

Question: 10

Topic: Senate staffing

Received: 20 March 2017

Senator Wong asked:

How has the Department of the Senate managed the additional demands of an enlarged crossbench, which with the defection of Senator Bernardi now numbers 21 senators if the two vacant places are included?

Answer:

The most apparent consequences of the larger crossbench and the composition of the Senate more broadly have been sustained, increased levels of committee activity (and therefore increased demand for secretariat support) and increased demand for procedural and legislative support services.

The Senate Committee Office has responded by engaging more staff and instigating more flexible support arrangements. The long-term staffing level of approximately 60 full-time-equivalent (FTE) staff rose to an average of 74 FTE in 2015-16, fell again during the first months of 2016-17 before the Parliament began, and now again sits at 74 FTE. An additional support unit was created during the last Parliament to assist with peaks in demand, and re-instigated after the election. Staff at all levels in the Committee Office have continued to work more flexibly to support secretariats that need assistance. [This in turn has provided development opportunities.] Nonetheless, the capacity to provide additional support for activities such as drafting dissenting reports continues to be limited due to workload.

The Procedure Office provides procedural and legislative support to (in particular) non-government senators. For many years the main support has been provided by the Clerk Assistant (Procedure), an Executive Assistant and an executive legislative drafter provided through an ongoing secondment arrangement with the Office of Parliamentary Counsel. The duties of several research section staff have recently been redirected to assist with these duties during sitting weeks, in particular by researching matters in support of legislative drafting. The responses to questions 7 and 8 refer to plans to enhance these services. It has also always been open to senators to approach the Clerk and Deputy Clerk with requests for procedural advice.

The department also continues to make training and procedural resources available for the staff of senators, particularly after a new Senate is sworn in, so that senators may be better supported by their own staff.

Finally, the President allocated a designated meeting room for cross-bench senators in 2015, which the department administers, and also arranged for the expansion of seats for advisers to cross-bench senators the same year.