



House of Representatives  
Standing Committee of Privileges  
and Members' Interests

Publication of details of Members' Interests  
on the Australian Parliament House website

November 2009



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The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

# Publication of details of Members' interests on the Australian Parliament House website

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Standing Committee of Privileges and Members' Interests

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Canberra

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## Membership of the Committee

Chair Mr Brett Raguse MP

Deputy Chair Hon Wilson Tuckey MP

Members Mrs Joanna Gash MP

Mr Steve Georganas MP

Ms Jennie George MP (Representative of Leader of the House)

Mr Petro Georgiou MP (Representative of the Deputy Leader of the  
Opposition)

Mr Daryl Melham MP

Hon Roger Price MP

Mr Don Randall MP

Hon Alex Somlyay MP

Mr Craig Thomson MP

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## Introduction

- 1.1 The Committee has been considering the desirability of the publication of the details of Members' interests on the Australian Parliament House (APH) website and how such publication might be achieved. The purpose of this report is to outline to Members the Committee's views on this matter and to advise Members of a specific proposal for implementation. The Committee would welcome comments from Members and other interested people on the proposal.
- 1.2 Under standing order 216, the Committee may
  - inquire into and report on arrangements made for the compilation, maintenance and accessibility of the Register, and
  - consider proposals by members and others on the form and content of the Register.
- 1.3 Thus a decision to make the Register available on the APH website is one that the Committee can make within the Standing Orders.

## Current situation

- 1.4 Members' declarations are made to the Registrar of Members' Interests who makes copies for inspection (see below) and for tabling in the House. A copy of the completed Register is tabled and made public as soon as practicable after all returns are received. Batches of copies of 'notifications of alteration' are tabled three times each year, on the last day of each sitting period.

- 1.5 The Register is not available electronically and, Members' entries are not re-keyed.
- 1.6 The register is kept up to date at all time. It is held in RG.39, the Clerk's Office. Access is under conditions set by the Committee of Members' Interests:
- inspection is not permitted until after the initial tabling of the register; and
  - inspection is by appointment, the usual hours being 10-12 and 2-4 on business days.

Copying is not permitted, but notes may be taken.

## Recent developments

- 1.7 The Committee was approached early in the 42<sup>nd</sup> Parliament by an organisation, Open Australia, which wished to make the declarations of Members' interests available on its website. The Committee provided Open Australia with the hard copy of the initial declarations of interests by all Members in the 42<sup>nd</sup> Parliament. These were scanned by Open Australia and placed on its website. At the Committee's request, Open Australia makes the following disclaimer on its website:

Please note that for the Register of Interests we have been asked to make the following caveats clear:

- ⇒ OpenAustralia is not officially supported or maintained by Parliament
- ⇒ At any given time it is possible that information available about Members' or Senators' interests through the site may not be up to date as they may have notified alterations
- ⇒ Fraudulent use or manipulation of the information could be raised as a matter of contempt.

- 1.8 It is understood that statements of Senators' interests also have been placed on the site.

## The Committee's consideration

- 1.9 The Committee is conscious that there is widespread interest in matters concerning Members and that there is a strong expectation of accountability and transparency in relation to Members' entitlements and interests. As a result the Committee agreed to explore the issues and options for possible implementation in the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament of electronic access to the Register of Members' Interests from the APH website. The Committee's considerations had regard to the existing framework provided in the House's resolution on Members' Interests, and it does not propose any change to that framework. The Committee considered:
- what would be recorded in the electronic register;
  - how the information would be captured and stored; and
  - how the information would be published.

## The Committee's proposal

- 1.10 While there is a number of options for the scanning and publication of details of interests, the Committee's considerations have identified a course which could see a decision implemented in a way which:
- maintains the integrity of the details published;
  - allows ease of access to the media and the wider public; and
  - minimises the creation of additional administrative steps.
- 1.11 At the commencement of each Parliament, each Member's initial interest return would be scanned, any protective security features would be added (see below) and, immediately after the returns had been tabled in the House, the full set would be posted to the APH website. The initial comprehensive statements by Members would thus be available on the same day as they were presented to the House.

- 1.12 Notices of alterations would be copied and scanned and have any security features added and then be posted.
- 1.13 It is expected the updates of alterations would occur weekly or fortnightly. The details of alterations would be posted with the initial declarations for each Member enabling easier checking of individual Members' declarations.
- 1.14 It is proposed that the main point of access on the APH website would be a new item – Statements of Members' interests. There also would be a link to the Committee's own home page, and there could also be links on each Member's home page to his or her statements.
- 1.15 The Committee also is considering placing security features on the document. It is possible to place a watermark on a PDF document which will make it more difficult to download the document, change it, and then present it as an original document. Security properties could also be added to the files before they were posted on the APH site to restrict cutting and pasting from the document and to enable low resolution printing only.
- 1.16 A new design for the initial interest return form will also be considered for the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament to incorporate the watermark and to improve the document so as to facilitate scanning.
- 1.17 Concerns also have been raised about the unrestricted dissemination of Members' signatures. The reality is that there are likely to be a number of sources from which Members' signatures could be obtained, but we have been advised that the Adobe Acrobat product would enable signatures to be blocked prior to publication. Such editing would not reduce or distort the information about Members' interests in any way. The Committee is still considering this matter.
- 1.18 The Committee has advised the Committee of Senators' Interests of its proposal.

## Conclusion

- 1.19 The Committee believes that the approach outlined above to the electronic publication of the Register of Members' Interests would allow implementation in a way which would achieve a reasonable balance between the considerations of the integrity of the data, the ease of access to those using the system and administrative efficiency. The Committee would welcome the views of Members and other interested people on the proposal which would be implemented in the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament.

Mr B Raguse MP  
Chair  
November 2009

