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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATIONS

Reference: Certain issues related to non-print material

(Briefing)

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JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATIONS

Thursday, 9 November 2000

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

Senators and members in attendance: Senators Lightfoot and McLucas and Mr Lieberman and Ms Jann McFarlane

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

Briefing on certain issues related to non-print material.

WITNESSES

NICOLL, Dr Paul James, Executive Director, Performance Audit Service Group, Australian National Audit Office.....48

TURNER, Mr Eric, Audit Manager, Performance Audit Service Group, Australian National Audit Office48

Committee met at 8.04 a.m.

CHAIR—Welcome to this meeting of the Joint Standing Committee on Publications. Today we are having a private briefing from the Australian National Audit Office. After that, the committee will then attend to its duties regarding reporting to parliament later today, so time is very short. The committee is undertaking a series of private briefings, of which this is one, into issues relating to the kinds of non-print material authored by government and parliamentary sources.

Although today the committee will be restricting itself to the consideration of material published on the Internet, we do not propose to investigate matters relating to e-commerce. We are seeking information on how access to material is gained by people with disabilities and on limitations for residents in remote and regional Australia in particular. We are not excluding anything else, but that is of particular interest to us. The committee is very interested in pursuing recent reports which seem to suggest that more importance is placed on agencies having an Internet site rather than on the effectiveness of the Internet site as a tool for involving Australians in the democratic process.

[8.05 a.m.]

NICOLL, Dr Paul James, Executive Director, Performance Audit Service Group, Australian National Audit Office

TURNER, Mr Eric, Audit Manager, Performance Audit Service Group, Australian National Audit Office

CHAIR—Welcome. I remind you that proceedings here today are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings in the houses themselves. The deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Dr Nicoll—Yes, Mr Chair, if it would assist. I would like to make a brief opening statement about our report. In 1997, the Prime Minister announced the government's Investing for Growth policy, and part of that had a requirement of government agencies that, by next year, 2001, government agencies would have all appropriate services Internet deliverable. Last year, my colleague Eric and I conducted a performance audit of how government agencies are going in implementing the government's policy in this domain, and we tabled our report in Audit report No. 18 of last year. It is called *Electronic service delivery, including Internet use, by Commonwealth government agencies*.

That report concluded that, overall, agencies were well on track to achieve the government's objectives. However, there were some impediments to them fully implementing what the government was hoping for, and we identified those. The report also included information about how agencies are using the Internet and how they anticipate using the Internet in the near future.

CHAIR—I noticed in the report that, in the context of access and equity, only about 19 per cent of agencies rated the issue of access and equity as being of high priority—or high concern I think was the generalisation that you made in your report summary. A large number, I think, said they had a moderate level of concern, but expressed the concern about costs of implementing or extending access—I think that was the tenor of your report. I was troubled by that in the sense that that seemed to me to be a cop-out—but I do not want to make a judgment. Does that indicate that these agencies are, in fact, not regarding access and equity as a prerequisite, as a fundamental requirement, and that they are looking at it and saying, 'Oh well, when we get funds one day, we will do it'? Am I being too harsh in that judgment? What is your view on that?

Dr Nicoll—It is probably an indication of how agencies see the importance of access and equity relative to their functions. It is hard to delve beyond that without a case by case study of the reasons for why particular agencies gave the responses that they did. We reported more specifically on infrastructure. On page 56 of our report, one of the interesting phenomena was that, while 19 per cent of responding agencies rated equity and access as a high or very high concern, if you include those who considered it of moderate concern, the percentage of 19 goes up very considerably, but actually slightly more saw infrastructure as being a particular issue. Twenty-three per cent saw infrastructure, or lack of infrastructure, as being a problem. Again, if you look at the data and include the moderates, that figure obviously will go up considerably.

CHAIR—Do you think that the agencies have included in their ‘business plan’ the objective of achieving an adequate level of access and equity?

Dr Nicoll—We did not review their business plans to see if they were picking up access and equity there. We focused on their responses to this particular dimension and particular opportunity, because the importance of moving forward on access and equity is an opportunity but it also requires serious planning on the part of agencies.

CHAIR—I know it is not really your role to define the actual pathway to achieving what should be open and transparent access to government information in a democracy necessarily, but I know you have a very keen interest in it. Have you got any early thoughts as to ways of driving this better?

Dr Nicoll—Yes, we do have some thoughts. What we have realised from our work on this audit is that the cost of delivering services via the Internet in many cases should include the costs of current non-Internet means of service delivery. While it is very important that agencies move on and implement the government’s policy, many agencies are in a situation where they are continuing, for very good reasons, with their current non-Internet means of service delivery. They then have the Internet means on top of that, which means that two cost streams are in operation. We are suggesting to agencies that, because of the importance of maintaining those two means of service delivery probably for extended periods—and they are the ones that make the decisions about how long they should maintain them for—before embarking on a decision to deliver their services via the Internet, they do a cost-benefit analysis, develop a business case and cost the initiative.

There is not a lot of data there that shows that agencies are doing this. Some are doing it very well but we do not know how things are going across the Public Service in this domain. Following this report, the Auditor-General has decided to develop a better practice guide for the managers of government agencies who are making the decision to deliver their services via the Internet or who have already decided to deliver their services via the Internet but are wanting to deliver their services better. Eric and I are working on that.

Mr Turner—One of the things we found in the audit that we undertook was a lack of guidance for agencies, so your concerns about access and equity probably relate to that at the time. As a result of that, as Paul said, we are developing this better practice guide.

CHAIR—So they are willing to be involved but waiting to be led rather than leading themselves—or is that too harsh a judgment?

Mr Turner—It depends on the agency.

CHAIR—I think Senator Lightfoot would like to ask you some questions about who the good performers might be.

Senator LIGHTFOOT—During your audit, you found, I imagine, some agencies that were underperforming, if I could put it that way, but what about the agencies that had implemented policy quickly and expeditiously?

Dr Nicoll—The Australian people are very fortunate, because we have some world leaders as agencies in this area. The Australian Taxation Office is acknowledged as being way out in front of a lot of other comparable tax offices overseas. The business entry point with DEWRSB—the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business—is another fine example that comes to mind. They are two which I think stand out. In terms of our better practice guide, we are working pretty closely with DEWRSB to build on their experience. For instance, they have a privacy policy for their web site and that is really way out in front of a lot of other web sites.

Senator LIGHTFOOT—Given that the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission was significant in its contribution to some of these areas, did you find it necessary to liaise with the commission in order to determine whether the implementation had been sufficient?

Dr Nicoll—In terms of that particular aspect, we did not liaise with the commission specifically because our survey was very wide ranging indeed and access and equity was just one dimension. In our current work on the better practice guide, we have deliberately involved the commission. In fact, we have invited them to write one component on access and equity. In the Audit Office we see access and equity as being so important that in the better practice guide we have a separate publication on that, if you like, within the confines of it. We asked the commission if they would be interested in participating in writing it and they accepted straightaway. The commission deserves credit for that because they do not have a lot of staff but they still reshuffled their priorities and put something out there.

Senator LIGHTFOOT—Thank you.

Ms JANN McFARLANE—With the access issue, having been a community worker for 25 years and one of the people who was very keen and brought this issue up in this committee, one of the things I have a concern about is the IT skills shortage. You point that out in your report. Even with the IT skills shortage, it is assumed in the Commonwealth departments that the staff are trained in access and equity measures. There is a report that government departments use that is a manual or guidelines. However, the people who are actually outsourced to undertake the IT work within government departments do not seem to have the same kind of culture or training. Is the skills shortage and the overall lack of access and equity strategies or measures in contracted-out firms another barrier and part of the difficulties of developing web sites or services across the Internet for Commonwealth government departments?

Dr Nicoll—We would be unable to provide much insight into that because we did not examine that particular question in the report. On pages 30 and 31 there might be some data which indirectly provides some insight into this. I am saying very indirectly because in no way would it be a satisfactory way of responding to your question. Page 30 mentions ‘technology to be used in agency IT initiatives’ and, for different categories of the disabled, that range is significant. Also, if you look on page 31 you can see data on the intended beneficiaries of the Internet and other electronic service delivery initiatives. We have categorised those as rural and remote, disadvantaged groups—which might include the disabled—and socioeconomic groupings, et cetera.

Mr Turner—In the end, what is on the web site is the agency’s responsibility, regardless of what is outsourced.

CHAIR—As there are no further questions, I thank you very much. We have touched base today. We have been assisted greatly by your report and by your comments today. There may be some further questions which we might write to you about if it is okay by you. The committee will be considering, probably before the end of the year, what sort of inquiry, if any, it might have or whether it will be making recommendations to parliament based on just the series of private briefings. Our primary concern is to support agencies like yours who are doing, may I say, an excellent job in helping to maintain and encourage top quality performance and transparency. We appreciate your work and wish you well.

Dr Nicoll—Could I just make one final comment?

CHAIR—Yes, certainly.

Dr Nicoll—What the survey shows is that just because a service is delivered by the Internet that does not necessarily make it a better service than that delivered by other means. I just wanted to leave the committee with that.

CHAIR—Yes, I was aware of that from other bitter experiences.

Senator LIGHTFOOT—It did not indicate that it was a worse service, did it?

Dr Nicoll—No. It is really up to agencies to demonstrate that it is a better service. We are trying to encourage them to have more data on whether it is a better service. If it is, they should go to it.

CHAIR—Yes, exactly.

Dr Nicoll—The government does not ask any agency to waste money by throwing things at things if they are not working properly.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Committee adjourned at 8.21 a.m.