

Received 13/8/09
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**SUBMISSION FROM MS ANNETTE ELLIS MP, CHAIR OF THE STANDING
COMMITTEE ON FAMILY, COMMUNITY, HOUSING AND YOUTH: INQUIRY –
THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEES**

I would like to thank Ms Julie Owens, Chair of the Standing Committee on Procedure for this opportunity to make this submission to the committee.

In my time in parliament, I have been a member of the House of Representatives Standing Committees for Publications; Family and Community Affairs; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs; Employment, Workplace Relations and Workforce Participation and Family, Community, Housing and Youth. I have also been a member of the Joint Standing Committees on National Capital and External Territories and Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade.

I have been Chair of the Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth for approximately eighteen months, and in this time I believe the committee has performed very important work including an inquiry into homeless legislation, the inquiry into Better Support for Carers entitled "Who Cares...?" and a Roundtable discussion on Volunteering. These issues that the committee has covered, I believe, are major areas of interest to the current Federal Government, and I feel that the work done by the committee has in no small way informed and influenced the Government in the formation of policy and legislation in order to deal effectively with these issues.

I note that the primary focus of the inquiry deals with five main issues related to the general and domestic purpose of the committees, including the number, subject matter and means of appointment, type of work they undertake, and the powers and operations of the committees. However, the main focus of my submission will be the factors influencing the effectiveness of House committees, including resources and structural issues, particularly in light of the proposed budget cuts to the Department of the House of Representatives.

What do the committees do?

In 2005, Clerk of the House of Representatives, Ian Harris summed up the functions of parliamentary committees as follows:

- Conducting investigations of issues of public importance.
- Gathering evidence and making recommendations.
- Facilitating the participation of the public in the legislative process.
- Promoting public debate.
- Reviewing policy and scrutinising the activities of the executive.
- Enabling parliamentarians to learn about policy issues in a mostly non-partisan environment.
- Generally performing functions that the House of Representatives or Senate are 'not well fitted to perform'.

Given these functions, it is clear that the committees play an integral role regarding the day to day functioning of parliament.

How is committee work important?

At the seminar held to mark the 20th Anniversary of the Establishment of the House of Representatives Committee System, it was noted that committees draw on the prestige and power of parliament, have the power to require evidence from departments, and can commission independent research and assessment. However, it was acknowledged that they are only able to do this if they are sufficiently funded. The performance of these functions allows the committees to have an impact on each stage of the policy cycle such as agenda setting, the development of policy, an indirect say in the decision making process and a role in evaluation and consultation.

Committees play a very important role in the education and development of a member of parliament. Through committee work, members are exposed to a wide range of information through access to academics, community groups, representatives from government departments, the business community and individuals who have an interest in the particular subject matter that the committee may be dealing with.

When we come into Parliament as new members we have the task of servicing our electorates. This is an enormous task and a huge responsibility in itself. However, I believe that the committee work that we participate in exposes us to the world around us and the way that everyday people are affected in their lives. It has been a very big education for me and the learning experience has proven invaluable.

There are moments I recall such as when I was involved in the Legal and Illegal Substance Abuse Inquiry, of listening to a big, burly truck driver in tears describing how he found his deceased son's body three days after he had overdosed. How do you place a value on experiences such as this? Or sitting in a shed in the middle of the Australian desert, listening to Indigenous elders outline the day to day issues that they faced regarding the health of the local community.

I have seen experiences such as these change the opinion, and indeed the whole outlook that certain members have had on various issues. An example of this was after visiting a remote indigenous community in Western Australia, one of the members of our delegation who had previously held a very firm and pre-determined view towards indigenous issues, turned to me and remarked that he now more fully understood the issues facing these communities. He felt far better informed than ever after visiting and talking directly with the individuals and communities involved.

Recently, as Chair of the House Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth, we held an inquiry into the everyday issues facing carers in our society. The personal stories of people who deal with the care of their loved ones not only had a major impact on the committee members, but also gave impetus to the government to provide extra assistance to these members of the community.

Former Principal Research Officer, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, Mark Rodrigues stated in his address to the 20th Anniversary of the Establishment of the House of Representatives Committee System:

“...the parliamentary committee approach to evaluation has a number of advantages, including that the evaluation takes a broad perspective of the policy landscape by undertaking wide consultation through a public submission process and public hearings...by using public forums, committees can hear personal stories and anecdotes from people who have not made a submission but have considered comments to make.”

Not only does this statement support the case that it better informs and educates our members, it also highlights the benefits and advantages to the general public. It allows members of the public to have their say in the formulation of government policy. It has the effect of better informing the public of various issues through not only the publication of reports generated by committee inquiries, but also through their own participation in the inquiries. And importantly, it opens up the parliamentary process to the wider community at a very personal level.

The committees have been successful in engaging with marginalised and disenfranchised sections of the community. This has in part been from media exposure of committee inquiries. The success has also been as a result of committees engaging with people in their own environments.

What do the committees need to function effectively?

Former NSW MLA, Kevin Rozzoli, when referring to the work of parliamentary committees at 20th Anniversary of the House Committee system has remarked:

Committees are a valuable tool for a richer democracy, however, to fulfil this role more emphasis must be given, particularly in Lower Houses, to reinforcing their independence from executive control. To do this, the parliament, and thus de facto, the executive must ensure that they are properly resourced, that is, adequate staff and accommodation, unfettered access to legal and fiscal advice...

When speaking of ‘adequate staff and accommodation’, he is obviously referring to the support role played by secretariats that are staffed by parliamentary officers under the *Parliamentary Service Act 1999*. These committees comprise of a secretary, an inquiry secretary, a research officer and administrative support. They assist with research, analysis, facilitate the work of the community and report writing. They are also essential in the area of logistical support and event planning, particularly when committees are engaged in travel away from the parliament.

During an previous inquiry I was involved in, due to lack of funding/savings at the time, Hansard did not travel interstate with the committee. Instead a local service was used. The evidence at that public hearing proved to be of particular importance to our inquiry. However due to lack of professional diligence/technical issues at the local level, none of the evidence was subsequently available to the committee.

The committees need resources to allow proper and open advertising to inform interested groups and individuals of committee activity. Committee inquiries cover a very broad policy and community interest. It is essential for the community to have

knowledge of this work. At the conclusion of this work, the produced Report must also be accessible, in print and on-line.

The effect of proposed funding cuts

Mr Ian Harris, Clerk of the House has acknowledged that there have been significant savings measures to the Department of the House of Representatives in the past ten years, that its budget has declined in real terms by eleven percent since 2000, and staffing levels have fallen by almost eighteen percent. Mr Harris has also stated that the budget outlook for the Department is dire and unsustainable. If it continues to run on the current basis, the Department could make a loss \$1.98 million (8.9% of total revenue) in 2009-10. This is expected to increase to \$2.39 million (10.6% of total revenue) in 2010-11, and \$3.7 million (16.3%) by 2012-13.

In response to this, the Department has proposed a number of savings proposals, some of which will directly affect the functioning and administration of the committees. This includes less advertising of committee inquiries and other departmental activities, reducing the number of supported delegations, greater internal printing of committee reports and a reduction in the print runs for reports, a reduction of the discretionary international and domestic travel of departmental staff, and other unspecified efficiencies in staffing arrangements.

As pointed out previously, there are a number of people who have been associated with the parliamentary committee process who believe that the role of the committees should be given more scope and greater participation in the process of policy formation. Notwithstanding this, the suggested proposals to reduce departmental expenditure will have an adverse effect on what is a vital function of the parliament.

The committee system encourages our parliamentary colleagues to be better informed about any number of different issues that affect their constituencies. It broadens our knowledge of the parliamentary process and their role in it. The proposed cuts will have a particularly derogatory effect on committee support services such as staff numbers, both within the parliament and out in the field. The cuts will also mean that there will be a reduced use of experts in certain fields who are seconded for their knowledge in that particular area.

The cuts will also have a major derogatory effect on one of the main groups that it is meant to serve – the constituency. A reduction in advertising of the committee inquiries will mean that fewer people in the community will be aware of their existence, and a reduction in the number of printed reports will mean that fewer people will learn of the outcome of the recommendations made in the inquiries. This will result in a negative outcome of their effectiveness as it will result in a smaller number of stakeholders being involved in the inquiry process.

For a parliamentary committee system to operate to its optimal level, appropriate and adequate levels of funding and resources can be contemplated. Anything other than this seriously devalues not only the committee system, but the parliamentary system as a whole.