

Conference of committee chairs, deputy chairs and secretaries

Format of the conference

- 2.1 In introducing the conference the chair of the committee stated that the objectives of the conference were to:
- assess the value of strategies developed so far;
 - share those strategies and ideas among all the committees; and
 - consider priorities for future action.
- 2.2 A copy of the agenda for the conference and a list of those who attended are at appendix A. It began with a briefing on the work being done by the Department of the House of Representatives to support committees in their efforts to promote their inquiries. Two committee chairs presented case studies on particular steps their committees had taken to engage the community in their work. There was some questioning of the presenters and the remainder of the conference was spent in general discussion.
- 2.3 This chapter outlines the information given by presenters and comments made in general discussion structured into activity groupings. Additional details gained separately from committees and others has been incorporated.

Since It's your House

- 2.4 In 1999 the Department of the House of Representatives decided to strengthen its support for committees and the House in their efforts to

engage people more in their work. This decision was chiefly a response to the work done by the Procedure Committee in the *It's Your House* inquiry and an earlier survey of Members' views. A small cell of people was established to work with committees and a specialist communications adviser was employed to boost the media skills available to committees.

2.5 Three main challenges to changing people's attitudes to the House of Representatives were identified. These were:

- helping people to better understand and appreciate the work undertaken by the House and its Members;
- increasing understanding of the way in which the House operates; and
- encouraging people to contribute to the work of the House.

Some of the concerns which created these challenges included:

- negative perceptions about the House and Members within the community;
- a tendency for people to focus on the combative nature of Parliament, rather than on the bipartisan work that is undertaken;
- varying degrees of community understanding about how the House operates; and
- lack of awareness about key operations of the House, such as committees.¹

2.6 Since the report of the committee efforts to achieve change have occurred in a number of areas.

Identity

2.7 The *It's Your House* report identified the need to create an identity for House of Representatives committees separate from that of their Senate counterparts. It is not uncommon for House committees to be confused with Senate or even government committees. It was suggested at the conference that at least some segments of the media did not really understand that there was a comprehensive House committee system operating.

1 House of Representatives, *What's happening at your House? Marketing the House of Representatives*, 2000 National Public Sector Awards for Marketing Excellence, submission



- 2.8 An emblem was designed to make House committees more visible and identifiable. While committees can, and do, use the Australian Coat of Arms and, at times, other logos or symbols such as a stylised Parliament House flagpole, these are also used by other bodies. The new emblem clearly symbolises the House of Representatives chamber.
- 2.9 It is used in publications, signage, advertisements and on banners, particularly at public hearings. An example of the successful use of the new banners and signs is described in chapter 3.

Advertising

- 2.10 In order to reach as many people as possible, traditionally committees have advertised their inquiries in major metropolitan daily newspapers. There is a need to question whether this approach is still appropriate and whether it represents value for money. The conference was told that it is not uncommon for the cost of advertising an inquiry across all major metropolitan newspapers to be about \$20,000 for one advertisement on one day.² This expenditure on one form of advertising limits what other types of advertising committees might choose to pursue and assumes a breadth of readership which metropolitan newspapers may no longer have. Committees have noted that the number of submissions received as a result of traditional newspaper advertisements seems to be limited. Nevertheless committees have an obligation to publicise their inquiries as widely as possible and newspapers are one possible way to do that.
- 2.11 One approach which has been taken is to redesign the style and format of the advertisements to reflect modern design characteristics and be more eye catching. The text of advertisements now uses plain English, avoiding parliamentary jargon and conveying simpler messages.
- 2.12 The first use of the new format was for a Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee inquiry into human cloning. The advertisement received more than 60 responses from the public after it appeared and was featured in

2 Conference, transcript of proceedings (unpublished)

the lead story on the Channel 9 *Today on Saturday* program.³ The new style has now been adapted for all House advertising. This use of a consistent style for committee advertising also helps to strengthen recognition of House committees as a body.

- 2.13 A regular monthly advertisement in the *Australian* newspaper under the title, *What's happening at your House?*, provides consolidated information about committee inquiries and activities. It is placed prominently in the news section of the paper rather than in the classified section. It would appear that these advertisements have resulted in an increased number of inquiries from the general public. The advertisement is also forwarded to more than 30 Members to provide information that can be used in their personal newsletters and other electorate material.⁴
- 2.14 The possibility of extending regular block advertising to other newspapers is being considered to improve the cost effectiveness of advertising.
- 2.15 Advertising of inquiries in other media is also being tested by committees. The inquiry by the Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs into human cloning used radio to promote public awareness of its inquiry. The Standing Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts used regional radio to promote a public meeting in a rural area (see Chapter 3).

Publications

- 2.16 A need to consolidate information about the House of Representatives and the committees in a user friendly format was identified. The House of Representatives has many publications about its work but there was no comprehensive single source of information for the public about the House and little recognition of committee work in the community. Two new publications for a general readership have been introduced and a media information bulletin is in preparation.

Your key to the House

- 2.17 A community guide to the House entitled *Your Key to the House* presents basic information on what the House does and how to find out more. The guide uses simple language and visual images of the House. Over 26,000 copies of this publication have been requested throughout Australia since November 1999.⁵

3 House of Representatives, *What's happening at your House? Marketing the House of Representatives*, 2000 National Public Sector Awards for Marketing Excellence, submission

4 id.

5 Conference, transcript of proceedings (unpublished)

About the House magazine

- 2.18 Another publication provides current information about the work of committees, inquiries, reports and facts about the House. This takes the form of a high quality bi-monthly magazine entitled *About the House*. Produced by the Department of the House of Representatives, this publication has grown from around 6,000 copies for the first edition to 13,000 copies in March 2001 distributed throughout Australia.⁶ The magazine features a broad coverage of committee inquiries with each edition. The magazine has generated a significant response from the general public.

Electronic media bulletin

- 2.19 A new electronic media alert bulletin *House Work* has been developed to convey a regular, consolidated summary of committee activity to the media. Distributed by email to media representatives, the bulletin will cover all the subjects of current inquiries. Journalists interested in a particular subject area will be able to access the relevant committee contact details, public hearing schedules and some information on the progress of the inquiry. The bulletin is expected to be available from May.

Seminars

- 2.20 In response to concerns by members about the level and quality of input to committee inquiries particularly from lobby groups and the public sector, a program of seminars was developed.
- 2.21 The seminars, conducted on a cost recovery basis, attract around 700 people annually.⁷ Several different seminars are available: 'About the House', 'About parliamentary committees', 'About legislation' and 'About parliamentary consideration of the Budget'. Seminars have also been tailored in response to specific requests.
- 2.22 Most seminars have been held in Canberra with the primary audience of public servants and lobbyists in mind. However one was successfully conducted in Adelaide in conjunction with a seminar on the work of the Treaties Committee (see chapter 3) and one is scheduled for Melbourne in collaboration with the Public Service and Merit Protection Commission.
- 2.23 The conference discussed the possibility of conducting seminars in regional areas. It was suggested that a seminar could be run in conjunction with a public hearing in a regional centre. This would alleviate some of the

6 House of Representatives, *What's happening at your House? Marketing the House of Representatives*, 2000 National Public Sector Awards for Marketing Excellence, submission

7 Conference, transcript of proceedings (unpublished)

cost and provide a focus for the seminar to attract an audience. The Clerk of the House indicated that the pricing structure for the seminars would be reviewed if any were to be held mainly for individuals rather than representatives of organisations. He thought that it would be appropriate for the price to be reduced in such circumstances.

- 2.24 The conference also discussed the possibility of conducting seminars especially for new press gallery journalists. It was felt that poor understanding of the work of the House and its committees among journalists hindered media coverage.

Media liaison

- 2.25 The *It's your House* report recognised the importance of the media in developing a connection between Parliament and the community. It made a number of recommendations aimed at lifting the media profile of House committees. Its principal recommendation was that the Department of the House of Representatives work with committees to develop a media strategy to improve media support for committees, including the implementation of a professional communications service to provide media support and liaison for committees.⁸ The conference was told of the appointment of a specialist communications adviser and given an outline of some of the action taken to implement this recommendation.
- 2.26 The chair of a committee which had made use of the services of the adviser remarked to the conference that it 'ha(d) really added some horsepower to getting the message across'.⁹ However it was also suggested that there was a particular challenge in gaining more mainstream media attention for the work of those committees or inquiries whose subject matter did not automatically command interest.
- 2.27 It was pointed out that the slow response rate by the Government to reports is a major contributing factor to the lack of media attention experienced by many committees. The media seeks outcomes and results for stories that have a limited life as far as the public interest is concerned. It is difficult to 'sell' the importance of a committee inquiry if the outcomes are not apparent. Recommendations by the Procedure Committee to improve the responsiveness of governments to committee reports have not been implemented.

8 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *It's your House: Community involvement in the procedures and practices of the House of Representatives and its committees*, October 1999, p.51

9 Conference, transcript of proceedings (unpublished)

- 2.28 As an alternative approach, the Joint Standing Committee on Migration, has in the past regularly called representatives from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs before the committee to give briefings on progress in responding to or implementing reports of the committee.
- 2.29 Another committee chair suggested that by making a smaller number of recommendations reports could be responded to in a more timely manner. This committee has also begun producing an annual report which evaluates the performance of the committee against recommendations accepted by the Executive.

Internet

- 2.30 The Internet is an important source of information about the work of the House and its committees, particularly for those in remote and regional areas. Committees reported receiving fewer requests for hard copies of submissions and transcripts of proceedings as more people are able to download the information that they require from their websites.
- 2.31 However, while there is a wealth of information available from the House's Internet site, it can be difficult for those not familiar with the House to find what they are looking for. A new *About the House* site was due to be launched in April which would be an electronic version of the magazine and have an emphasis on news and current affairs in relation to the work of committees.
- 2.32 It is intended that the site will eventually incorporate a 'Have your say' facility enabling people to submit their views in relation to particular committee inquiries.
- 2.33 To encourage greater public use of the Internet site, free postcards are available to Parliament House visitors through the guide service. These postcards which can be posted free of charge to anywhere in Australia include the House of Representatives Internet address.

Developing staff

- 2.34 Part of the strategy for improving media support for committees is the development of greater media liaison skills in committee staff. The specialist adviser has been tasked with coordinating workshops, on the job training and media related activities to strengthen these skills across all committee staff. The first workshops were successfully conducted in late 2000.

Involving schools

- 2.35 Committees have increasingly been moving towards encouraging the involvement of school students in their work. The Joint Standing Committee on Treaties has produced a video about the way it works which it hopes can be distributed to schools and universities. The Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration has worked in conjunction with the Parliamentary Education Office to attract senior economics students to its hearings. The Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations in its inquiry into educating boys involved students directly by hosting school forums which sought the views of boys directly concerning their educational needs and experiences.
- 2.36 The *About the House* magazine is being distributed on request to schools and libraries. A number of Members also distribute the magazine to some schools. It was suggested that Members should be asked to nominate a number of organisations, including schools, within their electorates which would form part of a mailing list for the publication.