



# BEYOND THE HEADLINES

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**HOW EFFECTIVE ARE PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES? DO THEY REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO THE POLICY MAKING PROCESS? ABOUT THE HOUSE TALKS TO THREE MPS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED THE BENEFITS OF COMMITTEE INVESTIGATIONS FROM BOTH THE FRONT AND BACKBENCHES OF PARLIAMENT.**

**F**rustrated by a three year delay in a government response to a committee report on regional aviation, independent MP Peter Andren (Member for Calare, NSW) recently called the parliamentary committee system a place for government backbenchers to lobby for promotion and a holding paddock for would-be parliamentary secretaries.

It isn’t the first time the parliamentary committee process has come under attack. In June 2005 the *Sydney Morning Herald* ran an article under

the headline “Democracy Denied”, which criticised the poor rate of government responses to committee reports and questioned the cost and value of committee inquiries.

But supporters of the parliamentary committee system insist it’s a process that takes parliament to the people, and influences government decisions by providing insight into public opinion on a wide range of issues, and not always in the glare of the news headlines.

The supporters include Bronwyn Bishop (Member for Mackellar, NSW), Judi Moylan (Member for Pearce, WA) and Jackie Kelly (Member for Lindsay, NSW). They believe committees play an important role examining issues in the sort of detail and with the level of public input that other parliamentary and government processes do not always allow.

And they should know—all three have been ministers in the Howard government: Bronwyn Bishop was the Minister for Defence, Science and Industry from 1996-98, and the Minister for Aged Care from 1998-2001. Jackie Kelly was Sports and Tourism Minister from 1998–2001, and

Left to right: parliamentary committee chairs Jackie Kelly, Judi Moylan and Bronwyn Bishop. Photo: AUSPIC Continued page 46 ►

Judi Moylan was Minister for the Status of Women from 1997-98 and Minister for Family Services from 1996-97.

They now all chair parliamentary committees: Bronwyn Bishop on the House of Representatives Family and Human Services Committee; Jackie Kelly on the House's Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Committee; and Judi Moylan on the Public Works Committee, which is a joint committee with members of the House and senators.

For Bronwyn Bishop, the committee system is how parliament connects with the community. She describes it as an extension of parliament, bound by the rules of the House of Representatives, and vital to our system of representative democracy.

"Speaking as a former government minister who actually paid attention to the House of Reps committees, I know the value of the system," she says.

"Absolutely a committee can bring about change. The laws we pass

as a legislature affect the way people live their lives, and the sorts of laws we make can indeed be determined by the work of the parliamentary committees."

To illustrate her point, Mrs Bishop singles out last year's inquiry into overseas adoption, which received 274 submissions, held 12 public hearings and took evidence from more than 100 people across Australia.

After hearing the evidence, the committee's report was highly critical of the existing arrangements for overseas adoptions. It made 27 recommendations to improve the process, the vast majority of which were accepted by the federal government, with the Attorney General, Philip Ruddock describing the report as "a blueprint for major reform".

"We've had a tremendous response to this report which really touched a nerve in the community. It has increased awareness of the issues, and we're going to see some important changes brought about as a result of it," Mrs Bishop said.

According to Judi Moylan, who has chaired the Public Works Committee since 1998, ministers don't take her committee's reports lightly.

The Public Works Committee is charged with making sure taxpayer's dollars are being properly spent on government infrastructure proposals valued at \$15 million or more. It's for that reason the government is motivated to accept the committee's recommendations.

"There is no compulsion for a minister to take on board the recommendations of the committee but, given our very specific brief, it would be a brave minister who would ignore the findings of the Public Works Committee," Ms Moylan says.

"I think our work is very helpful to a minister, because obviously they can't oversight every piece of infrastructure and scrutinise it the way we can. We have the potential to pick up problems before they become a problem."

One example is a recent accommodation project in Darwin, which Ms Moylan says could have been "a very costly mistake" had the Public Works Committee not intervened.

"There's a great deal of satisfaction in working to maximise the value of the dollar spent on behalf of the taxpayer. There's some fantastic work being done on committees, but the message doesn't get out to the public often enough. The difficulty comes because the media is looking for conflict stories, and bipartisan work on committees is not headline stuff," she says.

"Overall it's a good process and we would love the public to know more about all committee work, because they would see the value they get from the parliament if they could see the bipartisan work of committees.

"I think people are well served by the committee system because committee members have the opportunity to travel the country widely, to be in touch with the views of so many people on specific issues. I think there's great value in it."

According to Jackie Kelly, the ability of committees to travel is an



House of Representatives committee hearing at El Questro Wilderness Park in Western Australia for an inquiry into Indigenous employment. Photo: Andrew Dawson



Left: Recent parliamentary committee reports; Right: House of Representatives committee hearing on teacher education.

important part of the process because it engages people in democracy and makes them less likely to write off any final decisions as “that’s just Canberra”.

“Road trips are very valuable because people feel that parliament has heard their point of view. They may disagree with the conclusion we come up with, but they can’t deny that we listened. We still may go in another direction, but at least we have engaged people in the decision making process,” she says.

“It’s a way for people to stay engaged and connected with their government, and for them to have some ownership of government decisions. I think that’s critical to the success of any democracy.”

Committees also play a valuable role examining issues in more detail than is otherwise possible for parliament or government ministers.

“The feedback I get from ministers, who are so incredibly busy with a huge amount of work to get across, is that they’re always grateful you’ve done the work, you’ve heard the evidence. So when you’re talking to ministers, they do take what you’re saying seriously because you’ve obviously gone into more detail than they have,” Ms Kelly says.

“It’s a way for people to stay engaged and connected with their government, and for them to have some ownership of government decisions.”

But she believes we are over-served by committees, with doubling up of committees on the House and Senate sides.

Another way to improve the process, Jackie Kelly suggests, would be enforcing a time limit for government responses to committee reports, which currently take from a few months to several years.

Having just waited three years for a government response to one of her committee reports, Bronwyn Bishop says she supports measures which provide more opportunities for parliament to debate the conclusions and recommendations of committee reports, and which help to achieve more speedy replies from government. In particular, she highlights the benefits of having a second chamber for the House of Representatives, known as the Main Committee, which was established in 1994 to allow additional debating time for MPs.

“Once upon a time you had five minutes to introduce a report and then it would languish, until it might get debated by other people months later. Now we’ve changed the rules so that at the time a report is presented to parliament it will be debated in the second chamber, which is now a very active chamber for the House of Representatives, and everyone can get to debate it then and there,” she says.

“This means reports are given more timely discussion, which hopefully results in the government taking action to implement the recommendations, or at least respond to them.”

Mrs Bishop would also like public hearings to be televised.

“What I would ultimately like to see is the ABC have one of its multi-channels dedicated to the broadcasting of all parliamentary activity—not just Question Time, which is a kind of replacement for battle—but also the serious work that goes on in committees, so people can see for themselves the evidence we hear.

“I think it would bring more credit on the system of parliament, with a greater understanding of the important work that is done.” ■