

Parliamentary Departments

2.1 The committee took evidence from the parliamentary departments on Monday, 25 May 2009.

Department of the Senate

Level of committee activity and change in committee structure

2.2 A discussion of the level of committee activity, raised during an additional estimates hearing in February 2009, was continued at this hearing. The President advised that the Department of the Senate was expecting a deficit of approximately \$300,000 for the financial year. This was largely attributed to the sustained higher activity levels of the Senate committees.¹ Statistics supplied to the committee by the Clerk of the Senate indicated that in the 2008 calendar year there were 111 matters referred to the committees, which was the highest number in the 15 years covered by the data.²

2.3 In the context of this discussion, it was asked if the recent change to the committee system would increase staffing costs. In response, the Clerk of the Senate, Mr Harry Evans stated:

No. Basically our costs are due to the level of committee activity rather than the forums in which that activity takes place. I think it would be true to say it is marginally more expensive to run select committees rather than references to standing committees, but basically the cost is due to the level of activity—the number of inquiries to be undertaken and the number of reports to be done and so on. So we do not expect a great increase or decrease in the costs as a result of the change in the committee structure. Basically, as you know, it aims to avoid so many select committees and make it a bit more efficient in relation to the use of senators' time as well as staff time.³

Accessibility of Senate documents for people with disabilities

2.4 The committee sought further information on the Department's response to a motion in the Senate concerning access for people with disabilities to documents of the Senate. The Department advised that discussions were continuing with Vision Australia about new technology that could potentially be used to provide greater access.⁴

2.5 Other matters of interest discussed by the committee included the process undertaken in conducting staff redundancies and the relationship between the

1 *Estimates Hansard*, 25.5.09, p. 4.

2 'Senate Committee Activities' Report to Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee – Budget estimates 2009–10, p. 4.

3 *Estimates Hansard*, 25.5.09, p. 6.

4 *Estimates Hansard*, 25.5.09, p. 5.

Presiding Officers Information Technology Advisory Group and the President of the Senate.

Department of Parliamentary Services

Budgetary pressures

2.6 The Department of Parliamentary Services informed the committee that they would need to find approximately \$4.5 million worth of savings to remain within their budget. Reasons for this included an increase in electricity costs, rising insurance premiums, IT efficiency requirements arising from the Gershon IT review, staff wage increases and the recent announcement that Australian Federal Police security costs will significantly increase.⁵

Security arrangements at Parliament House

2.7 The committee examined the decision to reduce the number of security staff employed by approximately 25. The Department explained that security costs accounted for about a third of its budget, and that the reduction represented a return to the security staffing levels of 200506. In response to concerns that this may represent a threat to the safety of building occupants, the Department Secretary, Mr Alan Thompson stated:

Our assessment is that we can deliver a comparable level of security. This building is open for public visitation during normal hours but we actually have some staff in and around the building 24 hours a day seven days a week, and our assessment is that we can still provide a very high level of security.⁶

2.8 There was also a continuation of discussion from the February additional estimates about whether a need existed to screen members and senators on entry to Parliament House, and access to the parliamentary slip roads. The Department reported that the number of pass-holders with access to the slip roads had been reduced from 8000 to 1400.⁷

Hansard Production System

2.9 The Department reported on plans to upgrade the existing Hansard Production System which is approximately 10 years old. According to the Department, the upgrade is necessary to provide improved service levels and because the technology used in the old system is no longer supported. The budget for this system is approximately \$3.5 million and is expected to be implemented in approximately 12 months' time.⁸

2.10 Other issues discussed with the Department included the recommissioning of select water features at Parliament House, proposed changes to a greener air-

5 *Estimates Hansard*, 25.5.09, p. 13.

6 Mr Alan Thompson, DPS, *Estimates Hansard*, 25.5.09, p. 15.

7 *Estimates Hansard*, 25.5.09, p. 26.

8 *Estimates Hansard*, 25.5.09, p. 26.

conditioning system, continued couch grass trials, businesses within Parliament and artworks administered by the Department.