



Clerk's review

In any given year the work of the Senate Department does not vary in its essential character. For more than a century, the department has provided secretariat and advisory services to support the effective functioning of the Senate and its committees, and office services for senators in Parliament House.

Notwithstanding the underlying continuity of our functions, each year's report illustrates that the department has continued to embrace opportunities to work more efficiently and to respond professionally to changes in its operating environment, which are often of great magnitude. This year's report indicates that 2005–06 was no exception.

The most significant change in the department's operating environment was the change to the composition of the Senate. The beginning of the reporting period coincided with the commencement of the terms of senators elected or re-elected at the general election in November 2004, at which the government parties won a majority of seats in the Senate. This was the first time for more than 20 years that any government had been in this position. Last year's review speculated whether the change in the composition of the Senate would have an impact on the work of the department, particularly in reducing demand for its advisory services. Far from confirming this possibility, the figures for Output Group 1 show that the demand for written advice continued to grow and that the range of subjects covered by that advice was comparable with previous years.

In some areas of the department, however, the changed political environment had discernible impacts on workloads. As the chapter on Output Group 4 shows, the Committee Office was required to be even more flexible than usual in responding to uneven and fluctuating workloads. Some references committees had either no work or very little work as a result of fewer inquiries being agreed to by the Senate. On the other hand, there were more bills referred to legislation committees and the average time allowed for these inquiries fell. In the Table Office, the effect of the government majority was reflected in a reduction in the complexity of the task of processing bills because few non-government amendments were agreed to. Disagreements between the Houses about amendments to bills virtually disappeared, leading to a reduction in the number and complexity of messages and schedules of amendments prepared by that office. At the same time, there was little change in the number of bills considered, non-government amendments drafted or running sheets prepared. This may alter if senators give up moving amendments to bills.

By the end of the year, the government had announced its first major proposal to change Senate procedures by altering the structure of the Senate committee system and returning to something like the structure prevailing before 1994. Until that time, most committees were chaired by a government

senator and had government majorities. In 1994, following examination of various proposals by the Procedure Committee, the Senate agreed that the composition of committees and the distribution of committee chairs should reflect as closely as possible the numbers of seats held by the different groups that made up the Senate. The government's proposals were referred to the Procedure Committee, which is due to report in August 2006. The effect of these proposals on the department's work will be considered in future reports.

Changes in the composition of the Senate were also accompanied by changes in membership. Of those senators whose terms commenced on 1 July 2005, 14 were first-time senators, the largest number of new senators to be elected since 1948 when the Senate doubled in size. All new senators participated in an orientation program held over four days in July 2005, conducted by senior officers of the department with the involvement of serving senators including the President. The program is designed to familiarise new senators with the range of services available to them and to provide them with an introduction to the procedures of the Senate and its committees. Each program relies heavily on feedback from the previous intake of senators to ensure that the program design and content are as relevant and useful as possible to the needs of new senators. Once the formal program concluded, support for new senators continued to be provided as required.

This year, as in most years, there were also significant staff changes. It has been said on many occasions that the department's principal resource is its staff and their knowledge and expertise. In a small organisation, the departure of a small number of long-serving staff can represent the loss of many decades of experience and corporate knowledge. Although the department lost fewer staff overall than in previous years, separations of ongoing staff because of transfer or promotion to other agencies rose in comparison with previous years. This separation rate highlights the need for the department to remain competitive with the much larger executive and statutory agencies in order to attract and retain high-quality staff. During the latter part of the year, a new employee collective agreement was successfully negotiated by the department's Workplace Consultative Committee. The agreement provides competitive salary increases in return for continuing levels of high performance and productivity improvements.

Attracting and keeping good staff with competitive terms and conditions of employment, including opportunities for professional development, is one response to the inevitable challenge of generational change. From another perspective, loss of corporate memory may be addressed by recording important practices, precedents and principles in a form that will be accessible to future generations of parliamentary officers. This report contains many references to ongoing work to compile or update procedural information resources such as *Odgers' Australian Senate Practice*, practice manuals for committee staff or clerks at the table, or computer-based information and retrieval systems that all contribute to the continuing development of procedural expertise. This important ongoing work has benefits that extend far beyond its immediate purpose, because it also forms the basis of the department's work in promoting public knowledge and awareness of parliamentary processes and the role of the Senate and its committees.

Our current public information and awareness efforts have come a long way since the foundations laid in the late 1940s by J E Edwards (Clerk of the Senate, 1942–1955), who wrote and produced a booklet for visitors, called *Parliament and how it works*, and by then Usher of the Black Rod J R Odgers, who published an article entitled 'The Senate—Case for the Defence'. Since then, this aspect of our work has grown almost beyond recognition. In addition to the printed books, brochures and pamphlets, a great deal of information is available on the internet at minimal cost and with virtually instantaneous access. Recent annual reports have alluded to the development of a new resource to enable people with access to the parliamentary computing network to follow proceedings in the Senate via the aptly named *Dynamic Red*. On Budget day 2006, following resolution of information security issues, the *Dynamic Red* became available to the world on the internet. We expect that its wider availability will be of particular value to government agencies, representative organisations and the press.

There are limitations, however, in communicating only with these 'usual suspects'. Like all public institutions, the Senate belongs to the public, and the whole public is entitled to a true picture of its health. That is the greatest challenge. It may be met in small part by encouraging 'outsiders' to come in and look at the institution and talk about what they see. The department has attempted to do this through its fellowship program, whereby visiting scholars are granted access to departmental facilities in return for relevant work and publication. The department has also explored avenues for cooperation with other bodies, including particular schools in universities, for this purpose. It is hoped to continue this work in the future.

In the meantime, the functioning of the institution and access by the public to its proceedings will continue to depend largely on a very small group of dedicated people, to whom thanks are due.

Harry Evans

Clerk of the Senate