

Chapter 1

Online access to the Register of Senators' Interests

1.1 In its annual report for 2008, the committee noted an approach from a public interest group, OpenAustralia, proposing to scan the Register of Senators' Interests and publish it on its website. The committee suggested that the group also publish information about the status of the register and caveats about its use. The group complied with the committee's suggestions and now publishes senators' statements of interests and alterations of interests following tabling of the register at 6 monthly intervals. The Registrar provides the organisation with copies of the tabled register for that purpose.

1.2 The question has been asked, why should the public depend on an independent organisation for online access to the statements of interests of members of parliament?

1.3 In recent months, the committee has received for consultation a proposal by the House of Representatives Committee of Privileges and Members' Interests for online publication of the Register of Members' Interests. As the regimes for registration of interests in each House are broadly similar, it is appropriate for both Houses to consider in tandem the question of online access to their registers.

1.4 The proposals by the House committee were apparently prompted by the reaction by members to the OpenAustralia website and some concerns about possible identity fraud. Consequently, the proposals contemplated the addition of security features such as watermarking of pages, redaction of signatures and password protection of the document published on line, in addition to the normal security features applied to pdf documents published on the Australian Parliament's website. The House committee emphasised however, that no decisions had been made on the details of the basic proposal to publish members' statements online.

1.5 In principle, the committee supports the publication of senators' statements of interests online. There are numerous reasons why it is time to embrace change:

- senators' statements are already published online in two places by OpenAustralia (in a consolidated form) and on the Senate Tabled Papers website (in the form they are tabled);
- personal inspection of the register is limited in reality to very few people;
- there is very little parliamentary information that is not now published online.

1.6 The committee recognises however, that there is a need to balance transparency in relation to the interests of senators as elected members of parliament and the right to privacy of the family members of senators. Under the Senate

resolutions, the latter objective is largely achieved by the requirement for statements of interests of a senator's spouse or partner, and dependant children, to remain confidential. This is not the case under the resolutions of the House of Representatives where the whole statement is public.

1.7 The committee has taken advice from its secretariat and from Senate departmental IT staff in proposing a scheme for the consideration of senators that is simple, easy to administer and not inconsistent with versions of senators' statements already available online.

1.8 The committee therefore proposes for the consideration of senators the following scheme, to operate from the commencement of the next parliament (recognising that new statements will not be due till 28 days after the first sitting after 1 July 2011):

- Statements of interests of senators (Part A only) will be published on the website of the Committee of Senators' Interests. A link from the committee's home page will provide access to an alphabetical list of senators and each senator's statement of interests will be accessible from that list.
- Senators' Part A statements will be scanned into a pdf document without any watermarking or redaction, and published under each Senator's name on the list.
- Whenever notification of alterations are received, they will be added to the relevant senator's statement and the augmented pdf document will be published in place of the previous one. Readers will therefore have access to a senator's complete statement as if they were able to inspect the Register.
- Updates will be done on a weekly basis with a notation to that effect on the website.

1.9 Mock-ups of what the website would look like are attached in Appendix 1. The committee has viewed examples on the test website and is satisfied with the quality and appearance of the statements.

1.10 This proposal is for the short-term. The committee recognises that the majority of notifications of alterations of interests, if not the majority of statements, are filled out by senators by hand. This is a significant indication that senators are taking direct responsibility for the content of their statements, as envisaged by the resolution, even though some senators' handwriting could not be described as copperplate.

1.11 There is an important issue of the accessibility of pdf documents on the internet to people with visual disabilities, and the committee is aware from recent estimates hearings that the Senate department is working with Vision Australia to improve accessibility to Senate committee documents. Optical Character Recognition

software can be used with pdf documents to enhance accessibility but no OCR software is sophisticated enough to recognise the variety of handwriting contained in the Register.

1.12 In the longer term, therefore, the committee intends to investigate other options for collecting and publishing senators' interests statements. This might involve, for example, designing an online form that collects information directly to a database which could then be directly uploaded to the website. This form could also be printed and signed for lodging and tabling.

1.13 The committee will continue to investigate longer term options. In the meantime, the committee welcomes from senators (and others?) any response to these proposals and any further suggestions for online publication of the Register. Any comments should be provided to:

The Secretary
Committee of Senators' Interests
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Or by email to: Senators.Interests@aph.gov.au

The committee would appreciate receiving any submissions by 17 February 2010.



Senator David Johnston
Chair

