

SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS
ATTORNEY-GENERAL'S PORTFOLIO

Program: Australian Human Rights Commission

Question No. SBE16/025

Senator Watt asked the following question at the hearing on 18 October 2016:

Senator WATT: Is there a ceiling for individual commissioners as to the total travel expenses they can claim in any one year?

Prof. Triggs: Absolutely, partly reflecting our very, very limited budget. Each commissioner has a budget and they must work within that budget. There are no funds available once that budget has been expended. A commissioner will determine their priorities for the year and their travel relative to those priorities. If they do not have funds for further travel towards the end of a year—if they have not budgeted appropriately—then that is the end of their funding. That's by way of a general warning to anybody who happens to be listening!

...

Prof. Triggs: The total budget, to give you the information, is \$30,000 for each commissioner, and the commissioner will determine within that budget where the priorities lie, so in that sense it is global.

Senator WONG: Thank you.

Senator WATT: So \$30,000 for every individual commissioner to spend on items including travel, taxis—

Prof. Triggs: That is correct. The total budget for all of their work must be within that cap. Perhaps I could also point out that there tends to be a relatively higher level of expenditure by new commissioners in the first six months or so of their appointment because they, quite properly, travel extensively throughout Australia to meet stakeholders and to understand their portfolio. It tends then to be pulled back a little, and it might be in the second year that the funds might go to particular priorities. So there is a very high level of discretion for each of those commissioners as to how they expend that capped budget.

Senator WATT: That \$30,000 annual budget is substantially less than the \$77,000 that Mr Wilson racked up in his first year on the job if I am comparing the same figures.

Prof. Triggs: May I take that on notice? One thing that I have not mentioned is family reunion amounts, which would be in addition to that cap. So perhaps I could come back to you to explain that kind of expenditure.

Senator WATT: Are there any items apart from family reunion travel that are in addition to that \$30,000 cap?

Prof. Triggs: Yes. Under the Remuneration Tribunal there are very particular provisions on living away from home allowances which would also increase the total amount when you are reviewing these financial statements.

Senator WATT: Okay. When was this \$30,000 individual cap brought in as a policy?

Prof. Triggs: Certainly for the time that I have been at the commission it has been at the level of \$30,000. I cannot speak for my predecessor, but I can again confirm that with you on notice.

Senator WATT: Okay. I suppose I am still interested in why, if there was such a budget for \$30,000, Mr Wilson more than doubled that amount. Was that something that was of concern to the commission?

Prof. Triggs: It was not of concern. Those moneys were expended in the early part of his appointment, and it was reasonable for him to spend the larger amount in that early period, but I would like, if I may, to take it on notice to review exactly what the composition of that additional

fortysomething-thousand was and why it was expended. We will certainly get back to you with a very full description of what comprised that additional amount.

The answer to the honourable senator's question is as follows:

While each Commissioner has an annual budget of \$30,000 they may be required to participate in projects which have specific budgets attached to them. In those situations, the costs associated with such things as travel undertaken by the Commissioner will be taken from the project budget, not the Commissioner's individual budget. Further, on some occasions costs for travel and other expenses will be met by external parties. This explains the difference between the \$30,000 budget for Commissioner Wilson and the \$77,000 expenses referred to in the press following the response to QON AE15/151.

Of those expenses referred to in the response to QON AE15/151:

- \$21,776.81 was in relation to a Free Speech Initiative project funded by the Attorney-General's Department,
- \$12,470.28 was reunion travel and therefore part of Commissioner Wilson's salary package,
- \$2,571.28 was funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for an international study tour, and
- \$2,104.66 was funded by third parties through reimbursement of travel costs for events to which the Commissioner was invited.

It should also be noted that:

- The period in the QON was 1 February 2014 to 27 March 2015, that is, a period of greater than 12 months and straddling two financial years.
- The sum of \$77,000 in the press includes GST on some items which do not attract GST.