

Joint Committee On Public Accounts

Hearing 19 September 2008

Opening Statement

The Office of the Official Secretary to the Governor-General welcomes the chance to make a submission to this Inquiry. We also welcome the opportunity to help the Committee in its deliberations.

I should commence by presenting an apology from the Official Secretary to the Governor-General, Mr Stephen Brady, who is unable to be here today as he is with the Governor-General.

There is one amendment to our submission. On page 2, we show a table extracted from the Portfolio Budget Statements for 2008-09. The original table provided is an earlier working version which has minor variations to the PBS and I would like to request permission to submit the correct table.

Like many other witnesses who have already appeared before this Committee, the Office wants to make it clear that it supports more efficient ways to use Commonwealth resources and deliver services. However, as a small agency with a budget just under \$12 million with around 90 staff at two locations, the efficiency dividend is now starting to have an impact on our core operations and we need to address how this will be handled in the future.

It is probably worthwhile making some brief comments about the work of the Office. Under the Governor-General Act, the role of the Official Secretary is to support the Governor-General and he is empowered to employ staff to help him do that. The Official Secretary and the staff constitute the Office. The Office is a Commonwealth agency under the FMA Act and so has to meet all the reporting and accountability requirements mandated by that Act. In a small agency that is starting to present its own challenges.

The Governor-General has three main functions, her constitutional, ceremonial and community activities, and these are very demanding for any one person - as Appendix A in our submission shows. The Governor-General of the day gets very little 'down time'.

At another level, the Office is responsible for managing two heritage properties that belong to all Australians, two heritage gardens (one in an inland city in a drought), and effectively running two function centres. We are a small agency that employs specialists such as gardeners and chefs along side case workers for the Honours Secretariat, which in a tight employment market gives us even less flexibility.

By far the greatest challenge that the Office faces are the fixed costs such as salaries and utilities - and at the same time meeting the increasing demands on the Governor-General, and complying with the various heritage, environmental and building codes for our properties so that the 30,000 people each year who use them are safe and we can hand these assets on to the next generation in good order.