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PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA
DEPARTMENT OF PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

Ms Sarah Redden
Acting Committee Secretary
Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee

Dear Ms Redden,

Inquiry into the operation and management of the Department of Parliamentary Services

I thank the Committee for its invitation to provide a written submission to its inquiry into the operation and management of the Department of Parliamentary Services.

Given the breadth of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, my submission focuses on the Library's role and governance.

The *Parliamentary Service Act 1999* establishes the Office of the Parliamentary Librarian whose function is to provide high quality information, analysis and advice to senators and members of the House of Representatives in support of their parliamentary and representational roles.¹ The creation of this statutory office was one of a number of legislative measures put in place in 2005 to ensure the independent provision of library and research services to the Parliament.

The Parliamentary Service Act stipulates that these services be delivered:

- in a timely, impartial and confidential manner
- maintaining the highest standards of scholarship and integrity
- on the basis of equality and access for all parliamentarians, parliamentary committees and staff acting on their behalf, and
- having regard to the independence of the Parliament from the Executive.²

The Library's services are used by all parliamentarians. Both services and staff continue to be held in high regard by senators and members, as evidenced by the findings of formal evaluations, spontaneous client feedback, and the extent to which Library advice is cited by senators and members.

The Library's suite of services is carefully calibrated to meet the contemporary needs of the Parliament. While there are a myriad of sources of information available to parliamentarians, none of these affords the unique combination of qualities or personalised services offered by the Library.

Library staff are committed to excellence in client service—and this is reflected in consistently high levels of client satisfaction over time. The Library's service model is designed to meet the often

¹ *Parliamentary Service Act 1999, subsection 38B(1)*

² *Parliamentary Service Act 1999, subsection 38B(2)*

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unpredictable and fluid parliamentary environment. The experience of the past few months has shown how essential such flexibility and innovation are to meet client needs.

In addition to more traditional library services, the Library offers a comprehensive range of value-added services, including print and broadcast media monitoring and analytics, access to specialist databases, and to statistical and mapping services. The Library's collections, print and digital, are tailored and carefully maintained to ensure relevance and currency. The Library has implemented a 'digital first' acquisition policy so that parliamentarians and their staff have access to this information regardless of time or location. The benefits of this became apparent this year as clients and staff alike transitioned to working from home in response to COVID-19.

The Library's research service provides specialist and expert support to parliamentarians and committees, producing tailored and confidential research briefs and general distribution publications on legislation and policy issues of interest to the Parliament. The most recent client services evaluation found that research services remain the most often used of all Library services, with 94 per cent of parliamentarians and their staff using them to some degree.³ In 2019–20, the Library completed over 11,400 confidential client advices, and spent nearly 56,000 hours in their preparation. The Library also issued some 300 publications. In the latter part of the financial year, the Library focused its publications program on providing information and analysis to assist parliament in responding to COVID-19.

The Librarian reports directly each year on the performance of their function to the Presiding Officers, and thence to the Parliament, in the Department of Parliamentary Services annual report.⁴

The most recent annual report was tabled in the Parliament on 7 and 8 October 2020. It shows that the Library performed strongly throughout the year, experiencing high levels of demand and exceeding many client service targets including: timeliness; the number of publications released; online usage of our databases and publications; material added to the catalogue and to databases. Pleasingly, client feedback throughout the year indicated continuing high levels of satisfaction with our services.

Regular and direct oversight of the Library is provided by the Joint Standing Committee on the Parliamentary Library (JSCPL). This Committee is established each parliament by resolution of both houses specifically to advise the Presiding Officers on matters relating to the Library, including its annual resourcing. The Librarian reports to the JSCPL at each meeting on all aspects of the Library's work. Its endorsement is sought for key Library frameworks and policies, such as the Statement of Client Services.

Beyond its formal reporting aspects, the Library values the Committee as a sounding board and for providing feedback and a client's perspective on existing and proposed services. Over recent years the JSCPL has met with various Library teams to discuss their work and give them a client-perspective on how it is used. Committee members also play an active role in shaping the Library's strategic direction, including through advice on the design of the regular client evaluations of Library services (and discussions about their findings) and the commissioning of a strategic review

³ Uncommon Knowledge, *Australian Parliamentary Library: client service evaluation 2017*, p. 33.

⁴ *Parliamentary Service Act 1999*, subsection 65 (3)

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examining scenarios for the Library's work in ten years. This work, which was prepared with staff input, informed the Library's Strategic Plan and annual Business Plans.

I and my colleagues in the Library are aware that as the work of the Parliament changes over time, shaped by emerging issues, technologies and pressures, the Library will continue to evolve as it has in the past. The products and services that constitute the highest standards of client service and excellence of information, analysis and advice are not static. I look forward to assisting the Committee in exploring these issues.

Yours sincerely

Dr Dianne Heriot
Parliamentary Librarian
16 October 2020