

## Committee Office

### Output

Provision of secretariat support to the Senate legislative and general purpose standing committees, select committees and certain joint committees.

	Performance indicators	Performance results
Quality	<p>The degree of satisfaction of the President, Deputy President, committee members and senators, as expressed through formal and informal feedback mechanisms, with the quality and timeliness of advice and support and the achievement of key tasks.</p> <p>Advice, documentation, publications and draft reports are accurate and of a high standard.</p>	<p>Further to the senators' survey results published last year, formal and informal feedback mechanisms continued to show that senators consider the support provided by the Committee Office to be effective.</p> <p>When debating committee reports, committee chairs and senators recognised the high quality of services provided by secretariats in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• drafting reports</li> <li>• dealing effectively with witnesses and clients</li> <li>• organising committee meetings and hearings</li> <li>• producing quality committee briefings</li> <li>• providing sound procedural advice</li> <li>• liaising closely with senators' offices.</li> </ul>
Timeliness	<p>Meetings held, documentation provided and reports produced within timeframes set by the Senate or the committee, as relevant.</p> <p>Tabling deadlines met in all but extraordinary circumstances.</p>	<p>Committee secretariats organised meetings, hearings, briefings and inspections in accordance with committee requirements, within constraints arising from the availability of members.</p> <p>New secretariats were established in time to support the first meetings of new select committees.</p> <p>Reports were drafted and presented to the Senate in accordance with the timeframes set by committees and deadlines set by the Senate.</p>
Quantity	<p>Documentation is sufficient for committee purposes and material for the public is available promptly, electronically or in hard copy.</p>	<p>Committee staff provided committee members, witnesses and others with documents in accordance with secretariat procedures, orders of the Senate and committee requirements.</p> <p>On tabling, reports were promptly made available to senators and others in both printed and electronic formats.</p>

## Overview

The Committee Office administers legislative and general purpose standing committee secretariats, select committee secretariats and certain joint statutory committee secretariats. This role includes:

- giving accurate and timely procedural advice and administrative support to facilitate and expedite the work of committees
- arranging meetings and hearings in accordance with committee decisions
- providing comprehensive and timely briefings and research papers
- drafting high-quality reports which accurately canvass and analyse the evidence from submissions and hearings and reflect the requirements of committees
- assisting in the drafting of minority reports
- communicating effectively with witnesses and members of the general public
- being proactive in anticipating requirements of committees and chairs.

The staffing and administrative structure of the office is outlined in figure 16, including the secretaries of the committee secretariats. It is led by the Clerk Assistant (Committees), who also performs duties as a clerk at the table in the Senate chamber and as a committee secretary.

**Figure 16 Elements and responsibilities of the Committee Office**

<b>Executive</b>		
<i>Chris Reid, Acting Clerk Assistant</i> <i>Roxane Le Guen, Senior Clerk</i> Procedural advice and training Planning and coordination Secretariat staffing and resources Statistics and records		
<b>Legislative and general purpose standing committee secretariats</b>	<b>Joint statutory committee secretariats</b>	<b>Select committee secretariats</b>
Community Affairs <i>Naomi Bleeser</i> Economics <i>John Hawkins</i> Education, Employment and Workplace Relations <i>Shona Batge</i> Environment, Communications and the Arts <i>Stephen Palethorpe</i> Finance and Public Administration <i>Christine McDonald</i> Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade <i>Kathleen Dermody</i> Legal and Constitutional Affairs <i>Julie Dennett</i> Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport <i>Jeanette Radcliffe</i>	Australian Crime Commission <i>Tim Watling</i> Corporations and Financial Services <i>Ian Holland</i> Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity <i>Tim Watling</i>	Agricultural and Related Industries <i>Jeanette Radcliffe</i> Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities <i>Hamish Hansford</i> Fuel and Energy <i>Penelope Robinson</i> Reform of the Australian Federation <i>Ian Holland</i> National Broadband Network [ceased to exist 17 June 2010] <i>Ian Holland</i>

The full-time equivalent staffing level for the Committee Office in 2009–10 was 59 (62 in 2008–09).

The typical staff structure of a committee secretariat supporting a legislative and general purpose standing committee comprises a committee secretary, a principal research officer, a senior research officer or a research officer, and an executive assistant. Depending on the workload allocated to a committee, additional resources are often provided to assist with administration or with research, analysis and report writing.

The cost of the office in 2009–10 was \$8.6 million (\$9.0 million in 2008–09). The 2008–09 expenditure was higher because of a significantly greater workload in that year.

The primary cost in operating a committee is staffing, with a typical secretariat costing about \$385,000 this year. The other costs relate to administration and include items such as advertising, venue hire, refreshments at hearings, transport (including flights, charter flights and taxis), accommodation for staff at interstate hearings and report printing. The administrative costs of a typical secretariat for the reporting period was about \$67,000.

With the approval of the President of the Senate, access to specialist advice was obtained by one committee secretariat during 2009–10, at a cost of \$1,600.

Senators' salaries are not included in the costs of committees, as it is not possible to establish the proportion of a senator's salary that should be attributed to committee work. The flight and accommodation costs of senators attending hearings are paid by the Department of Finance and Deregulation.

Hansard and broadcasting services for public hearings are provided by the Department of Parliamentary Services. The office works with the Department of Parliamentary Services to coordinate and enhance the provision of those services.

## **Procedural advice and administration**

In 2009–10, committee secretaries provided procedural and administrative advice to committee chairs and members as well as to members of the public, including people seeking information about committee activities or participating in committee inquiries. Higher level advice was also provided by the Clerk, Deputy Clerk, Clerk Assistant (Committees) and Senior Clerk of Committees.

The advice, oral and written, covered a wide variety of procedural issues, such as:

- the establishment of inquiries, the drafting of terms of reference and the membership of committees
- the interpretation of standing orders relating to the operations of committees

- ways of dealing with adverse reflections on persons, made in evidence to committees
- issues relating to parliamentary privilege
- matters arising from estimates hearings—for example, the definition of an ‘officer’, restrictions to lines of questioning, and the placing of questions on notice by senators.

In the year since the Senate adopted a new order for dealing with claims of public interest immunity, there is some evidence that the order has worked reasonably well. However, there appears to be an increasing tendency for witnesses at public and estimates hearings to take questions on notice rather than make a claim of public interest immunity.

In addition to procedural advice, the office provided extensive training on committee operations and procedures to new senators and new staff of senators, as well as to new and ongoing departmental staff.

Committee secretaries met regularly throughout the year to discuss management and procedural issues encountered by committee secretariats, and to discuss issues raised in the *Procedural Information Bulletin*.

Under standing order 25(10) the chairs of the committees may meet to discuss any matter relating to the operations of the committees. The Chairs’ Committee is chaired by the Deputy President. The Clerk Assistant (Committees) is the secretary. During 2009–10, the committee met on two occasions, and considered issues such as the behaviour of the media at committee hearings; ‘watermarking’ the broadcast footage of Senate committees; and a statistical summary of committee activity in 2009–10.

## Activity levels

As was the case in 2008–09, the Senate referred a high number of matters to committees for inquiry in 2009–10.

## Legislative and general purpose standing committees

The Senate has eight pairs of legislation and references committees established pursuant to standing order 25 as permanent committees. Permanent committees continue for the life of a parliament and are re-established at the commencement of each new parliament.

During 2009–10, the Senate referred 130 matters to standing committees, 96 of which were bills or packages of bills. As shown in table 4, the committees tabled 157 reports, excluding reports on estimates, compared to 160 reports in 2008–09.

**Table 4 Activities of committees, 2007–08 to 2009–10**

	2007–08	2008–09	2009–10
<b>Meetings (number)</b>			
Public	90	307	227
Private	207	313	435
Inspections/other	3	7	9
<b>Meetings (hours)</b>			
Public	445	1,671	979
Private	70	109	104
<b>Matters referred</b>			
Bills/provisions of bills (as packages)	50	90	96
Other	24	29	34
Reference of annual reports automatically	15	16	16
<b>Reports presented<sup>a</sup></b>	101	160	157
<b>Submissions received</b>	3,905	6,296	9,116
<b>Witnesses</b>	1,165	2,556	2,659
<b>Extensions of time granted</b>	25	79	95

a Excludes estimates; includes reports on annual reports and other non-bill references.

**Table 5 Referral of bills inquiries, 2007–08 to 2009–10**

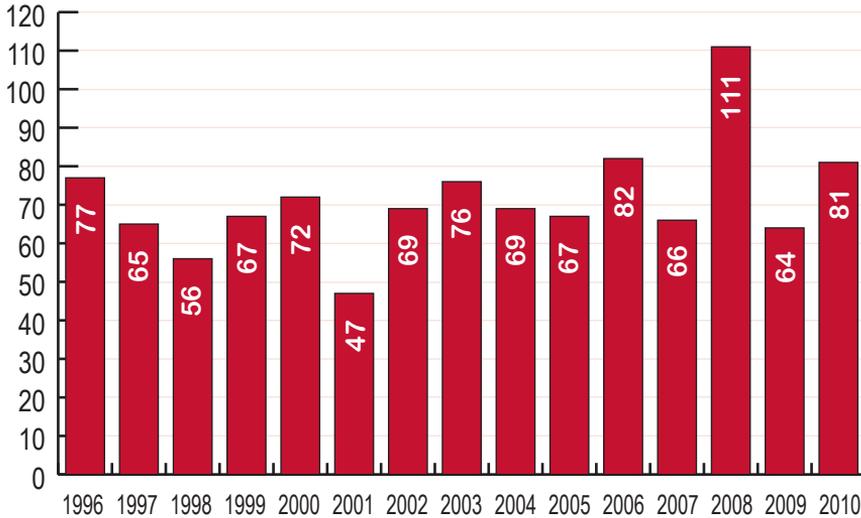
	2007–08	2008–09	2009–10
Number of bills introduced into parliament	197	235	226
Number of individual bills referred	65	129	114
Proportion of total individual bills referred	33%	55%	50%
Packages of bills referred	50	90	96

In 2009–10, bills referred to committees had an average reporting deadline of 41 working days. This compares to an average of 35 working days in 2008–09.

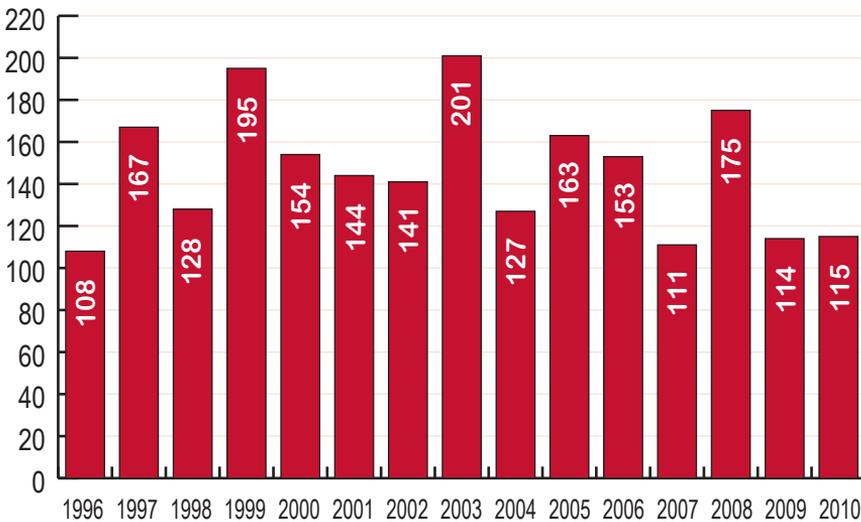
The results in tables 4 and 5 for the past three reporting periods show the range in workloads of Senate committees in the previous parliament (in which the Government held a majority in the Senate) and the current parliament (in which the Government does not hold a majority in the Senate). To gain a better understanding of the fluctuations in workload

across parliaments and election cycles, it is necessary to look at the statistical history, as shown in figures 17 and 18.

**Figure 17** Number of Senate committee references, 1996 to 2010



**Figure 18** Number of Senate standing committee hearings, 1996 to 2010



As shown in table 6, the usual cycle of estimates hearings was conducted during the year, commencing in October 2009 with a week of supplementary hearings for the 2009–10 Budget. A week of additional estimates hearings was held in February 2010. The initial estimates hearings for the 2010–11 Budget took place between 24 May and 4 June 2010.

The requirement to hold an additional day of estimates hearings into Indigenous matters, which affects all the portfolios with budget expenditure or responsibility for Indigenous issues, is now well established and appreciated by senators with an interest in this policy area. In addition, the Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee reconvened on 17 June 2010 to hold a further hearing into the estimates of the Department of Finance and Deregulation in relation to government advertising.

**Table 6**      **Activities of committees considering estimates, 2008–09 to 2010–11 budget cycles**

Budget cycle	Hours of budget estimates hearings		Hours of additional estimates hearings	Total hours	Witnesses	Pages of evidence
	<i>May–June<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>October–November<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>February</i>			
2010–11	329	–	–	329	1,710	3,997
2009–10	332	189	177	698	3,156	7,119
2008–09	322	176	166	664	5,758	10,191
2007–08	333	<i>Not held</i>	183	516	1,832	4,004

a Main hearings.

b Supplementary hearings.

Overall, the 2009–10 budget cycle estimates involved 698 hours of hearings, a slight increase on the 2008–09 budget cycle. Committees prepared and tabled 16 reports on estimates, eight following the additional estimates held in February 2010 and eight after the budget estimates held in May–June 2010.

The activity of committees considering estimates generates considerable administrative effort for committee secretariats. Scheduling the hearings is particularly complex because:

- all departments and statutory bodies of the Commonwealth are involved
- ongoing coordination is required to ensure that ministers are in attendance to take responsibility for answering questions
- many senators wish to attend hearings of more than one committee, and so secretariats spend much time coordinating and adjusting programs and timetables to facilitate this.

An example of the last point occurred during the budget estimates in May 2010, when the Secretary of the Treasury could only appear before the

Economics Legislation Committee on a day on which four other committees were scheduled to hold estimates hearings. As the Standing Orders allow only any four of the eight committees to meet at the same time, agreement was reached for the Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee to postpone its estimates public hearings on that day until after the Economics Legislation Committee had completed and adjourned its hearing.

In the course of the estimates public hearings, senators place many questions on notice. Secretariats follow up and publish the answers to those questions. Typical numbers of questions placed on notice in the last budget estimates hearings range from 168 questions for the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee to 617 questions for the Economics Legislation Committee.

### Select committees

A select committee is an ad hoc committee established by the Senate to inquire into and report on a specific matter or matters. In most cases, a select committee ceases to exist when it presents its final report. Often, select committees also present interim reports.

Five select committees operated during 2009–10. One of those, the Select Committee on the National Broadband Network, presented its final report to the Senate on 17 June 2010 and then ceased to exist.

The Committee Office continues to provide secretariat support for:

- the Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries—this committee has two inquiries and is due to report on 13 August and 23 August 2010
- the Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities—this committee is due to report every six months and to present its final report on 30 September 2010
- the Select Committee on Fuel and Energy—this committee is due to report on 30 August 2010
- the Select Committee on the Reform of the Australian Federation—this committee is due to report on 17 November 2010.

During 2009–10, select committees held 109 meetings (public and private), for a total of 309 hours. They received 310 submissions and heard 606 witnesses. The corresponding figures for 2008–09 were 139 meetings (public and private), for a total of 390 hours, 8,620 submissions and 789 witnesses.

## Joint committees

Joint committees comprise senators together with members of the House of Representatives. They are established by resolution of each House and, in the case of statutory committees, in accordance with the provisions of the relevant Act.

During 2009–10, the Committee Office supported three statutory joint committees: Corporations and Financial Services, the Australian Crime Commission, and the Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity.

The committees held 84 meetings (public, private and inspections) for a total of 173 hours. They received 389 submissions and heard 184 witnesses. The corresponding figures for 2008–09 were 96 meetings, 148 hours, 392 submissions and 188 witnesses.

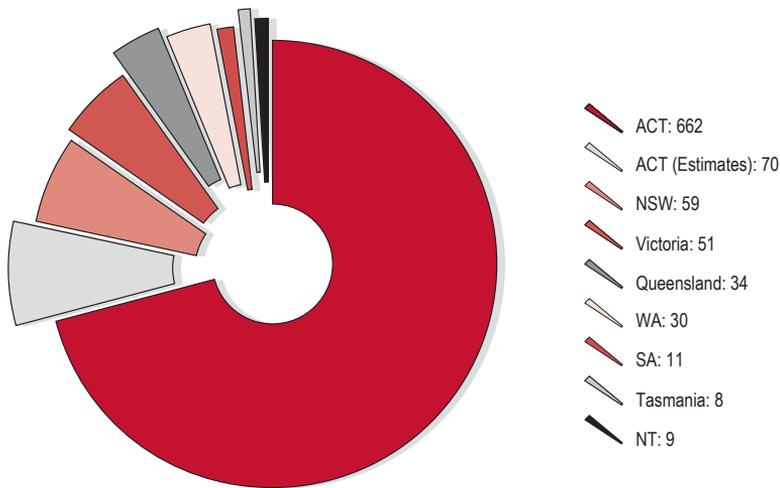
## Community engagement

Committee members place considerable value on engaging with a broad range of people as they conduct each committee inquiry. Committee secretariats assist committees to achieve this, through a variety of strategies:

- advertising all inquiries in the national media and on the internet
- corresponding directly with groups known to be interested in the subject matter of an inquiry
- travelling interstate, including to regional centres and remote areas, to have hearings with witnesses and visit the sites of matters under investigation
- conducting hearings through telephone and video conferences, including with witnesses overseas.

Senate committee secretariats supported 934 meetings and hearings during the year, an increase compared with 862 in 2008–09. These statistics include estimates hearings held by committees. A breakdown by location of the committee meetings and hearings in 2009–10 appears in figure 19.

**Figure 19** Committee meetings and hearings by location, 2009–10



## Use of technology

The Senate Centralised Information Database assists committee secretariats to quickly and accurately handle the large volumes of information used to support committee inquiries. The database includes capacity:

- for members of the public to enter submissions directly
- for secretariats to rapidly collate data, such as addresses for mail-outs
- for information to be transferred electronically from witnesses to secretariats.

The database was completed in May 2010 and is now used by all standing committee secretariats. It is improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the office by saving staff time, enabling staff to transfer seamlessly between secretariats, and enhancing the office's management of the large numbers of submissions received by committees.

Two innovations foreshadowed in last year's report were implemented in 2009–10:

- Acknowledging that video footage of hearings is increasingly being broadcast on television, the Chairs' Committee resolved to require a Senate 'watermark' (that is, a logo) to appear on all broadcast footage of Senate committee hearings. All television media outlets have complied with the requirement since it was introduced in December 2009.

- The office has long advocated the broadcasting of interstate public hearings just as public hearings held in Parliament House are broadcast. By June 2010, the Department of Parliamentary Services had commenced implementation of such a service, by using ‘away kits’ to provide instant audio broadcast of interstate public hearings. The introduction of full telecast and webcast of committee hearings from anywhere in Australia remains a priority for the office.

The office also continues to investigate strategies to support committee inquiries by enhancing accessibility to committee material held on the Senate’s website. The committee section of the website attracts substantial interest. As in 2008–09, more than 13 million page views were recorded in 2009–10, indicative of the usefulness of the committee material made available by the office. The content and presentation of committee material on the website will be further developed in 2010–11.

## **Education activities and other contributions**

In 2009–10, Committee Office staff also contributed to the department’s outcome by:

- serving as secretaries to parliamentary delegations
- acting as presenters in the department’s training and seminar programs
- providing briefings about Senate committee work for visiting parliamentary delegations—briefings about estimates hearings continued to be of particular interest to international visitors.

The office also contributed to the reviews of the committee systems of the parliaments of Victoria and Queensland (including a formal submission by the Clerk of the Senate to the Parliament of Queensland in May 2010).

In both 2009 and 2010, two participants in the Working in the Senate Development Program were attached to various committee secretariats, providing administrative and research support to Senate committee inquiries.

## **Factors, events and trends influencing performance**

As was the case in 2008–09, the high committee secretariat workloads were the significant feature of 2009–10, particularly the large number of inquiries referred by the Senate (which is covered in the ‘Activity levels’ section).

The trend of the Senate to set very short reporting timeframes, often referring several bills to a committee for report within a week or a fortnight, has made it difficult for committee secretariats to complete the necessary administrative preparations, including making arrangements for Hansard and broadcasting services and calling for submissions from the public. It also limits the resources available to secretariats to analyse evidence and draft reports.

The full-time equivalent staffing level for the Committee Office in 2009–10 was 59 (62 in 2008–09). The decrease resulted from the reduction in the number of select committees in 2009–10 and the more effective utilisation of staff across the office. Several long-serving officers retired during 2009–10, a significant loss of committee working experience. The positions were filled by a combination of internal promotion and external appointment.

In 2009–10, the office's strategies to effectively manage its workload included:

- deploying staff from committee secretariats experiencing lighter workloads to assist busier committee secretariats
- securing secondments from executive departments to assist with specific tasks, including serving as a committee secretary or assisting with research
- requesting committee staff to work additional hours (noting that this strategy cannot be sustained in the long term).

## Evaluation

The principal formal means of evaluating the performance of the Committee Office in supporting Senate committees and certain joint committees is the biennial senators' survey. The last survey was conducted in 2009, with the next one due in 2010–11.

Comments made in the chamber when a committee's report is tabled or debated are another source of evaluation. As in 2008–09, senators were highly positive in their comments, some of which are listed in figure 20. Informal feedback from witnesses also indicated satisfaction with their dealings with secretariat staff.

## Figure 20 Senators' comments on Committee Office secretariats, 2009–10

I want to put on record my appreciation to the secretariat and my appreciation for so many people who gave their time to tell us their stories—again reinforcing the value of the committee system in this place. We now have those issues in front of us ...

But, as usual, we could not have done it without the brilliant and diligent supporting work of the secretariat and the staff ... our thanks to all the work that goes on behind the scenes.

Firstly, I thank the secretariat for the work that they did in preparing the report. It was quite a lengthy period of inquiry and their attention to detail in working with the committee was very much appreciated. I again thank the secretariat and my colleagues on the committee for the work that went into the inquiry.

I thank the committee secretariat for its work in providing an overview of the very important area of Australia's role as an education provider in our world.

## Performance outlook

The election period is likely to reduce the level of committee activity during the next 12 months. The timing and the result of the election will determine committee activity in 2010–11 and beyond.

The key resource that the office provides to committees is its people. In 2010–11, the office will adopt a structured approach to consolidate institutional and procedural knowledge among new and more experienced staff, manage limited resources and enhance the office's technological capability, to ensure that its services to committees remain of the highest order. This will include the implementation of any relevant recommendations arising from the department's structural review.