



PARLIAMENT of AUSTRALIA
HOUSE of REPRESENTATIVES

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Ms Julie Owens MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Procedure

Received
21/8/09 JOL

Dear Ms Owens

The committee system

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with the committee on 13 August; we appreciated your committee's interest in our perspective on the operations of the House's system of committees.

This note has been prepared to follow-up on matters discussed on 13 August.

Achievements

It is common to hear Members refer to their committee work in terms such as 'a highlight of my work' or 'a most rewarding experience....'; happily it is also common to hear Members speak warmly about the experience of working with colleagues on committee inquiries, regardless of their party.

Nevertheless there may be a danger in that because the work of committees has become such a well established feature of the work of the House it could be easy to underestimate its value and importance. Since 1987 hundreds of reports have been presented, between them covering every major area of national government responsibility. Elements of executive accountability can be seen in all of them; some have been heavily focused on holding government to account, while others have had a broader nature. Numerous reports have dealt with issues of great social, economic, legal or environmental significance.

It has very often been the case that government responses have not met government's own target of timelines; and it is also true that in simple statistical terms often the acceptance rate of recommendations has not been high. It is however important that such aspects are given careful consideration. Two recent authoritative papers by a departmental colleague, David Monk have shed more light on the true effectiveness of committee reports¹.

¹ Parliamentary Studies Centre Papers 10 and 11: David Monk *In the Eye of the Beholder? A Framework for Testing the Effectiveness of Parliamentary Committees* and *A Statistical Analysis of Government Responses to Committee Reports: Reports Tabled between the 2001 and 2004 Elections* (www.parliamentarystudies.anu.edu.au)

I am also sure that all Members of your committee will recall cases where there has been delayed or modified reflection of committee recommendations in government policy or administration. My observation is that often committee reports form part of evolving thinking and attitudes, perhaps bearing fruit at unexpected times or in unexpected ways.

It is also my belief that the true value of committee work is not just in a committee's report, let alone in the statistical success rate of its recommendations. The inquiry process itself can be extremely beneficial in itself. Citizens, experts, officials and others can appreciate very much the opportunity to participate – often it may be a matter of 'at last somebody is listening' or 'somebody is interested' - see for example the recent report by the Standing Committee on Family, community, Housing and Youth into the role of carers². Some of these issues have been discussed in a paper '*The changing role of parliamentary committees and the place of the community*' by departmental colleague Siobhan Leyne³. In my view the potential for committee work to counter feelings or perceptions that the House or the Parliament is not relevant or of value is of great importance. In this regard the work of the Liaison and Projects Office in explaining and promoting inquiries has been particularly important.

Finally, Members have often commented on the value of committee work in terms of their own understanding of issues- another illustration that the worth of committee work needs to be thought of in much broader terms than merely the report and the success rate of recommendations. This aspect was discussed in a paper by Mr Rod Sawford: *Community participation and member education* presented at a seminar to mark the 20th anniversary of the House committee system. Referring to one inquiry with which he had been associated Mr Sawford said

That report, like many others, stands as a testament to the very best qualities and attributes of the public service, parliamentarians from all sides of politics and the community. Reports like.....sustain relations in a very positive way between public servants, parliamentarians and the community and that collaboration should never be underestimated.⁴

Future possibilities

House committees have increasingly used innovative practices to allow greater participation in inquiry processes. In some subject areas it would now be unlikely that committees would consider relying only on traditional evidence gathering procedures. Developments such as community forums and short statements by people who may not have made written submissions have not taken the place of traditional approaches, rather they have been supplementary to them. They have provided for many more people to be involved in inquiries and for a wider range of views and experiences to be put before Members.

² *Better support for carers* – report by the Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth - www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/fchy/carers/index.htm.

³ Paper presented at seminar to mark 20th anniversary of the establishment of the House Committee System- http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/20_anniversary.

⁴ http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/20_anniversary.

In my view, although the newer supplementary approaches that have been developed have been highly successful, the longer term success of the system itself suggests that attention should be given to the possibilities of further innovation.

Technological developments offer tremendous potential to extend the reach of communities work in times of community participation⁵. Former colleague John Baczynski has discussed the use of available technologies by House committees during the 41st Parliament in a paper published by the Parliamentary Studies Centre⁶. He cites the use of online technologies by the Standing Committee on Health and Ageing during its 2007 inquiry into breastfeeding. The committee 'utilised several parenting websites with online forums as a means to promote the inquiry and to observe current community perspectives on the topic'; it used three external sites and the committee secretary registered as a user on some sites and posted a message promoting the inquiry and inviting submissions, with the result that there was a surge in submissions⁷.

In another case, in this Parliament the House Standing Committee on Education and Training conducted an electronic survey to encourage students to contribute their experiences to its combining school and work inquiry. The form asked for short responses and provided the opportunity to make further comment on each question. The survey form was advertised via a direct mail out to all secondary schools and colleges and a letter sent to all Members and Senators requesting them to encourage students to provide input as well. The Committee also used more traditional methods such as school visits and general media advertisement to encourage participation in the survey. The Committee has received approximately 2,800 responses and it proposed that the responses will be accepted collectively as an exhibit.

The use of such technologies presents many challenges, such as issues of authentication and possible distortion, and raises some interesting procedural and administrative questions. However, the potential to enhance links and the flow of information between committees and the community is such that in my view they should be explored. While many of the new technologies to date have been primarily about disseminating information about particular committee inquiries, and providing information on the work of committees, there is potential to move beyond that role to enabling greater dialogue with different groups within the Australian community and enhancing their engagement with the Australian Parliament. It is possible to envisage committees, for example, hosting on-line forums or blogs and participating in social networking sites in some form to reach groups, particularly younger Australians, and seek their input into particular issues. Use of technology in this way will be a useful adjunct to the more traditional methods of operation for committees.

⁵ And see Procedure Committee report *Application of Modern Technology to Committee Proceedings*, November 1994, and see recommendations 22 and 23 of the committee's 1998 report on the committee system.

⁶ John Baczynski *Opportunities for Greater Consultation? House Committee use of information and communication technology* Parliamentary Studies Centre Paper No 8 – www.parliamentarystudies.anu.edu.au

⁷ Baczynski, op cit, p 4.

There is currently a project underway to redevelop the Australian Parliament's web site. Although in its very early stages, there is an acknowledgement of the need to build in the capacity to engage in a range of e-consultation processes if the decision is taken to move in this direction. It is interesting to note that the UK Parliament is currently developing its capacity to run online consultations on behalf of parliamentary select committees. Previous eConsultations were run by the Hansard Society on behalf of Parliament and covered a wide range of subjects (for details see: <http://forums.parliament.uk/html/index.html>). I also note that the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions is investigating whether an e-petitions system for the House should be adopted.

In addition there is the potential for committees to work through other Members in terms of evidence gathering and community involvement in inquiries. For example, in some inquiries a committee could devise a structure to allow other Members to obtain information or input from people in their individual electorates. A committee could develop a grid or series of points to give Members a structure within which to seek local input or comments.

Such actions, like applications of modern technologies, in appropriate cases could

- greatly increase the range of views put to a committee;
- allow a very wide range of geographical areas to be covered
- save on travel costs and committee Members' time;
- inform Members not on a committee of the progress of an inquiry and allow them to be involved in a structured way
- generate greater knowledge of a committee inquiry in a low cost manner
- improve the prospects of an informed and interested reception for the report when the inquiry was completed
- help improve the integration of committee work into the life of the House.

I should also note that the work done by the Department's Liaison and Projects Office to promote inquiries has enabled factual and interesting information to be disseminated, and has reduced reliance on the expensive and sometimes questionable process of advertising for submissions.

Although only a small number of bills have been referred to House committees, in every case the results have been commendable. It is my hope that greater use will be made of the committee system in the consideration of legislation. In many ways this would be a logical step, and my colleagues and I stand ready to support any such development.

In the longer-term it is also quite likely that committee work will become more fully integrated into the weekly work of the House. In this regard I draw the committee's attention to my submission to its inquiry into the conduct of the business of the House and, in particular, to the possibility that the programming of committee related business be separated from private Members' business and given a separate time period, for example before 2pm on Tuesdays, the time being allocated by the Deputy Speaker in consultation with Chairs and Deputy Chairs.

Members and committee staff have already made highly successful innovations in relation to committee work. As in so many matters, there is so much activity going on on so many fronts that as well as encouraging further innovation, part of the challenge is to recognise and obtain best value for the practical successes already achieved by individual committees.

The department will be pleased to provide further comment on these or any other matters of interest to your committee.

Yours sincerely

I C HARRIS
Clerk of the House
20 August 2009