

Committees: Participatory democracy

- 3.1 The House committee system operates as an interface between representative democracy and participatory democracy, acting as a 'bridge' between the Parliament and the people. In this section, the Committee considers how improvements might be made to structural issues, such as:
- accommodating new ways of interacting with the public;
 - ensuring strong relationships with witnesses; and
 - the House's role in managing its relationship with the public.
- 3.2 First, the Committee makes some observations on the particular traits of the House committee system that enable it to be such an effective participatory democracy tool.

A bipartisan approach: House committees' signature

- 3.3 Many witnesses and scholars refer to committees' role in scrutinising government and holding it to account.¹ This is certainly one aspect of the House committee system. Although its scrutiny work involves the robust discussions one would expect of a healthy parliamentary institution, it is typically more cooperative and bipartisan in nature than in some other

¹ For example: Civil Liberties Australia, *Submission No. 9*, p. 2; Associate Professor S. Rice OAM and Dr M. Rimmer, *Submission No. 11*, pp. 4-5; Dr P. Larkin, *Submission No. 14*, p. 2; I Holland, 'Parliamentary committees as an arena for policy work' in HK Colebatch (ed.), *Beyond the policy cycle – The policy process in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2006, pp. 66-90; M Rodrigues, 'Parliamentary inquiries as a form of policy evaluation', *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 26-7; R Willis, 'The role of questions on notice in parliamentary democracy', *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, vol. 24, no. 2, p. 137.

committee systems. Historically, House committees have also focussed on working cooperatively to formulate constructive solutions to public policy problems.

- 3.4 One of the most consistent messages from the Speaker, Deputy Speaker, and committee Chairs and Deputy Chairs, was that Members greatly value the opportunity to work cooperatively across party lines.² While this approach may not attract as much media attention as an adversarial, party-political one, Members consider that it delivers significant benefits to the Australian community, in terms of policy formulation and implementation and community input.
- 3.5 The House's current committee system was formally established in 1987 and has evolved into a mature system of committees with its own distinctive culture and traditions. The Committee, and Members consulted by it, see these traits as being especially valuable in facilitating the House committee system's participatory democracy contribution. The Committee therefore does not seek to make any recommendations that would jeopardise this.

New ways of interacting with the public

- 3.6 This section of the chapter considers how committee inquiries are usually carried out, and whether there might be scope to improve the way these operations contribute to the committee system's role as a bridge between Parliament and the public.
- 3.7 First, the Committee discusses emerging trends in gathering evidence for inquiries. Secondly, the Committee specifically considers the use of information and communication technologies, both in the conduct of inquiries and the committee's private deliberations, and considers potential barriers. Finally, the Committee discusses the relationships the House has with witnesses and with the general public.

2 Also discussed in Chapter 1.

New technologies, new possibilities

- 3.8 The committee system, and the associated standing orders, were developed in a time where print and radio were the principal methods of communication. Committees essentially conducted enquiries, called for and accepted written submissions, held public hearings or private briefings, and produced printed reports. For most of the life of the current House committee system, interaction required a meeting of people, and travel was expensive.
- 3.9 Over the years, travel has become less expensive, teleconferences and videoconferences are now more accessible, and genuine interaction is possible online. A committee seeking to engage with the community could, subject to standing orders, hold a dialogue with the community, or host a conversation between members of the community. Methods of 'inquiry' have expanded.
- 3.10 A brief analysis of language of previous reports shows that when talking of committees, the collection of information from the public, and the presentation or promotion of committee work, are the norms.³ Essentially, the process may be summarised as: gathering information, writing the report, and telling people about it. In reports in the age of television, the language shows a concern for controlling the image presented to the public is the norm.
- 3.11 The Committee believes that the House committee system is unique. Its bipartisan nature and its focus on policy allow it to adopt a more progressive approach to the ways that it builds the bridges between the community and the Parliament, and the ways it engages the community in the work of the Parliament.
- 3.12 The language of a modern committee system would be more about public access and dialogue. There are a few examples of committees that have moved beyond the conventional model, incorporating regular briefings, electronic communications, and conferences.⁴

3 See, for example: Chapter 6 of *It's your House*.

4 Some of these are discussed at paragraph 3.16.

- 3.13 There are broadly three phases associated with the conventional model of the conduct of committee inquiries:
- adoption or receipt of the terms of reference;⁵
 - promotion of the inquiry and receipt of written submissions from relevant stakeholders, generally followed by selected witnesses giving oral evidence at public hearings or private briefings; and
 - committee consideration of the available evidence and production of a report of its findings, which is presented in the House.⁶
- 3.14 Over recent years, some aspects of evidence gathering have been modernised in response to emerging technologies. For example, although submissions used to be forwarded in hard copy, committees now accept submissions by email as well, making the process more efficient and accessible.
- 3.15 Some submissions and research suggest that committees be open to collecting evidence for inquiries via the internet, through discussion boards and online forums, to reduce travel costs and to open up the inquiry process to a different audience.⁷ Professor Marsh suggests other approaches, such as deliberative forums, citizen juries, focus groups and quantitative surveys of public opinion.⁸
- 3.16 As noted above, some committees have started to move away from the traditional model of evidence-gathering, in favour of activities that may allow for broader participation and facilitate a 'conversation' between witnesses. For example, one committee has recently hosted a conference as part of an inquiry,⁹ and roundtable discussions are frequently used by

5 House general purpose standing committees receive their references from the House or from the relevant Minister. Within this process, there is scope for such committees to negotiate the terms with the Minister. Some domestic and joint committees may adopt their own terms of reference.

6 Similar accounts of the inquiry process are given in: I Holland, 'Parliamentary committees as an arena for policy work' in HK Colebatch (ed.), *Beyond the policy cycle – The policy process in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2006, p. 74; M Rodrigues, 'Parliamentary inquiries as a form of policy evaluation', *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 28–9.

7 The Hon. K. Rozzoli, *Submission No. 2*, p. 13; Professor G. J. Lindell, *Submission No. 4*, p. 2; J Baczynski, 'Opportunities for greater consultation? House committee use of information technology and communication technology', *Parliamentary Studies Paper*, No. 8, Crawford School of Economics and Government, Australian National University, Canberra, 2009.

8 Professor I. Marsh, *Submission No. 13*, p. 5.

9 The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, as part of its inquiry into smart infrastructure. See conference page, viewed 16 March 2010, at: <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/itrdlg/smartinfrastructure/thinkfuture.htm>.

committees.¹⁰ Some committees have also used web-based solutions to inform their inquiries: for example, in 2009 the Standing Committee on Education and Training used an online survey to facilitate input from high school students.¹¹

- 3.17 Some committees also make use of regular briefings. For example, the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade is undoubtedly a very effective committee, which operates differently to some other committees. Its regular program of briefings for the committee plays an important role in direct communication between the two houses and with its constituent communities.
- 3.18 Parliamentary Friendship Groups, which are less formal structures, also fill this role in a range of areas, providing ongoing contact and dialogue with a range of groups, including people with disabilities, and the United Nations. Given that there has been an expansion in the number of Friendship Groups, it could be said that parliamentarians appreciate the opportunity for interaction and information exchange with a range of communities.

Committee conclusions

- 3.19 The Committee is pleased with these increasingly diverse methods of evidence-gathering. They allow committees to engage with more sections of the population and can facilitate the collection of sensitive evidence, which witnesses may be hesitant to give in person. There is scope to expand committees' use of web-based tools – including social networking sites – and to explore alternative methods of operating.
- 3.20 These different types of evidence-gathering are unlikely to obviate the need for committees to travel and receive oral evidence in person at public hearings. These will continue to be important: they allow Members to engage with members of the public in their own communities and hear witness experiences first hand.

10 For example, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing has hosted a number of roundtable forums throughout the 42nd Parliament, including those into impotence medications; regional health issues jointly affecting Australia and the South Pacific; and burns prevention. See list of activities, viewed 16 March 2010, at: <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/haa/reports.htm>.

11 This was part of the Committee's inquiry into combining school and work. A printable version of the survey was made available and responses were also accepted in hard copy; Standing Committee on Education and Training, *Adolescent overload? Report of the inquiry into combining school and work: Supporting successful youth transitions*, p. 5.

- 3.21 Nevertheless, committees should continue to be innovative in their evidence-gathering methods, having regard to the nature of the inquiry and the needs of interested individuals and organisations. Because a broad range of such methods are enabled under the existing standing orders, the Committee does not make any recommendation for change.
- 3.22 The Committee does note, however, that conducting inquiries through new technologies (such as hosting internet-based discussions with witnesses and other interested members of the public) may necessitate the House reviewing its practices to, among other things, ensure the appropriate protection by parliamentary privilege. Committee practices have tended to be relatively stable in the past, and have largely followed precedents. Given the potential for rapid technological change in the current environment, the Committee will continue to monitor developments in this area.
- 3.23 While new technologies provide new opportunities, they may also require new levels and types of support. Some technologies, such as those involving new web interfaces, require staffing levels and expertise currently under pressure or unavailable to committees. The Committee therefore urges the Department of the House of Representatives (DHR) to monitor the need for additional resources into the future.

Information and communication technology

- 3.24 Traditionally, committees receive oral evidence from witnesses through private briefings and public hearings, at Parliament House and beyond. Standing order 235(b) allows committees to resolve to conduct proceedings using audio visual or audio links. Some committees have used this to hold briefings by teleconference or videoconference. Information and communication technologies have, in some cases, therefore obviated the need for witnesses or the committee to travel.
- 3.25 Developments in the use of these technologies have helped House committees operate more efficiently and effectively, making inquiry processes accessible:

The emergence of interactive information and communication technologies has given House committees the opportunity to reassess the flow of communication during committee inquiries, and may provide an alternative avenue for the committees to

engage with relevant groups in the community regardless of their physical location.¹²

3.26 Evidence generally favoured the expanded use of teleconferencing and videoconferencing, where appropriate.¹³ There are some barriers to this: for instance, there may be infrastructure limits to committees regularly conducting teleconferences or videoconferences, particularly if many more committees start taking up these options.

3.27 Furthermore, the current standing orders assume that committees can anticipate the need to use audio and visual links for a private or public meeting, and pass an enabling resolution at a prior meeting:

In particular, during the longer parliamentary breaks issues may arise that need to be dealt with, where a meeting using an audio visual or audio link would be able to address the issue. However, as no resolution authorising this is in place, committees either have to defer consideration of a matter, or incur expenditure by bringing Members together for what may be a brief meeting.¹⁴

3.28 Noting these difficulties with standing order 235(b), the DHR recommends an amendment:

(b) A committee may ~~resolve to~~ conduct proceedings using audio visual or audio links with members of the committee or witnesses not present in one place.¹⁵

Committee conclusions

3.29 Although there are financial and logistical benefits offered by information and communication technologies, it is neither practical nor desirable for *all* committee meetings to be conducted by teleconference or videoconference. There is value in committees travelling from place to place to get a sense of issues where they exist and gauge community

12 J Baczynski, 'Opportunities for greater consultation? House committee use of information and communication technology', *Parliamentary Studies Paper*, No. 8, Crawford School of Economics and Government, Australian National University, Canberra, 2009.

13 There was general support for this during the Committee's consultations with Chairs and Deputy Chairs. There may be situations where the use of audio and visual links would not be appropriate. For example, if a witness's veracity needs to be tested, a committee would likely prefer to examine the witness in person. Similarly, if an inquiry has a particular geographical focus, a committee may prefer to visit the community to witness issues and experiences first hand.

14 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 6*, p. 11.

15 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 6*, p. 11.

attitudes and experiences first hand. Committees will still need to gather evidence in person in many instances.

- 3.30 However, the Committee supports the use of relevant technologies to make deliberations and evidence-gathering more efficient and effective, and sees scope for the House to take a more strategic approach to its use of technology.
- 3.31 The DHR does not specify whether any change should be made to the last sentence of standing order 235(b), which currently reads, 'A committee may resolve for a subcommittee to use audio or visual links'. The Committee suggests that no change be made to this section at this time, to allow individual committees to run their subcommittees as they see fit.
- 3.32 The Committee accepts the DHR's suggested amendment to standing order 235(b) but notes that reducing barriers to the use of technologies may increase demand for teleconferencing and videoconferencing facilities. It is essential that adequate and appropriate facilities are available to all committees wishing to use them.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that the phrase 'resolve to' be omitted from standing order 235(b).

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the Speaker arrange for:

- **an investigation of the adequacy of teleconferencing and videoconferencing facilities available to committees; and**
- **consideration of any upgrades or additional facilities required to meet current and anticipated future demand from committees.**

Interacting with witnesses: ensuring strong relationships

- 3.33 The success of committee inquiries depends largely on the contribution and goodwill of witnesses. Policy experts and members of the community have a substantial input to inquiries, shedding light on matters that the Parliament might not otherwise be aware of.
- 3.34 The Committee received proposals on the range of witnesses able to be called by House committees, and the treatment of witnesses. The Hon. Kevin Rozzoli suggests that there should be no restrictions on who a committee may call as a witness, and would include the staff of Ministers.¹⁶ The Committee also received a submission supporting committees having the power to compel Ministers to appear before them.¹⁷
- 3.35 Some evidence suggests that witnesses may not always feel that they are treated with appropriate respect and courtesy.¹⁸ Although some of these comments do not appear to refer to *House* committee proceedings, the Committee supports the House affirming its continuing commitment to the highest standards of conduct when interacting with witnesses.
- 3.36 The DHR notes that the standing orders currently provide little guidance to committees on interactions with witnesses.¹⁹ The DHR supports the House passing a resolution along the lines of that recommended by the Procedure Committee in its 1999 report.²⁰ This proposed resolution is currently used as a guide by committee staff.²¹

16 The Hon. K. Rozzoli AM, *Submission No. 2*, p. 2.

17 Associate Professor S. Rice OAM and Dr M. Rimmer, *Submission No. 11*, p. 6.

18 For example: Civil Liberties Australia, *Submission No. 9*, p. 1; Associate Professor S. Rice OAM and Dr M. Rimmer, *Submission No. 11*, p. 8.

19 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 6*, p. 13.

20 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 6*, p. 13. The text of the proposed resolution is reproduced at Appendix E of this report.

21 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 6*, p. 13.

Committee conclusions

- 3.37 The Committee is satisfied that provisions for committees to seek information from Ministers and their staff are adequate.²² It therefore does not recommend any change.
- 3.38 The Committee echoes the sentiments of an earlier Procedure Committee:
- When formal evidence is received it is important that witnesses feel confident that they will be treated fairly and with respect and that they understand the rights and obligations of both themselves and the committee. ...
- Adopting firm guidelines with the official backing of the House is the first step in ensuring consistent and open practices.²³
- 3.39 The Committee supports guidance on the treatment of witnesses being formalised by a resolution of the House. This may alleviate some concerns about the treatment of witnesses at public hearings and reaffirm the House's commitment to treating witnesses with fairness and respect.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that the House, through a motion introduced by the Leader of the House, adopt guidelines for committees' interactions with witnesses, in the terms contained in Appendix E of this report.

22 House committees may invite Ministers to attend at a hearing, although many committees have preferred to obtain detailed information from officials within relevant government departments. A 2003 Senate committee report expressed the view that the Parliament already has the power to compel Ministers' staff to attend committee hearings. See: Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee, *Staff employed under the Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984*, October 2003.

23 *It's your house*, pp. 63–4.

A bridge between Parliament and the public: taking a strategic approach

- 3.40 An earlier section of this chapter discussed technological reforms for improving the way in which committees obtain information from witnesses. This section considers the House's role in managing its important relationship with the Australian public: a two-way process that involves the House reaching out to the community and informing citizens of its activities; and finding ways in which the House can build dialogues with the community.

Increasing public awareness of committee work

- 3.41 Question Time and other high profile features of the House receive a great deal of media attention. Other types of House business, perhaps with a somewhat lower profile or less adversarial in nature, sometimes struggle to attract media attention. This includes the work of House committees.
- 3.42 Significant time and other resources are dedicated to committee work – both by Members and those outside the Parliament. Many House committee reports have profoundly influenced the public debate on a range of important issues, including:
- child custody and child support, for example the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs report, *Every picture tells a story*; and the Joint Select Committee on the Family Law Act – Certain Family Law Issues report, *The Child Support Scheme*;²⁴
 - maritime safety, for example the Standing Committee on Transport and Regional Services report, *Ships of shame*;²⁵ and
 - health funding, for example the Standing Committee on Health and Ageing report, *The blame game*.²⁶

24 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, *Every picture tells a story: Inquiry into child custody arrangements in the event of family separation*, Parliament of Australia, Canberra, 2003; Joint Select Committee on the Family Law Act – Certain Family Law Issues, *The Child Support Scheme: An examination of the operation and effectiveness of the scheme*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1994.

25 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Transport and Regional Services, *Ships of shame: Inquiry into ship safety*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1992.

26 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing, *The blame game: Report on the inquiry into health funding*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2006.

- 3.43 The inquiry process also plays an important role in bringing together disparate groups of people to discuss matters of national importance. It is therefore essential that an adequate and appropriate profile be given to committee business in the Chamber and Main Committee.
- 3.44 Committee Chairs and Deputy Chairs were unequivocal about the need to raise the public profile of the House committee system. Members often refer to the excellent work undertaken by House committees and regret their low profile. This is consistent with the findings of two previous Procedure Committee reports, which focussed on promoting community involvement in the work of House committees.²⁷ Those reports discussed similar issues to those currently being considered by the Committee. The need for community involvement and access is therefore hardly a new principle, but the many new options available to committees – particularly as a result of technological advances – justify a revisitation of this matter.
- 3.45 House committee work is an important repository of public policy resources: not only committee reports, but also submissions and transcripts of evidence, which reveal important technical and attitudinal information on public policy issues. It is essential that the House properly preserve these highly valuable resources and continue to make them readily accessible. This may also assist the House in maximising the value of the work of committees.
- 3.46 There was general agreement that the current time for presentation of committee and delegation reports does not assist in this regard. The Committee discusses this further in Chapter 7. In the rest of this section, the Committee considers how addressing the following issues might improve the public profile of the House committee system:
- statements by committee Chairs;
 - parliamentary privilege;
 - promoting committee work; and
 - broadcasting infrastructure.

27 *It's your House; Promoting community involvement.*

Statements by committee Chairs

- 3.47 The Committee supports a more comprehensive treatment of committee work in the Chamber. This could be achieved by providing opportunities in the House for short statements by committee Chairs. These statements might inform the House and the public about new inquiries being undertaken. The Committee considers that this would be an effective mechanism for deepening the narrative around committee work in the Chamber, and for providing more accountability and transparency of committee work.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the standing orders be amended to provide for committee Chairs to make short statements during private Members' business time, informing the House of new inquiries being undertaken by the committee. The standing orders should also provide for the whips to allocate the time for each such statement.

Parliamentary privilege

- 3.48 Many Members are concerned that parliamentary privilege restrictions prevent them from speaking to the media about committee activities. Members clearly take matters of privilege very seriously and are anxious to ensure that they do not commit an inadvertent breach. While the Committee appreciates this, there appears to be some confusion about what is and is not permissible. The standing orders currently allow committees to disseminate information about their activities in a number of ways, as careful consideration of standing order 242 reveals.
- 3.49 Standing order 242(b) may cause confusion. It reads:
- (b) A committee's or subcommittee's evidence, documents, proceedings and reports may not be disclosed or published to a person (other than a member of the committee or parliamentary employee assigned to the committee) unless they have been:
 - (i) reported to the House; or
 - (ii) authorised by the House, the committee or the subcommittee.

- 3.50 This protects the confidentiality of a committee's documents and proceedings, until such time as the committee has decided they may become public. It ensures that committee conclusions are not pre-empted and committee processes are not otherwise interfered with (thereby possibly undermining the committee's cohesion and effectiveness). Despite part (b) of standing order 242, committee members are free to speak with members of the public, including the press, about evidence that has been authorised for publication by the committee and other matters already in the public domain.
- 3.51 Parts (c) and (d) of standing order 242 give committees a great deal of flexibility:
- (c) A committee may resolve to:
 - (i) publish press releases, discussion papers or other documents, or preliminary findings; or
 - (ii) divulge evidence, documents, proceedings or reports on a confidential basis to persons for comment.
 - (d) A committee may resolve to authorise a member of the committee to give public briefings on matters related to an inquiry. An authorised member may not disclose evidence, documents, proceedings or reports which have not been authorised for publication. The committee shall determine the limits of the authorisation.
- 3.52 The last sentence of part (d) in particular gives committees complete discretion to determine what can and cannot be discussed publicly, and by whom. It requires the agreement of the committee, through a resolution, which is entirely appropriate.

Committee conclusions

- 3.53 Some Members have called for a change to the standing orders that would exclude these restrictions while empowering committees to limit public comment where necessary. The Committee considers this neither necessary nor prudent. The extent to which a committee will be comfortable with its members speaking publicly about its activities will depend on the dynamics of the individual committee, the level of trust and cooperation between members, the nature of the particular inquiry, and other factors. The Committee therefore does not support such a change, and is confident that the current standing orders provide committees with adequate flexibility, while protecting the privacy of witnesses and trust between Members over their deliberations.

- 3.54 It is clear, however, that many Members would benefit from being reminded of the scope and application of standing order 242, and the Committee suggests that the DHR's ongoing program of information sessions for Members could be an appropriate forum for this.

Promoting committee work

- 3.55 The importance of facilitating input from the community was discussed earlier this chapter. This section is concerned with how the House reaches out to the public and promotes the work of its committees.
- 3.56 The difficulty in attracting attention for cooperative committee work was highlighted by Dr Phil Larkin, who spoke of the nature of media interest in Westminster committee proceedings:

It can be tricky to try to get attention for something that is not a major stoush, basically. ... [T]he place was absolutely packed to the rafters with media. When they realised that the hearing was going to be conducted in a fairly polite and dignified manner, they were gone. ... The government taking a pasting is much more of a headline than the government being told that it is doing an okay job and should carry on along the same lines.²⁸

- 3.57 Although this may be true for the mainstream media, the experience has been that many members of the public – once they become aware of the House committee system and its activities – consistently show a high degree of interest in committee work:

... there is a steady demand for parliamentary information. Sometimes people say that people are not interested in parliament, but we are finding that it is quite the opposite. There is not a week goes by that we do not get an email request for the magazine, a copy of the TV show and a subscription to the email alert service. ... The suggestion that people are not interested in parliament is not something that exists anymore. People are really interested.²⁹

28 Dr P. Larkin, *Transcript of evidence*, 22 October 2009, p. 6.

29 Mr A. Lomp, Department of the House of Representatives, *Transcript of evidence*, 29 October 2009, p. 13.

- 3.58 The public response to the creation of Australia's Public Affairs Channel (A-PAC) reinforces this view:

There is a real hunger amongst Australians, as I think we have demonstrated with our live coverage of the community cabinets, to have greater exposure to the democratic process.³⁰

Committee conclusions

- 3.59 Along with many of its colleagues, the Committee is very supportive of the DHR's outreach efforts to better inform the public of the work of House committees, including:

- the free *About The House* magazine, which has a circulation of about 80,000 readers;
- the *About the House* television segments and website;³¹
- an e-mail alert system;
- a media advisory service for committees supported by the House;³² and
- its contribution to the Parliamentary Education Office.³³

- 3.60 This work is commendable, and should continue. Of course, this depends on sufficient resources being available. The Committee is concerned that the budgetary pressures discussed by the DHR may affect the resources for promoting committee inquiries in future.³⁴

Broadcasting infrastructure

- 3.61 Related to the DHR's promotional activities is the availability of footage of committee proceedings. The Committee was pleased to hear about the improved availability of footage as a result of the establishment of A-PAC and the DHR's *About The House* television segments and website.

30 Mr A. Frangopoulos, Australian News Channel Pty Ltd, *Transcript of evidence*, 29 October 2009, p. 4.

31 The website is at: <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/house_news/index.asp>.

32 Mr A. Lomp, Department of the House of Representatives, *Transcript of evidence*, 29 October 2009, p. 3.

33 The Parliamentary Education Office is jointly funded by the DHR and the Department of the Senate, and administered by the latter. Department of the House of Representatives, *Annual report 2008–09*, p. 27.

34 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 6*, p. 14. The issue of resources (including, amongst other things, resources for outreach activities) was considered by the Committee in Chapter 2.

- 3.62 The positive response to committee footage on A-PAC is heartening and illustrates the considerable community demand for more information about the Parliament. The Committee had some initial reservations about the accessibility of A-PAC, given that it is not available on free-to-air television. However, its free availability online through the A-PAC website is welcomed.³⁵
- 3.63 Members of the public are similarly able to access video clips of committee proceedings and *About The House* television segments through the DHR's website.³⁶ Although there are funding constraints, the DHR's outreach activities have at times extended to travelling with committees and filming interstate public hearings, as well as interviewing witnesses about their experiences.
- 3.64 Both A-PAC and the DHR have noted, however, that not every committee room in Parliament House has a permanent video camera, and that this compromises the number of hearings that can be broadcast and webcast.³⁷

Committee conclusions

- 3.65 A-PAC³⁸ and the DHR perform valuable services for the community, particularly by making the House more accessible. Parliament needs to carefully consider its infrastructure and meeting room accessibility to best respond to current and future community demand for footage of House committee proceedings.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the Speaker investigate the adequacy of the infrastructure available for audiovisual recording and broadcasting committee proceedings within Parliament House and for the development of low cost audio-visual recording of interstate public hearings.

35 Mr A. Frangopoulos, Australian News Channel Pty Ltd, *Transcript of evidence*, 29 October 2009, pp. 1, 9.

36 Mr A. Lomp, Department of the House of Representatives, *Transcript of evidence*, 29 October 2009, p. 9.

37 Mr A. Frangopoulos, Australian News Channel Pty Ltd, *Transcript of evidence*, 29 October 2009, p. 17; Mr A. Lomp, Department of the House of Representatives, *Transcript of evidence*, 29 October 2009, pp. 14, 16.

38 Through the footage created and distributed by the Department of Parliamentary Services.

Managing the Parliament's relationship with the public

- 3.66 Over the years, the Parliament has taken steps to manage its important relationship with the public.³⁹ This has largely focussed on 'taking Parliament to the people', such as the promotional work discussed above and safeguarding how images of the Parliament are conveyed to the public.⁴⁰
- 3.67 Equally important is ensuring that the public has a place within the Parliament and its activities. As the interface between the community's elected representatives (representative democracy) and members of the community themselves (participatory democracy), House committees have a particularly important role.
- 3.68 In the past, House committees have given the community a voice by seeking written submissions and inviting some witnesses to give evidence orally at public hearings. Emerging technologies – such as social networking sites, communications technologies, new media, and Web 2.0⁴¹ – may provide an opportunity for House committees to better engage with the public and to build dialogues, rather than the one-way communication that may characterise the collection of evidence and the presentation of committee findings in a published report.

Committee conclusions

- 3.69 While traditional methods of seeking community input have their place, it is also appropriate for House committees to facilitate communication with interested citizens. The House must pursue technologies to improve public access to committees. This might include making it easier for people to:
- 'have their say' on current inquiries or reports published by committees;
 - follow committee proceedings, including public hearings; and
 - generally interact with committees.

39 Relevant Procedure Committee inquiries include: *It's your house*; *Promoting community involvement*; and *Media coverage*.

40 The Joint Committee on the Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings is a statutory committee responsible for regulating the broadcast of proceedings of the House of Representatives and the Senate.

41 See, for example: Government 2.0 Taskforce, *Engage – Getting on with Government 2.0*, Australian Government, Canberra, 2009. The Australian Youth Forum also provides some good examples of new media and information and communication technologies being used to create a dialogue. See: <<http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf>>.

- 3.70 Some House committees have responded well to emerging technologies, including the use of online surveys and questionnaires, social networking tools and webcasts. Some also provide their members with an ongoing briefing program, independent of inquiry activities, to keep members informed of developments in relevant subject areas.
- 3.71 These responses have been somewhat *ad hoc* and reactive, rather than strategic. The Committee also notes that many initiatives that have improved the accessibility of House committees – such as the DHR’s outreach efforts and the broadcasting of committee proceedings through A-PAC – have largely been driven by interventions external to the House itself. The House must drive change and manage the adoption of interactive technologies, particularly as they are used to engage with, and seek input from, the community.
- 3.72 The Committee sees a role for itself in monitoring committees’ adoption of new technologies, and ensuring that the practices and procedures of the House accommodate this progress. It notes that its terms of reference, set out in standing order 221, would allow this.⁴²
- 3.73 The Committee also suggests that there is a role for the Liaison Committee of Chairs and Deputy Chairs in keeping Members informed of emerging technologies and any issues that may be encountered by committees seeking to use them.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that the Liaison Committee of Chairs and Deputy Chairs broaden its role to include advising Chairs and Deputy Chairs of emerging technologies that may be used in the conduct of committee inquiries, and any issues that committees may encounter in seeking to make use of these technologies. The Liaison Committee might include new technologies as a standing agenda item, to enable monitoring and advice to be provided on emerging technologies.

42 Standing order 221 states the role of the Procedure Committee as being ‘to inquire into and report on the practices and procedures of the House and its committees’.

