

## PARLIAMENTARY DEPARTMENTS

**2.1** The Committee took evidence from the parliamentary departments on Monday, 14 February 2005.

### Department of the Senate

**2.2** Issues raised by members of the Committee and other senators in attendance included:

- Media allegations regarding staff social activities;
- Use of senator's printing entitlements;
- Parliamentary privilege and draft transcripts of senator's speeches; and
- Resourcing of select committee inquiries.

#### *Media allegations regarding staff social activities*

**2.3** The Committee inquired about media allegations of a "go-slow" by Department of the Senate staff. An article referred to by Senator Faulkner claimed that Senate staff 'will only have to serve politicians for 21 days in the first seven months of 2005'.<sup>1</sup> The Committee is concerned at this fundamental lack of understanding of the work of the Senate and departmental staff, and refers readers to the Senate Briefs and other educational material prepared by the Department of the Senate.<sup>2</sup>

**2.4** The Committee heard that negative publicity regarding an offer of paid leave for Senate officers to attend an annual Public Service-wide golf day and a wine appreciation class was unfounded. Mr Harry Evans, Clerk of the Senate, advised the Committee that no Senate Department staff attended the golf day, and the wine class was conducted in staff members' own time. The Committee suggests that members of the media thoroughly check the veracity of their information before making allegations of impropriety.

#### *Use of senator's printing entitlements*

**2.5** The Committee heard that the use of senator's printing entitlements had "skyrocketed" during the 2004 election period. Mr Evans stated that a total of \$1.07 million was spent on senator's printing during the 2003-04 financial year, whereas senator's printing costs from 1 July 2004 until 31 January 2005 had already reached \$717 000.

**2.6** The Committee also heard that the Usher and Deputy Usher spend an average of one to two hours per week checking whether senators' printing requests comply

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1 McIlveen, L. 'Senate staff will tee off – on full salary' *Courier Mail* 6/11/04

2 Senate Briefs are available at: <http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/pubs/briefs/index.htm>

with guidelines. Ms Griffiths advised the Committee that in the few cases where requests breached the guidelines, the issue had been resolved between the senator and the Usher or the Deputy Usher without the need for recourse to the Clerk or President of the Senate.

#### *Parliamentary privilege and draft speech transcripts*

**2.7** The Committee raised concerns about matters of privilege associated with senators' proof speech transcripts (formerly known as "pinks") being available on the intranet. Mr Evans stated that uncorrected speech transcripts cannot be given absolute privilege for publication in case they contain errors.

**2.8** Senator Murray questioned whether there is a need to revise the *Parliamentary Privilege Act 1988* in light of the advances in communication and information technology since that Act was last reviewed. Mr Evans, although not elaborating on the broader issue, stated his belief that legislating for the general publication of the pinks would be unwise.

#### *Resourcing of select committee inquiries*

**2.9** The Committee heard that Senate select committee inquiries are funded from the committee office budget, with funding for four select committee inquiries per year built into the budget. Mr Evans advised the Committee that experienced former committee staff are employed on short term contracts when extra resources are required.

### **Department of Parliamentary Services**

**2.10** Issues raised by members of the Committee and other senators included:

- Safety and security works around Parliament House;
- Refurbishment and renovation of the health and recreation centre;
- Water conservation initiatives around Parliament House;
- Absence of the Christmas Tree from Federation Mall;
- The decision to publish fewer hard copy *Hansards*;
- Status of the nurses' centre;
- Progress in implementing the Podger Report recommendations relating to the Parliamentary Library; and
- The impact of budget cuts on the department.

#### *Safety and security works around Parliament House*

**2.11** The President of the Senate, Senator Calvert, acknowledged the disruption to Parliament House occupants caused by the current works around Parliament House, and expressed appreciation for their cooperation. The President also advised the Committee that completion of the security barriers, originally scheduled for late

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March, would be delayed by two months due to the need to obtain bollards from the United States. He made a commitment to the Committee that the temporary barriers would be removed from the front of the building by the end of March.

**2.12** Senator Faulkner asked why the bollards were not sourced in Australia. Ms Hilary Penfold QC, Secretary of the Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS), replied that they were unable to obtain Australian-made bollards that met specifications.

**2.13** The Committee heard that eight speed humps were being constructed on Parliament Drive to deter speeding and allow maintenance and gardening staff safe access to cross the road. The total cost of materials and installation was \$132 000.

#### *Refurbishment of the health and recreation centre*

**2.14** Senator Mason asked when the refurbishment of the health and recreation centre would be completed. The President replied that the expected date was now late July or August 2005. Ms Penfold advised that the delay was largely caused by the extensive work required on the swimming pool to repair "concrete cancer" and ensure compliance with current occupational health and safety standards.

#### *Water saving initiatives around Parliament House*

**2.15** The Committee heard that 3.2 hectares, or approximately 20% of the turf around Parliament House was not being watered in order to reach Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Government water savings targets. The Committee heard that the dead grass on the eastern and western sides of Parliament House was due to be replaced by a drought-resistant variety once ACT water restrictions were reduced. Ms Penfold told the Committee that the grass on top of Parliament House is still being maintained to preserve the waterproof membrane covering the building. The turf in the courtyards is also being maintained because it is in good condition and not due for replacement. The Committee also heard that shower heads in senators' suites were gradually being replaced with AAA-rated water saving shower heads.

#### *Federation Mall Christmas tree*

**2.16** The Committee questioned the absence of the Christmas tree from the front of Parliament House, and heard that the National Capital Authority (NCA) last year offered to give DPS the Christmas tree usually placed on Federation Mall during the yuletide season. Ms Penfold advised the Committee that she made a unilateral decision to decline the offer due to unknown storage costs and annual putting up and taking down costs in the order of \$50 000.

#### *Decision to publish fewer hard copy Hansards*

**2.17** The Committee heard that DPS had decided to print fewer hard copies of the daily proof *Hansard*, and cease printing the weekly *Hansard* altogether. Expected annual savings for the Department were in the order of \$750 000, although Ms

Penfold acknowledged that there would be some transfer of costs to those senators, members and departmental staff who printed their own copies. Committee members expressed concerns that DPS did not consult with Parliament House occupants before this decision was made in December 2004; and that senators and members were not informed of the change until early February 2005.

### *Status of the nurses' centre*

**2.18** Senator Knowles asked questions about the status of the Parliament House nurses' centre and its role in providing preventative health measures. Ms Penfold advised the Committee that nursing services had not been reduced subsequent to the 2004 review of the nurses' centre carried out by DPS at the request of the Joint House Committee.

### *Progress implementing Podger Report recommendations*

**2.19** The Committee spent time discussing the Department's progress in implementing the recommendations of the *Review by the Parliamentary Service Commissioner of Aspects of the Administration of the Parliament* ("the Podger Report") relating to the Parliamentary Library. The four relevant recommendations are:

**Recommendation 5.1:** The position of Parliamentary Librarian be established at a senior level within the amalgamated service provision department.

**Recommendation 5.2:** The independence of the Parliamentary Library be granted by Charter from the Presiding Officers.

**Recommendation 5.3:** The independence of the Parliamentary Library be reinforced by strengthening the current terms of reference for the joint Library Committee.

**Recommendation 5.4:** The resources and services to be provided to the Library in the amalgamated department be specified in an annual agreement between the Departmental Secretary and the Parliamentary Librarian, approved by the Presiding Officers following consideration by the joint Library Committee.<sup>3</sup>

**2.20** Senator Faulkner asked about progress in appointing a Parliamentary Librarian—a position not permanently occupied since 1990 and abolished in 1999. The President advised that the selection process could not begin until the statutory position of Parliamentary Librarian was created by the passing of the Parliamentary Service Amendment bill. Ms Penfold stated that preparations for recruitment had commenced, including consideration of remuneration arrangements and the composition of the selection panel. The joint Library Committee will be involved in the appointment.

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3 Podger, A. (2002) *Review by the Parliamentary Service Commissioner of Aspects of the Administration of the Parliament*, p. 8

**2.21** The President advised that there was no intention to adopt a charter to ensure the independence of the Parliamentary Library. A charter was considered unnecessary because the statutory position of Parliamentary Librarian, along with the provisions of the Parliamentary Service Amendment bill regarding client confidentiality and equality of services would sufficiently ensure independence.

**2.22** The Committee heard that some progress had been made towards the implementation of recommendation 5.3. Ms Penfold advised that a new terms of reference for the joint Library Committee had been drafted by the Speaker's office, and there were plans to take the draft to the Library Committee.

**2.23** The Committee heard that recommendation 5.4, which relates to an annual resources and services agreement between the Departmental Secretary and the Parliamentary Library, is provided for in the Parliamentary Service Amendment bill.

**2.24** Senator Faulkner expressed his disappointment at the overall lack of progress in implementing the recommendations, and signalled his intention to maintain a watching brief.

**2.25** Subsequent to the hearing, the Committee received advice from the President that sought to clarify a number of issues and provide additional information about progress on implementing the Podger Report recommendations. A copy of which is at Appendix 3.

#### *Impact of budget cuts*

**2.26** The Committee asked about the monetary impact of the next round of budget cuts on DPS. Another \$1.3 million would be cut this year. Ms Penfold told the Committee that the budget cuts this year had been divided up on a pro rata basis according to the previous budget of each branch. In the current financial year, the library budget was cut by \$382 000. Ms Penfold said that the negotiation of a new certified agreement would place further pressure on the budget. The increased salary costs for the department were expected to be around four per cent on a salary budget of \$55 million, or \$2 million next year. Ms Penfold outlined some cost saving initiatives, including a fleet management approach to procurement, limiting use of consultants and catering services.

**2.27** Senator Faulkner asked whether the parliamentary departments' budgets had been "cut to the bone" because they were in the unique situation of being required to fund security measures out of their budgets while other departments' budgets were supplemented for increased security. Ms Penfold stated that DPS was currently 'living within its means', and expected to remain within budget because of the relatively light sitting schedule in the second half of the 2004/05 financial year.

**2.28** However, Ms Penfold told the Committee that the projected full year deficit across the security budget was approximately \$2.7 million. The expected deficit was partially caused by the transfer of security funding from the chamber departments to the DPS at the start of this financial year. With the transfer of the security function,

DPS only received the chamber departments' notional security funding less the \$1.1 million budget cuts. This was despite the fact that the chamber departments were spending around \$1.7 million more annually on security than the budget allocation.