



# Part 1

## Overviews

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*View of the House of Representatives Chamber in action at the Table.  
Image: David Foote, Auspic/DPS.*

# Clerk's review

## Overview

The year has comprised two quite distinct halves. The first half took the usual path for an election year. Following the general election on 18 May 2019, majority government returned. When the Forty-sixth Parliament opened on 2 July 2019, 151 members were sworn in, an increase of one, and the work of the Chamber, Federation Chamber and parliamentary committees resumed after that.



By contrast, the second half of the reporting year was a period of sustained disruption: bushfires, severe smoke haze from the fires, and COVID-19. In my view the department has performed well to deal with rapid and substantial change brought about by COVID-19. Of course, the department has not been alone in facing such significant effects on our work, the way we work, and our staff. But the very nature of the parliament—the central forum for debate and decisions on national issues—renders its operations particularly vulnerable to the dangers of COVID-19. It also makes our department's response critical.

## The parliamentary environment

In some aspects there has been continuity and in many respects there has been cooperation. On 2 July 2019 the House re-elected the Hon Tony Smith as Speaker and Mr Kevin Hogan as Deputy Speaker. The work of parliamentary committees was resumed swiftly and the House then met on 35 days until the end of the year.

Some typical events which enable reflection on aspects of the parliament and its members over the years took place. One of these was the Speaker's lecture for 2019, delivered on a sitting day, 17 September, by Troy Bramston, an experienced political journalist. The topic of the lecture was, 'Sir Robert Menzies: the Art of Politics'. The lecture was well attended and a copy was made available on the department's website.

From the first sitting day in 2020, the House's business and operations began to demonstrate their capacity for flexibility. The bushfires were the major focus on 4 February and for much of that remaining week, following a motion of condolence moved by the Prime Minister and seconded by the Leader of the Opposition. After Mr Hogan's move to the ministry in 2020, Mr Llew O'Brien was elected Deputy Speaker on 10 February. Also on 10 February, the President of the Republic of Indonesia, His Excellency Mr Joko Widodo, addressed a meeting of the House to which senators were invited.

Sittings later in February and early March were much as usual and the force of COVID-19 was manifest in the House for the first time on 23 March, with increased spacing in seating for members and a limit on the number of people present at any time in the Chamber. The public galleries were closed, the media had restricted gallery access and public access to Parliament House itself had been restricted.

Following the Prime Minister's ministerial statement on COVID-19 and the Leader of the Opposition's reply, most of the sitting was occupied with the coronavirus economic response package of bills, and supply bills. A revised program of sittings for the year was agreed to, with the next sitting scheduled for August. Before rising late on 23 March, the House made further preparations for an uncertain future by agreeing there could be departure from the standing orders in particular circumstances, provided that the Leader of the House and Manager of Opposition Business agreed in advance.

Despite the change to the sitting pattern, the House met again on 8 April and again from 12 to 14 May, with a focus on bills responding to the economic impact of the pandemic. A revised sitting pattern was agreed on 14 May, providing for sittings in mid-June and a more crowded sitting pattern for the second half of the year.



*The Clerk of the House, Ms Claressa Surtees, and Deputy Clerk, Ms Catherine Cornish, brief the Speaker, the Hon Tony Smith MP, and Deputy Speaker, Mr Llew O'Brien MP, ahead of sittings on 8 April 2020.  
Image: David Foote, Auspic/DPS.*

Throughout the June sittings there was still a reduced number of members in the Chamber, and with a heavy reliance on informal 'pairs' for divisions, more members in total were able to attend during the sitting period. Accommodating the evolving changes in the Chamber and ensuring compliance with COVID-19 safety measures placed a significant extra workload on the department's chamber support staff. By the end of the reporting period, while the Chamber looked very different, its business and operations were much as usual. In all, the House lost 10 sitting days in the first half of 2020, yet if the revised pattern can be adhered to, there will be 65 sitting days for the calendar year, a typical number overall.

The Forty-fifth Parliament was notable for its volatility and it ended with minority government. The four by-elections relating to section 44(i) of the Constitution were another facet of the volatile environment in the last reporting period. The first year of the Forty-sixth

Parliament has been unremarkable in some ways. There has been one resignation by a member—on 30 April, the Member for Eden-Monaro resigned for personal reasons—and a by-election was held on 4 July. Majority government has made for a generally more routine chamber environment, at least in the first half of the period. While the restrictions and uncertainty caused by COVID-19 have made for constant innovations in the procedures underpinning the work of the House, those innovations have also been enabled in advance by cooperation at the political level.

### Departmental capability

My appointment as seventeenth Clerk of the House began on 12 August 2019, following the retirement of the former Clerk, David Elder. Other changes to the Executive were the appointments of Catherine Cornish as Deputy Clerk and Jerome Brown as Clerk Assistant (Procedure). Since then the new Executive team has been consolidating as the Forty-sixth Parliament has progressed. Our collective capability continues to develop and extend in this sustained period of challenge.



*The Clerk of the House, Ms Claressa Surtees (centre), with Deputy Clerk Ms Catherine Cornish and Serjeant-at-Arms Mr James Catchpole at the presentation of the Address in Reply, 4 December 2019.  
Image: Penny Bradfield, Auspic/DPS.*

For the department generally we have striven to maintain standards of service, while adjusting the ways we provide services to ensure we meet health and safety standards and minimise or mitigate risks. We are increasingly aware that the current level of uncertainty will extend and we will need to calibrate our efforts to achieve equilibrium.

Although the parliamentary institution and the department certainly change, such change has usually been incremental. The processes of the institution are based on precedent, which fosters authority and predictability, yet there is no precedent for the circumstances

of the last four months of the period. Nevertheless, I believe the institution and the department have responded quickly and effectively to date.

In preparation for successive sittings and changes, I have prepared procedural advice, often in collaboration with senior colleagues. Departmental staff have continued to support chamber operations for each sitting. As a precaution, attendants' services in the two chambers have been reduced and rostered individual shift times at the Chamber Table have been reduced as often as possible for the small roster of Clerks and Deputy Clerks. The Table Office maintained its secretariat role for the chambers—programming business and processing legislation—and the Serjeant-at-Arms' Office continued to manage the changing physical arrangements.

In anticipation of future needs, since March our staff have been working collaboratively across the Parliamentary Service on measures to enable members, and senators, to make contributions remotely to proceedings in their respective chambers.

Staff in other work areas have been supported in working from home where possible, especially on sitting days. At times, more than half our staff have been able to work from home, following upgraded ICT support from the Department of Parliamentary Services and our department's advice about the home working environment.

Committee Office staff have been able to carry out much of their work remotely and are increasingly able to support committee meetings and hearings with members, staff and witnesses participating effectively from a number of locations. Several departmental staff have been seconded to the Australian Public Service to support the government's response to COVID-19.

## Innovation

Never before have we had such a live and sustained exercise in business continuity. The constantly evolving arrangements have placed pressures on staff and systems, but there have been some advantages. There has been a dual aspect to our response to COVID-19. We have quickly learnt to work differently. While we can no longer meet as a whole department, we have maintained our regular management meetings with participation from within the building and remotely through teleconferencing. With the support of our Parliamentary and Business Information Services Office staff we have been able to resume whole-of-department meetings recently for general governance and training activities through webinars. We look forward to greater flexibility in the future for large-scale meetings through videoconferencing, and for this we will rely on ICT support colleagues in DPS.

While conscious that departmental staff must have access to the information and support they need, we have been equally aware of the need for effective business continuity. We moved rapidly so that the great majority of staff have adequate ICT and management support to be able to work away from Parliament House for long periods. At the end of the period we had begun a transition back to work in Parliament House but will maintain our responsiveness to changing needs.

## Collaboration across the parliamentary service

The parliament continued to welcome visitors during the year and the department supported several major events, until visits were suspended. The 28th annual meeting of the Asia-Pacific Parliamentary Forum (APPF) was held at Parliament House in January 2020. As a regional grouping of national parliamentarians, the APPF is highly relevant to members and senators. Although the nearby bushfires and smoke haze restricted opportunities for outdoor activities, the Australian delegation and members from the 19 member parliaments and 10 observer parliaments enjoyed a full program of negotiation and debate. Several departmental staff formed a secretariat to support preparations and the conduct of the meeting. During the meeting the secretariat was assisted by staff from all areas of the department, as well as from colleagues across the parliamentary service.



*Asia-Pacific Parliamentary Forum opening ceremony in the Great Hall at Parliament House, 13 January 2020.  
Image: David Foote, Auspic/DPS.*

The parliament's Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit hosted the 15th biennial conference of the Australasian Council of Public Accounts Committees in November 2019, with the assistance of that committee's secretariat. Departmental staff attended the 40th Australasian Study of Parliament Group conference at Parliament House in October 2019. The conference was jointly hosted by our department, the Department of the Senate and the Office of the Australian Capital Territory Legislative Assembly, and its theme was prescient: 'Parliaments navigating disruption in 2019'.

Strong professional relationships continue to be important for the department. This year I have chaired regular meetings of the heads of the parliamentary service departments. The effectiveness of this group has been particularly important in providing a fully informed and integrated response to the issues we face as a parliamentary service. While we individually bear responsibilities for the governance of our respective departments, for some responsibilities and plans it is highly beneficial that we are able to provide a whole-of-parliamentary-service commitment—one important example is the *Reconciliation Action Plan 2019–2022* adopted this year.



*The Clerk of the House, Ms Claressa Surtees, with Mr Rob Stefanic, Secretary of DPS, Mr Richard Pye, Clerk of the Senate and Ms Jenny Wilkinson, Parliamentary Budget Officer, with the Reconciliation Action Plan 2019–2022.  
Image: Penny Bradfield, Auspic/DPS.*

I have also maintained regular contact with counterparts in other parliaments in Australia and New Zealand as our working environments have dealt with the unexpected. In both groups we are conscious of the specialist nature of our parliamentary environments and that we cannot rely solely on advice or arrangements that are geared for the circumstances of executive administrations.

## The year ahead

With the Executive, I am mindful that for the foreseeable future most actions and matters must be considered with COVID-19 in mind. Realistically, this means that we must be prepared for the possibility of events that might not have happened before and that we might need to act in ways that have not been anticipated. From a practical point of view, the department will continue to monitor our business continuity plans and arrangements and should expect to implement changes more frequently.

Our staff are central to our success and every care will be taken to ensure staff safety, wellbeing and continuity—our new ways of working will enliven this. So too will the continuing pursuit of existing strategic priorities.

The department's workforce planning process continues to mature. Risk management is embedded in all our processes but the recent disruption has focused attention in a more direct way, including on succession planning. Senior staff will be involved initially in implementing plans for critical roles, and succession planning will be implemented progressively through the department.

Much of our highly regarded staff training program has been suspended over the last four months of the period and, while staff have been able to engage in externally based online learning, I will be pleased when we can resume our own bespoke development activities.

We look forward to the introduction of Windows 10 and Office 365. Its availability to our department has been delayed, partly as a result of COVID-19. Its introduction will bring us into line with colleagues in other parts of the parliamentary service and enable productivity improvements. It will also allow us more robust videoconferencing and communication options.

In November the department's enterprise agreement will expire and staff have attended information sessions about the options ahead. A sentiment survey on support for a determination will be conducted early in the next reporting period.

I am proud of the department's performance over the year, especially its effective response to the succession of challenges we faced in the second half. We are well placed to harness the best of the outcomes from the year and to remediate the rest. Despite the continuing uncertainty, I am optimistic about the department's ability to continue to achieve in such circumstances and to generate and deliver a high level of support to the House and the parliament.



# Departmental overview

The department's purpose as set out in its *Corporate Plan 2019–20* is:

to support the House of Representatives, and the wider parliament, in the role of a representative and legislative body primarily by providing advice and services, and through engaging with the community and other parliaments.

## Role and functions

The *Parliamentary Service Act 1999* provides for a non-partisan parliamentary service to serve the Australian Parliament. The Department of the House of Representatives is established by and operates under the Act, together with three other parliamentary departments: the Department of the Senate, DPS, and the Parliamentary Budget Office.

During 2019–20, the department continued in its role as a service department for the parliament, supporting the work of the House of Representatives, its members and committees, and some joint committees (comprising members of the House and the Senate).

The department continued to provide services to increase public knowledge and awareness of the work of the House and the Australian Parliament, and to encourage interaction. The department also assisted the House and the parliament in maintaining institutional relationships with their state, territory and international counterparts.

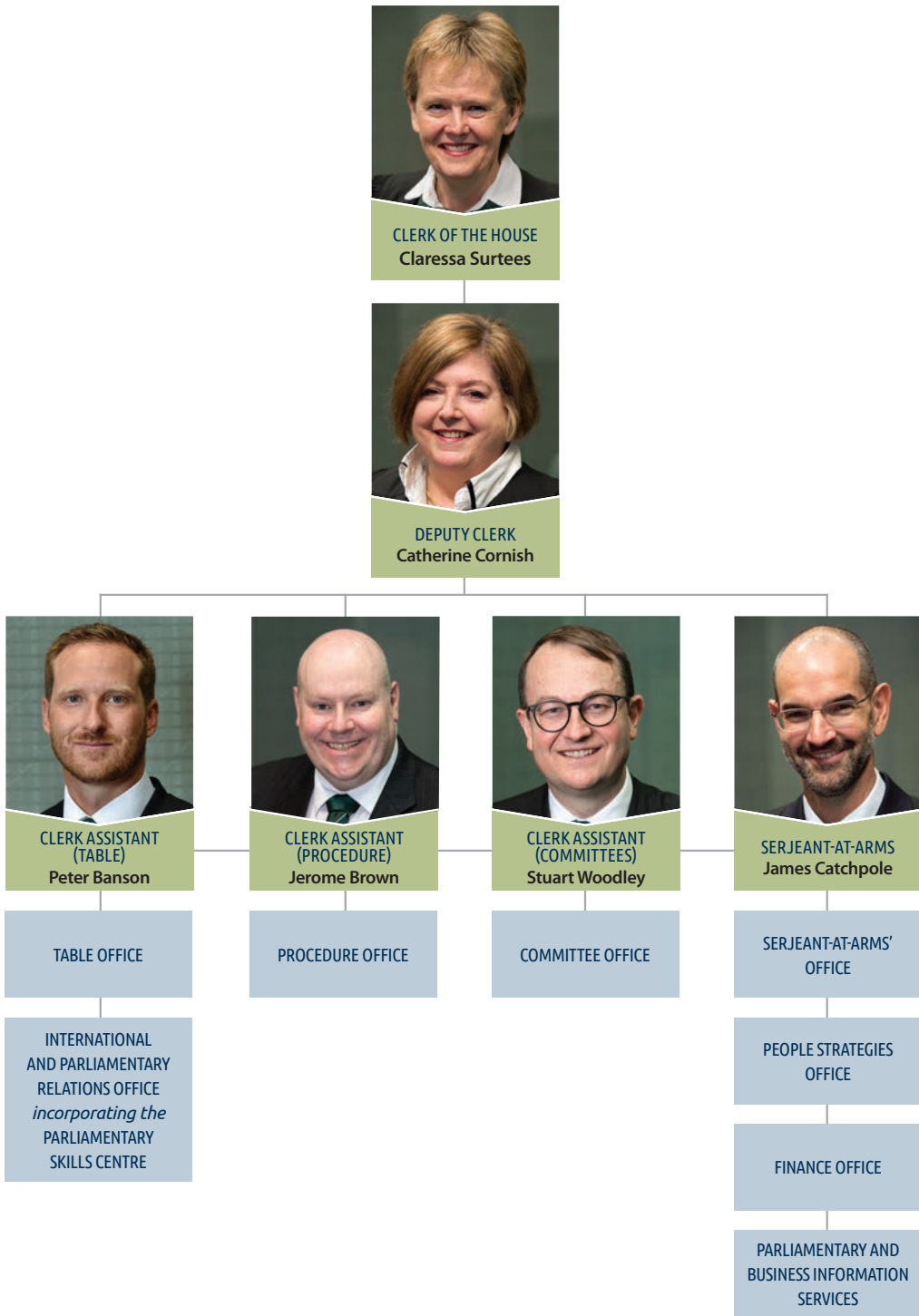
## Departmental structure

The department is managed by its Executive: the Clerk, Deputy Clerk, Clerk Assistant (Table), Clerk Assistant (Procedure), Clerk Assistant (Committees) and Serjeant-at-Arms.

While no changes were made to the department's structure during the year, a new Clerk, Deputy Clerk, and Clerk Assistant (Procedure) were appointed. Ms Claressa Surtees became Clerk of the House in August 2019. Ms Catherine Cornish was appointed Deputy Clerk in September 2019. Mr Jerome Brown became Clerk Assistant (Procedure) in November 2019.

Figure 1 shows the departmental structure at 30 June 2020.

Figure 1: Departmental structure at 30 June 2020



## Roles and responsibilities of the Executive

### **Clerk**

The Clerk is the most senior official of the department and a steward of the parliamentary institutions. The Clerk is the principal adviser to the Speaker, and is responsible for leading approximately 178 departmental staff members who provide administrative and procedural advice and services to the House and parliamentary committees, and support the parliament's international and domestic engagement. With the heads of the other three parliamentary departments, the Clerk provides leadership of the parliamentary service.

### **Deputy Clerk**

The Deputy Clerk is the second most senior official of the department. The Deputy Clerk is responsible for advising and assisting members, their staff and departmental staff on matters of parliamentary practice and law, and for overseeing the drafting of private members' bills and amendments. The Deputy Clerk assists the Clerk in managing the department, and during the Clerk's absence performs the duties of Clerk.

### **Clerk Assistant (Table)**

The Clerk Assistant (Table) is responsible for the areas of the department that provide programming, procedural and legislative support to the Chamber and Federation Chamber of the House. The Clerk Assistant (Table) is also responsible for the areas of the department that support the parliament's program of international delegations and parliamentary strengthening.

### **Clerk Assistant (Procedure)**

The Clerk Assistant (Procedure) is responsible for the Procedure Office, which provides procedural research, publications and services explaining the work of the House and its institutional role. The Clerk Assistant (Procedure) also contributes to the House's parliamentary strengthening activities related to parliamentary procedure.

### **Clerk Assistant (Committees)**

The Clerk Assistant (Committees) is responsible for the Committee Office, which provides a range of support services—including procedural, research, analytical, drafting and administrative support—to House committees and to some joint committees.

### **Serjeant-at-Arms**

The Serjeant-at-Arms is responsible for the corporate areas of the department, which provide support and a range of services for members and for departmental staff. The Serjeant-at-Arms has a key role in managing ceremonial, access and security matters relating to the House.

## Outcome and program structure

The department’s outcome and program structure for the year is set out in the *Portfolio Budget Statements 2019–20*.

The department has one outcome:

Advisory and administrative services support the House of Representatives to fulfil its representative and legislative role.

The department has two programs:

- » Program 1: Departmental—supports five activities
- » Program 2: Administered—supports one activity.

Figure 2 shows the department’s outcome and program structure, and the activities under each program.

**Figure 2: Outcome and program structure, 2019–20**

