



Part 1

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Clerk's review

Overview

Performance of the department's work has changed remarkably since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021–22, the department has maintained very high levels of responsiveness and adaptability to fluctuating circumstances, including public health advice and related restrictions, in supporting the work of the House of Representatives and the parliament.



The conclusion of the parliamentary term in a further pandemic year of significant workload has seen departmental staff continue to be unwavering in their efforts, ensuring that the vital legislative and representative functions of the House could succeed. I acknowledge and thank them for their dedicated and professional parliamentary service. The department consistently acted on the latest health advice, with the result that most of our staff were working from home during parliamentary sittings, in order to reduce health risks associated with the large influx of people coming to Parliament House. Our staff demonstrated resilience and innovation in undertaking all aspects of their work regardless of whether they were in the building or working from home.

The continuing challenges presented by the pandemic included a two-month local area lockdown, fluctuating border restrictions and changing approaches to building management, all of which affected our staff as well as parliamentarians. Physical distancing remained an important aspect of risk management, and changing seating plans and face masks were familiar features within the Chamber during the year. The health and wellbeing of our staff remained a priority and staff were encouraged to seek guidance and support in dealing with the high degree of uncertainty in aspects of work and life, including drawing on the department's employee assistance program.

The focus on work health and safety during the period also included the department responding to a range of reviews relating to our parliamentary workplace: the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces conducted by the Australian Human Rights Commission's Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins, the Review of the Parliamentary Workplace: Responding to Serious Incidents (the Foster review) and a Comcare review. Responding to these reports has meant an additional ongoing stream of work for the department and across the parliamentary service. The report of the Jenkins review *Set the Standard: Report on the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces* was presented on 30 November 2021, with a two-year implementation timeframe.

The final sitting week of the House for this reporting period ended on 31 March. It featured an early presentation of the government's budget, due to the federal election; in addition, on the final day of sittings, the department supported the parliament in welcoming the President of Ukraine, His Excellency Volodymyr Zelenskyy, to address a meeting of the House and invited senators, via video link from a war zone. The facilitation of the address involved much collaboration and cooperation among departmental staff and across the parliamentary service. The relative ease with which this address was able to be supported at very short notice was due to the unique arrangements put in place for remote contributions to chamber proceedings by members in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Parliament's work continued

The Presiding Officers decided that for the spring sittings, while Canberra was in lockdown, Parliament House would operate under a range of conditions, including closing the building to the public for four months, restrictions on the number of people in the building and mandated mask wearing. The changes to building access meant that much of the parliamentary work outside the Chamber needed to be conducted via remote access technology, and the continued cooperation of the Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS), specifically the Broadcasting and ICT areas, was an ever present and welcome feature of the year. Chamber proceedings themselves remained fully broadcast on the website.

Only 90 of the 151 members of the House attended the Chamber for the first sitting of the Canberra lockdown period. Once again, pursuant to resolution, members were able to participate in the business of the House remotely. In participating remotely, members could contribute to debate, make a ministerial statement or ask or answer a question during Question Time. Over this period, meetings in the Federation Chamber were postponed.

There was change of a different kind also when, after six years as Speaker of the House, the Hon Tony Smith MP announced that he would step down from the position in November 2021. The House acknowledged and thanked Speaker Smith. The change in speakership is an event of particular significance for the department, as it effects a change in the department's leadership. More immediately, it necessitated a significant level of preparation by our staff outside the Chamber for the election process in the Chamber to ensure that the nomination process and possible voting process went smoothly. The Clerk has an active role in this process, in accordance with standing orders. I chaired the election, in which there were two nominations for Speaker; following a ballot, I declared Andrew Wallace as Speaker.

An early 2022–23 Budget was held in March in what eventuated to be the last week of sittings of the 46th Parliament. With changes to public health advice, the Budget was able to be delivered with the galleries and public areas open and a larger number of people in Parliament House for the event than had been possible in the previous two years.

As the 46th Parliament came to an end there was the usual pattern of increased activity, particularly with parliamentary committees finalising their inquiries before the dissolution of the House. Although there were fewer committee meetings than in previous years, the number of reports presented was very high, with 24 reports being presented on the last day of sittings. There was general satisfaction among members and committee support staff that committees were able to hold more in-person meetings than in recent years, although last-minute changes to scheduled events, related to the pandemic, remained prevalent.

The 46th Parliament was prorogued and the House of Representatives dissolved on 11 April 2022, for a general election for the House of Representatives and half the Senate, which was held on 21 May.

In late June, the department held its usual orientation seminar for 35 new members of the House of Representatives. This seminar was held in Parliament House and newly elected members undertook an intensive program of information sessions presented by senior staff of the department, other parliamentary departments, and certain offices in the executive government finance portfolio, designed to assist members with their new role. This valuable opportunity to provide the newest members of the House with an introduction to the parliamentary environment requires a significant level of coordination and organisation and it is pleasing that feedback from attendees was so positive.

Our staff and the parliamentary service

The pandemic continued to present challenges which, I am happy to say, we were able to counter with resilience and good humour. The lockdown in Canberra in August and September 2021 meant that many staff entered a period of working from home, with only staff members essential to support the work of the Chamber attending Parliament House. The last few years have meant that staff are now well adapted to working remotely, and they continued to provide a high standard of support for committee hearings and briefings and other events.

During lockdown and across the reporting period the welfare of staff was paramount, and staff were encouraged to keep in touch with each other and, public health advice permitting, to meet in workgroups outside the building. A spontaneous Reps Fun Committee developed an online program of activities to boost morale and keep staff connected to one another. Staff particularly enjoyed the photo of the week selections as well as a variety of online sessions by colleagues on cooking, flower arranging, keeping bees and chickens, and more! The social culmination of 2021 was the re-established, and rebranded, Reps Community (formerly social club), who organised a Christmas raffle and a well-attended Christmas party in the beautiful gardens of Old Parliament House.

After a challenging 46th Parliament, staff were encouraged to take leave where possible to refresh and maintain their equilibrium. For the corporate areas, I acknowledge that the end of the parliamentary term brings an intensive work program. These offices respond to the significant imperative of finalising arrangements for retiring and non-retained members and of receiving returning and new members. The election period also provided an opportunity for a professional refresh for some staff to work on special projects in the department, perform different duties on secondment or take up mobility placements elsewhere.



Clerk of the House, Ms Claressa Surtees, and the Speaker, the Hon Andrew Wallace MP. Image: David Foote, Auspic/DPS.

Our training and development focus over the period included the core themes of work health and safety, workplace bullying and harassment prevention and management, and leadership capability. We were pleased that much of the training was able to take place in person; even so, the amenity presented by virtual training remains valuable for staff. Our in-house professional development sessions, designed to build staff procedural capacity, remain a valuable resource for the department.

I thank the leaders of the other three parliamentary departments for their cooperation and collaboration as we work together in our common parliamentary service for the parliament: Richard Pye, Clerk of the Senate, Rob Stefanic, Secretary of DPS and Stein Helgeby, Parliamentary Budget Officer.

Together, we four heads of the parliamentary service have acknowledged that the parliamentary service has been under considerable scrutiny this year, due to issues raised in 2021 involving serious workplace incidents at Parliament House and commentary about the culture in our workplace. I was pleased that we made a joint submission to the Jenkins review, with details of the working environment of parliamentary service employees under the *Parliamentary Service Act 1999* and related departmental policies and procedures.

Looking ahead

Preparations for the opening of the 47th Parliament and the establishment of parliamentary committees will dominate the first month of the new parliament. There will be 35 new members and many other members in new roles given the change of government. Together with a large number of crossbench members, these changes mean there is likely to be an increased need for services and advice from departmental staff, and consideration is being given as to how best to address this both in the short term and on an ongoing basis.

Following the presentation of the report of the Jenkins review, a range of leadership groups have been established featuring senior executive departmental staff working with colleagues across the parliamentary service and from executive agencies to progress implementation of recommendations. While many of the recommendations relate to parliamentarians and their staff, the department is part of the parliamentary workplace and we are committed to playing a meaningful role in guiding change and contributing to a healthy culture. The introduction of the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service (PWSS) was an important outcome of the Foster review and, with my parliamentary colleagues, I was encouraged by the broadening of its scope to provide some services to parliamentary departments and continue to advocate for the extension of the PWSS in full to the department.

In the coming year, parliamentary engagement will return to a more traditional, in-person format; however, travel remains complex and planning and lead times remain significant. Where possible, outgoing and incoming delegations will take place; where they cannot, virtual means provide opportunities to continue this valuable engagement.

Claressa Surtees
Clerk of the House

Departmental overview

The department's purpose as set out in its *Corporate Plan 2021–22* 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 2021–22 the department continued to meet 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 for part 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

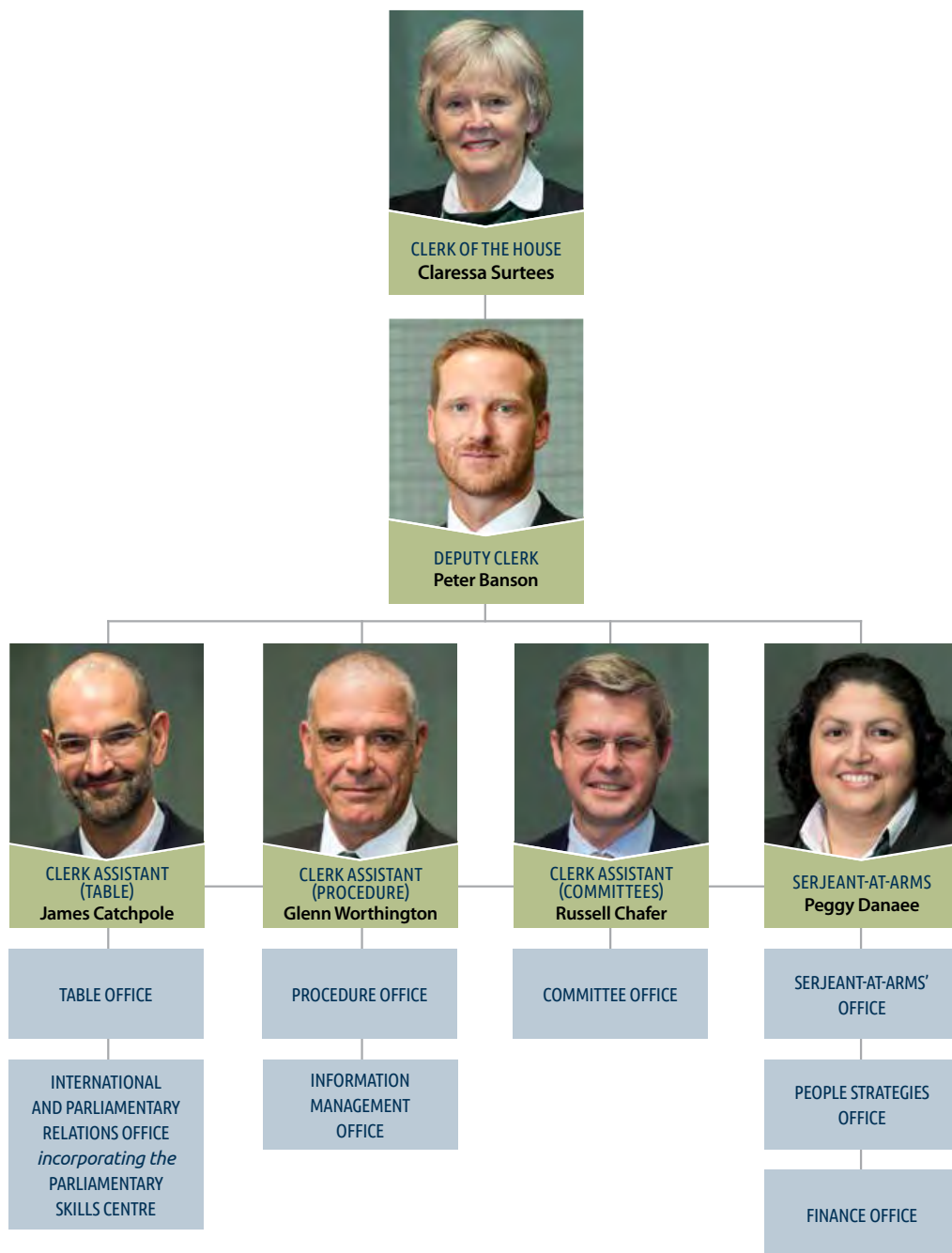
The department is managed by its Executive: the Clerk, Deputy Clerk, Clerk Assistant (Table), Clerk Assistant (Procedure), Clerk Assistant (Committees) and Serjeant-at-Arms.

During the year, the Parliamentary and Business Information Services Office was renamed as the Information Management Office, with Executive responsibility shifting from the Serjeant-at-Arms to the Clerk Assistant (Procedure).

Also this year, although the Executive membership remained the same, there was a rotation among branch manager responsibilities.

Figure 1 shows the departmental structure as at 30 June 2022.

Figure 1: Departmental structure as at 30 June 2022



Roles and responsibilities of the Executive

Clerk

The Clerk is the most senior official of the department. The Clerk is principal adviser to the Speaker and members on House and committee proceedings, parliamentary privilege and other parliamentary matters. The Clerk leads some 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 leads 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 explaining the work of the House and its institutional role, and the Information Management Office. 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 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 2021–22*.

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, 2021–22

