

## Government Response

### Report of the House Procedure Committee

#### 'House Estimates: Consideration of the Annual estimates by the House of Representatives'

#### **Recommendation 1**

The committee recommends that:

- the second readings of the appropriation bills be agreed to without further debate following the Leader of the Opposition's speech in response to the Treasurer's budget speech;
- after the second reading of the appropriation bills the motion 'That the House approves the Budget' be moved;
- the wide-ranging budget debate (currently occurring on the question for the second reading of the main appropriation bill) then take place on the question 'That the House approves the Budget';
- the rules relating to relevance and amendment which currently apply to the second reading of the main appropriation bill apply to the budget debate in its new form;
- debate on the consideration in detail stage of Appropriation Bill (No. 1) in the Main Committee take place concurrently with the budget debate in the Chamber of the House, and possibly alternately with the budget debate after the budget debate has been referred to the Main Committee;
- the procedures above be adopted for the additional appropriation bills, adapted to the shorter time frame, and the general budget-type debate at this time take place on the question 'That the House approves the additional estimates'.

**Proposed Response:** The government does not support the recommendation. The government considers that the current arrangements for considering the budget bills in the House and in the Main Committee provide adequate opportunities for examination and debate.

#### **Recommendation 2**

The committee recommends that:

- the Selection Committee be responsible for arranging the timetable and order of business for the consideration in detail stage of the main appropriation bills. In doing so the committee must seek advice from the Leader of the House on the availability of Ministers;
- the timetable be published on the Notice Paper for the first sitting day of the week of consideration and remain on the Notice Paper until the consideration has been completed; and
- the timetable published on the Notice Paper be generally observed, with the proviso that consideration of a department may conclude earlier than indicated on the program if no further Member seeks the call, and that the consideration of the next department may commence if the representing Minister is available and other Members present agree.

**Proposed response:** The government does not support the recommendation. The government considers that the current arrangements for scheduling the consideration-in-detail stage are operating effectively.

### Recommendation 3

The committee recommends that the standing orders provide that if the Chair notes that no Minister is present to respond to matters raised during the consideration of the estimates, the Chair shall suspend proceedings until a Minister is available.

**Proposed response: The government does not support the recommendation. While acknowledging that it is desirable for relevant ministers to be present, the government does not favour suspension of proceedings where ministers are able to be appropriately represented and members have an opportunity to take part in the debate.**

### Recommendation 4

The committee recommends that when proposed expenditure for a department is being debated during the detail stage of Appropriation Bill (No. 1), the relevance rule applying should permit reference to expenditure in respect of the department contained in Appropriation Bill (No. 2) and to any other document relevant to expenditure of a department which has been tabled in the House, including the department's annual report, portfolio budget statement, portfolio additional estimates statement, report of the Auditor-General or parliamentary committee report relating to the department. A similar provision should apply to any detail stage debate of an additional appropriation bill.

**Proposed response: The government agrees in-principle that the relevance rule should permit reference to expenditure in respect of the department contained in any of the appropriation bills and notes that this is existing practice.**

### Recommendation 5

The committee recommends that the standing orders require portfolio budget statements of departments to be tabled in the House as soon as they are available and before the consideration of the estimates, and that the portfolio additional estimates statements also be tabled in the House.

**Proposed response: The government does not support the recommendation. These documents are already made public and are tabled in the Senate.**

### Recommendation 6

The committee recommends that when the proposed expenditure of a department or group of departments is considered in detail:

- the Minister responsible for the department, or another Minister representing the Minister, shall make an opening statement, summarising proposed expenditure for the department, noting trends and changes and significant developments; and
- the chair of the relevant general purpose standing committee, or a Member of the committee representing the chair, shall have the opportunity to make a short statement, outlining any report or activity of the committee relevant to the expenditure of the department, and reporting any observations the committee wishes to make on the operations of the department.

**Proposed response: The government does not support the recommendation. Full details of the Budget are presented when the appropriation bills are introduced. The opportunity to speak to the consideration-in-detail stage is available to all members under the existing arrangements.**

### **Recommendation 7**

The committee recommends that the chapter of the standing orders headed 'Financial Procedures' (current standing orders 291–293) be amended to include all standing orders applying to the budget and estimates processes, and equivalent changes be made to the proposed revised standing orders.

**Proposed response: The government does not support the recommendation. The government notes that the current Standing Orders and the accompanying 'Guide to Procedures' and 'House of Representatives Practice' provide a comprehensive coverage of the current appropriations procedures.**

### **Recommendation 8**

The committee recommends that:

- immediately after the second reading of the main appropriation bill is agreed to (in accordance with recommendation 1), the House refer the estimates of proposed expenditure, and other budget documentation including portfolio budget statements, to the relevant House standing committees or to House committees composed of the House members of joint committees administered by the Department of the House of Representatives;
- the allocation of departments to committees be determined by the Speaker;
- the committees hold estimates hearings for those departments where the responsible Minister or Presiding Officer is a Member of the House of Representatives;
- the hearings be held after the rising of the House on the Thursday evenings and the Fridays of the two sitting weeks immediately following budget week;
- the standing orders relating to estimates hearings permit any Member of the House to attend and question witnesses;
- the timetable of hearings be notified to Members, Ministers and departments well in advance;
- the processes above be adopted for the additional appropriation bills, adapted as appropriate to the shorter time frame.

**Proposed response: The government does not support the recommendation. There are a range of existing opportunities for comprehensive scrutiny of appropriations by the House of Representatives, including the debate of the appropriation bills, questions and other debates.**

## **Recommendation 9**

The committee recommends that (if not already occurring in accordance with recommendation 8) portfolio budget statements, portfolio additional estimates statements and copies of details of expenditure contained in appropriation bills be automatically referred to the relevant general purpose standing committee.

**Proposed response: The government does not support the recommendation.**

## **Recommendation 10**

The committee recommends that:

- the resources, staffing and workload of House general purpose standing committees, and joint committees administered by the Department of the House of Representatives, be reviewed by the Clerk of the House with a view to accommodating annual reviews by the committees of the expenditure and performance of government departments and agencies; and
- following a satisfactory outcome to the review, each general purpose standing committee form an expenditure subcommittee to report annually on the expenditure and performance of the departments and agencies within its area of responsibility.

**Proposed response: The government notes the recommendation. Issues relating to committee resourcing are a matter for the Speaker.**