

Ideas in action

- 3.1 The conference heard from two committee chairs about their specific experiences with encouraging better community involvement in the work of their committees. This chapter describes those experiences as well as those of some other committees. The information has been collated from the presentations at the conference and from other information supplied by the committee secretaries.

Case study 1—Economics Committee

Taking the city to the country

- 3.2 The *It's your House* report suggested that committees 'look at public hearings not just as vehicles for gathering information and opinion from witnesses but as opportunities to demonstrate their relevance to a wider audience.'¹ The Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration (Economics Committee) holds six monthly meetings with the Governor of the Reserve Bank. In the past these meetings have been held in Sydney or Melbourne, being the main financial centres in Australia.
- 3.3 Last year the committee decided to hold its 1 December 2000 meeting with Reserve Bank Governor Macfarlane in the regional centre of Wagga Wagga. The members wanted to give a rural community the opportunity

1 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, p44

to see the work of the committee as well as to expose the Reserve Bank Governor to regional Australia's concerns.²

- 3.4 Wagga Wagga was chosen by the committee for a number of reasons. It was accessible enough for ease of travel from Sydney, Melbourne or Canberra. It was able to offer the committee the facilities required for the meeting and has a sufficiently large population to provide an interested audience for such an event. The local member for Riverina, a member of the Economics Committee, went to considerable lengths to assist the arrangements for the visit.
- 3.5 Approximately 30 media representatives attended the meeting. The committee's Reserve Bank meetings always attract a large contingent of media. However the chair noted that representation by some of the major media at Wagga Wagga was slightly less than usual.
- 3.6 About 40 members of the public took the opportunity to attend the meeting, many of whom had attended the Mayor's civic reception held for the committee and the Reserve Bank Governor before the hearing.
- 3.7 There was representation from two local schools with approximately 25 senior economics students attending the hearing. The meeting offered them an opportunity to witness first hand the processes of parliamentary accountability at work. A member of the committee at the meeting put a question that had been constructed by the students to the Reserve Bank Governor. The Governor and the committee members met with the students during a break in proceedings. Students were also provided with an activity working sheet to stimulate their interest and help them maintain their concentration. The activity sheet was developed by the Parliamentary Education Office (PEO) working in conjunction with the committee secretariat.
- 3.8 The local federal Member in Wagga Wagga arranged a civic reception with the Mayor and other activities to give the members of the committee and the Reserve Bank Governor a chance to meet the community. The Member worked with local media to promote the event. In particular, the Governor agreed to give a personal interview on the local television station, something which he very rarely does.
- 3.9 The events which ran in conjunction with the meeting enabled members of the Economics Committee and the Reserve Bank Governor to meet with representatives of the Wagga Wagga community to hear how current economic issues were impacting on regional Australia.
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2 Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration, media release, 5 September 2000

- 3.10 The meeting in Wagga Wagga stimulated considerable interest from a community that would not otherwise be exposed to the work of this committee. It also gave members and the Reserve Bank Governor an opportunity to enhance their knowledge about regional and rural concerns and their perspective on the monetary policy issues being examined. As a result of this hearing the committee has decided to undertake future regional hearings and it has been suggested by the Governor of the Reserve Bank that more remote locations could be considered.
- 3.11 The hearing in Wagga Wagga built upon other initiatives of the Economics Committee in making its work more widely known and understood.

Targeting school participation

- 3.12 Before the Wagga Wagga meeting, the committee secretariat and the PEO had trialed a proposal to promote the committee's meetings to schools. Prior to a meeting with the Reserve Bank in Melbourne on 22 May 2000, letters were sent to 15 to 20 schools in the local area inviting the attendance of senior secondary economics students. As a result, approximately 120 students attended the meeting.
- 3.13 The students were allocated seats at the venue and refreshments were provided for them. During the meeting break members of the committee talked to them and answered their questions. They also met the Governor of the bank.
- 3.14 The feedback from schools that attended was positive although a very small number of students had found the length of the meeting made concentration a little difficult to maintain. In response to this, the PEO designed the activity worksheets which were used at the Wagga Wagga meeting.

Media liaison

- 3.15 The House Economics Committee has worked on developing a good relationship with the media. At the Wagga Wagga meeting the media representatives were provided with particular facilities in the hearing room including power access for laptops.
- 3.16 Audio feed of the Reserve Bank hearings is transmitted to Parliament House so it can be included as an audio webcast on the Parliament's Internet site and broadcast within Parliament House. This allows the community as well as the media in the parliamentary press gallery and

others at Parliament House to hear an audio broadcast of the meetings and also assists Hansard to produce the transcript of the hearings quickly.

3.17 The committee, unlike some other House committees, has always attracted media attention, however, the committee has found the media's focus on the Reserve Bank rather than the work of the committee unsatisfactory. It was concerned that the committee was becoming a platform for the Reserve Bank with no recognition of the committee's role and its work. To counter this the committee has employed a number of strategies. These are:

- a cooperative attitude of working with the media to promote the event and facilitate the financial media's gathering of the facts;
- displaying House of Representatives banners prominently at hearings;
- using a shortened version of the committee's name, House Economics Committee, on all promotional material and work;
- putting name plates with the committee's name on the table in front of the Governor and Deputy Governors at meetings so as to maximise recognition for the committee in television footage;
- directing where the television cameras and photographers are located during hearings to ensure that there are opportunities to get pictures of both the Governor and the committee members;
- recognising that the Governor's comments would be the focus of media attention after the hearing therefore directing the committee's media activities to before the hearing; and
- contacting the media prior to the hearing to organise interviews with radio and television especially the media outside Parliament House and in regional areas.

Taking advantage of other events

3.18 The date set for the following Reserve Bank meeting to be held in Melbourne coincided with the day after the Centenary of Federation celebrations in that city. The committee decided to make a feature of this and worked towards getting the hearing promoted as an extension of the Centenary of Federation celebrations. The meeting was held in the Victorian Legislative Council Chamber which gave an historic ambience and provided an interesting backdrop for television coverage.

3.19 The committee's work with the media and with students was extended further for this hearing with several different styles of media alert issued beforehand and the communications adviser accompanying the committee

to Melbourne to manage media liaison. In addition the large number of students who attended were provided with information packs about the issues involved in the hearing, the work of committees generally and the centenary of Parliament. Copies of the centenary special issue of *About the House* magazine proved popular with the students and other visitors.

- 3.20 The chair of the Economics Committee noted that his experience showed that an important factor in achieving success in building better understanding between committees, the media and the community is to take a flexible and creative approach. Encouraging such flexibility was a key goal of the Procedure Committee in its *It's your House* recommendations.

Case study 2—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee

Working with remote communities

- 3.21 In 1999 the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs undertook an inquiry into the Reeves Review of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1979*. The subject matter of the inquiry was controversial and generated considerable media attention and strong public opinion.
- 3.22 The committee sought the views of as many as possible of the communities that would be affected by the recommendations of the Reeves Review. This required them to travel to indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. On these occasions journalists would often be present. On one occasion a journalist travelled with the committee.
- 3.23 This close association with the media carried with it inherent risks. However rather than exclude the media, the committee embraced their interest and provided a framework for them to operate in.
- 3.24 The media was required to seek the approval of the chair of the committee for any tape recording when meetings were held in urban areas, as is usual practice for recording any proceedings. When in remote communities, permission had to be sought from the community itself. One journalist was warned for taping private conversations but in general journalists respected the potential sensitivity of the situation and accepted the committee's guidance. The committee encouraged the media involvement and provided background briefings.

- 3.25 The chair commented that, at the end of the inquiry, the media had a better understanding of the parliamentarians and the work of the committee because they actually saw them in operation. He also felt that the publicity given on national television showed a positive image of parliamentarians of all political persuasions, men and women, working together and listening to the concerns of people in remote areas of the Northern Territory.

Non traditional evidence gathering

- 3.26 Many formal submissions were received by the inquiry into the Reeves Review, however, the committee recognised the need to work with a range of cultures and not simply rely on traditional ways of evidence gathering. The committee held public meetings which were advertised via local radio stations in four or five regionally specific languages. These public meetings could attract around 200 to 300 participants. Committee staff were able to take a Hansard officer and translators and go into the gathering to record statements from participants.
- 3.27 Initially there was some question as to what actually constituted the record of these meetings. After some consideration it was decided that the translators word as spoken would be recorded by Hansard and that would be considered as evidence.
- 3.28 The committee found that some indigenous people were reluctant to speak in front of large groups. The committee accommodated this reluctance by agreeing to speak to the people concerned in private on the understanding that the transcript of the conversation would be published in the normal way.

Video reporting

- 3.29 During the inquiry the committee found considerable cynicism among communities in the Northern Territory concerning the inquiry process. Many of the participants in the inquiry had been involved in previous inquiries, not necessarily parliamentary inquiries, which had come and gone without seeming to generate any results. This had left the communities with a strong feeling that their views were not really considered. Members of the committee were keen to produce a report that could be accessible to all members of the community and which demonstrated that the committee had listened to and considered community views and concerns.
- 3.30 A video version of the committee's report, *Unlocking the Future*, was produced which employed visual images, symbols and other techniques

to communicate with people whose principal way of gaining information is not through the traditional printed report. It featured film footage of dramatic moments during some of the meetings with Aboriginal communities and explained the process of the inquiry and some of the recommendations.

- 3.31 Copies of the video were provided to communities who had contributed to the inquiry. The cost of production of such a video needs to be assessed in relation to the overall committee budget. However, the chair of the committee believed that, in this case, the approach had been a success and resulted in effective communication of findings and a positive portrayal of the inquiry process and the work of parliamentarians.
- 3.32 The demand for the video has fallen somewhat since the report was first presented in August 1999, however, the reach of the video has gone beyond those involved in the report with it being distributed on demand to some universities.

Case study 3—Joint Standing Committee on Treaties

Explaining international treaty making to the public

- 3.33 The Joint Standing Committee on Treaties deals with an area which has considerable potential impact on the Australian community. Its role is to improve the openness and transparency of the treaty making process. Treaties should reflect and advance the interests of the community but treaty making and international agreements are not well understood by many people.
- 3.34 The Treaties Committee held two free public seminars designed to improve public awareness of the opportunities that exist for people in the community to be involved in the process of making and reviewing Australia's international treaty obligations. The first seminar was held in Adelaide on 12 November 1999 and the second in Brisbane on 20 July 2000. The Adelaide seminar was combined with a general seminar on the work of the House and its committees.
- 3.35 The idea to host the seminars was an acknowledgment of the controversial nature of some international treaties and the desire by the committee to help people make an informed contribution to its review processes.
- 3.36 Advertisements for the seminars were placed in local newspapers and members of the committee who represented electorates in the city where

the seminar was to be held promoted the seminar through the local media. A brochure was prepared and sent to interest groups, university legal studies departments, legal firms and local schools.

- 3.37 The first of the seminars in Adelaide attracted approximately 120 people while the Brisbane seminar attracted around 200. Participants for the Brisbane seminar were asked to fill in a form registering their interest in attending.
- 3.38 The seminars began with a video produced by the committee which features members describing the treaty making process. It is hoped that the video will be distributed to schools and universities in the future.
- 3.39 Following the video a number of speakers gave presentations. Guest speakers included the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Hon Alexander Downer MP, and representatives from the State Parliament involved in treaty making. An open forum provided an opportunity for comments and questions from the public.
- 3.40 The two seminars proved to be an effective way of allowing people to have their say on matters that concerned them as well as allowing members to be informed of community views. It also proved to be an effective way of raising general awareness of the work of the committee.

Some other effective ways of improving input to inquiries

Letting large numbers of people have a say

- 3.41 The Treaties Committee has also used innovative means to gain input from a large number of people to a specific inquiry. When the committee was conducting an inquiry involving the World Trade Organisation a great deal of public concern over the issue became apparent. It would not have been practical to hold formal hearings of all those interested in the inquiry.
- 3.42 The committee invited people who had expressed an interest, either formally in a submission or through informal contact with the committee, to attend a public meeting.
- 3.43 These public meetings were held in a number of capital cities. Participants were given the opportunity to make five minute statements to the committee. This gave the committee an overview of public opinion and allowed a large number of people who had strong interests to contribute their views.

- 3.44 A similar process has been used by the Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs for its controversial inquiry into human cloning. In this case public forums were held which enabled input from members of the public as well as those who had made submissions.

Radio advertising

- 3.45 The Standing Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts developed a radio advertisement to inform a regional community about a forthcoming public meeting to be held in Geraldton for its inquiry into regional radio.
- 3.46 The local radio station was approached and peak time advertising booked for the advertisement which was to be played three times a day, for three days before the public meeting. The cost for the advertisement to appear nine times was around \$300. The local ABC radio station also played the advertisement in their community announcement segment free of charge.
- 3.47 The script for the advertisement was written by the committee staff and presented by a member of the committee using the facilities of the Department of the Parliamentary Reporting Staff.
- 3.48 While the success of the advertisement is difficult to estimate, approximately 50 to 80 people attended the meeting representing a good turnout. However traditional methods such as advertising in newspapers and mail-outs had also been used.
- 3.49 In order to assess the effectiveness of different advertising techniques, the committee has sent a survey to each person who lodged a submission. It is hoped that this will provide useful information on the method of promotion which was most successful in gaining public participation.

