Overall Contribution of the House of Representatives Committee System

John Halligan
University of Canberra

20th Anniversary of the Establishment of the
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The twentieth anniversary of the House of Representatives committee system is an important milestone in the development of the institution. The presentation looks at several committee roles and contributions made by the committee system through several themes: historical context and developmental significance, roles of committees; MPs and committees; and contributions to public policy. In examining the contribution of the committee system we need to consider it in the context of a lower house of a Westminster type parliament and one in which hybrid committees perform complementary functions[i].

Historical context

The establishment of the House of Representatives committee system was a landmark in its institutional development and for parliament overall because it represented a new stage in committee evolution. In its first fifty years, the Parliament of Australia succeeded in institutionalising only three non-domestic committees: the Joint Committees of Public Accounts and Public Works, administered by the House, and the Senate Standing Committee on Regulations and Ordinances. These three pioneers stayed close to their original briefs as bodies concerned primarily with scrutiny. Other initiatives that went beyond such briefs either did not get off the ground or enjoyed only brief lives[ii]. Increasingly from the 1960s, greater use was being made of committees but usually select committees or some form of joint committee with the Senate.

The modern period of committee development in parliament commenced in 1970 with the establishment of the Senate's comprehensive set of Legislative and General Purpose Standing committees, which could be described as a 'system' of committees. The House was moving in a similar direction in the 1970s through a succession of new standing committees: Aboriginal Affairs (1973), Environment and

Conservation (1973), Road Safety (1974) and Expenditure (1976). With four standing committees established incrementally, the House could be said to have the basis for moving towards a full system. All were eventually absorbed into the new House system, the comprehensive set of committees established in 1987.

In terms of parliamentary institutionalisation then, distinctive stages are apparent. Both houses lacked standing committees until the 1970s (ignoring those focusing on internal matters): for the House, the only standing committees between 1901 and 1973 were domestic committees. The history of committees is one of movement from ad hoc arrangements dominated by select (and joint) committees to a focus standing committees and full-fledged systems of committees.

The 'comprehensive committee system' acquired by the House in 1987 was based on eight general purpose standing committees. Successive parliaments since 1992 have produced variations on the original list, including expanding the number in 1996 to nine and in 2002 to thirteen (the current list is in Table 1) [iii], and other changes ranging from committee titles to more substantial matters of content (particularly since 1996). Interestingly, Harris (2005: 623) observes that 'the functions of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence were extended, thus giving the House the capacity to monitor or to "shadow" the work of all federal government departments and instrumentalities'. This raises the question about where the 'committee system' begins and ends, and that a fuller appreciation of committee contributions needs to take into account complementary functions performed by different types of committee.

Committee roles and reports 1970-99

Three basic types of committee policy role emerge in a recent study: scrutiny, investigation (divided into review and strategy) and legislation (Halligan, Miller and Power 2007). Two broader responsibilities—parliamentarians' recruitment and training, and public interaction and communication—are also central to the performance of these roles. A focus on these functions provides us with one basis for examining change, and the relevance of committees.

The four committee roles can be related to phases in the policy cycle[iv]. The first two roles, strategic investigation and appraisal of legislation, refer to the forward-looking phases of policy development, in which ideas and options are analysed and policies formulated. Strategic investigation offers opportunities for parliamentary

committees to contribute independently of the executive, although they will often be either complementing or working in conjunction with the government. The breadth of issues involved means that strategic roles are more concerned with broader national matters. Legislative appraisal addresses the government's policy preferences and in terms of scope is both narrow (mainly amending legislation) and broad (significant new legislation).

Scrutiny refers to the narrower work of committees. There is generally a compliance and technical character to the work. The scope of the inquiries will often be less extensive than those for the many investigations of review and strategic reports[v].

Review reports focus on the evaluative phase of policy development, and are concerned with issues about ongoing programs with wide impacts on government and society, and with questions about the 'effectiveness' or 'appropriateness' of policies or programs (compare the 'compliance' or 'efficiency' interest of scrutiny inquiries). In a review process established policies or programs are evaluated, often in anticipation of future changes to those policies or programs.

The number of House committee reports increased substantially since the 1980s (Table 2) reflecting an overall expansion of committee activity in parliament. In terms of the broader picture, most reports have come from Senate (over one-half) or joint (over one-third) committees. The House, which overall plays a rather more modest role in the production of committee reports, accounts for about one-tenth of the reports for 1970-1999[vi].

The House reports are concentrated in review. Strategic investigation reports form a significant second, but the other two roles are unimportant (few items of legislation were referred and scrutiny reports were rare). Review surged in the 1980s and appeared to plateau in terms of level of activity in the 1990s. Strategic investigation continued to rise across the 1970-1990s. The House's level of specialisation in the 1990s was very high if review and strategic investigation are combined (93 per cent), with review accounting for 75 per cent overall (Table 3).

For the same period the House system specialised in several policy fields as indicated by the reports produced by committees (Table 4 & 5).

Lower house in context

The House of Representatives acquired a comprehensive committee system but the coverage varies in practice. The House system has been much more oriented to the needs of the executive and of local communities than to the interests of professionalised policy communities as in the Senate.

A feature of the references of standing committees is that they have the power to inquire into a range of matters – bills, reports, motions, proposals etc – provided the matter has been referred to them by the chamber or a minister. The result is that most references come directly from a minister, which is interpreted to mean that 'effectively the minister decides the agenda of the committee'. Annual reports and audit reports are automatically referred to standing committees for them to undertake an inquiry.

It has been significant that the executive appears to have been more comfortable with House committees engaging in broad reviews, rather than more detailed (and potentially troublesome) studies. However, the House system has sought to free itself at least partially from ministerial direction. A report from the House Procedure Committee recommended that committees not be dependent upon ministerial references in order to maintain 'watching briefs' over the continuing performance of executive agencies in areas previously the subjects of committee inquiry (HoR Standing Committee on Procedure 1999: 28).

There are differences between the houses, although stereotypes are no always illuminating. Apparently 'Senators are different, they're more for dotting the 'i's' and crossing the 't's' whereas the House of Reps are probably a little bit more gung-ho (MP). From a Senator's point of view the House of Reps. is 'very different - the case is argued in the caucus and in the minister's office. In the Senate…you've got to have your arguments right, you've got to know your ground, you've got to be well researched'.

The House system has functioned in a manner perhaps best described as 'rational-bureaucratic', being inevitably closer to the executive. In its short history of twenty years it has developed cautiously but incrementally. The House committees have frequently shown a willingness to complement the work of government. The mode of executive–legislative relations most salient in the House of Representatives system is a combination of intra- and inter-party (Halligan, Miller and Power 2007). The intra-party sub-mode is most in evident in the close relations between committee

chairs and ministers; the inter-party sub-mode in the relatively high proportion of broadly focused policy inquiries. A common strategy was working collaboratively with the executive (e.g. the Banking, Finance and Public Administration Committee and its relations with the Department of Finance and Administration).

One generalisation about members' favoured reports is that they were ones that stayed well clear of major areas of partisan disputation. Committees may also assist a government in resisting political pressures; for example, one committee was reported as playing 'an important role in maintaining the Commonwealth's responsibilities and activities in environmental protection' (Committee secretary). According to one committee chair, government domination is the main constraint on committees and in conjunction with 'a sometimes overly cautious degree of self-censorship by committees, seriously limits the choice of inquiry topics for committees and thus the scope for scrutinising either legislation or Executive performance' (Somlyay 1997).

MPs and committees

The transformation of parliament's internal structure through the introduction and expansion of committee systems has had important implications for members of parliament, in particular backbenchers. The impact of committees on parliamentary work has been immense; membership has become an established and important part of the lives of most MPs who join committees soon after taking their seats in parliament. The activities of committees occupy much of their time while they are in Canberra (and often much of their time when they are not), and it is through the work of committees that they find opportunities to pursue policy goals. Being the chair of a House committee has emerged as one of the most common preparations for prospective ministers.

In 1970, most MPs gave little attention to committees: over half were not members of any committee; just over a quarter belonged to one; and a mere eighteen per cent could claim multiple memberships. By 2000, the patterns of committee memberships had changed noticeably for the House of Representative. By then fifty-three per cent of MPs had multiple memberships; the non-servers were for the most part members of the political executive (twenty-eight per cent). The trends in multiple committee memberships largely reflect a substantial growth in the numbers of committees, and in committee positions relative to the membership of parliament. The

total number of all types of committees for the House (including joint, but not of course party committees) was 30 for 2006-07 (HoR 2007: Appendix 3).

Perhaps the most notable feature of committee service is its ubiquity: virtually all those who have served in the Australian Parliament between 1970 and 1999 were on at least one committee at some stage during their parliamentary careers. Only nineteen members of the House of Representatives over this period had not been on committees at any time while they were in parliament. A number of those never on committees were ministers,[vii] most of who had been in parliament for only a short period of time before securing positions on the frontbench.

Committee service is also noted for its variability: the time given by individual members of committees varies widely within, between committees, and over time. When MPs were interviewed in the 1990s they were asked about the proportion of their time spent on all committee work, the most common response overall was around one quarter, with the balance devoted to constituency or other parliamentary work. But it was evident from the interviews that parliamentary committees have passive as well as active members. Some members did not show significant commitment, regarding 'their involvement in the committee processes as totally irrelevant. Serving on any committee sits very uncomfortably with them' (Whip). One MP saw the level of activity of committee members as related to how long they had been on a committee: 'newer members do most of the work…the older ones have obviously worn a bit thin, and it's quite evident from some…don't take it very seriously'.

Judging from the numbers of meetings held, and the numbers and sizes of reports produced, there are substantial differences in the demands that different committees make on their members. For example, in 2006–07, Economic, Finance and Public Administration with 36 and Health and Ageing with 34 compared with the active joint committees of Accounts and Audit, and Works (with the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade and Public recording 102), whereas several of the less busy House standing committees held between ten and twelve meetings (HoR 2007).

A third feature of committee service is its diversity. In 2008, there are 21 House committees (excluding domestic committees), which cover all fields of government. The political and social issues that they can address are almost unlimited.

The standing 'general purpose' committees have potentially open terms of reference that allow them to range widely within their broad subject areas.

A primary indicator of acceptance of committees is commitment to the work of one or more committees. While length of service on a committee does not automatically mean increasing expertise in the work of this committee it seems reasonable to assume that most members remain on particular committees for long periods because of interest in their work. There is clear evidence of increasing specialisation in committees over time. MPs moved from being overwhelmingly generalists to a significant core (one third) who are specialists (Table 6)[viii]. Of the policy fields, the most notable was the level of specialisation in social and community services in the House of Representatives.

Institutional development

The focus of institutional change in the direction of greater specialisation and capacity building through the development of committees. What has (and has not) become institutionalised? The study of institutionalisation addresses the acquisition over time of stable procedures and norms, including durability, structural complexity, environmental responsiveness and relative autonomy. These questions can be examined within the constraints of a Westminster system by examining specialisation within the parliament through delegation of responsibilities and tasks to committees, and within committees through the development of procedures, norms, ethos and membership continuity (Norton 1998).

To what extent has institutionalisation occurred within the committee systems? First there is the characteristic of small memberships, which seems to be best realised in the smaller arena. The House standing committees have their membership set at ten that provides the basis for focused attention as they conduct investigations.[ix] Secondly, committee jurisdictions have paralleled those of the main government agencies, with little scope for overlapping jurisdictions. The coverage of departments is now comprehensive. (There is however scope for overlapping jurisdictions between the House and Senate systems.)

Thirdly, there is the level of commitment by committee members. Committee specialisation, previously mentioned, is a good indicator of acceptance of, and commitment to, the work of one or more committees. MPs have moved from being

overwhelmingly generalists to a significant core (one third) who are specialists (a figure that may have increased in the 2000s).

The expansion of the standing committees and of a fully-fledged system was accompanied not only by the establishment of the leadership positions of chair and deputy chair but also by some consolidation of these roles. No longer were committees the main preserve of the parliamentary party leadership as in the days when the main committees were of the domestic type. Leadership positions came to be regarded as stepping-stones to ministerial careers rather than simply as ends in themselves (see the discussion in Halligan, Miller and Power 2007: Chapter 8).

An obvious and striking indicator of the contribution of committees to policy processes has been the growing number and diversity of reports produced by committees. The number of reports produced during the ten years 1990–99 was more than triple the number produced two decades earlier (1970–79). The growing diversity of reports can be illustrated by looking not only at the different types of policy roles to which those reports relate, which we have broadly differentiated as scrutiny, review, strategy and appraisal of legislation, but also at the widening range of subjects addressed. A further dimension to this diversity comes from the distinctive approached taken by the House of Representatives to their inquiry and reporting functions.

The policy roles of committees have been growing, especially in the area of government operations and social programs, in part because of the overload of the political executive, which has opened up opportunities for ambitious backbenchers to become more involved in policy development and review. Increasingly, external interests in relevant policy communities were being drawn into these policy processes.

Looking at the roles from the point of view of the volume and distribution of reports, the House overall plays a somewhat modest role in the production of committee reports, which are overwhelmingly concentrated in Review. Strategic investigation reports are a significant second. The House's level of specialisation in the 1990s is very high if review and strategic investigation are combined. The other two roles barely register, the House having assiduously avoided the most contentious (legislation) and the least contentious (scrutiny). Standing committees have not generally pursued the opportunities to undertake scrutiny work[x], but some MPs are involved in scrutiny through joint committees administered by the House. Within policy fields, there has also been specialisation in some areas (Table 4 & 5).

The standing committees in the 2000s appear to have continued established practices. Most reports during the last three parliaments have involved some form of investigation. Only Legal and Constitutional considers bills. Apart from Economics, Finance and Public Administration's regular reporting on annual reports (particularly the Reserve Bank of Australia), considerations of departmental and agency annual reports were rare as were those on those on reports of the Australian National Audit Office.

Committees and public policy

Committees are now a substantial element in the organisational structure of the Australian Parliament with parliamentarians spending much of their time in committee meetings and well-established public expectations about their role as part of external consultation in the policy process. This raises the question of the value of committees and what they contribute to the public policy.

There are two ways to examine how committees affect policies. The first is to consider their impacts on public policies through reports and recommendations. An obvious measure is the acceptance and implementation of recommendations by government, but this is difficult to determine in practice except on a case study basis; and the interpretation of such statistics can be complicated by the politics of formulating committee recommendations and anticipation of recommendations by the bureaucracy. It is appropriate therefore to also distinguish broader processes as a means of appraising different types of impact—on experts and public policy debate as well as on government. These questions can also be considered through committee roles: what is their impact through the performance of scrutiny, review of legislation and investigation, and through public communication?

Committees engage at various stages in the policy process and with various actors, such as members of the government, bureaucracy and policy communities. An accepted depiction of the role of committees contributing to the policy process is through representing community views and feeding in recommendations and information (House of Reps Standing Committee on Procedure 2001: 3).

In the Australian context the cabinet dominates the decision stage, and an executive-centric process is adopted to depict options for parliament in the policy process (Table 7) (Halligan, Miller and Power 2007; Bridgman and Davis 2004). It is important to note that contributions by parliamentary committees are not standard

components of the policy process, certainly in the earlier stages. Committees are prominent at the legislative stage and have review and scrutiny options through, and to some extent even beyond, the policy implementation stage.

A starting point is provided by perceptions of committee roles among the parliamentarians interviewed for our study. These reflected experience with a number of committee activities,\ including scrutiny of administration, appraisal of legislation, contribution to policymaking and consultation with the community. There was general recognition of committee contributions to policymaking, and often this was made explicit as the primary role. One general conception was of the committee as 'a vehicle for transmitting ideas, for raising issues that otherwise might be neglected ... all part of influencing policy'.

There was one important factor shaping responses: all MPs can participate in scrutiny or debating the merits of legislation in the chamber, but with committees it depends on opportunity. A distinctive but not surprising feature of committee leaders' responses therefore was that their perceptions of committee roles reflected the chamber in which they were located: appraisal of legislation and scrutiny of administration did not show up among MPs, whereas investigation was prominent. It was recognised that committees specialised in different functions.

Parliamentarians' perceptions of roles also depended on the nature of their committee experience. These factors produced substantial variation in how they perceived committee roles. There was then a spectrum of entry-points to the policy process: agenda-setting, developing policy, implementation of decisions, evaluation of policy implementation and public consultation with committee roles associated with each (Table 7).

Agenda-setting and issue identification were understood in terms like 'putting new things on the agenda; 'drawing attention to the problems'; '[within] the community of issues'; and of the committee system as an 'avenue for policy generation'. The investigatory work by committees regularly feeds in ideas to government.

A distinctive committee role was supporting the policy developmental aspirations of the executive, in particular as a tool for ministers. For example, when a minister has difficulty promoting a new policy proposal, he may arrange for a reference to a committee to investigate the matter. A unanimous recommendation from the committee may then provide the minister with a very strong case to argue in

a cabinet. As with the previous stage, the extensive investigatory recommendations by committees feed into government.

An interesting experiment in the House has been with the 'exposure draft' in which the government publishes a draft bill and explanatory memorandum before the bill is introduced (Harris 2005: 342). This practice has been used only sparingly during the 2000s.

Despite the increasing attention given to different forms of legislation in parliament, the House standing committee roles remains identified with one committee, but it received only one bill during the last two parliaments (2002-2007).

Administrative oversight (or the evaluation of policy implementation) has been regarded as a primary responsibility of legislatures, even if it has not necessarily always performed effectively. Standing and joint committees review the performance of public agencies and scrutinise the administration of government policy. Some of the review work by standing committees fits here.

There has been clarity about the House's conception of the role of committees as 'representing community and other views in the public policy process' (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure 2001: 3). These linkages between policy making and community communication were well-understood by parliamentarians who made comments like: 'Interaction and consultation with community interests ... and contribution to policy making are virtually indivisible' and 'policy making should be based on community interests and community opinion in a democracy'.

Committee leaders were highly conscious of communication with the community, and the interrelationships with other roles. Variations on this theme were the need to involve the broader community in the policy making process, providing a forum for policy debate and the committee as an extension of the democratic process that becomes thereby more participatory.

In terms of policy impact, the evaluation of the performance of parliamentary committees would appear to be a straightforward matter. The reports can be assessed for the 'strike rate' achieved. The reactions from committee secretaries were instructive about this measure of committee performance, 'strike rate' being defined as the percentage of its recommendations accepted and implemented by government. However, a committee can score highly on this indicator by eschewing recommendations that are unlikely to gain ready acceptance. A committee secretary

observed that his committee was not courageous and would discuss whether it was worth making a particular recommendation: 'We're not doing it because it will make our statistics look bad…Whereas other committees will say: "We think it's the right thing anyway, so…we're going to recommend it". And you chip away and eventually policies change. So we're nor very courageous as far as that goes'.

There is evidence that many committee reports achieve a high acceptance rate by government. One former House committee secretary reports 'about ninety-five per cent acceptance by the government of our recommendations' (Aldons 2000, 2001). The track record in the 2000s appears to be uneven with variations among committees and parliaments with the response rate weaker for the 41st parliament (ignoring the reports tabled in late 2007).

Turning to a more general discussion, there are two basic types of impact: on government and on non-government interests or different policy communities. One indicator of regard for committees and their work is the reports that have been cited as significant by our members. For the most part, our informants cited reports from their own 'home' committee system, drawing on their own experience. The rationale for nominating a report usually reflected the impact on broader stakeholders and reference source or some other precedent. Overall, only a small percentage of reports were cited as being especially meritorious, mostly with only single citations. Relatively few received two or three endorsements, one being *Ships of Shame*. The broader scope investigative inquiries (review and strategy) attracted the bulk of the recommendations.

By far the most regular instances of parliamentary committees having some form of policy impact on administration are through the activities of review and scrutiny. Here, evaluation encounters the 'rule of anticipated reactions' as officials adjust their plans when they know in advance that they are going to be subject to close committee examination.

> you don't see the changes straight away, because the Minister doesn't have to accept what you recommend in your report, but they accept quite a bit of it and it also starts public service thinking ... 'maybe we should start doing something along these lines.' They don't like to admit they're wrong at any time but they'll pick it up later on down the track (MP).

The more typical response of members was to see the impact in terms of a broader community and public policy rather than government per se. The *Ships of Shame* Report was widely recognised because it:

> changed attitudes throughout the world. I've made two overseas trips in connection with that. Most of them scoffed at us and said it would never happen. *Lloyds List of Shipping*, the shipping magazine, wrote: What would these Australian politicians know about shipping?' Like all politicians they'll have a knee-jerk reaction. When that Report came out that same newspaper, the leading shipping newspaper in the world, congratulated us (MP).

The process of the inquiry put a lot of information into the public domain that really stimulated the debate. The report was regarded as having a big impact on ship safety, international regulations, port control and shipping generally coming into Australian ports.

Experience in this system in the field of Aboriginal affairs is also instructive. As early as 1963, receipt of the famous Yirrkala bark petition led to the House creating the first in a series of committees to work in this policy field. A highpoint of this work was the major 'support services' inquiry of the late 1980s (Rowse 1992; Power 1996). The work of the committee has accounted for only two reports for the 40th and 41st parliaments, but the niche established over a third of a century ago remains to be tapped by an energetic chair and a sympathetic executive.

An important aspect of committee investigations and reviews is that it is usually subject to the open and public processes associated with other committee inquiries: it involves consultation with representatives of interest groups and other members of the public through public hearings, and it results in public reports. It thus enables far more public participation in the policy process than when deliberation is confined to the main chambers of parliament.

The House of Representatives has been focusing on improving communication and public involvement, and comments that 'it is through the activities of parliamentary committees that the community has the greatest opportunity to become involved in the day to day work of our parliamentary system' (HoR 1999; 2001). The Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs' *Every Picture Tells a Story: Report into the Child Custody Arrangements in the Event of Family Separation w*as based on a process that attracted 1,715 submissions within a short timeframe (Dept HoR 2004).

There have of course been many other significant reports. However, the question remains as to whether Somlyay's (1997) observation still applies ten years on: 'House committees have generally not been able to carve out a clear niche for themselves - a niche that allows them to make an effective contribution to the business of parliament'. Is this because of 'self censorship' in relations with political executive, the lack of glamour and publicity associated with scrutiny of annual and audit reports or simply overwork?

Overall contribution and challenges

At a general level, it can be concluded that an important effect of the growth of committee work over the past third of a century has been the broadening of opportunity for participation in policy development. The broadening has, of course, been most obvious in relation to MPs. In the traditional Westminster system, opportunities for MP involvement were largely restricted to the party room and party committees. While these retain great significance, MPs are now exploiting opportunities other than being severely limited by party organisation.

Beyond the MPs, a range of individual citizens and public interest groups are now increasingly able to participate in policy development through involvement in the work of the committees. As the parliament moves through the twenty-first century, these opportunities for 'outside' engagement may come to be of the highest significance for the functioning of the parliament as the leading institution of representative democracy in Australia.

Several developments covered in this paper warrant further research to extend the analysis to the late 2000s and to detail the contributions of committees and how they serve the roles of the House of Representatives.

What is most apparent is the durability of the committee system for twenty years. Some changes to parliaments are susceptible to the political dynamics of the day, and are reversible. The House committee system is now impervious to such influences. It has become well institutionalised and has evolved significantly as a committee system. Yet, significant questions remain about the level of utilisation and responsibilities of the system. The House system has depended on ministerial references for its work, and has had to develop relations of trust with the executive to produce steady streams of relatively 'safe' broadly focused policy references.

There is therefore substantial potential for further evolution in the second twenty years of the House's committee system that expands upon the volume of work, extends the roles played and takes the system of committees to a new developmental level.

Annex

Table 1   House of Representatives Committees 2008

Standing Committees 2008	Joint 2008*
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Affairs	Joint Statutory Committees
Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry	Intelligence and Security
Communications, Information Technology & Arts	Public Accounts and Audit
Economics, Finance and Public Administration	Public Works
Education and Vocational Training	
Employment, Workplace Relations and Workforce Participation	Joint Standing Committees
Environment & Heritage	Electoral Matters
Family and Human Services	Foreign Affairs, Defence & Trade
Health and Ageing	Migration
Industry and Resources	National Capital & External Territories
Legal and Constitutional Affairs	Treaties
Science and Innovation	
Transport and Regional Services	*Administered by House of Reps

Table 2   Reports by policy role 1970-79–1990-99

	1970-79		1980-89		1990-99		1970-99	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Scrutiny	0	0	7	6	3	2	10	3
Legislation	0	0	0	0	9	6	9	3
Review	36	86	92	82	100	67	228	75
Strategy	6	14	13	12	38	25	57	19
House of Reps	42	100	112	100	150	100	304	100

Source: adapted from Halligan, Miller and Power 2007, Chapter Table 4.5

Table 3   Reports by chamber and policy role 1970-99 (%)

Policy Roles	Strategy	Legislation	Review	Scrutiny	Total
Senate	7	20	27	46	100
Joint	9	2	21	68	100
House of Reps	19	3	75	3	100
Parliament	9	12	30	49	100

Source: adapted from Halligan, Miller and Power 2007, Chapter Table 4.4

Table 4   Review reports of House of Representatives committees 1970-99 (N)

Committee	1970-79	1980-89	1990-99	1970-99	
Environment & Heritage	15	23	10	48	26%
Communications, Transport & the Arts	4	16	16	36	19%
Economics, Finance & Public Administration	0	9	26	35	19%
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Affairs	6	7	10	23	12%
Family & Community Affairs	0	2	12	14	8%
Employment, Education & Workplace Relations	0	4	5	9	5%
Legal & Constitutional Affairs	0	1	9	10	5%
Industry, Science & Resources	0	1	7	8	4%
Primary Industries & Regional Services	0	0	2	2	1%
Total	25	63	97	185	100

Source: adapted from Halligan, Miller & Power 2007, Ch. Table 6.1. Titles have changed.

Table 5   Strategy reports of House of Representatives committees 1970-99

	1970-79	1980-89	1990-99	1970-99	
	N	N	N	N	%
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Affairs	2	4	4	10	21
Environment & Heritage	1	1	5	7	15
Employment, Workplace Rel's, Small Business & Educ	0	2	5	7	15
Legal & Constitutional Affairs	0	1	5	6	13
Communications, Transport & the Arts	0	3	2	5	11
Industry, Science & Resources	0	1	4	5	11
Family & Community Affairs	0	0	4	4	9
Economics, Finance & Public Administration	0	0	2	2	4
Primary Industries & Regional Services	0	0	1	1	2
Total	3	12	32	47	100

Source: adapted from Halligan, Miller and Power 2007, Chapter Table 6.4
NB: titles may have changed over time

Table 6   Committee specialisation of MPs 1970 & 1999

	1970		1999	
	N	%	N	%
Specialists	14	14	47	33
Generalists	85	86	94	67
Total	99	100	141	100

Source: Halligan, Miller and Power 2007.

Table 7   Parliament committees and the policy process

Stage	Contribution	Roles
Agenda-setting	Committee inquiries and reviews can influence government policy agenda	Investigation: Review Strategic
Developing policy	No formalised role, but possible on behalf of executive Exposure draft bills	Investigation: Review Strategic Legislation
Decision making	No direct role	
Implementation of decisions	Legislation (and other committees) examine bills, recommend amendments	Legislation

	Delegated legislation	Scrutiny
Evaluation of policy implementation	Committees review performance of public agencies and administration of policy.	Investigation: Review Scrutiny
Consultation	Major role for committees at several stages	Public communication

Source: Halligan, Miller and Power 2007

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Endnotes

[i] The paper draws on parts of Halligan, Miller and Power 2007, and the interview material comes from research conducted for that study.

[ii] There was also the restoration of the Joint Committee of Public Accounts in 1951, and a Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs was established in 1952, but functioned without the Opposition until 1967.

[iii] The original eight were Aboriginal Affairs (from 1973); Community Affairs; Employment, Education and Training; Environment, Recreation and the Arts; Finance and Public Administration; Industry, Science and Technology; Legal and Constitutional; and Transport, Communication and Infrastructure.

[iv] The roles correspond to those of other studies. Compare Marsh's (1995) use of scrutiny and oversight (covering current issues, budget cycle, legislation) and strategic policy making (review of major programs and strategic evaluations). See also the Bridgman and Davis (2004) discussion.

[v] Scrutiny reports include those focusing on the reports of the Auditor-General, public accounts, public works and the examination of delegated legislation. But note that official use can vary. An annual report lists all non-domestic committees as 'scrutiny', while in another part of the same report there is reference to '22 investigatory committees' (Dept HoR 2004: 44, 167).

[vi] In making comparisons it is important to take into account the fact that the figures do not reflect variations the size of reports (and the scale of inquiries that produced them).

[vii] They included Connor and Patterson (in Whitlam ministries); Newman and E. L. Robinson (in Fraser ministries); Hawke; and three members of the Howard ministries (Fahey, D. A. Kemp and McLachlan).

[viii] 'Specialists' are MPs whose period of service in his/her 'primary' committee (the committee on which he/she has served longest) is at least twice as long as his/her average length of service on all committees (up to the dates shown). 'Generalists' are those whose period of service on their primary committee is less than twice that of their average length of committee service (Halligan, Miller and Power 2007).

[ix] Compare joint committees administered by the House where the size jumps to sixteen (e.g. Treaties and Public Accounts and Audit) and thirty-two (Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade).

[x] Somlyay (1997) comments: 'Unfortunately, with the notable exceptions of the House Financial Institutions and Public Administration Committee (in relation to annual reports) and the House Environment and Recreation Committee (in relation to audit reports), House committees have shown little interest in taking full advantage of these opportunities'.