COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATIONS

Reference: Certain issues related to non-print material

(Briefing)

THURSDAY, 12 OCTOBER 2000

CANBERRA

JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATIONS

Thursday, 12 October 2000

Members: Mr Lieberman *(Chair)*, Senator Lightfoot *(Deputy Chair)*, Senators Bishop, Buckland, Calvert, Chapman, McKiernan and McLucas and Mr Hardgrave, Mrs Hull, Mr Lloyd, Ms Jann McFarlane, Mr Rudd and Mr Sidebottom

Senators and members in attendance: Senators Buckland, Lightfoot and McLucas and Mrs Hull, Mr Lieberman and Ms Jann McFarlane

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

- Briefing on certain issues related to non-print material.

WITNESSES

Committee met at 8.04 a.m.

LANCE, Ms Kay Chee, Manager, Policy and Directions, National Office for the Information Economy

STEWART, Mr Brian, General Manager, Policy and Directions, National Office for the Information Economy

CHAIR—Welcome. Firstly, I indicate to my colleagues that Senator Joe Ludwig, a hardworking member of our committee, has been given additional responsibilities and has been discharged as a member of the Joint Publications Committee. We are delighted to welcome in his place Senator Geoffrey Buckland, a senator from South Australia. Senator Buckland, welcome to our committee. We are very pleased that you are joining us.

The meeting today continues a series of private briefings that the committee has been undertaking for some months. The briefings are to do with the kinds of non-print material authored by government and parliamentary sources in the dynamics of the changing world. We are seeking information from experts such as Brian and Kay on how access to such material is gained by people across our great nation, especially those with disabilities and those in remote and regional locations. The committee is also interested in the issue of authentication of the authorship of material and its preservation. We are not restricting ourselves to material published on the Internet. Instead, we are investigating a variety of electronic formats, including CD-ROMs, newer technology such as digital video disc and material recorded on older technology such as audio cassette and videotape. We are not at this stage proposing to investigate matters relating to e-commerce, but it is a moveable feast so who knows! Perhaps after what you tell us today we might decide to jump off a cliff and do something totally opposite, but I doubt it. It is a very challenging area.

Mr Stewart—I have a slight quandary. A day is a long time, and I am in a different organisation today. You may have seen a release yesterday from Senator Alston, announcing the creation of a new executive agency under the Public Service Act, combining the old NOIE and the old OGO.

CHAIR—Congratulations.

Mr Stewart—Thank you. The Office of Government Online is now part of the new NOIE, which is the National Office for the Information Economy.

CHAIR—As in all committees, proceedings here today are legal proceedings of the parliament and as such warrant the same respect. In a general sense, all committees tell witnesses that the committee requires the forms of the House to be followed, and misleading statements and submissions may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Stewart—Yes. I understand that I have only a few minutes so I will make it relatively brief. The Government Online part of the new NOIE is described in our *Government Online Strategy*, which was released on 6 April by Senator Ian Campbell, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts. It sets the framework

for most of the work we do inside OGO. There is quite a lot of material in there but, as I understand it, the area that the committee is most interested in is what we call the enablers or standards that we have set for agencies, particularly in the area of accessibility standards and preservation and archiving standards.

What I will say about each of the six or seven standards we have specified in this online strategy is that, generally speaking, there is another agency in the Commonwealth sphere that has full ownership. OGO does not regard itself as having full ownership of most of those standards, with the exception of perhaps one or two. We work quite closely with the Privacy Commissioner, the human rights commissioner, the National Archives and AusInfo in implementing those standards. Our role is one of ensuring that other Commonwealth agencies— the wider Commonwealth sphere—see those standards as being important to the delivery of online services to clients and businesses. So we do not own those standards and do not take responsibility for them, but we do take responsibility for their promulgation and for making sure that agencies are aware of their responsibilities in implementing those standards in the online sphere.

In regard to both the accessibility standards and the preservation standards, they are both reasonably new. It is our assessment that there probably is not an enormous amount of expertise out there in the Commonwealth at this stage, although it is growing. That they are both reasonably new standards is probably reflected more widely in the business community. Electronic record keeping is something that we are learning about. Accessibility for people with disabilities and for people in rural and remote communities is something which we are definitely starting to learn about, but I do not think we are on our own in this area. If you look around the broader business community, and if you look around the globe, accessibility standards are a new sphere in people's consciousness. Some of those standards have been around for a little while, but it is only in the last six to 12 months that they have really taken off in terms of people's consciousness of them.

I think our assessment around the Commonwealth is that we put these standards in here because we felt there needed to be a bit of an improvement in the uptake of those standards. We are now trying to measure how agencies are going with that. As part of the strategy, we require agencies to report to us on a six-monthly basis—at the present time, we are compiling the results of the second of those surveys—and we are trying to measure how we are going against each of those standards. If you look around the globe, there are not a lot of sites which comply particularly well with accessibility for people with disabilities and for people in rural and remote areas, and I think the whole Internet community is on a bit of a learning path as to how we should deal with this. We see our particular role as being one of working with the Archives in the case of preservation, and with Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in the case of accessibility, to prod, to encourage, to assist and to facilitate agencies to implement those standards broadly across online publications.

CHAIR—Ms Lance, do you wish to add anything from your new perspective on the other side of the table?

Ms Lance—I do have a little preliminary information from the surveys if you would like me to go through it now.

CHAIR—Yes, please.

Ms Lance—As my colleague mentioned, this is the second round of online surveys of the progress of all government agencies against various things in the online strategy. You have indicated that you are interested in accessibility, archives and regional things. The preliminary figures indicate that government agencies are not yet at the stage where they are fully compliant with all those things, but the majority of them have indicated that they will be compliant by the set date. What we read into it is that it is a very useful exercise that government agencies are going through—being aware of the standards and guidelines and how to be compliant with them. Whilst many of them may not have been compliant in round 1 and in the earlier days they are making all efforts to be compliant by the set deadline, which is 30 December 2000 for some of them.

In the case of the W3C guidelines to assist people with disabilities—the World Wide Web consortium guidelines—I will give the committee the actual figures when they are firmed up. This is the first week of assessment of the returns and about one-third are compliant. But what is very gratifying is that the majority—the other nearly two-thirds—have said that they will be compliant. Very few agencies have web sites that specifically target rural and regional. The figures are about 10 per cent or so. What we probably take into account is that a lot of these accessibility standards would assist people in rural and regional areas. Also, they will not be tied to standard government office opening hours and things like that, so in a way it is an indirect assistance.

CHAIR—That is very interesting. Do you have a strategy worked out yet to enforce performance? I appreciate you have a reporting process that requires them to report and you to assess, but what happens if they do not perform? How do you propose to deal with that?

Mr Stewart—In the accessibility area, all Commonwealth agencies are bound by the Disability Discrimination Act, and it is the responsibility of HREOC to enforce that. Our role has been very much one of raising agencies' awareness—getting it very much in their sights and in their consciousness—providing training facilities and prodding them through the survey. We held a major half-day forum on 12 July with all the major speakers, including a number of disabled people who could talk about their particular problems. The enforcement responsibility would be one for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission because they are the ones who administer the Disability Discrimination Act. It is a complaints based system. I think agencies are starting to become aware that they are liable to have complaints made under that act against their sites. There are a few cases where agencies have had action taken against them by disabled people—where people could not access particular web sites—and HREOC has become involved. In that particular area, the enforcement responsibility would fall, in our view, on HREOC's shoulders. Our role is very much to facilitate, to inform, to assist and to train.

CHAIR—Do you provide an annual report to parliament of what you have observed during the year?

Mr Stewart—What we have done so far is to provide a series of progress reports. We published a progress report last year, which predated this so it did not include measurement of these particular standards. There was a progress report which Senator Campbell released at the end of last year. The results of the first round survey were released publicly by Senator

Campbell, and I expect that towards the end of the year we will have a second progress report. It was not a formal report to parliament, but it was a public report released by Senator Campbell.

We are in a major information collection stage at the moment, and we have a number of obligations on agencies to report. One is through our private online survey of former agencies to fill in how they have gone against certain things. In the second sphere, agencies are required to publish what is called an online agency action plan, whereby they have to put out a strategic statement about how they will get all their services online by 2001 in line with the Prime Minister's commitments. In that action plan they will need to specify how they are fulfilling their standard obligations as well. There will be both a private and a public report and we will combine those—I expect later in the year—for a second status report which will be available publicly.

CHAIR—With the few minutes remaining, senators and members may have some questions. We will be writing to you with a series of other questions that may not be asked in the time we have available.

Ms JANN McFARLANE—What do you think are the other major psychological or corporate blocks to having the disability access and the rural access happen on web sites?

Mr Stewart—There are a couple of things. The initial culture about how to design a web site did not have any of this in its sites. If you read some of the early texts on this, and if we look at some of the earlier sites that were regarded as good practice sites, there was an attempt to try to do things which were very visually appealing, fancy and technically very sophisticated. Those sorts of things sometimes cause accessibility problems, and the broad culture amongst web developers did not really pick this up. You now have a legacy of a lot of sites with a various mix of problems. More seriously, I just do not think there are a lot of skills in train in this country. Courses for web developers, web managers and people who manage these areas are very few and far between. There are only two, three or four organisations that provide that sort of training, so I think there is a major dearth of training. We did try to get them together in front of Commonwealth agencies, and we had virtually all of those at the forum on 12 July.

The big issue is training. Once that training is in place, there will be a process of ensuring that agencies have this sort of stuff included as part of their web management cycle. As part of the strategy, agencies are required to include accessibility standards in all contracts with web developers. As part of the process, agencies are now required to pick this up. One of the questions we ask in our survey is: have you included accessibility standards in your new web development contract? It is partly a legacy problem, partly a training problem and partly the question of getting sites to evolve.

We have had some questions from web developing companies that came to the seminars—to our open public forums. They said, 'You can't be serious. You can't expect us to redesign every site in the Commonwealth overnight.' I do not think we can, and it is going to be a bit of a journey. The challenge for us, in conjunction with HREOC, is to make sure that we set achievable targets along the way so that people do not throw up their hands in horror because it is all too hard. We have to set achievable targets. I do think that we in the Commonwealth are in a very good position here compared with the rest of the Internet community. It just is not on the radar screen for most of the people out there.

Ms JANN McFARLANE—I have two children doing communications degrees at two different universities and, as part of their projects, they have had to design web sites. I have looked at what they are doing and asked them about their web sites. When they raised it with their tutors, they were just told, 'That really happens in the community sector; it is not a concern of ours.' To me, that is a link. A lot of courses now require the students to design a web site as part of a project. Where is the link there? We do not have a link to them that I am aware of. Who has that responsibility? How does this filter down to the people who are learning the web site development—at that embryonic stage?

Mr Stewart—I am not sure I have an answer to that question, Ms McFarlane. You could perhaps talk to the education and training people, but I think it is an exercise that the human rights commission will have to educate people about. There are some very active people. For training purposes we have used a chap called Brian Hardy, a chap called Larry Stillman and a chap called Tim Noonan, one of whom is actually blind himself. They are all work in training courses, and I think they are out there pressing the flesh. There is going to be a role for HREOC in talking to some of those training institutions. I guess our role is very much limited towards making sure that Commonwealth agencies are aware of their obligations, aware of the standards which the Commonwealth has mandated and aware of the training opportunities. If the demand is there for training with Commonwealth agencies, I guess there will be a supply response at some stage.

The other interesting point to note on this accessibility area, which I did not mention in my preamble, is that this is now an agreed standard with the states and territories as well. There is a Commonwealth-state ministerial council, called the Online Council, which Senator Alston chairs and which deals with Internet matters. At their most recent meeting, the Commonwealth, states and territories all agreed to accept the W3C standards for their jurisdiction, so there is now a broad agreement amongst all jurisdictions in the country that we are to pick up these standards as part of our web standard. That will be a further demand for the training services. From our side we are trying to push that demand for the training.

Senator LIGHTFOOT—Ms Lance, you mentioned the W3C. What umbrella does that come under? Or is it a stand-alone organisation? Where is it situated? Where did they draw their standards? Why are we choosing them?

Ms Lance—I believe it was started by the founder of the web many years ago, and it was based in MIT—Massachusetts Institute of Technology—first of all. It comprises something like 400 companies. I think Brian may know a little bit more about it.

Mr Stewart—It is a consortium that is based around MIT, and it is supported by industry. It is a consortium of quasi-academics which is supported by industry and is designed to draw all the competing firms together.

Senator LIGHTFOOT—Is it still with MIT?

Mr Stewart—They now have clones around the world. There is now one in Europe, I think there is one in Japan and there is now one in Australia. There is now a W3C centre in Australia which is situated—

Senator LIGHTFOOT—Who sits at the top of that pyramid?

Mr Stewart—I do not know the governing structure of that, to be perfectly honest. All I could describe it as is an industry supported private consortium of cooperative standard-setting organisations.

Senator LIGHTFOOT—What does it cost to be a member of that?

Mr Stewart—I think to be a full member it is about $50,000 a year. That gives you access to all their research and early research. To be a sponsoring member, it is about $5,000 a year.

Senator LIGHTFOOT—So you can be an individual, you can be a company, you can be a country or you can be a state?

Mr Stewart—Yes, anybody can sign up. The advantage of joining is that you get to contribute to the standard-setting process and, if you are developing software products, you get early access to the standards. You get a bit of a head start, so there is an incentive to join.

Senator LIGHTFOOT—What does the government get for $50,000 a year?

Mr Stewart—I do not believe we have joined, although I am not sure. The Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts has a lot of web sites, and I know one of those sites has joined as a member. I am not sure whether it is the $50,000 or the $5,000 membership status.

Senator LIGHTFOOT—Would you take that on notice and come back to us?

Mr Stewart—Yes, I will. The expert in this area—the person who is the most influential in the setting of the standards in this area—is an Australian called Charles McCathie Nevile. He is based in Melbourne. He also talked at our 12 July seminar for agencies. So the major voice in standards setting in this area is an Australian individual.

Senator LIGHTFOOT—So there is the WC3, and the head of it sits in Massachusetts. Is that right? Or does it go beyond that?

Mr Stewart—The governing structures would. I need to take on notice the precise governing structures because I have a feeling there are three or four different centres of W3C now.

Senator LIGHTFOOT—Would you take that on notice? We do have limited time.

Mr Stewart—Yes, indeed.

Senator McLUCAS—There is a report of web sites for rural Australia. Are you aware of that?

Mr Stewart—Yes.

Senator McLUCAS—One of the comments is that, in particular too many sites are laden with excessive graphics that slow down. Is that going to change over time? That is a snapshot of today, as far as I can see it.

Mr Stewart—The message I have heard the trainers in this area say is, 'Don't necessarily try to make sites plain and boring. You do not have to make sites plain and boring in order to make them accessible. There are ways.'

Ms Lance—One of the guidelines in the W3C is that web sites should be designed so that, if there is a lot of graphics, the viewer has the choice of turning them off and having text only, which would assist those people with slower and older browsers.

Mr Stewart—To answer your questions at a very technical level, you will find fewer images being used. The reason that images are being used so much to date is that people have wanted to get colourful fancy text, and there are now ways of doing that without using images—by using more advanced HTML techniques. I could start to get very technical at this point, but I think you will see fewer and fewer images being used. The point is not so much to make boring sites but to make sites which can be navigated without the images off and which people with disabilities can easily navigate when they are using their text-to-speech interpreters.

Senator McLUCAS—Is it to do with the fact that people in more rural areas do not have the Internet servers that people in cities do? That is a view that I have; I do not know whether it is correct?

Mr Stewart—My understanding is that the quality of the infrastructure in the bush is regarded as being a bit less than what it is in most of the metropolitan areas, although I have been told that there are some areas in the metropolitan country which also are not that well served—some parts in Northern Sydney are not that flash, I believe. In those sorts of areas, the connection speed you can get is somewhat less. Therefore the information you can download in a certain amount of time is less, and therefore you want the core information and not the peripheral bits—you want your core text rather than a whole lot of peripheral images. It is very much a bandwidth problem, as I understand it.

Senator McLUCAS—I wonder whether Internet designers or web page designers could make it so you could click to add on the peripherals rather than getting the peripherals and then clicking them off. It might be a better way of doing it.

Mr Stewart—There are two schools of thought here. One is whether you should create a flash site and a simple site—a text-only site—and some people have done that. But in presentations I have heard from experts in the field, they have suggested that that is actually a bit hard to do because you then have to manage and maintain two separate sites and keep them in sync. You are better off having one site which is well designed and which can be navigated equally well with the images off and the images on. There are smart ways of doing things if you have thought about them and have been trained in the appropriate way of doing them.

Senator BUCKLAND—I have a couple of questions that are more to do with the training provisions and the equity more particularly in remote areas than in rural and regional areas.

What level of training will be provided to these people? How will it be delivered? What standards will be set for those delivering the services?

Ms Lance—In rural or regional areas?

Senator BUCKLAND—More particularly in remote areas, where access is very limited.

Ms Lance—My colleagues mentioned that we run a series of workshops on accessibility issues. The workshop people take them through the whole suite of, I believe, 14 guidelines. That includes things on graphics and things that we do not even think of, like flashing images.

Senator BUCKLAND—I am more concerned about the low numbers. We are not talking about mass numbers such as in a capital city but about the low numbers of people. How will that be administered once the system is online?

Mr Stewart—Are you talking about training for users?

Senator BUCKLAND—For users.

Mr Stewart—That is a bit outside our mandate, and inside the Office of the Government Online.

Senator BUCKLAND—But they will be providing that training, and they need to be trained to a standard.

Mr Stewart—The Commonwealth has a number of initiatives in train to assist people in regional and rural areas to access services and to get familiar with them. It is a bit outside my area to speak about it in detail. The government has a number of programs, including Networking the Nation. Networking the Nation is a granting program designed to get community access out there into regional and rural Australia. Similarly, the government has a Rural Transaction Centre Program, designed to get transactional centres into regional and rural Australia. So there are a number of initiatives. I would have to take on notice the documenting of all of those for you because it is a bit outside our mandate. Our mandate is very much with agencies and getting agency services online—so it is more on the supply side of that equation than on the demand side. There are others who are trying to assist and encourage.

Senator BUCKLAND—You will have to forgive me because I have not been involved with it before, but if that is the case, it worries me a little that you are setting up a system that other agencies then have to fall in line with. Where is the coordination link between agencies and the end user?

Mr Stewart—We try to coordinate amongst agencies by holding a series of forums, and we have a series of coordination committees. We have a number of channels whereby people get to understand the broad scope of things we are doing. Whenever we take things to ministers there is obviously a coordination process involved with that as well.

Inside the Commonwealth it is very much the case that we have a number of coordination forums. I think we have quite close working relationships—including within our own portfolio—with those people who run the programs, especially the Networking the Nation Program, which I guess will be the major one that is trying to push people out. The Networking the Nation Program is actually used as one of our better examples. It calls for applications for grants online and interacts with its board members, who are quite often in rural areas. So we have used it as a very good example of some of the things that can be done. I do think we have quite good informal linkages with the people who run some of those programs.

CHAIR—Brian and Kay, thank you very much. We will write to you for further information, and we appreciate your being kind enough to add the information that we seek following on from today. We wish you well in your work. Your new role is very challenging. Good luck.

Committee adjourned at 8.31 a.m.