

Hub of the House

Hundreds of pieces of legislation, hundreds of documents and hundreds of petitions are dealt with every year by the House of Representatives. Helen Beringen goes behind the scenes to talk with the people who help the House and its members take care of the enormous amount of business the federal parliament must handle.

It's the hub of many an Australian household—the kitchen or dining table around which family and friends often gather to discuss the important things in their lives.

The house on the hill is no different. The centrepiece of the House of Representatives Chamber is a large rectangular table where the affairs of the nation are regularly discussed and debated.

At Question Time the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader engage each other across this table—a gift from the Canadian

texts line its length and the symbol of the House, the Mace, is placed on it when the House is in session.

The Table's pivotal role in the business of the House is recognised in the rules of the House (the standing orders) and by the fact that there is an entire office that bears its name.

The Table Office comprises 15 people who work behind the scenes to ensure the business of the House proceeds smoothly throughout a parliamentary sitting day,

MPs on those rules, and ensuring the laws signed off by our Governor-General reflect the intent of the parliament. It also involves preparing the official record of proceedings (*the Votes and Proceedings*), and maintaining all House documents and records, including committee reports and petitions from the public.

The Table Office supports the Speaker, whose seat overlooks the Table, as well as his deputies and a panel of assisting MPs.



parliament when Parliament House was opened in 1988. Ministers and shadow ministers also sit there when they debate the laws of the land.

Copies of the Constitution, previous parliamentary debates and other relevant

which can stretch from early morning until late into the night.

Their job includes providing programming and procedural support (making sure the rules and practices of the House are followed), offering confidential advice to

It also supports the Leader of the House and the Manager of Opposition Business, the party Whips, all their staff, parliamentary liaison officers, and the Clerk and Deputy Clerk in the conduct of the House of Representatives Chamber and Main Committee (the 'second' debating chamber).

While most of this work is done behind the scenes, some Table Office staff also work on the floor of the House itself. As Clerks they sit at the Table, supporting the conduct of proceedings and offering advice, when required.

About two thirds of the House's work is government business (including legislation). The rest is made up of Question Time and opportunities for private members (for members who are not the Speaker, Prime Minister, ministers, parliamentary secretaries, the Opposition Leader and Deputy Opposition Leader).

"The challenge of it is that the House is the master of its own business, so the program is quite fluid," says Peter Mason, Director, Programming.

The day Australia went to war with Iraq was no exception. Originally the day had been programmed to ensure a range of bills received attention. But when federal cabinet decided to commit Australian troops to war, a passionate debate overtook the planned program. The scrutiny of laws would have to be rescheduled.

When Prime Minister John Howard entered the House of Representatives to explain the government's decision, he moved a motion to condemn Iraq and endorse military action. Opposition Leader Simon Crean responded by moving an amendment that put an alternative position. Emotions ran high—several people were asked to leave the public gallery for heckling and three MPs were ejected during the fiery debate. But the

Members of the House value Table Office advice and services. The federal member for the NSW seat of Lowe, John Murphy, has asked more than 20 per cent of the questions placed recently on the *Notice Paper* (the official document that lists the bills to be introduced or debated, the issues that members intend to discuss and the questions for which members are seeking written responses from ministers). Mr Murphy is effusive in his appreciation for the work and service given to him by the Table Office staff, particularly Notice Paper Manager James Rees and his predecessor Max Kiermaier.

"The House is the master of its own business, so the program is quite fluid."

"I want to praise their professionalism," he says. "They provide objective and impartial advice."

"They are extremely helpful at all times, are exemplary servants of the department and they are making an important contribution to our democracy."

As part of this service, the office provides tailor-made procedural guides or 'scripts' to all MPs who sponsor legislation, amendments to bills or other items of business. These buff-coloured guides, which

That's just one way the office achieves its overall aim of supporting the efficient operation of the House Chamber and Main Committee.

Responsibility for the administration of the passage of legislation and motions through the House rests with a small team led by Joanne Towner, Director, Legislation and Records.

Behind the scenes, the legislative process includes loading electronic versions of legislation and supporting documentation onto the parliamentary website, processing changes to bills electronically (a single integrated bills system is used by the Office of Parliamentary Counsel, the House of Representatives and the Senate), and producing final versions and notifications. Then it's check, check and check again.

Head of the Table Office, Robyn McClelland, stresses the importance of accuracy in the team's work, from correct procedures in the Chamber, to legislation which accurately reflects the wishes of the House and the parliament.

"We've got a good track record given the scale of our work," says Ms McClelland, Clerk Assistant (Table). "For example, our parliament processes about 200 bills per year. The United Kingdom's House of Commons, by contrast, processes about 60 bills."

Sophisticated document comparison software has been introduced to help process bills.



staff of the Table Office calmly went about doing what they needed to do to help reschedule the parliamentary program.

It's all part of the job for the Table Office, nestled in a small cluster of offices deep in the parliamentary building, just up the corridor from the House Chamber.

are also provided for use by the Speaker, stand out from the mountain of white paper on an MP's Chamber desk. They can be a lifeline when a bill is waiting to be introduced, helping members work their way through the detailed procedural requirements laid down by the rules of the House.

Since October last year, all bills have been electronically checked for accuracy. But technology can only help so far in stopping any mistakes from appearing in legislation. Supplementary manual checks continue to be undertaken on all bills. (As with all legal documents, a single word out of place can change the entire meaning of a clause,

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and impact on the operation of the entire piece of legislation.)

Technology has also revolutionised the workings of the office when it comes to document production and paper handling.

In the mid 1990s the Table Office designed its own software, the Document Production System (DPS), to allow computerised production of documents for the Chamber. It has allowed a range of databases within the office to be linked and has increased the automation of many processes, including the preparation of the *Notice Paper*, the *Daily Program*, Chamber and Main Committee procedures, and the *Votes and Proceedings*.

The DPS has been given to the Senate and to Hansard who are delighted with it.

"It's a far cry from the days when procedural guides were typed out, gestetner copied and underlined by hand," says Peter Mason.

The introduction of the DPS offers efficiencies and improved responsiveness to the needs of the House.

"The system paid for itself in six sitting weeks," Ms McClelland says.

Technology also plays a major role in the smooth running of the Chamber itself. Take the Chamber Table, for example. Under the Table is a labyrinth of wires providing the infrastructure for audio and computer technology requirements—including email access for the Clerks sitting at the head of the Table.

Table Office staff can now communicate with the Clerks in the Chamber via their computers while monitoring proceedings on a television screen and receiving details of House decisions on a continuously up-dated computer service.

The latter is thanks to Votes Manager, Lynne Eveston. Working a bank of three

computers and a video recorder, while viewing a television monitor, Ms Eveston drafts the official record of proceedings of the House, the *Votes and Proceedings*. The 'Votes' detail the decisions of the House on every item of business. It has been produced for all sitting days since 1901.

The ever-changing political landscape provides an interesting and exciting workplace. "Every day something new happens," says Ms Eveston. "While everything may look calm in the Chamber there is a lot of running around behind the scenes."

Huge amounts of parliamentary information are available online for MPs, staff and the public, and the office encourages electronic access to material. It provides an inquiry and document distribution service for members and their staff.

Every aspect of the House's work is recorded for posterity. Ray Barter runs the document store, ensuring that an original and up to five copies of every major document considered by the House since federation are kept safe in archives deep in the building.

Staff members are modest about their dedication to the job, which sees some arrive two hours before a sitting day begins (which sometimes means 7am) and be among the last to leave (sometimes after 10pm).

They are quick to point out that they are not the only parliamentary staff with such working hours—others include Chamber attendants, Hansard reporters (who write the verbatim transcript of proceedings), the in-house television camera operators and security staff.

"Because we work such long hours together it becomes like a family," says Trish Bicket, House Procedures Manager.

And the job of each of the 'family members' must be carried out regardless, each sitting day.

So the office has adopted a process of 'shadowing', where other parliamentary workers come in one night a week and learn certain jobs, in case of absences during sitting weeks.

As well as on-the-job training and development, debriefing sessions are held on Fridays following sitting weeks, and are open to all departmental staff. Matters of parliamentary procedural interest are shared, discussed and documented and made available through the department's intranet site.

Ms McClelland says the skills, knowledge and attitudes of the Table Office staff are very important.

"While the DPS, bills and other computer software systems are integral to the work of the office, it is the staff's knowledge and commitment to client service, accuracy and care which are vital in the office's success," she says.

Since 1999, parliamentary staff have had their own legislation, the Parliamentary Service Act, reflecting the commitment to impartially assist the work of the parliament and its members from all sides of the political spectrum. It is backed by a code of conduct and statement of parliamentary values.

The Table Office, in endeavouring to facilitate the business of the House and to meet the requirements of MPs, lives this commitment on a daily basis. ■

Helen Beringen is a freelance journalist from Canberra.

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pp 32-33 left to right: The Table in the House of Representatives Chamber; Procedures Manager Trish Bicket preparing documents for the Speaker; Attendant Keith Johnson with the hundreds of documents that the Table Office handles; Member for Lowe John Murphy hands a Question on Notice to Notice Paper Manager James Rees; Raymond Knight responding to a request at the inquiries desk; head of the Table Office, Robyn McClelland.

This page left to right: Votes Manager Lynne Eveston; Attendant James Barry and Assistant Director James Catchpole prepare for a day's proceedings in the Main Committee; Ray Barter in the document store.

