



Clerk's review

The general elections of 2007 resulted in the election of 15 new senators (in reality only 14, as one senator was a veteran of 10 years' service who was re-elected after a break). This equalled the turnover following the 2004 elections, and meant that 40 per cent of the membership of the Senate changed in three years. However comprehensive it might be, the new senators' orientation seminar—the first stage of which was conducted by the department in February 2008, to be followed up by a more intensive session in July—cannot provide a complete solution to the loss of collective memory and knowledge represented by this level of turnover.

Inevitably, the workload of the department increases as new senators find their way. It is a workload which is welcomed, because the turnover also means stimulating questions and requests for advice and assistance from those who view the Senate and its operations with fresh eyes. As has been observed before, the department needs the constantly renewed stimulus of new senators with different ideas.

It has become a truism that the country and the parliament confront public policy issues and problems of unprecedented complexity and difficulty. In tackling those issues, the scrutiny and accountability role of the Senate will be vital, as will the function of the department in supporting that role. The workload of the department is therefore bound to increase in the future.

In the heat and pressure of parliamentary work there is seldom opportunity for the department to test the appreciation by senators of its role, but those opportunities that do present themselves, such as the senators' survey and comments that senators make on the department's work as they go along, indicate that the department's role is valued and appreciated.

There was an element of 'the calm before the storm' in the long 2007 election recess and the generally lower number of sitting days preceding it, which resulted in a lower level of legislative activity overall. The change of government, however, indicated an upsurge in that activity. This is the usual pattern of the electoral cycle. The period of an opposition majority in the Senate, to be followed by the return of what is now regarded as the normal situation of no party holding a majority, reinforced that upsurge, which is expected to continue. The appointment of six select committees in the first half of 2008 gave an indication that the calm was over.

The heavy workload of committees was the most notable phenomenon of the year, represented in 2007 by very tight deadlines for the committees to report on their references, particularly those relating to bills. The election period and the shorter sittings resulted in the work being compacted. Committee workload also surged in 2008 and is expected to increase further.

The staff level of the department remained virtually constant, indicating a higher level of productivity, mainly the result of higher levels of skills possessed by staff. The department is a skilled-staff organisation; all staff possess specialised skills to a high level, and there are no unskilled jobs. The development of technology continues, but the application and use of technology depends on the skills levels of the staff.

In relation to funding, the increase in productivity has enabled the department, through a period of over 10 years (since the department's funding base was last recalibrated), to pay salary increases from efficiency gains, to meet the efficiency dividends applied to the department by agreement of the Appropriations and Staffing Committee, and to build up a significant cash surplus from carried-over appropriations. During the year, with the approval of the committee, the department returned approximately half of its cash surplus, amounting to over \$10 million, to the Treasury, in response to a plea by the new government for savings.

Some outside observers, moved by genuine commitment to the cause of parliamentary scrutiny, suggested that this money should have been spent on more staff or other resources. The limited and scarce resource of the Senate, however, is the senators and their time. The scarcity of that resource cannot be made up by more money and staff. There is a point beyond which providing more money and more staff is counter-productive. The same number of staff more highly skilled can make a difference, but the effective work of the Senate and its committees ultimately depends on the application of senators and their time.

The department's people look forward to working with the 'new' Senate and its senators and committees in the arduous but stimulating environment of the coming years.

Harry Evans

Clerk of the Senate