference the issues that were probably coming to you as a department?

**Mr BROADBENT**—I would give the same answer!

**Ms Foster**—I cannot really comment on that, I am sorry. They do reflect the issues that have been drawn out for the department's and the government's attention.

**Mr ADAMS**—Thank you.

**CHAIR**—If there are no further questions, we will go to our next petition, which is the social security agreement between Australia and the Philippines. Paragraph 3 of the minister's response of 12 January states:

Officials from my Department met with representatives of the Philippines Embassy on 21 November 2008 for discussions in connection with this matter.

Could you advise the committee and the petitioners who suggested that these discussions commence? Was it the Philippines embassy or was it Australia? How are such approaches made?

**Ms Stawyskyj**—The embassy actually phoned and asked if they could come and have a discussion around the issue of a social security agreement. Approaches to Australia can be made in various ways. They can be formal approaches to the Prime Minister or the Minister for Foreign Affairs but they sometimes also come through an embassy making an initial approach to us so that we can talk about, for example, what a social security agreement would mean and what might be contained in it and to outline the various processes.

**CHAIR**—So it is usually the embassy that approaches the government? The government does not approach a particular embassy regarding a similar agreement?

**Ms Stawyskyj**—Australia may but at the moment, no, we have not been approaching anyone specifically for agreements. It is possible for us to do, though.

**Mr ADAMS**—I have a question on the number of pensions between the two countries. We have a lot of treaties between different states—between Australia and other countries—don't we?

**Ms Stawyskyj**—We do. We have no social security agreement, obviously, with the Philippines, but some people can earn a pension in their own right. Once you have access to an age pension, it is indefinitely portable, so people can take it across.

**Mr ADAMS**—It is all about those living here and how many of ours are living there and those sorts of things.

**Ms Stawyskyj**—And people who may return.

**Mr ADAMS**—People coming and going.

**Ms Stawyskyj**—Yes. So you have two levels.

**Mr ADAMS**—That is right, two levels. We have had Filipino brides in Australia, so I guess there would be a series of those women that may now be widowed and receiving an Australian pension and that sort of thing. Are there any figures to indicate the number of people that we are talking about between the two countries?

**Mr Hutchinson**—The estimated resident population of Filipino born people in Australia is roughly 140,000. I think just over 7,000 of those are of pension age or over 65, so there is a reasonably sized population in Australia. At the moment, Australia pays age pension overseas indefinitely, so Filipino born people who have come to live in Australia and who want to return to the Philippines after they had been granted their age pension can do so. They can take their age pension with them.

**Mr ADAMS**—Do you have any figures on that?

**Mr Hutchinson**—Yes, I was just going to say those. At the moment we are paying about 463 pensions into the Philippines, which is worth about \$5.6 million a year.

**Mr ADAMS**—Are there any figures on the other way?

**Mr Hutchinson**—We do have some figures but these actually come from Centrelink, so they are obviously not the full picture; they are only Centrelink customers. But, based on Centrelink data, the Philippines is paying about 731 pensions into Australia worth about \$0.7 million per year.

**CHAIR**—Big difference!

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**Mr BROADBENT**—How many of the pensions going into the Philippines are disability pensions?

**Mr Hutchinson**—Off the top of my head I think it is about 80. Let me just check.

**CHAIR**—Eighty out of a total of how many?

**Mr Hutchinson**—Out of 463.

**Mr BROADBENT**—Is that about the same as the general population of Australia? Is that about the same as the community norm?

**Mr Hutchinson**—Off the top of my head, it does not sound particularly out of whack. It is 80, as I mentioned.

**Ms Stawyskyj**—I should also say that with the disability support pension the portability period is only 13 weeks for most people, so there is not indefinite portability but there may be some who have—

**Mr Hutchinson**—These are probably people who were paid before the legislation was changed in 2004.

**Mr BROADBENT**—Can you explain the legislation to me now?

**Ms Stawyskyj**—On 1 July 2004 the portability period for pensions changed. What we call working age pension can only be portable for a period of 13 weeks.

**Mr BROADBENT**—Can you explain ‘working age’?

**Ms Stawyskyj**—Pre age-pension age.

**Mr BROADBENT**—You mean people who could work?

**Mr Hutchinson**—Of working age.

**Ms Stawyskyj**—Yes.

**Mr ADAMS**—So there is a 13-week period when someone can still collect and leave the country?

**Ms Stawyskyj**—Yes. Once they have left the country their pension will be portable for 13 weeks. If they have not returned after the 13 weeks it will stop. But there are some saving provisions for people who may have been overseas prior to 1 July 2004. So the figures would be reflecting those saved customers.

**Mr ADAMS**—Is there anything in the legislation to allow somebody to write to the department or the minister and get a longer period of time?

**Ms Stawyskyj**—We constantly get letters, but there is no discretion to extend that period, with the exception—

**Mr Hutchinson**—There is a discretion. If somebody, for example, had a medical emergency and could not return. An unexpected—

**Ms Stawyskyj**—Yes, an unexpected one.

**CHAIR**—Say they are back in the Philippines for 14 or 15 weeks and their disability pension stopped after 13 weeks; what happens when they arrive back in Australia? They would have to reapply again or go straight back onto the disability support pension?

**Mr Hutchinson**—They would have to contact Centrelink.

**Ms Stawyskyj**—They would have to contact Centrelink and then it would be restarted.

**Mr Hutchinson**—It would probably depend on the length of time. To be honest, I am not sure whether Centrelink would make them reclaim. If it were a few weeks over the 13 weeks I suspect Centrelink would probably just re-establish their pension.

**Mr BROADBENT**—We are talking about a very small number of people here, aren't we?

**Mr Hutchinson**—Yes, relatively.

**Mr BROADBENT**—Relatively.

**CHAIR**—Very small.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—I have two questions. I would like to clarify that the only social security payment made by Australia that will go on until death for people who have moved overseas is the age pension.

**Ms Stawyskyj**—Under the current rules, but there are a number of people who had their provisions saved when the portability period changed on 1 July 2004. So, from that period on, people had the portability limited, except for age pension.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—So before 2004, before there was a legislative change, someone on a disability pension could have moved offshore and continued to get it?

**Mr Hutchinson**—If they were severely disabled, which is not the normal criteria for receiving it.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—I have two more questions now. Is the payment of the age pension to people offshore a separate matter to these social security agreements?

**Mr Hutchinson**—It is separate in the sense that the social security law already provides for portability of pensions outside the terms of agreements. In other words, somebody getting an age pension can generally take their pension overseas indefinitely.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—That is an agreement signed up with each individual country as well or it is an Australian law?

**Mr Hutchinson**—That is just the Australian law.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—My final point is that there were some comments made by various people about the one-off payments that occurred in December and that will occur next time. What obligation is there to pay those one-offs to people that do not live in this country?

**Ms Foster**—The next lot of one-offs will be paid through the tax system, so I do not think we can actually answer that question. I do not think we actually know what the tax arrangements would be.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—Okay. Let us just look at the December ones then. Age pensioners got money. My recollection is that in parliament it was suggested that under these social security agreements the government was obligated to pay money to people offshore.

**Ms Stawyskyj**—Not under the agreement. It was not an agreement matter—I would think. I did not see that comment or the context of it. I think, in terms of the ESS, the payments were made in the context that it was a down payment on future reform. I think it was seen to be a payment that would be—

**Mr Hutchinson**—in lieu of a regular increase to the pension rate.

**Ms Stawyskyj**—Yes. So the pension review is examining what the ongoing pension payments will be.

**Ms Foster**—Yes, the appropriate level of pension payments.

**Ms Stawyskyj**—I think this was then made as a step forward.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—You are saying these things about the \$10.4 billion package from December?

**Ms Foster**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—This has got nothing to do with the petition.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—Clearly not. But it is an interesting point.

**CHAIR**—We might save that for another day. I have just one further question. The minister stated that the department met with the Philippine Embassy on 21 November. When do you think a decision will be made regarding the reciprocal agreement with the Philippines?

**Ms Stawyskyj**—I think the meeting in November was an exchange of information with the embassy. It was not a formal approach. They were seeking information about how our system works and how the agreement and treaty processes work. At that meeting, we offered to meet with the community to help explain our portability rules as well. But since that contact we have had no other formal approaches.

**Mr ADAMS**—What other pensions have portability other than the age pension? Are there any?

**Mr Hutchinson**—In some of our agreements, we include the disability support pension, for example, for severely disabled people. Again, those are agreements negotiated or concluded prior to—

**Mr ADAMS**—That is the treaties we have with other countries?

**Mr Hutchinson**—Yes.

**Ms Stawyskyj**—The formal side.

**Mr Hutchinson**—But aside from that—no.

**Ms Stawyskyj**—But, since our portability rules changed in 2004, we have not had any other pensions included in our social security agreements.

**Mr ADAMS**—So there is no other portability of pensions—other than the age pension—say, to the Philippines?

**Mr Hutchinson**—Except for the 13 week?

**Mr ADAMS**—Yes. But there are no other pensions where someone can go and live in the Philippines from Australia and collect the pension? They can if they are on an age pension but they cannot if they are not.

**Mr Hutchinson**—That is correct.

**Mr ADAMS**—You cannot do it on Newstart, can you?

**Mr Hutchinson**—No.

**Mr ADAMS**—Thank you.

**CHAIR**—We will go to the next petition we have before us: a petition on rent assistance. It was tabled in the House by Ms Marino, the member for Forrest, on 22 October. The ministerial response was due this week, because the 90 days has lapsed. I am just wondering when that response would be received?

**Ms Foster**—I believe it was sent yesterday. It was just tabled this morning—no?

**CHAIR**—We have not received it. It might be still on the minister's desk for a signature.

**Ms Foster**—It is described as 'rent assistance', but the particular petition we received was more specifically around the 25 per cent of the now total average weekly earnings benchmark.

**CHAIR**—I am afraid we do not have it. We might just have to get the secretariat and the department or someone to check with the minister's office as to when that will be received by the committee. To my knowledge, and from the papers I have before me, we have not received it. I think we might have to hold this over until our next meeting—hopefully, we will have the ministerial response by then—and get that section of the department in, because there were a few questions that I did want to ask concerning the petitioners. What Miss Marino stated in her speech to the House when she tabled the petition was quite disturbing: people in her electorate are paying 65 per cent of the Newstart payments in rent. I think we will hold that over until our next meeting and see if we can get a certain section of the department in.

Our next petition is quarantine of social security income. We have not had a response to this petition.

**Ms Wilson**—The response is coming very shortly.

**CHAIR**—What is the reason for the long delay?

**Ms Wilson**—We are in a process at the moment where the minister is considering her response to the NTER review and considering policy changes, and that is a matter currently with government. I can answer questions about the current schemes, if you like, but I cannot talk about future policy—although, I think the minister is going to provide an interim response very shortly.

**CHAIR**—Can you give us a little bit of current departmental policy in terms of income quarantining.

**Ms Wilson**—There are a few things going on. As you know, the Northern Territory emergency response brought in income management—or, as you called it, 'quarantining' of income support payments—in July 2007. That is being continuously rolled out, and now all of the prescribed communities in the Northern Territory are subject to income management. There is also a new initiative that is being rolled out as a trial in the Kimberley and Cannington which relates to income management in cases of child neglect. We have been working with the Western Australian Department for Child Protection on that one. Just recently, school enrolment and attendance measures started in the Northern Territory. That one is not income quarantining but a process whereby, if people do not provide sufficient evidence that their children are enrolled at school or if the attendance of their children at school is not sufficient, Centrelink can take action to suspend their payments until the parents take responsibility for ensuring their children are enrolled and attend school. They are the three main things that are going on at the moment, as well as the Cape York trials. There are some welfare reform matters there, and income quarantining is one factor of that.

**Mr BROADBENT**—Ms Wilson, I do not know whether this is in your area, but how many kids up there actually cannot go to a school? How can this work when there is no school for them to go to?

**Ms Wilson**—That is a matter for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations—they actually implement the program and they look after education—but it is also a matter for the Northern Territory government, which is responsible for education.

**Mr BROADBENT**—Can I make the point again: we are the ones who put this program forward. You said it has been rolled out in most areas now. But, where there is not a school, how can the program be rolled out at all?

**Ms Wilson**—I am sorry; that is not a matter for FaHCSIA.

**Mr ADAMS**—There are an extra 250 teachers who have been allocated by the Commonwealth—paid to the Northern Territory. There is a whole issue there. It is getting some statistics about whether their children are going to school, and starting to overcome the difficulties of the problems up there.

**Ms Wilson**—Sorry, I will just clarify. The school enrolment and attendance measure has only been rolled out in limited locations in the Northern Territory. In those locations we have made sure that the schools have adequate infrastructure to cater to—

**Mr BROADBENT**—I come from a position that I do not want to see someone disadvantaged because we have rolled out a program and we are not the ones on the ground and we are directing things from Canberra et cetera et cetera. It is very important that we have a great amount of respect for the people that we are dealing with in the Northern Territory.

**CHAIR**—Mr Simpkins—I am sorry, Mr Broadbent; do you have another question?

**Mr BROADBENT**—Yes, but I will not ask it.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—I would have thought that, in the process for the school enrolment side of the program, ultimately the principal or the administration of the school has to notify that there has been an attendance issue. Without that tick in the box, which obviously necessitates a school being in the location, this would not be an issue. Would that be a reasonable thing to say?

**Ms Wilson**—That is correct. There are two things that the government is trying to do here. It is trying to make sure that children attend school once they are enrolled, and it is trying to ensure that children are enrolled at school. To ensure that children are enrolled at school, parents have a responsibility to let Centrelink know and provide evidence that their children are enrolled, so that is not notified by the school authority. If somebody is enrolled at school and their attendance is poor, the school authority—that is, the Northern Territory education board, the Catholic education board or the Tiwi Education Board—would notify Centrelink of the poor school attendance, and that would be the trigger for Centrelink to take action.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—This is just a follow-up to that and my last question. This petition, in point 2, asks the House to:

Affirm the principle that garnisheeing of income in respect to school enrolment and school attendance and child protection issues only occur under judicial review.

How is that achievable? Or is that achievable?

**Ms Wilson**—No, it is a bit of a moot point, actually. Originally, the legislation that was brought in by the previous government in terms of income quarantining did have school enrolment and attendance issues leading to income quarantining or income management. That legislation is sitting there but has never been used. The legislation that came into force last year after going through parliament actually has a suspension regime—for example, if somebody does not have their child enrolled at school, their payments are suspended, and once they prove to Centrelink that their children are enrolled at school their payments are backdated in full.

**Mr CHESTER**—Just picking up on that point: is that only in prescribed communities?

**Ms Wilson**—No. I will tell you which communities it relates to, and it does not only relate to prescribed communities because it is happening across the entire township of Katherine, which is not prescribed. I will just give you some more detail of that; I have that here.

**CHAIR**—That would be appreciated.

**Mr BROADBENT**—Could you describe the Katherine situation to us as well?

**Ms Wilson**—In Katherine, anybody who lives in the postcodes—or the area—in Katherine that have been identified—

**Mr BROADBENT**—Not blanket Katherine—everybody?

**Ms Wilson**—Yes, everybody in Katherine as well as some Katherine town camps. I have the names of them here for you. I can tell you those. In Katherine it is the whole township of Katherine and Gorge Camp, Rock Hole and Bingara, which are all town camps. So any parents who live in those areas—

**Mr BROADBENT**—So that is red and yellow, black and white?

**Ms Wilson**—Yes, entirely. Any parents who are on Centrelink payments in those areas would be required, from the beginning of this school year, to provide evidence to Centrelink that their children are enrolled at school. They got a letter at the beginning of the school year, and the schools provided them with evidence that their children were enrolled.

**Mr BROADBENT**—Are there any figures on how that has worked in Katherine?

**Ms Wilson**—It is very early days, and we do not have any figures yet. You need to note that suspension is a last resort, so if there are enrolment or attendance difficulties then Centrelink would be doing a lot of work with those families—

**Mr BROADBENT**—How long does the process take, Michelle?

**Ms Wilson**—There is not a time line that—

**Mr BROADBENT**—You haven't done it before.

**Ms Wilson**—says, 'Within 14 weeks, if we don't get any action then we would suspend.' They could suspend two days after the beginning of the school year, in theory, but Centrelink is working with social workers and making sure that families have the capacity and that there are not other issues that are preventing them sending children to school.

**Mr BROADBENT**—And does it seem to be working all right in Katherine?

**Ms Wilson**—It is very early days; I cannot give you any—

**CHAIR**—When do you think we might have some sort of indication of how it is working?

**Ms Wilson**—They are going to do some evaluation, but I expect the first lot of useful data would be at least three months away, having implemented a number of these things now, and given that Centrelink are going to work very hard with families before they actually suspend. I suspect you could ask that question in two months and you might get a—

**Mr BROADBENT**—But they do not suspend; they only manage the money, don't they? They do not suspend the money?

**Ms Wilson**—No, the original legislation for income management had school enrolment and attendance as part of that, but some legislation was passed late last year that does not income quarantine but suspends people's payments until they take appropriate action to ensure that their children are enrolled or appropriately attending school.

**Mr CHESTER**—Beyond Katherine, are there other communities involved in this process?

**Ms Wilson**—Yes, Hermannsburg, Wallace Rock Hole—and Tiwi and Wadeye are due to come on at the beginning of March. They have been delayed because the main negotiations are with the Catholic education board and the Tiwi Education Board. Those negotiations are in the finalisation stage at the moment, so we expect them to come on there. Western Australia was also flagged to go over, and negotiations are continuing with the Western Australian government for, I think, just Cannington in Western Australia, in Perth.

**CHAIR**—Mr Adams, did you have a question?

**Mr ADAMS**—Yes, thank you. I am sorry about the badgering from my colleague!

**Ms Wilson**—It is good practice for Senate estimates!

**Mr ADAMS**—Okay, we will be the beginnings for you! The law change last November, I think, was to tie in the Centrelink payments and tidy up some of that, because the Commonwealth does not have access to school attendance records because that is run by states and territories. It was the linkage to Centrelink payments, because Centrelink payments are the whole factor, the common denominator, right round the country for some of these issues—not

only this one but many others—especially children not attending school. Can you just give us a little understanding of that legislation?

**Ms Wilson**—I might have to take that on notice, mainly because DEEWR is actually the main department that looks after this measure.

**Mr ADAMS**—Okay. I do not want cause people extra work. I think I have most of that. I just wanted to tie it up—that it was a link back to Centrelink; that there was some need to get that linkage to the Commonwealth legislation so that we could actually do what was intended in policy terms.

**Ms Wilson**—That is right. The previous legislation would have required more thorough data exchange between the states and the Commonwealth in this regard, and indeed with the independent schools authorities—especially the enrolment factor. Centrelink being able to operate unilaterally and asking people for evidence and putting the responsibility on parents actually removes that requirement—as does the schools authority just being able to raise attendance issues rather than the Commonwealth just being able to look at the data itself. Does that answer your question?

**Mr ADAMS**—Yes, thank you. With regard to the figures that were talked about, evaluation is extremely important in this debate. You would understand that.

**Ms Wilson**—Yes, certainly. Evaluation is—

**Mr BROADBENT**—I do not think Mr Adams is talking about big evaluations. I think he is talking about having the Centrelink area manager saying, ‘How’s it going?’ I know the department cannot do that; they have to do these huge evaluations. But we would just like some feedback. Having worked in disability services myself, I know all about evaluations—and I can tell you that I do not like them. I do not like the way we go about it. I think it is atrocious. Often the people who do the evaluation are not field officers anyway and do not have a full understanding of what is going on. Do these states understand that you are taking away their authority in another area in this process as well? You do not have to answer that.

**Ms Wilson**—Sorry, I do not understand that question.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—I am quite fond of anything which forces greater parental responsibility where there are shortcomings and where children are potentially at risk through parents who are not that interested. That is a bit of a general statement, and there is a lot of grey in it. Why did you pick Cannington in WA?

**Ms Wilson**—Cannington is a place where we are running a child protection initiative. People can be subject to income management if they are referred from the Department for Child Protection in Western Australia.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—Yes, but why was it chosen?

**Ms Wilson**—It gives us an opportunity to look at the two measures running alongside each other. When we get to the evaluation, we will be able to see whether there are links between child protection and neglect and school attendance and enrolment.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—So Cannington was really just a random choice?

**Ms Wilson**—The Western Australian government chose Cannington in terms of child protection.

**Mr SIMPKINS**—Because there is an issue there?

**Ms Wilson**—Yes, because there is an issue there. And we wanted to test the approach in a number of contexts as well.

**CHAIR**—We will now go to the final petition that is before us, and that is ‘Early intervention services for children with a disability’. It was tabled in the House by Ms Ley, the member for Farrer, on 2 December 2008. The petition was mainly to do with the Woodstock Early Childhood Intervention Service. Ms Ley was hoping to be in attendance today. She sends her apologies. She is speaking in the House as I speak. I am going to ask two very brief questions and then hand over to other committee members. I thank the department and the minister. We got a very swift response to the petition, which we received on 2 February. I want to go to the response and the last paragraph on page 1. The minister stated: ‘I understand that staff from my department have been in contact with Woodstock support, and I have offered to meet with them at their office in Albury to discuss the delivery of services under the HCWA package.’ Has this meeting taken place? If not, has it been scheduled and when will it be held?

**Ms Brown**—No. The meeting has not yet taken place. The meeting is still being arranged. We have been in touch with the Woodstock organisation. We are happy to meet with them and discuss this as soon as we are able to organise that meeting. We are happy to help them through the process. We are very keen to have as many providers as possible on the autism provider panel.

**CHAIR**—Okay. I have a question on the last paragraph of the minister’s response. Can the department advise the committee and the petitioners on time frames for the development of the National Disability Strategy referred to in that paragraph?

**Ms Bedford**—The progress to date has been that in October and November last year we had a fairly robust consultation process for the development of the National Disability Strategy. Around 2,500 people attended face-to-face consultations and we have had more than 750 written responses. We are in the process of analysing those submissions. In the next couple of months there will be a consultation report that will bring together both the written submissions and the face-to-face consultations. That will be a public document after government has considered it.

**CHAIR**—Is there any indication of when that might be?

**Ms Bedford**—Within the next two months. We want it to be a really robust document to take us forward. I can also give you some information around what those submissions are indicating about early intervention, if you like.

**CHAIR**—That would be appreciated.

**Ms Bedford**—There were 54 submissions, or around 7.2 per cent of all submissions, that noted that a lack of early intervention and detection of disability was an issue—so the detection or diagnosis of disability. We asked people to identify barriers and possible solutions in their submissions. The possible solutions included an increase in early intervention, particularly for young children with disabilities. Some of the recommendations were around reviewing the effectiveness of mainstream services for early intervention in primary and secondary schooling—so education responses. Another solution was in the health sector, around health and wellbeing and increasing early intervention through health measures.

I can also, if it is helpful, give you some statistics around young children and specialist disability services. The states and territories have a responsibility for those. This is 2006-07 data. There were around 230,000 users of disability services in 2006-07. Of those, 15,868 or around 6.8 per cent were aged nought to four and 33,324 were aged five to 14, so there was quite a spread of children within the CSTDA range.

**CHAIR**—When Ms Ley tabled the petition she stated that Woodstock estimate that 260 children in the Albury region do not receive assistance. Is this correct? How many families do receive assistance in Albury?

**Ms Bedford**—We would have to go to New South Wales and ask them for that data.

**CHAIR**—Could you take it on notice to do that?

**Ms Bedford**—Yes.

**Mr CHESTER**—I note the minister's response refers to the increase in funding that has been provided for disability support services. Does that meet the current need as you see it or is there still a shortfall in terms of what the states are asking for to provide these services?

**Ms Bedford**—The states also put funding into disability services. The issue of unmet need in disability is a long ongoing one and we are working with states and territories to grapple with what the exact figures are. There is always demand for more disability services. I would never be able to say that that would meet all the demand that is out there.

**Mr CHESTER**—In relation to the \$12,000 package—I think it is \$6,000 per financial year—is that prescriptive in the types of services that can be used or is there some element of flexibility? A lot of rural and regional communities do not necessarily have access to the full range of allied health services. Is there much flexibility in that package for the families to decide what model fits them for that \$12,000?

**Ms Brown**—There are a number of early interventions that are available under that Helping Children with Autism package. Those services are based on best practice guidelines. A rather large report was commissioned by the Department of Health and Ageing in 2006. We refer to it as the Prior and Roberts report. They were the authors of the report. They set out the appropriate treatment and interventions for the range of disorders that children with autism may have. So we

have based the funding package on what is contained in that review, on the interventions that are contained in that review.

**Mr CHESTER**—Given it is quite a moving field, if you like—there is more information coming out, and each circumstance can be quite unique—is there any flexibility in that regard? I know you have got a website that you have just started.

**Ms Brown**—That is correct.

**Mr CHESTER**—That improves access for regional areas, but I know that, among a lot of people in my community, in Gippsland, where access to services is quite difficult, there is a push on to have more flexibility with regard to that \$12,000. I am not sure whether that is something you can answer about.

**Ms Brown**—That is probably not something I can answer about right here, but, as new therapies or interventions may become available, I would anticipate that that is something that we would need to look at in the future. We would also need expert clinical advice on that as to the appropriateness of those treatments to be funded by the government. The other thing I would like to mention is that, under the package, there is a rural and remote allowance available, of \$2,000 per year, to assist people in rural and remote regions with travel arrangements and other issues so that they can avail themselves of the services. We appreciate that access for people in rural and remote regions can be an issue, so that is why that other allowance is in the package—to assist people in those areas.

**Mr ADAMS**—The review model that you spoke about, of what the service delivery is—that is a medical model, isn't it?

**Ms Brown**—The authors were experts in autism. I cannot immediately recall what their qualifications were—whether they were in medicine—but they definitely have expertise in autism.

**Mr ADAMS**—You start off by needing to be diagnosed as having an autism spectrum disorder. There is a medical starting point, isn't there?

**Ms Brown**—Yes. It is a prerequisite that you have a recognised diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder before you become eligible for the funded services under the package.

**Mr ADAMS**—There is a lot of discussion about how early that starts and that early intervention process, isn't there?

**Ms Brown**—Yes, there is. On the basis of our understanding of best practice at the moment, it is of greatest assistance to children if children can avail themselves of that early intervention, because that assists them with integrating and mainstreaming into normal services, normal schooling et cetera.

**Mr ADAMS**—I want to come to the early intervention service provider panel. Is that the panel that selects the delivery model for an individual? Or are people are chosen from that panel?

**Ms Brown**—If I may, I will go back and outline for you the process for families once they find out about a diagnosis that their child has. They are able, under the package, to go and see an autism adviser in their relevant state or territory. They can visit them, telephone them or contact them by email.

**Mr ADAMS**—Sorry—who are they?

**Ms Brown**—Who are the autism advisers? They are currently advisers in the autism peak bodies—so the relevant autism associations.

**Mr ADAMS**—There are two of those, aren't there?

**Ms Brown**—No. There is one in each state and territory. So they can contact their relevant adviser. Their adviser is able to give them independent, impartial information about what services and treatments are available and tell them about which providers might be closely or proximately located to them. Then the families have a choice as to which services they might access, which they consider might be best for their child.

In relation to the panel, we have an ongoing arrangement whereby any interested providers of autism services can apply to become members of the panel. They have to meet certain selection criteria, and once we are satisfied that they meet those criteria they are put on the panel. We currently have providers covering over 300 locations in Australia, which is quite good considering—

**Mr ADAMS**—Who usually makes up those people?

**Ms Brown**—The providers?

**Mr ADAMS**—Yes.

**Ms Brown**—The basic requirement is that any provider must have available two of the following three professionals or services: a speech pathologist, occupational therapist or child psychologist. They must have two of those experts available and it is considered that having that multidisciplinary provision of services available is the best approach for children with autism.

**Mr ADAMS**—\$12,000 will not go far.

**Mr BROADBENT**—Let's put on the record that this is a fabulous program. We have always wanted to do something for families who have children with autism.

**CHAIR**—Hear, hear!

**Mr BROADBENT**—The government have done that. They are rolling out the program, and at least we are doing something. It is not a matter of \$12,000; it is something we can offer families and it is working very well.

**Ms Brown**—If I may also add that this is also in addition to what the states and territories already provide, so it is supplementing or augmenting what states and territories already do.

**Mr ADAMS**—Is the service delivery of disability services changing or evolving in the different states?

**Ms Bedford**—Yes. Each state is going through a reform process and we are also working on reforms nationally, especially under the new national disability agreement, which commenced on 1 January. So there is quite a large reform agenda, and that includes early intervention.

**Mr ADAMS**—That agreement is helping to drive some of that?

**Ms Bedford**—It is the chief driver for that reform.

**Mr ADAMS**—Thank you.

**CHAIR**—I would like to thank everyone for their participation here today. I thank Hansard.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Simpkins**, seconded by **Mr Broadbent**):

That this committee authorises publication of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

**Committee adjourned at 12.07 pm**