

Parliamentary Departments

2.1 The committee took evidence from the parliamentary departments on Monday, 21 May 2007. The following issues of interest are discussed below:

- Parliamentary education;
- Ordinary Annual Services;
- Security checks for pass holders; and
- Refurbishments.

Department of the Senate

Parliamentary education

2.2 Following inquiries at previous hearings, the committee scrutinised the Parliamentary Education Office's interaction with the newly established Parliamentary and Civics Education Rebate (PACER) program administered by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). The committee reiterated concerns surrounding the decision to reallocate the Citizenship Visits Program from Parliament to DEST. The committee requested the department correspond with DEST to obtain statistics showing the number of students who have received payments under the PACER program, and the number of those students who participated in the PEO program at Parliament House.¹

2.3 In response to correspondence from the Department of the Senate, DEST supplied statistics for PACER, not statistics for students of the PACER program who participated in the PEO program. DEST explained that schools only had to attend the mandatory institutions as part of the PACER program 'wherever possible', as stated in the guidelines. This measure is intended to ensure that schools were not disadvantaged if certain institutions did not have the capacity to host the increasing number of school visits under the PACER program.²

Ordinary Annual Services

2.4 The committee also sought information on outcome budgeting and the ordinary annual services of the government in relation to section 53 of the Constitution with reference to the committee's report, *Transparency and accountability of Commonwealth public funding and expenditure*. The committee explored the Minister's delayed response to the Appropriations and Staffing Committee's request for information on the adequacy of portfolio budget statements in

1 *Estimates Hansard*, 21 May 2007, pp 5–8.

2 Budget Estimates 2007-08, Department of the Senate, answer to question on notice p. 1. (received 29 May 2007), http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/fapa_ctte/estimates/bud_0708/parliament/index.htm.

distinguishing between ordinary annual services and newly established programs.³ Subsequent to the hearing, the Minister responded to the President of the Senate in writing.⁴ This matter was further discussed during the examination of the Department of Finance and Administration (see chapter 4).

2.5 During the examination of the department, members of the committee and other senators in attendance also raised the following issues:

- The Dalai Lama's visit to Canberra;
- Rules on photography and broadcasting of Senate proceedings;
- Replacement of printers in Senators' offices; and
- Refurbishment of the chamber refreshment rooms.

Department of Parliamentary Services

Security checks for pass holders

2.6 The committee raised questions with the Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS) in relation to the proposals to subject certain classes of pass holders (press gallery, lobbyists, staff of non-ministerial parliamentarians and departmental employees) to security checks prior to employment. Some committee members expressed concern that the proposal could impede the freedom of press, and suggested the proposal be examined by the staffing committee.⁵

2.7 Subsequent to the hearings, the Presiding Officers announced that they would not accept the recommendation that members of the Press Gallery undergo police background checks due to genuine concerns expressed by building occupants. Ms Karen Middleton, the press gallery president, responded:

The Press Gallery believes this proposal, had it proceeded, would have given police and bureaucrats the power to determine who works as a journalist. This would have fundamentally undermined basic democratic tenets including free access to the legislature and an independent media. We appreciate the Presiding Officers' willingness to hear the arguments and their subsequent decision not to proceed.⁶

2.8 Other security issues relating to members of parliaments' staff are discussed in the report's examination of the Department of Finance and Administration in chapter 4.

3 *Estimates Hansard*, 21 May 2007, pp 8–10.

4 Budget Estimates 2007-08, Department of the Senate, answer to question on notice p. 2. (received 1 June 2007), http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/fapa_ctte/estimates/bud_0708/parliament/index.htm.

5 *Estimates Hansard*, 21 May 2007, pp 16–29.

6 'Media police checks rejected', *Canberra Times*, 26 May 2007, p. 5.

Refurbishments

2.9 There was prolonged examination of DPS regarding the cost of planned refurbishments of the dining suite in the Prime Minister's office.⁷ A spokesperson for the Prime Minister later indicated outside the hearing that 'there was a proposal to increase the size of the area but the Government has decided not to proceed.'⁸

2.10 In addition, the committee heard that \$200 000 had been allocated to replace the executive chairs in the Cabinet suite as the previous chairs had been water damaged in a flood two years ago. The department noted that \$94 315 of this expenditure would be reimbursed by Comcover.⁹

2.11 The committee was pleased to hear the positive report on the functioning of the security bollards outside the entrances to Parliament House. The committee heard that there had been no incidences since March 2007, and a 0.07 per cent failure rate.

2.12 The committee was also pleased to hear DPS had undertaken to follow up various inquiries from previous hearings. DPS is requesting a Health Services Australia review of the influenza vaccine administered on a voluntary basis to building occupants.¹⁰

2.13 The committee also heard that indexes for the bound volumes of *Hansard* had been improved and re-inserted into the volumes.¹¹

2.14 Other matters of interest raised included:

- Improving energy efficiencies and use of water in Parliament House;¹²

7 *Estimates Hansard*, 21 May 2007, pp 40–43 and 46–57.

8 'PM Scraps \$540,000 dining room plan', *The Australian*, 21 May 2007, <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,21768385-1702,00.html>.

9 *Estimates Hansard*, 21 May 2007, pp 38–40.

10 *Estimates Hansard*, 21 May 2007, pp 36–38.

11 *Estimates Hansard*, 21 May 2007, pp 46 and p. 61.

12 *Estimates Hansard*, 21 May 2007, pp 43–44.

- Other building services and refurbishments; and
- Various activities of the Parliamentary Library.