

Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Supplementary Budget Estimates 18-21 October 2010

Question: PM91

Asked By: Senator Abetz

Topic: Parliament House 'situation room'

Type of Question: Written

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 3 December 2010

Number of pages: 4

a) Please provide update on construction of the situation room

Answer: The Parliament House Briefing Room (PHBR) became operational in October 2010.

b) Original completion date; actual completion date

Answer: The PHBR was originally scheduled for completion at the end of July 2010. A number of factors, including a shortage of appropriately skilled tradespeople, delayed the delivery of the PHBR until the end of September 2010.

c) Original budgeted cost; final budgeted cost

Answer: The original budget allocated for the construction of the PHBR was \$12.0 million. Final actual costs are not yet available due to some ongoing testing and fine-tuning activities. However, the total cost of the PHBR is expected to be within budget.

d) Does this cost include all fit out and electronic equipment being installed?

Answer: Yes

e) Which agency will run it once completed?

Answer: The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) is responsible for the operation of the PHBR.

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f) Whose budget will its running costs be funded by?

Answer: Ongoing maintenance and operating costs associated with the PHBR will be funded through PM&C's budget.

g) Who will decide when it should be used?

Answer: The PHBR has been designed to support the National Security Committee of Cabinet (NSC) and any Prime Ministerial Task Force (PMTF) convened in response to a crisis. The Prime Minister would decide whether or not to convene the NSC and/or a PMTF in the PHBR.

h) Is there capacity for full Cabinet to be inside plus technical staff?

Answer: Yes

i) If no, what is capacity of the room?

Answer: Not applicable

j) Does it allow video conferencing with Australian commanders in Afghanistan?

Answer: The specific technical capabilities of the PHBR are sensitive national security matters and it would not be appropriate to comment in relation to this.

k) Does it allow video direct commands to be relayed from the Prime Minister say to a navy boat intercepting a people smuggling boat off Christmas Island?

Answer: The specific technical capabilities of the PHBR are sensitive national security matters and it would not be appropriate to comment in relation to this.

l) Does it allow the Prime Minister to take direct charge, say, of a riot situation at Villawood?

Answer: The specific technical capabilities of the PHBR are sensitive national security matters and it would not be appropriate to comment in relation to this.

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m) Will the Foreign Minister be likely to use it? For what purposes?

Answer: The Minister for Foreign Affairs may use the PHBR as part of a Cabinet committee convened in the facility. The Minister may also use the facility to support secure communications with colleagues in Australia and abroad.

n) Will it be used by non-ministers? Will it be used by Defence, AFP, intelligence agencies, Customs et al if a minister is not in attendance?

Answer: The facility is designed to support secure communications with any member of the NSC or a PMTF convened in response to a crisis. This could include non-ministers.

o) What were the deficiencies in the technical capability of the Cabinet suite and PMO? How will this room improve them? Is that worth the cost?

Answer: The PHBR is a 'networked' facility designed to more effectively support decision-making by the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, through better use of information and technology. The PHBR allows ministers to:

- receive briefings from senior officials supported by advanced audio-visual solutions;
- remotely participate in classified meetings from a number of dispersed locations in Australia and around the world; and
- securely communicate with other leaders, including First Ministers of the States and Territories and selected world leaders.

In addition to the improved information and communications technology, the PHBR also allows the presentation and discussion of more highly classified information.

The existing Cabinet suite and the Prime Minister's Office do not have these capabilities.

The 2008 Homeland and Border Security Review, which was conducted by Mr Ric Smith AO PSM, recommended the development of the PHBR, including the

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capabilities outlined above. This program has been, and continues to be, reviewed under the Financial Management Framework to ensure efficient, effective and ethical use of Commonwealth resources.

p) This was a project personally pushed by Rudd? Has Gillard stated any views on the project?

Answer: The 2008 Homeland and Border Security Review recommended the establishment of the PHBR. The Government continues to support this recommendation.

q) What was the space now occupied by the room previously used for? Where are those services now located?

Answer: The area now occupied by the PHBR was previously used as office space for 18 employees of the Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS).

These employees are currently working from temporary accommodation at the Attorney-General's Department (3-5 National Circuit, Barton) while their new office space is under construction at Parliament House. The new office space is expected to be completed by April 2011.