



# Part 1

## Overviews

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# Clerk's review

## Overview

The year has been dominated by sustained disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I wrote last year that the department needed to be prepared for the possibility of new events and that we might need to act in ways that had not been anticipated. As the pandemic evolved this year, the department rose to meet many challenges.

At times, the ever-changing COVID-19 situation placed a significant workload on staff of the department. Our staff worked admirably this year during periods of significant change and uncertainty, and I am confident the House of Representatives was well supported by the department in discharging its legislative and representative functions.

The pandemic influenced the operations of the House. The sitting fortnight scheduled to commence on 4 August did not go ahead, and throughout the year, many parliamentarians were at times unable to attend sittings for reasons related to the pandemic. The response to these impacts was procedural and technological innovation, developed and expertly facilitated by our staff and parliamentary service colleagues.

From 24 August, members (and senators) were able to contribute to certain Chamber proceedings remotely, by official video link, following agreement to adopt new parliamentary rules and procedures. From 9 November, the opportunity to participate by video link in certain Federation Chamber proceedings was also made available to members.

The health and safety of departmental staff and members was a major focus during the year. Measures to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission were put in place and constantly reviewed, with departmental officers consulting with senior health officials to ensure the measures reflected the latest advice. Special measures based on this advice were implemented in the chambers and committee rooms. Masks were part of the dress code for our staff working in the chambers and committee rooms for much of the year.

Our responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and other work health and safety matters were reviewed by Comcare this year. I am pleased to note that in relation to our actions to ensure the safety of staff during the pandemic, Comcare found we met all compliance requirements and demonstrated a positive commitment to the management of COVID-19 risks in the workplace.

## Parliament's work continued

Special seating arrangements were put in place in the chambers for members and there was a heavy reliance at times on informal pairing arrangements for divisions. The number of support staff present in the chambers was reduced, and there were additional cleaning and hygiene protocols. The Presiding Officers strongly recommended that masks be worn in the circulation areas of Parliament House and where physical distancing may be difficult or not possible.

The success of the parliament's response to the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen in the level of activity sustained throughout the year. The House sat for 31 days in the second half of 2020, and a further 36 days in the first half of 2021. Despite the cancellation of the first sitting fortnight in August 2020, there were more sitting days than at any time since the 2014–15 reporting period. The Federation Chamber met 63 times and for 232 hours this year, a similarly impressive result. After many committee inquiries were paused in the last reporting period, inquiry activity recommenced at levels typical for this stage of the parliamentary cycle.

Two new members were sworn in during the year, following by-elections for the electorates of Eden-Monaro and Groom. In both cases, the newly elected member was from the same political party as the former member and the composition of the House remained unchanged.

However, the composition of the House did change from 23 February, when the member for Hughes resigned from the Liberal Party, stating his intention to sit as an independent member for the remainder of the parliament. Following this change, the House comprised seven independent and minor party members on the crossbench, 76 government members and 68 opposition members.

The year was also notable for the presentation of two federal budgets. The government's 2020–21 Budget was postponed from May to October 2020 due to pandemic uncertainties, and the 2021–22 Budget was introduced, as usual, on the second Tuesday in May 2021.

While usual in terms of timing, Budget day 2021 was a rare occasion during the year when, for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic, all 151 members could be accommodated together in the Chamber at one time. It was a rare day also because the Prime Minister introduced an address to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, in relation to the death of His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh.

## Our staff and the parliamentary service

Our staff are central to the department's success, and their health and wellbeing is our highest priority. During the year, much of our internal conversations and training were focused on mental health awareness and building resilience. This year once more has emphasised the need for the department to be adaptable, and the resilience of our staff has been demonstrated every day.

The year also saw stronger risk management and significant progress in succession planning for critical roles, important initiatives brought into sharper relief by the pandemic.

In collaboration with the Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS), this year we provided laptops to all staff. This change greatly facilitated remote working, with significant improvements for virtual meetings. Our staff have embraced the greater flexibility offered by Office 365 and Microsoft Teams, and we have transitioned more of our ICT systems to the cloud environment.

At the outset of the pandemic last year, the department quickly learnt to work differently, and this positive attitude to change continued throughout this year. We utilised a variety of teleconferencing and videoconferencing solutions so that our staff could come together

– as individual teams, as program areas or as the entire department. We also rapidly developed the capability to deliver seminars and internal training online. This enabled us to continue to hold information sessions for members, educational seminars for interested parties, and our own highly regarded in-house procedural training.

There was significant change in Executive personnel this year, with the retirement of Catherine Cornish, Deputy Clerk, after many years of commendable service to the parliament. Her contributions in parliamentary knowledge-sharing and capacity-building supported staff and members alike, in this parliament, in the Pacific and around the globe.

Peter Banson was appointed Deputy Clerk, having recently undertaken the role of Clerk Assistant (Table) and, prior to that, senior roles in the Speaker's, Serjeant-at-Arms' and Committee offices. Other changes to the Executive saw the appointments of several experienced senior staff – Russell Chafer as Clerk Assistant (Committees), Peggy Danae as Clerk Assistant (Procedure) and Glenn Worthington as Clerk Assistant (Table).

I thank the leaders of the other three parliamentary departments for their collegiality and goodwill in our shared mission to provide expert support to the parliament: Richard Pye, Clerk of the Senate, Rob Stefanic, Secretary of DPS and Stein Helgeby, Parliamentary Budget Officer.



*Clerk of the House, Ms Claressa Surtees, and Deputy Clerk, Mr Peter Banson. Image: Tracey Nearmy, Auspic/DPS.*



## Looking ahead

The COVID-19 pandemic, with its attendant uncertainties and the potential for swirling and rapid spread throughout the community, will remain a dominant influence for the future. Despite the promise of a safer outlook due to increasing vaccinations across Australia and the world, the challenge for the department remains the need to be fully operational while providing a safe working environment within a pandemic overlay. By its very nature, parliament is the central forum for debate and decisions on national issues. As a workplace parliament is unique, with people travelling from across the country to engage in these debates and make decisions. We recognise that the operations of parliament are therefore particularly vulnerable to the consequences of COVID-19, and our department's response remains critical to the parliament's continued and safe operation. Our achievements in providing safe support during the reporting period provide confidence that the department can continue its success and meet new challenges.

External reviews into the working environment at Parliament House brought our health and wellbeing further into focus this year. The outcomes of the report of the Review of the Parliamentary Workplace: Responding to Serious Incidents (the Foster review) and the anticipated report of the Australian Human Rights Commission on the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces are expected to become operative next year. While several aspects of the reviews are more concerned with parliamentarians and their staff, the department fully engaged with these reviews, and we will use any findings to further strengthen our safe and respectful workplace culture.

The department's priority continues to be supporting the work of the House for the remainder of the 46th Parliament, and the year ahead will include an element of planning around the election anticipated before the House is due to expire on 1 July 2022. While the House is dissolved, our priorities will shift to managing a range of processes associated with the departure of retiring and non-retained members, the arrival of returning and new members, and planning for the opening and resumption of a new parliament.

The first item of business for every parliament is the election of a new Speaker. The current Speaker, the Hon Tony Smith MP, has announced that he will not be seeking re-election, bringing to an end 20 years of parliamentary service, with over six years as Speaker. I thank him for his leadership and support of me and the department in his time as Speaker. A change in the speakership is an event of particular significance for the department, and preparations to support the new Speaker and familiarise them with their role and functions will be an important priority in the year ahead.

I look forward to continuing to work in collaboration with all parliamentary colleagues to build on the strengths of the department and ensure it continues to thrive, support the House and parliament, and meet challenges of the future.

Claressa Surtees

Clerk of the House

# Departmental overview

The department's purpose as set out in its *Corporate Plan 2020–21* 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, the Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS) and the Parliamentary Budget Office.

During 2020–21 the department met the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, and provided the highest standard of support for 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 strengthened its services to increase public knowledge and awareness of the work of the House and the Australian Parliament, and to encourage interaction. Despite restrictions to interstate and international travel throughout much of the year, the department continued to assist the House and the parliament in maintaining institutional relationships with state, territory and international counterparts.

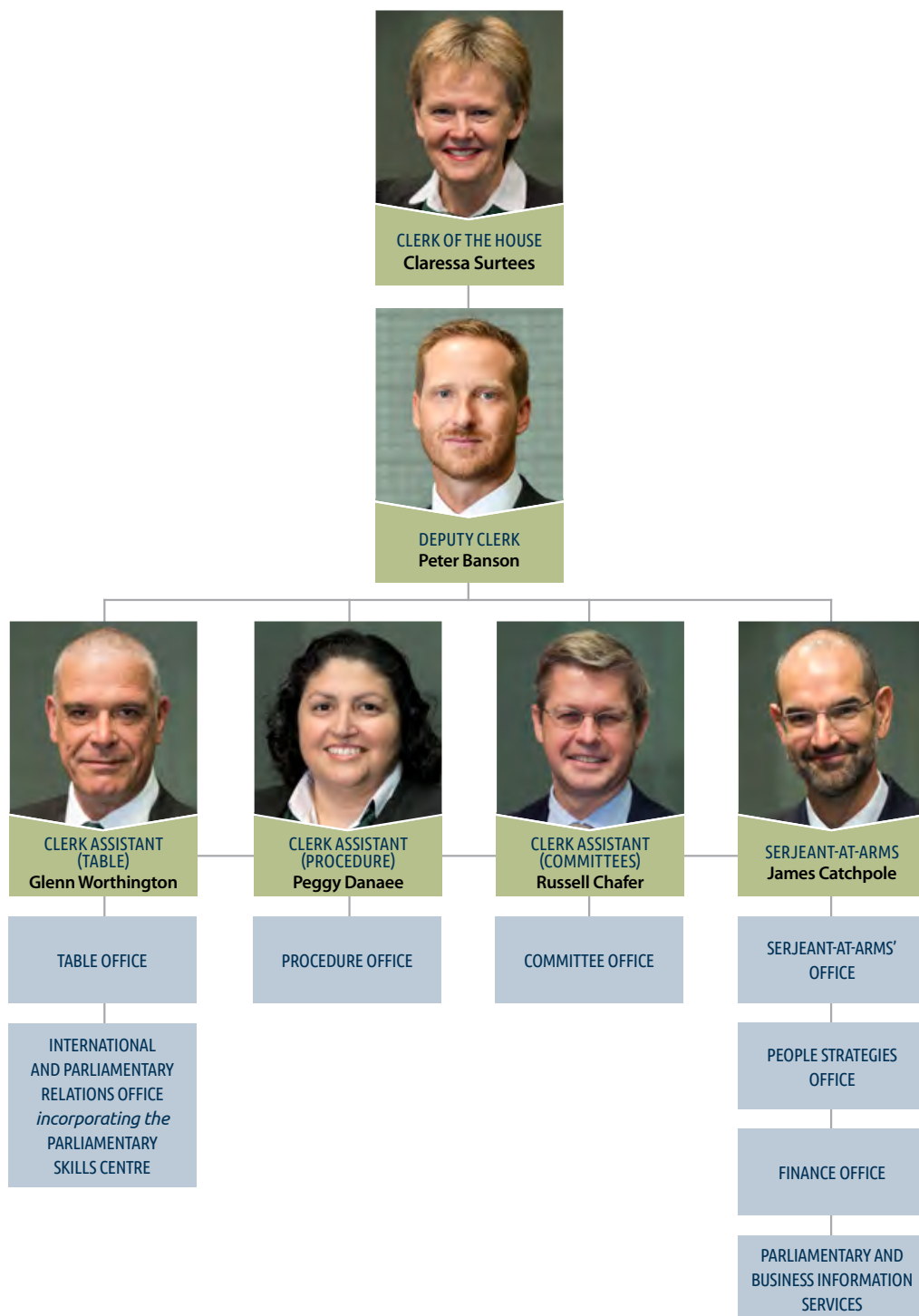
## Departmental structure

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

There were no changes to the department's structure during the year; however, new appointments were made to the positions of Deputy Clerk, Clerk Assistant (Table), Clerk Assistant (Procedure) and Clerk Assistant (Committees).

Figure 1 shows the departmental structure as at 30 June 2021.

Figure 1: Departmental structure as at 30 June 2021



## Roles and responsibilities of the Executive

### **Clerk**

The Clerk is the most senior official of the department. She is the principal adviser to the Speaker of the House and its members, and a steward of the parliamentary institutions. The Clerk is responsible for leading some 180 departmental staff members, who provide administrative and procedural advice and secretariat and other 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 performs the duties of Clerk during the Clerk's absence.

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

The Clerk Assistant (Table) is responsible for the Table Office, which provides 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 that explain 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 support services to House committees and to some joint committees. Services include procedural, research, analytical, drafting and administrative support.

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

The Serjeant-at-Arms is responsible for the corporate areas of the department, which provide support and services to members and 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 2020–21*.

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, 2020–21**

