

Committee Office

Output

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

Performance information

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.

Advice, documentation, publications and draft reports are timely, accurate and of a high standard. Tabling deadlines met in all but extraordinary circumstances.

Documentation is sufficient for committee purposes and material available to the public is available promptly, electronically or in hard copy.

Performance results

The 2011 senators' survey reported high levels of satisfaction with all aspects of support provided to Senate committees. All participants were either highly satisfied or satisfied with both the procedural advice they received and with the preparation of briefing papers and reports, and the research produced, by secretariats.

Other formal and informal feedback mechanisms also continued to show that senators consider the support provided by the Committee Office to be effective.

Accurate advice, documentation, publications and draft reports were provided to committees in accordance with committee requirements.

Reports were drafted and presented to the Senate in accordance with the timeframes set by committees and deadlines set by the Senate.

Committee staff provided committee members, witnesses and others with documents in accordance with secretariat procedures, orders of the Senate and committee requirements.

On tabling, reports were promptly made available to senators and others both electronically and in hard copy.

Overview

The Committee Office 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, and is a member of the department's executive responsible for a range of governance matters. In 2010–11, the Clerk Assistant (Committees) was a member of the Parliamentary Library review committee and was coopted as a member of the Australia and New Zealand Association of Clerks-at-the-Table education committee. The administrative structure of the office is outlined in figure 15, including the secretaries of individual committees.

The 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 full-time equivalent staffing level for the Committee Office in 2010–11 was 58 (59 in 2009–10).

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, a research officer and an administrative officer (formerly called an executive assistant). The change to that position title was in response to the Committee Office submission to the department's structural review of 2010 and was implemented in consultation with officers affected and their supervisors. Depending on the workload allocated to a committee, additional resources are often provided to assist with administration or with research, analysis and report writing.

Figure 15 Elements and responsibilities of the Committee Office

Executive		
<i>Chris Reid, Clerk Assistant</i>		
<i>Jackie Morris, Senior Clerk of Committees</i>		
Procedural advice and training		
Planning and coordination		
Secretariat staffing and resources		
Statistics and records		
Legislative and general purpose standing committee secretariats	Joint statutory committee secretariats	Select committee secretariats
Community Affairs <i>Ian Holland</i>	Corporations and Financial Services <i>Tim Bryant</i>	Senate select Australia's Food Processing Sector <i>Tim Bryant</i>
Economics <i>John Hawkins</i>	Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity <i>Jon Bell</i>	Scrutiny of New Taxes <i>Shon Fletcher</i>
Education, Employment and Workplace Relations <i>Tim Watling</i>	Law Enforcement [Australian Crime Commission until 23 November 2010] <i>Jon Bell</i>	Joint select Australia's Immigration Detention Network <i>Tim Watling</i>
Environment and Communications <i>Stephen Palethorpe</i>		Gambling Reform <i>Lyn Beverley</i>
Finance and Public Administration <i>Christine McDonald</i>		Ceased during 2010–11 Senate select Agricultural and Related Industries [ceased to exist 23 August 2010] <i>Jeanette Radcliffe</i>
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade <i>Kathleen Dermody</i>		Fuel and Energy [ceased to exist 30 August 2010] <i>Penelope Robinson</i>
Legal and Constitutional Affairs <i>Julie Dennett</i>		Reform of the Australian Federation [ceased to exist 30 June 2011] <i>Tim Bryant</i>
Rural Affairs and Transport <i>Jeanette Radcliffe</i>		Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities [ceased to exist 24 September 2010] <i>Hamish Hansford</i>
		Joint select Christmas Island Tragedy of 15 December 2010 [ceased to exist 30 June 2011] <i>Tim Watling</i>

The cost of the Committee Office in 2010–11 was \$8.3 million (\$8.6 million in 2009–10). While the workload for the year has been substantial, and often intense, administrative costs incurred by the office decreased due to reduced travel and committee activity over the election period in 2010.

The primary cost in operating a committee is staffing, with a typical secretariat costing about \$415,000 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) and accommodation for staff at interstate hearings, and report printing. The administrative costs of a typical secretariat for the reporting period were about \$45,000.

No specialist advice was obtained by Senate committee secretariats during 2010–11. However, translation costs incurred by committees totalled \$2,100.

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 2010–11, 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

- issues relating to parliamentary privilege, including the unauthorised disclosure of committee information and interference with witnesses
- matters arising from estimates hearings—for example, the late answers to questions on notice, the scope of questioning and the self-imposed restriction on questions relating to sub judice matters.

Committee secretaries met regularly throughout the year to discuss management and procedural issues encountered by secretariats, and to discuss issues raised in the *Procedural Information Bulletin*. Senior officers from other areas of the department, including the Clerk, met with committee secretaries during the year, as did representatives from support areas such as Hansard and broadcasting from the Department of Parliamentary Services.

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 2010–11, the committee met on one occasion (with other meetings postponed because of the election and timetabling constraints towards the end of 2010). The committee considered issues such as the behaviour of senators and the role of a committee chair, the workload of committees and the application of new technology to store and distribute documents.

Activity levels

As was the case in 2009–10, the Senate referred a large number of matters to committees for inquiry in 2010–11.

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.

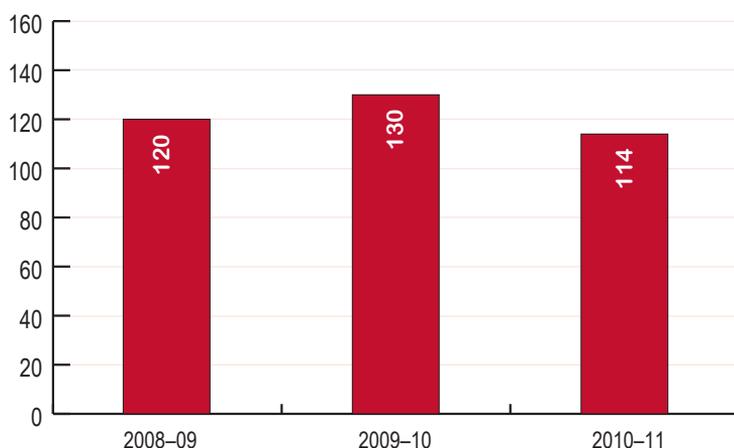
During 2010–11, the Senate referred 114 matters to standing committees. As shown in table 4, the committees tabled 192 reports, compared with 174 reports in 2009–10.

Table 4 Reports presented by standing committees, 2008–09 to 2010–11

Report type	2008–09	2009–10	2010–11
Reports on bills	86	83	82
Interim reports on bills	15	9	10
Reports on other references	29	33	41
Interim reports on other references	13	18	29
Reports on annual reports	16	15	15
Reports on estimates	16	16	15
Total	175	174	192

Figure 16 also shows the consistently high volume of matters referred to standing committees by the Senate in the past three years.

Figure 16 Number of Senate standing committee references, 2008–09 to 2010–11



In 2010–11, bills referred to committees had an average reporting deadline of 44 working days. This is similar to 2009–10 with an average of 41 working days.

Table 5 provide data about the activities of Senate committees for 2008–09, 2009–10 and 2010–11, and table 6 provides data about the referral of bills to committees for those years.

Table 5 Activities* of standing committees, 2008–09 to 2010–11

	2008–09	2009–10	2010–11
Meetings (number)			
Public hearings	241	227	118
Private meetings	313	435	350
Inspections/other	7	9	6
Meetings (hours)			
Public hearings	997	979	507
Private meetings	109	104	79
Submissions received	6,296	9,116	4,898
Witnesses	2,556	2,659	1,482
Extensions of time to report granted	79	95	61

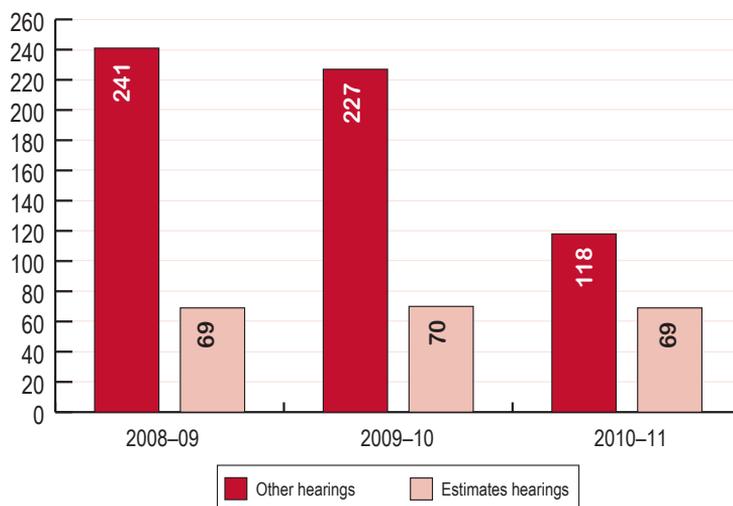
* not including estimates activities – see table 7 for those activities.

Table 6 Referral of bills to committees for inquiry, 2008–09 to 2010–11

	2008–09	2009–10	2010–11
Number of bills introduced into parliament	235	226	224
Number of individual bills referred	129	114	83
Proportion of total individual bills referred	55%	50%	37%
Packages of bills referred	90	96	68

Although the volume of work and reports tabled in 2010–11 have been very high, the volume of submissions received and public hearings held in relation to matters other than estimates have declined significantly compared with 2009–10. Figure 17 shows the number of estimates hearings and the number of other hearings held.

Figure 17 Number of Senate standing committee hearings, 2008–09 to 2010–11



As shown in table 7, the usual cycle of estimates hearings was conducted during the year, commencing in October 2010 with a week of supplementary hearings for the 2010–11 Budget. A week of additional estimates hearings was held in February 2011. The initial estimates hearings for the 2011–12 Budget took place between 23 May and 3 June 2011.

The requirement to hold an additional day of estimates hearings into Indigenous matters, which involves several 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, to accommodate the availability of witnesses, the Environment and Communications Legislation Committee reconvened on 16 June 2011 to complete its hearings on certain agencies under the Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy portfolio: the Australian Communications and Media Authority and the NBN Co.

Table 7 Activities of standing 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^a</i>	<i>October–November^b</i>	<i>February</i>			
2011–12	334	–	–	334	1,449	3,884
2010–11	329	178	174	681	3,910	8,507
2009–10	332	189	177	698	3,156	7,119
2008–09	322	176	166	664	5,758	10,191

a Main hearings.

b Supplementary hearings.

Overall, the 2010–11 budget cycle estimates involved 681 hours of hearings, which is consistent with 2009–10 budget cycle. Committees prepared and tabled 15 reports on estimates, eight following the additional estimates held in February 2011 and seven after the budget estimates held in May–June 2011 (with the Community Affairs Legislation Committee expected to table its budget estimates report in July 2011).

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.

In the course of the estimates public hearings, senators place many questions on notice. Secretariats follow up and publish the answers to those questions. Numbers of questions placed on notice in the last budget estimates hearings ranged from 297 questions for the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee to 1,088 questions for the Community Affairs Legislation Committee. In total, almost 5,000 questions will be processed relating to the 2010–11 budget estimates, with answers received, and those not received, closely scrutinised and monitored by committees.

Senate 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.

Six Senate select committees operated during 2010–11. Four of those presented final reports during the year and then ceased to exist.

The Committee Office continues to provide secretariat support for:

- the Select Committee on the Scrutiny of New Taxes—this committee is due to present its final report on 30 November 2011
- the Select Committee on Australia’s Food Processing Sector—this committee is due to present its final report on 30 June 2012

During 2010–11, Senate select committees held 59 meetings (public and private), for a total of 84 hours. They received 174 submissions and heard 142 witnesses. The corresponding figures for 2009–10 were 109 meetings (public and private), for a total of 309 hours of meetings, 310 submissions and 606 witnesses.

Joint committees (including joint select 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 2010–11, the Committee Office supported three joint statutory committees: Corporations and Financial Services, the Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity, and Law Enforcement (formerly known as the Joint Committee on the Australian Crime Commission).

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

Three joint select committees operated during 2010–11. One of those, the Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy of 15 December 2010, presented its final report on 30 June 2011 and then ceased to exist.

In total, joint statutory and joint select committees held 77 meetings (public, private and inspections) for a total of 115 hours. They received 193 submissions and heard 224 witnesses. The corresponding figures for 2009–10 were 84 meetings, 173 hours of meetings, 389 submissions and 184 witnesses.

The Committee Office continues to provide secretariat support for:

- the Joint Select Committee on Gambling Reform—this committee is due to present its final report on 30 June 2013
- the Joint Select Committee on Australia’s Immigration Detention Network—this committee is due to present its final report on 7 October 2011.

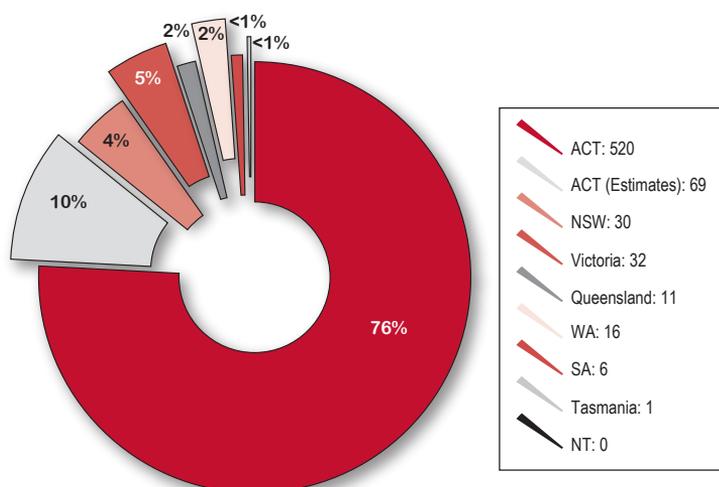
Community engagement

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 overseas witnesses.

Senate committee secretariats supported 685 meetings and hearings during the year, a decrease compared with 934 in 2009–10. These statistics include estimates hearings held by committees. A breakdown by location of the committee meetings and hearings in 2010–11 appears in figure 18.

Figure 18 Committee meetings and hearings by location, 2010–11



Use of technology

The Senate Centralised Information Database (SCID) 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, completed in May 2010, continues to improve 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. Further extension of SCID functionality, for example, by including reporting capability, is being planned for 2011–12.

Other developments in 2010–11 included:

- The trial of a document handling system called CommDocs (currently used by the House of Representatives Committee Office). It is series of private searchable websites for each committee, accessible only to members of the committee and their authorised staff. CommDocs contains documentation for each committee (agendas, minutes,

briefing papers, meeting timetables etc) in one location for each committee, and is a better alternative to emailing the documents to all the members of a committee. Some Senate and Senate administered joint committees are using CommDocs as part of a joint project with the House of Representatives Committee Office, which will be trialling SCID.

- Live audio broadcasts of almost every interstate public hearing held across Australia were available. The introduction of full telecast and webcast of committee hearings from anywhere in Australia remains a priority for the office. The work of the Department of Parliamentary Services to provide for audio broadcasts from anywhere in Australia has greatly assisted committees.
- Skype was used for the first time this year by one committee (to facilitate a senator joining a public hearing) and, together with other video and teleconferencing facilities, is an important step in improving the efficiency with which committees transact business.
- The office also continues to investigate strategies to support committee inquiries by enhancing accessibility to committee material on the Senate website. The committee section of the website attracts substantial interest. Over six million page views were recorded in 2010–11, 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 2011–12.
- Improving the access to online material for the vision impaired is an area the office investigated this year. The Environment and Communications References Committee commenced a trial to convert to HTML a selection of submissions received by the committee for its inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala population (it has a revised reporting date of 24 August 2011). Seventeen submissions were converted to HTML by Vision Australia at a cost of approximately \$2,000. Feedback from interested groups is being sought with a final report on the trial to be provided to the Clerk.

Education activities and other contributions

In 2010–11, Committee Office staff also contributed to the department's outcome by:

- serving as secretaries to parliamentary delegations, including to two Senate committee delegations

- acting as presenters in the department’s training and seminar programs
- delivering training sessions to public service departments and agencies throughout the year
- contributing to the redevelopment of the Commonwealth Parliament website
- providing briefings about Senate committee work for visiting parliamentary delegations and visiting parliamentary officials—briefings about estimates hearings continued to be of particular interest to international visitors.

The office also contributed to the implementation of the recommendations emerging from the structural review of 2010. Specifically, the office invested significantly in the learning and development framework, including arranging a series of training sessions and workshops for departmental staff specifically about committee work as well as supporting a range of non-Committee Office training opportunities. Several online resources were also updated or introduced to assist staff and senators (including new senators) and their staff.

In 2010, there were two participants in the Working in the Senate (WISE) development program and in 2011, there was one participant. Those officers were attached to various committee secretariats, providing administrative and research support to Senate committee inquiries. WISE participants also undertake placements in the other department programs during the year. The office also hosted two officers from public service departments, each for three months, as part of the Parliament of Australia Graduate Program 2010, and again in 2011.

Factors, events and trends influencing performance

As was the case in 2009–10, the high committee secretariat workloads were the significant feature of 2010–11, particularly the large number of inquiries referred by the Senate (see the ‘Activity levels’ section above). Significantly, the Committee Office also supported nine Senate select and joint select committees during the year, four more than in 2009–10.

The trend by the Senate to set short reporting timeframes, often referring bills to a committee for report within a week or a fortnight, has placed considerable pressure on committee secretariats to complete the necessary administrative preparations, including arranging public hearings and calling for submissions from the public. It has also limited the resources available to secretariats to analyse evidence and draft reports. The most significant concern, however, is the limit on senators’ time to attend to

their committee obligations, which often include much travel time, preparation for public hearings and consideration of draft reports.

The slight decrease in the office's full-time equivalent staffing level (from 59 to 58 – see 'Overview' section) was the result of the accumulated timelag between the completion of standard recruitment processes and the arrival of newly appointed officers.

As in previous years, the office's strategies in 2010–11 to effectively manage its workload included:

- deploying staff from committee secretariats experiencing lighter workloads to assist busier committee secretariats
- engaging experienced former staff to return to the office for short to medium-term periods to assist, in the most part, with drafting reports
- requesting committee secretariat staff to work, and compensating them for working, additional hours at peak times.

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. This year's survey revealed very high levels of satisfaction with all aspects of the support provided by the office to Senate committees and relevant joint committees.

Comments made in the chamber when a committee report is tabled or debated are another source of evaluation. As in 2009–10, senators were highly positive in their comments. Informal feedback from witnesses also indicated satisfaction with their dealings with secretariat staff.

Performance outlook

The key resource that the Committee Office provides to committees is its people. The office will continue to provide excellent service in an environment of great change and high workload. A workforce staffed, where ever possible, by ongoing (permanent) and increasingly experienced officers is a priority and continues the focus on enhancing procedural and administrative capacity in the office at all levels. The office will also continue to support the learning and development framework and other priorities emerging from the structural review of 2010, including input to the Senate Public Information Office and better engagement with technology.

