

Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee

Report

Mr PERRETT (Moreton) (10.35 am)—On behalf of the Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs I wish to make a statement concerning the committee's inquiry into the regulation of billboard and outdoor advertising. I wish to thank the former chair, Mark Dreyfus QC, for his safe pair of hands and congratulate him on his elevation to parliamentary secretary and cabinet secretary.

There is little doubt that outdoor advertising works. Indeed, the Outdoor Media Association claims that, at its best, outdoor advertising, which includes billboards and the like, reaches consumers 'where they live, work and play; where they drive and shop; where they commute; and where they congregate'. As can be implied from this claim, advertising located in a public space is difficult to avoid. Outdoor advertising is proving to be an extremely effective way of getting a message across but, unfortunately, community concern about it appears to be on the rise. For example, complaints about outdoor advertising rose from 16 per cent in 2008 to 24 per cent in 2009. Moreover, the most complained about advertisement in 2009 related to a billboard image. In Australia, advertising standards, including those relating to outdoor advertising, are currently governed by a system of industry self-regulation, which is funded by a voluntary levy paid by advertisers.

On 14 December last year, the Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee, of which I am Chair, resolved to conduct an inquiry into the regulation of billboard and outdoor advertising. The primary objective of this inquiry is to examine the adequacy of the current regulatory arrangements with regard to advertising that can be viewed from public spaces—that is, where members of the public are unable to exercise their choice not to see that advertising material. So not where you have control with the television remote or where you can say no to the material being offered to you by the spruiker, but where you have no control. The scope of the inquiry therefore extends to everything from advertising on shopfront windows to roadside billboards and transport advertising, right up to floating blimps, banner towing and even skywriting.

Since announcing the inquiry, the committee has received a number of submissions. These submissions reaffirm that there certainly is a level of community concern out there about this issue. For example, the potentially negative impact that overly sexualised images and the objectification of women in advertising has on individuals and the community is a consistent theme in those submissions. As is the embarrassment many parents experience as they feel forced to explain ambiguously-worded, sexually-imbued billboard advertisements to their young children or perhaps even to their older parents. Some submitters have suggested that while the current system of self-regulation relies heavily on the vigilance and commitment of the community to lodge complaints, people are often unaware about how to go about doing so. Moreover, it has been suggested that the Advertising Standards Board, the body responsible for determining whether advertisements have breached the industry code of ethics, is out of touch perhaps with the community standards it purports to uphold.

The Attorney-General, the Hon. Robert McClelland, has requested that the committee inquire into and report on a range of issues. For example, the inquiry will determine whether the current self-regulatory system is working. Is it the best model or are there other models which involve co-regulation or complete regulation? Are community concerns about outdoor advertising being met under the current system of self-regulation? Should outdoor advertising, which cannot be switched off or avoided, be regarded as a special category of advertising with its own classification system?

In its examination of this issue, the committee will keep in mind current consumer protection mechanisms and the desirability of minimising the regulatory burden on businesses. This inquiry is timely—technology is advancing quickly and all the time, especially when it comes to outdoor advertising. If improvements are to be made to the regulation of billboard and outdoor advertising it is important that they be considered now, with one eye on a future where high-tech, in-your-face advertising may flourish unfettered in our communities.