



rec'd 17/9/09

STANDING COMMITTEE ON INFRASTRUCTURE, TRANSPORT, REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND
LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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Ms Julie Owens
Chair
House Standing Committee on Procedure
R1. 43
Parliament House ACT 2600

Dear Ms Owens

INQUIRY INTO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HOUSE COMMITTEES

Thank you for the invitation to make a submission to the Procedure Committee's current inquiry. On behalf of the House Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, this submission notes concerns particularly addressing terms of reference b) and e), namely:

- the type of work being undertaken by Committees; and
- the factors influencing the effectiveness of House Committees, including resources and structural issues.

The number of inquiries conducted by the Committee in this Parliament has expanded significantly compared with that undertaken in the previous Parliament, where one inquiry was conducted and one report was tabled. In a six month period between July and December 2005, the previous Committee held 16 meetings (10 in Canberra) for a total of 49 hours, and tabled no reports. By contrast, in the six month period between January and June 2009 this Committee held 19 meetings (10 in Canberra) for a total of 42.24 hours, and tabled two reports. During the 42nd Parliament (to date), the Committee has undertaken four inquiries with an expectation of a fifth inquiry prior to the end of the Parliament.

It should also be noted that not only has the workload expanded significantly, but the range of issues examined has similarly broadened. The Committee has looked at issues across its full portfolio spectrum. During the 42nd Parliament, the Committee intended to conduct a program of short, sharp inquiries with specific focus (in comparison to the extensive inquiry which resulted in the single report during the previous Parliament). Recognising the importance of regional Australia however, the inquiries were undertaken in the usual manner; that is, calling for and receiving submissions and undertaking public hearings and inspections in each state and territory. Two of the Committee's four inquiries have been into regional development issues, necessitating travel into regional Australia, covering multiple, distant locations in each state and territory for each inquiry.

Two of the Committee's inquiries during this Parliament were referred by the Minister of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government. In each instance, a reporting date of less than nine months was requested and met. The minister-referred inquiries occurred concurrently.

Staffing levels in the 42nd Parliament have been the same or less than those in the 41st Parliament for this Committee. At the peak of its activity during this Parliament, the Committee has undertaken three inquiries concurrently. During this time, the secretariat was staffed with one committee secretary (responsible for 3 Committees), one inquiry secretary, one research officer and one part-time administrative officer. The highest level of secretariat staff for this Committee during this Parliament has been one committee secretary (responsible for 3 Committees), one inquiry secretary, one full-time researcher, one part-time researcher and one part-time administrative officer.

To date in this Parliament, the Committee secretariat has:

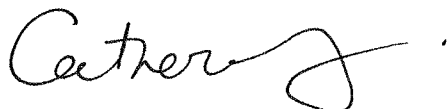
- supported 65 meetings, comprising 32 private meetings in Canberra and 33 public hearings in various locations around Australia (only nine of which were in capital cities);
- supported six inspections;
- processed 515 submissions; and
- tabled four reports and met each of its reporting dates

The Committee notes that while the volume of reports (four to date in this Parliament) is not excessive when compared to some House and Joint Committees (namely Joint Committees on Public Works; Treaties; Intelligence and Security), the reports of this Committee have been the products of inquiry processes where relatively large numbers of submissions were received and processed, and evidence was collected after periods of travel around Australia – both elements requiring intensive resources.

The Committee also notes with concern the high staff rotation within Committee secretariats and the possible impacts which result in terms of the efficiency and effectiveness on the work of the Committee.

Finally, the Committee hopes that when considering the future effectiveness of House Committees, the Procedure Committee is able to recommend that adequate resources be provided to support the Committees in their important work.

Yours sincerely



Catherine King MP
Chair

19 August 2009.