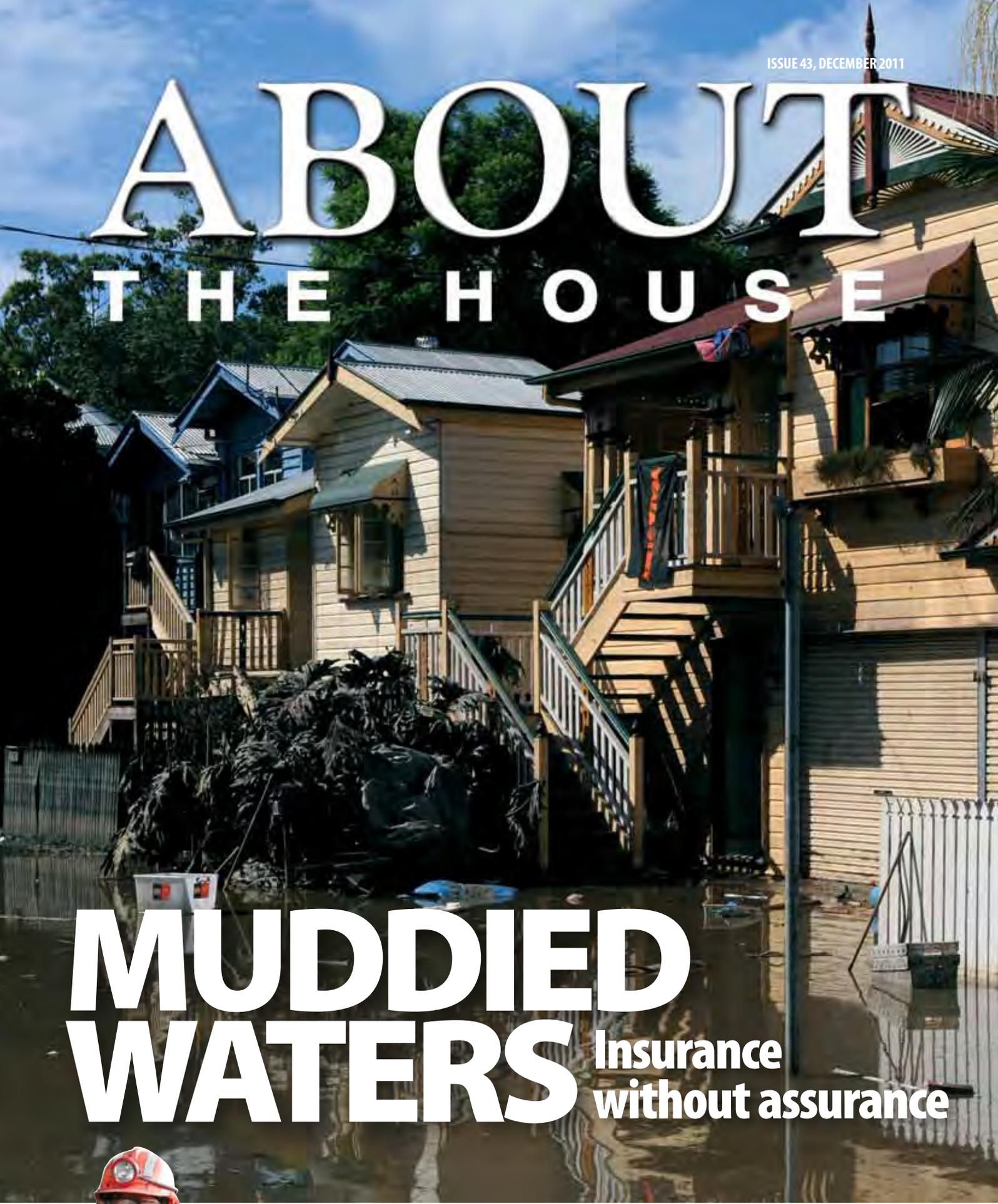


ABOUT THE HOUSE



MUDDIED WATERS

Insurance
without assurance



NOMADS OF THE BOOM
Find work, will travel

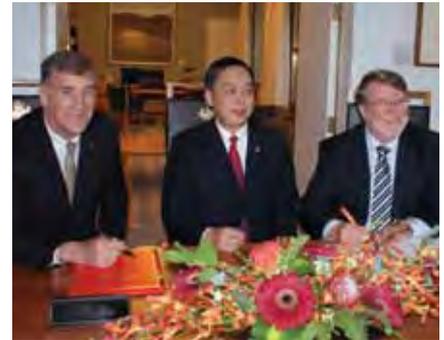
YEN FOR TRADE
Blossoming business

CHINA LINKS GROW

The signing of a parliamentary agreement between the Australian parliament and China's National People's Congress has added another layer of cooperation to the growing relationship between the two countries. The parliamentary Memorandum of Understanding paves the way for more regular parliamentary exchanges between Australia and China to help parliamentarians of both countries better understand each other's political processes and engage on issues of mutual interest.

The agreement was signed in China by National People's Congress Chairman Wu Bangguo and brought to Australia by a visiting Chinese parliamentary delegation. A ceremony at Parliament House in Canberra saw Speaker of the House of Representatives Harry Jenkins and President of the Senate John Hogg sign the agreement on behalf of the Australian parliament.

As part of the agreement, an annual parliamentary dialogue will be held between the two countries, to provide an opportunity for regular discussion



COOPERATION: John Hogg, China's Liu Dongdong and Harry Jenkins at parliamentary agreement signing

of regional and international issues affecting both countries.

NEWSPIX



WAIT IS OVER: Foreign students to get what they pay for

SUPPORT FOR STUDENT PROTECTION

The House of Representatives Education Committee has supported legislation designed to ensure international students receive the education they pay for when they come to Australia to study.

The education services bills establish a universal Tuition Protection Service (TPS), which will assist in student placement and refund arrangements if a provider defaults.

The TPS will be funded by a series of levies on education service providers, some of which vary based on the relative risk of a provider defaulting on its obligations.

Providers will also be limited in their ability to collect course fees in advance, and be banned from accessing pre-paid fees until the student involved begins their course.

For information on the committee's review of the legislation, visit www.aph.gov.au/ee or email ee.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4573.

PACIFIC PARTNERSHIPS EXTENDED

A program to support the development of Pacific island parliaments has been extended to the Cook Islands, Samoa and Vanuatu. The Pacific Parliamentary Partnerships program is funded primarily by AusAID and is being conducted jointly by Australian federal, state and territory parliaments in conjunction with the United Nations Development Programme.

The program is aimed at developing the parliamentary skills of elected representatives in Pacific parliaments, boosting the capacity of parliamentary secretariats, and enhancing the community outreach initiatives of each parliament to help them better engage with their citizens.

Since January 2011, the Pacific Parliamentary Partnerships program has supported parliaments in Kiribati, Tonga and Tuvalu.

The New South Wales parliament, with AusAID support, has also established a development program for parliaments in Bougainville and the Solomon Islands.



PACIFIC PARTNER: Samoa's Parliament House



PARLIAMENTARY HANDBOOK LAUNCHED

The Parliamentary Library has released its *Parliamentary Handbook* for the 43rd Parliament, an authoritative guide to the current and previous Australian parliaments.

The handbook was launched by the joint chairs of the Parliamentary Library Committee, Dick Adams (Lyons, Tas) and Senator Gary Humphries (ACT).

Readers will find details on the parliamentary service and political career of each senator and member as well as statistics about the 2010 federal election. It also contains important historical information including a list of prime ministers, longest serving MPs and details of each referendum held since 1901.

Each federal electorate is also profiled and an election timetable showing the latest possible dates for the next federal election has been included.

The Parliamentary Handbook is available at www.aph.gov.au/library/handbook and copies are available from the Parliament Shop at Parliament House in Canberra for \$70 each.

ABOUT THE HOUSE

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House of Representatives magazine

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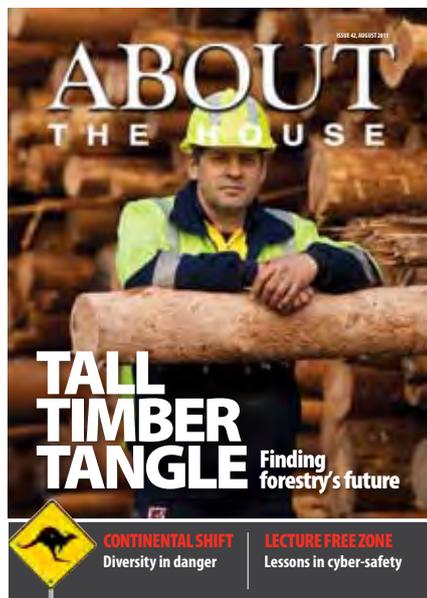
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Despatch BOX



“It is this political freedom that leads to free expression”

HAVE YOUR SAY

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Canberra ACT 2600,
or email: news@aph.gov.au
or fax: (02) 6277 8521

Please include name, address and daytime contact details. Letters may be edited to fit available space and for clarity.

HEART OF AN ENDURING DEMOCRACY

Twenty-three years after opening Australia’s new and permanent Parliament House on 9 May 1988, Her Majesty the Queen returned to parliament’s Great Hall for a reception in her honour during her most recent visit to Australia.

“The Great Hall lies at the heart of Australia’s enduring democratic institutions,” Her Majesty said. “It is easy enough to talk about democracy, but it must never be forgotten that it represents a compact between the Australian people to accept the wishes of the majority, while always remaining conscious, and sympathetic, to those whose voices are not always heard.

“It is this political freedom that leads to free expression, which encourages new development in areas as varied as the arts, sport and commercial enterprise. With this foundation, Australia has flourished and achieved excellence on the world stage.”



AAPONE

IN HER HONOUR: Warm reception for the Queen at Parliament House

The Queen’s visit comes two years ahead of celebrations planned for the 25th anniversary of Parliament House, coinciding with the centenary of Canberra in 2013.

To stay updated about the 25th anniversary celebrations, join our email alert list by emailing your details to: news@aph.gov.au

NEW FOCUS ON THE ASIA PACIFIC

President Barack Obama became the fourth President of the United States of America to address Australia’s parliament when he delivered a speech to members and senators in the House of Representatives chamber on 17 November 2011.

The President’s speech focused on the enduring friendship between our two countries and our military and diplomatic partnership in the Asia Pacific region.

“The bonds between us run deep,” President Obama said. “In each other’s story we see so much of ourselves.”

Looking to the future, he said the United States would increase its role in the Asia Pacific as the region grows in economic importance.

“Here we see the future,” President Obama said.

“Our new focus on this region reflects a fundamental truth — the United States has been, and always will be, a Pacific nation.”

President Obama said the future the United States seeks in the Asia Pacific is one of security, prosperity and dignity for all.

“So let there be no doubt: in the Asia Pacific in the 21st century, the United States of America is all in.”



AAPONE

FRIEND AND ALLY: President Barack Obama addresses the Australian parliament

Hillside

NEWSPIX



KEY TO SUCCESS: *Learning benefit through laptops*

Laptop access delivers results

A SMALL school in the outback town of Doomadgee has been praised in the House of Representatives for impressive NAPLAN results achieved by its largely Indigenous student population.

In last year's nationwide testing, the Doomadgee State School in north-west Queensland saw only 30 per cent of its Year 3 students at or above the national minimum standards.

This year, that figure has soared to 95 per cent of Year 3 students at or above national minimum standards in numeracy.

Member for Lyne (NSW) Rob Oakeshott said the school is using a range of clever strategies to achieve these results, including technology through the One Laptop per Child Australia program.

Mr Oakeshott told the House of Representatives around 5,000 students are engaged in the charity's program which is achieving impressive results in

closing the gap and lifting access and participation rates in education.

"Climate change is not the moral challenge of our time; access and participation rates in education is," Mr Oakeshott said.

"We have a shameful entrenched policy failure in Australia where poorer students, Indigenous students and regional and rural students are now 30 per cent less likely to engage in higher learning compared to their richer, metropolitan, non-Indigenous peers."

Mr Oakeshott said the One Laptop per Child Australia program has corporate support in Australia and "deserves more attention from the government".

He said greater trust and engagement with the private sector is consistent with the United Nations Millennium Development Goal 8 which calls for private sector partnerships in new information and communication technologies.

Brain centre boosts research

AUSTRALIAN research into neurological disorders has been enhanced by the opening in Melbourne of the largest brain research centre in the southern hemisphere.

The Melbourne Brain Centre will provide state of the art facilities for more than 700 staff working to shed new light on common degenerative brain disorders such as Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease.

Member for Melbourne Ports (Vic) Michael Danby helped open the last of the three faculties that make up the brain centre, later telling parliament it was a great step forward for brain research in Australia.

"For the first time, neuroscientists and neurologists from across Melbourne and around Australia will be able to join forces to improve diagnosis and treatment for people with brain disorders," Mr Danby said.

"As Australia's population ages, the need to combat these terrible diseases will become more and more pressing. The brain centre will achieve this goal, translating more rapid advances in knowledge into better patient care and better health outcomes."

The centre was jointly funded by the Victorian and federal governments and private donations, with Mr Danby praising the dedication of all involved to keep Melbourne at the forefront of medical research.

"The massive investment by state and federal governments, together with this generosity through private philanthropy, keeps that edge in Victoria in medical research which so distinguishes our city.

"It is one of the leading cities for medical research, and I think this national brain centre is going to make a very valuable contribution towards that."

Hillside

Apple rejection heightens concerns

DODGY leaf matter and live insect pathogens found in apple imports from New Zealand have sparked urgent calls for a review of Australia's quarantine measures to ensure domestic orchards are protected from any incoming diseases.

For the first time in 90 years, Australia is importing apples from New Zealand despite heated opposition from those concerned about the risk of exposing our pest-free apples to diseases such as fireblight.

Australia is currently free of fireblight, and according to the Member for Riverina (NSW), Michael McCormack, an outbreak would devastate Australian horticulture, cause considerable environmental harm and be impossible to eradicate.

Arguing the future of Australia's apple industry is in jeopardy, Mr McCormack told the House of Representatives one of the first consignments of New Zealand apples has been denied entry because of quarantine concerns.

"By 18 August 2011, just a day after the all-clear was given, seven permits had already been issued to New Zealand orchardists. Later that same month a live-insect pathogen and potentially fireblight-carrying leaf matter had already been found in one of the first consignments," Mr McCormack said.

"The Australian government needs to urgently review its quarantine protocols to ensure our biosecurity measures are the tightest and toughest they can be."



THINKSTOCK

Garden mishap prompts label debate

ONE man's gardening misfortune with toxic compost has fuelled debate in the House of Representatives over the need for improved labelling of fertiliser products.

In a private member's motion the Member for Sturt (SA) Christopher Pyne called for the introduction of a new national standard for composts, soil conditioners and mulches.

He said the need for improved labelling came to his attention after one of his constituents, Des Kerr, purchased compost with a dramatically high pH level which suffocated his plants.

"Like Mr Kerr, all gardeners should know what is in the compost we are buying, what the pH level of the compost is and what other ingredients it may contain," Mr Pyne said.

With around 57 per cent of Australians growing their own vegetables, fruit and herbs, and an estimated 72 per cent purchasing plants for their garden during spring, Mr Pyne said the motion would help consumer confidence in a growing industry.

"The compost industry in Australia has a turnover of more than \$600 million per annum, employs more than 1,900 full-time employees and has an investment in capital of over half a billion dollars," he said.

"This motion, which seeks to encourage the uptake of compost for private and domestic use, would contribute to the future growth of this important industry."

Opening our hearts to save theirs

AN Australian medical program is giving hope to thousands of people in the South Pacific region and beyond who suffer from life threatening heart conditions.

Operation Open Heart was founded in 1986 by medical volunteers to provide cardiac treatment to the people of Tonga, and has since expanded to more than 2,000 patients throughout the South Pacific, Africa and South-East Asia.

The Member for Bruce (Vic) Alan Griffin became aware of the amazing work being done by Operation Open Heart during a parliamentary committee visit to Tonga and Indonesia.

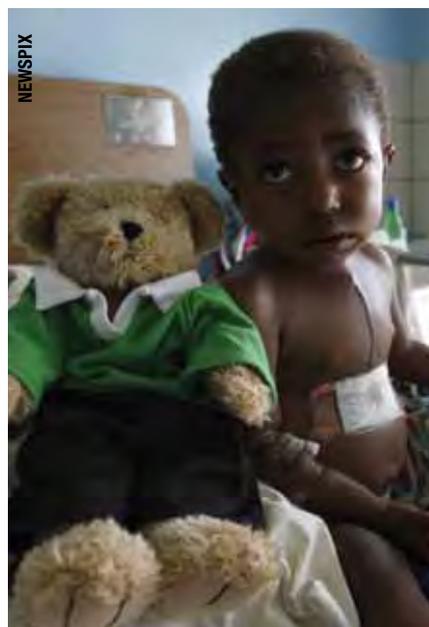
Mr Griffin told parliament he was inspired by the amount of time and effort being donated to those in need.

"It is common to do more than 50 surgeries in a 14-day visit," he said. "As anyone who has been involved in the medical area would know, that is a phenomenal level of activity."

As well as conducting surgeries, volunteers also help train local medical staff to diagnose and treat heart

conditions, with the aim of becoming self-sufficient once visiting teams return home.

Mr Griffin thanked all the Operation Open Heart volunteers for the selfless work they are doing to improve the lives of people suffering from heart conditions.



NEWSPIX

ALL HEART: Medical volunteers are helping to save lives in the Pacific

Gas rumblings shake the hill

Community concerns ignite parliamentary debate.

AAP/ONE



NOT SEAMLESS: Gas mining splits communities

MPs on all sides of parliament have added their voices to community concerns over the multi-billion dollar coal seam gas industry, with one member of the House of Representatives seeking to boost Commonwealth powers to block any projects which threaten water supplies.

A vocal stoush has developed in recent months between miners and farmers in the coal rich basins of New South Wales and Queensland which have seen an explosion in coal seam gas exploration over the past decade.

Some landowners are angry about being unable to stop exploration on their properties amid concerns coal seam gas mining threatens water resources and food security.

Independent Member for New England (NSW) Tony Windsor has introduced an amendment to the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, which would require companies to notify the Commonwealth if they think a new project will impact on water resources. It would also enable the federal government to intervene and veto projects if it thinks water resources are threatened.

Natural resources belong to states, which are responsible for granting mining royalties and setting regulations. However some major projects need to be approved by the Commonwealth under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act if they are deemed to be environmentally significant.

Speaking in the House of Representatives, Mr Windsor said state laws have not kept up with environmental pressures new developments could pose.

“There is a need for a nationally consistent standard to allow certainty for gas and coal companies at the same time as protecting Australia’s limited water resources,” he said.

LATEST

BABY ALCOHOL DISORDERS INVESTIGATED

The prevalence of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) in Australian communities is being investigated by a parliamentary inquiry.

FASD is the term used to describe a range of cognitive, physical, mental and behavioural disorders that result from a baby’s exposure to alcohol when it is still in the womb.

The House of Representatives Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee will look at what sorts of intervention measures and prevention strategies can be used to combat FASD. It will also examine ways to better manage the issue through access to appropriate care and support services.

A recent inquiry into Indigenous youth and the justice system concluded that FASD was an emerging health problem across Australia and urged the federal government to recognise

FASD as a registered disability. It also proposed a further specific review into the issue.

Several MPs spoke in the House recently in support of a motion calling for more government action to reduce the rates of FASD.

Graham Perrett (Moreton, Qld), chair of the Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee, told the House around 2.7 babies in every 1,000 will suffer from FASD.

“Babies born with foetal alcohol syndrome face a range of difficulties later in life including lower IQ, developmental delays, behaviour problems, learning difficulties, memory problems ... and increased risk of alcohol and drug misuse,” he said. •

LINKS

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NEWS

“If we are serious about food security, we need to protect these water resources.”

Independent MPs Bob Katter (Kennedy, Qld) and Rob Oakeshott (Lyne, NSW) have also raised water supply concerns during questions to the government in parliament.

And Labor MP for the northern NSW seat of Page Janelle Saffin added to the debate when she tabled a petition from her constituents.

“My primary concern is about water,” she said. “I note that often people want the federal government, whoever they are, to fix everything that the states do not do. This is not always possible, but this is an issue we need to tackle.”

Nationals MP Mark Coulton has told the House people in his electorate of Parkes (NSW) are becoming increasingly concerned about coal seam gas exploration.

“While I am not opposed to the coal seam gas industry as such and I believe there is a place for both farming and coal seam to coexist, I think that we need to have a closer look at the safety aspects of coal seam gas mining,” he said.

In response to Mr Katter’s question, Prime Minister Julia Gillard said the government was monitoring the debate over water impacts.

“In order to deal with this issue – billions of dollars of investment, a constitutional position and some

farmers with concerns – what you need to do is be studious, methodical and careful,” she said.

“You have got to make sure that you understand the situation, that you act consistently and that you give the same message to all parties.”

Greens Senator Larissa Waters said her party was in discussion with Mr Windsor over his bill when she introduced a Greens bill into the Senate which would give farmers the right to say no to coal seam gas mining on their land.

“Our bill will be a test for the government and the Coalition on where they really stand on food security and the longevity of our rural communities,” she said.

Mr Windsor would need the support of a major party and several crossbenchers for his bill to pass.

The House of Representatives Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry Committee is inquiring into the bill and has asked all Australian governments to provide submissions.

A Senate inquiry into the management of the Murray-Darling Basin has also been investigating the impacts on it of coal seam gas mining. It is due to report by the end of the year. •

LINKS

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THINKSTOCK

OILS AIN'T OILS: *Support for labelling bill dissolves*

PALM OIL BILL STALLS

Legislation requiring food manufacturers to state whether palm oil is present in a product has been rejected by a majority report of the House of Representatives Economics Committee.

Currently food containing palm oil can be labelled as vegetable oil. While some palm oil is produced sustainably, much of it is associated with deforestation in Indonesia and Malaysia which in turn threatens wildlife such as orang-utans.

During two days of hearings, the Economics Committee heard differing views from the food industry, environmental groups and representatives of the Malaysian government and palm oil industries about the potential impacts of this legislation.

The Food Standards Amendment (Truth in Labelling – Palm Oil) Bill 2011 was co-sponsored by independent Senator Nick Xenophon and the Greens and had already passed through the Senate.

But the committee report recommended scrapping the bill because it would not be effective.

According to the report, the states and territories, which have the power to legislate on food labelling, would not be compelled to comply with the law.



Video news from the House now available at
www.aph.gov.au/ath

Committee chair Julie Owens (Parramatta, NSW) also said the bill would put Australia at risk of a World Trade Organization dispute with Malaysia and Indonesia, and threaten labelling harmonisation arrangements with New Zealand.

"We understand the strong feelings in the community about palm oil and any link it may have to deforestation and the reduction of orang-utan habitat," Ms Owens said.

"But the bill will not fix the problem. Instead, it will harm our international relationships with New Zealand, expose us to a WTO dispute, and threaten nationally uniform laws that annually save billions of dollars in costs for consumers and businesses.

"A long-running review sponsored by COAG is already looking into this. We should let the review run its course."

Coalition committee members issued a dissenting report noting the government supported the bill until recently and recommending the bill not be passed at this time in light of the government's stance.

Greens MP Adam Bandt (Melbourne, Vic) also released a dissenting report questioning why the bill lost support after passing the Senate.

"It is disappointing that the government is not prepared to support this bill and that the Coalition has altered its level of support," Mr Bandt said.

"If there are, as the government alleges, barriers to the parliament passing the bill, then the government has the power to remove those barriers, and should do everything necessary to enable labelling of palm oil and the passage of this bill.

"Further, the review of food labelling law and policy has been underway for two years and the rate of reform is frustratingly slow.

"The main driver for food labelling should be conveying information that enables consumers to make informed choices, rather than the demands of the food industry." •

LINKS

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DEFENCE DIGITAL MEDIA



BACK TO BASE: Maintenance measures to be implemented

Defence to improve upkeep of bases

Audit recommendations accepted.

The Defence Department has told a parliamentary committee it has accepted the Auditor-General's advice on how to better maintain its vast portfolio of real estate and property worth \$20 billion.

The Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) reported that Defence faced a \$500 million shortfall over three years in maintaining its 72 major military bases, plus training areas and other military establishments scattered across the country. The annual upkeep of this Defence estate cost taxpayers about \$482 million but, according to the audit office, Defence's maintenance management has "not been fully effective".

The ANAO considered Defence should have long-term upkeep plans and condition assessments of base facilities and infrastructure, including engineering services. It warned funding for current estate maintenance was insufficient and this funding shortfall will increase maintenance backlogs and reduce the life of existing assets.

Deputy secretary of defence support Simon Lewis told the Public Accounts and Audit Committee the department welcomed the ANAO report and had accepted the recommendations.

"We will embed the recommendations into our day-to-day processes," Mr Lewis said.

An earlier Defence budget audit report from 2008 described the Defence estate as an "ageing, complex and costly historical legacy in which investment for maintenance had been decreasing since the 1980s". It urged Defence to move to fewer "super bases" if they were consistent with strategic planning requirements.

But Mr Lewis told the parliamentary committee that consolidating military bases around Australia was unlikely to save much money in the short-term and most likely require spending more, not less, during any start-up phase.

The upfront costs would include the buying of new sites, repairing of former Defence sites so they could be sold or used for other purposes, and improving the facilities at existing bases where consolidation was to occur.

He told the MPs there would be savings but they would come further down the track. •

LINKS

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NEWS

Cap on payday loans

Fees and interest to be reduced.

Government legislation capping fees and interest charged by finance firms issuing short-term loans is being investigated by a parliamentary committee.

These loans are generally of between \$100 and \$2,000 and are regularly used as a stopgap measure by people who have run out of money before their next payday. They often include compulsory charges and interest worth as much or even more than the amount of money lent, leaving consumers at risk of needing to borrow more money to cover repayments.

Introducing the Consumer Credit and Corporations Legislation Amendment (Enhancements) Bill 2011, Assistant Treasurer Bill Shorten told parliament around \$500 million a year was lent in short-term loans.

“At one end it can include small loans in which a person borrows \$300 which must be repaid plus interest a week or two later, on the borrower’s next payday,” Mr Shorten said. “It also covers larger loans up to \$2,000.”

Mr Shorten said the vast majority of short-term loans are sought by low paid workers or people on Centrelink benefits.

“It is estimated that nearly half of payday borrowers have incomes of less than \$24,000 a year, and up to two-thirds earn less than \$36,000.

“We do not believe it is acceptable that these consumers are left to pay exorbitant rates of interest because they have a very urgent need for a small amount of money.”

Mr Shorten said some lenders are charging huge amounts in interest and fees such as \$2,000 on a loan of \$1,000 taken out over a year. These already stretched borrowers then face a real risk of a debt spiral, where their existing loan is extended or rolled over into a new loan.

“Borrowing money at very high interest leaves the underlying financial difficulties unresolved,” he said.

“When the direct debit payment comes out automatically at the next



DEBT TRAP: *Low-income earners caught by high interest loans*

payday, it can leave the borrower with no cash for the next week’s basics, so they have to go and get another loan, trapping them again in a cycle of debt.”

The bill will cap upfront lending fees to 10 per cent of the amount of the loan and then two per cent each month for the life of the loan.

“This cap delivers real outcomes for consumers,” Mr Shorten told parliament. “It ensures that borrowers who are in need of a small amount loan will not face relatively high costs, and will reduce the risk of an ongoing cycle of dependency through the continued use of this form of credit.”

However the chair of the National Financial Services Federation, Mark Redmond, fears many short-term lenders will go bust if the legislation is passed unamended, threatening an important source of funds for hundreds of thousands of Australians.

“We agree with Assistant Treasurer Bill Shorten that vulnerable and disadvantaged Australians should be protected from spiralling into ever larger amounts of debt,” Mr Redmond said.

“We also agree that unlicensed loan sharks should be hunted out of the industry and we are continuing to work with regulators to ensure lenders are licensed and abide by responsible lending rules already in place.

“But the government’s planned cap on fees and charges for short-term loans is too low and if put in place without amendment will send many short-term lenders out of business.”

Mr Redmond also cautioned that the need won’t go away when an authorised lender is put out of business.

“People will need money and there will always be those that are desperate enough to get those funds through loan sharks, backyard means, and the like,” Mr Redmond said.

The legislation will also introduce Australia’s first statutory protection against negative equity to better protect seniors seeking to take out a reverse mortgage on their home.

Reverse mortgage lenders and brokers will be required to meet specific disclosure requirements by walking consumers through the different scenarios before they take out a reverse mortgage.

“The most significant risk to our senior Australians is that they could end up with a debt greater than the value of their home, known as negative equity,” Mr Shorten said.

“For example, they may borrow too much while still relatively young and unknowingly restrict their future choices if they later need to move into aged-care accommodation or have greater health bills.”

Federal parliament’s Corporations and Financial Services Committee is examining the legislation, with more than 40 submissions received. •

LINKS

www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/corporations_ctte
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 (02) 6277 3583



FOREST FLOOR: *High-quality native hardwood still in demand*

Timber mills facing the axe

Shrinking wood supply threatens industry's future.

The northern NSW town of Grafton and its timber mills are feeling the squeeze from logging restrictions that are diminishing the supply of native hardwood logs.

Many mill owners and forestry workers expressed concern about their long-term future when appearing before a parliamentary inquiry into the future of the Australian forestry industry. Local environmental groups also attended to outline the damage already done to forests and to call for more restrictions on logging in state forests.

Andrew Hurford, managing director of Hurford Hardwood, told the House of Representatives Forestry Committee that only 314,000 hectares of Forest NSW's north coast estate of 840,000 hectares is actively managed for timber production, with more than half not available for harvest.

Mr Hurford said a further two million hectares of forests that once supplied timber have been reserved, mostly in national parks.

Timber mill managing director Spiro Notaras, whose mills have been operating around Grafton for nearly 60 years, said his industry's future was being threatened by a dwindling supply of hardwood logs.

His mill once supplied the grey box timber for the Speaker's chair in the House of Representatives chamber from the Bom Bom state forest.

"We've cut most forests in this region two or three times and that's what we are still doing today," Mr Notaras said.

"We are still cutting state forests that we cut 50 years ago and that can still go on for another 100 years and more – it could go on virtually in perpetuity. And that's what a lot of people

don't understand – the eucalypt, it regenerates and it not only regenerates vigorously but it generates a lot of fuel and becomes a fire hazard.

"By thinning out the small logs and the fuel you reduce the fire hazard."

But since the 1970s governments have responded to the concerns of environmentalists by limiting access to state forests that had previously been logged.

"Since 1975 we have seen over 70 per cent of our areas locked up," Mr Notaras said. "For instance, within 150 to 200 kilometres of Grafton probably 60 to 70 per cent of the area has been locked up and made into national parks."

To counter this some Grafton timber industries have diversified into using more plantation timbers. But despite a growing environmental consciousness, Andrew Hurford told MPs the buying public still prefers native hardwood timbers to plantation hardwood timber.

"Green Tree is our brand of plantation product," Mr Hurford said. "It's on our website and we take it to all the shows, everyone says that's fantastic but no one has ordered a stick."

"While we mix it in as a native forest, everyone is perfectly happy to buy it, but when we produce it as a plantation product it's seen as not being the full quid, not the real deal."

Big River Group managing director Jim Bindon said the diminishing supply of hardwood logs had led to their mills in Grafton and Wagga Wagga making the transition to products made from plantation pine.

"At a group level we have two major plywood factories and we process pine and hardwood," Mr Bindon said.

"Basically pine is 90 per cent of our intake and that's a major change from years ago when our company was 100 per cent involved in hardwood or native timbers."

He insists accessing native hardwood timbers to make flooring was still a very important part of Big River's business because it was one of the few areas where they had a competitive advantage over Chinese and European imports.

"Pine grows all around the world whereas native eucalypts only grow here so unfortunately that core competitive advantage has weakened as our

NEWS

percentage of hardwood supply has dropped,” he said.

“Countries from overseas can’t say that they have this eucalypt product. This native eucalypt has a couple of qualities from an appearance point of view – a lot of people like the look of hardwood, whether that be in flooring, stairs or in architectural panels.

“The other thing is we use hardwood for its strength properties because it is an extremely strong and dense timber. Imports from Europe or China just don’t have those traits.”

Not surprisingly some Asian businesses are trying to directly access raw Australian native timbers.

“At the moment I get people from China, Indonesia and Thailand wanting to buy our logs or our raw timber – take it over there and remanufacture it and sell it back here,” Mr Notaras said.

“I could make more money doing that but it’s against my principles so I couldn’t do that. I’d sooner shut than do that. Forestry was set up to employ people in the country – a decentralised industry. Now they want to shut it down – it’s madness.”

Environmental groups at the hearing denied their campaigns were

the primary reason for any decline in the local timber industry.

Carmel Flint from the North East Forest Alliance said much of the decline in the timber industry over the past 10 to 15 years has been the result of falling wood supply from over-logging and mechanisation.

“We have seen a lot of changes to the industry and the jobs have declined regardless of environmental outcomes,” Ms Flint said.

“Some people are innovating. Big River Timbers has the veneer peeler and are trying to use smaller logs and plantation logs and that really has to be the future of this industry.

“So we need to see all the mills move to that kind of equipment to allow them to use small logs and plantation logs.”

John Edwards from the Clarence Environment Centre agreed the supply problems for the timber industry were mostly self-inflicted and said more should have been done decades ago on growing native hardwood plantations.

“The way things are going, every harvest, the trees are getting smaller so it is just unsustainable and we have got to accept that,” Mr Edwards said.

“We should have been planting for saw logs years ago. We have missed a real opportunity with the tax rebates that were offered. And for sheer lack of oversight on behalf of the government we have ended up with a debacle.”

He believed state forest supply contracts were also drawn up on overly optimistic estimates of available timber.

“Or they have logged more than they originally intended because they are absolutely desperate now to get the timber out of the forests,” he said.

“They are logging in areas that shouldn’t be logged. We have had evidence of endangered ecological communities being logged, rainforests logged, mapped old growth logged, a complete disregard of the threatened species prescriptions ... that are outlined in the integrated forests operations agreement.

“There are loopholes in the agreement unfortunately.”•

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TAX COMPLAINTS REDUCED

Complaints against the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) have fallen dramatically and tax refund waiting times have significantly reduced since peaking at the beginning of 2010.

ATO chief operating officer Paul Duffus told a special hearing of federal parliament’s Public Accounts and Audit Committee the ATO has been focusing on improving complaint handling procedures as well as minimising overall complaints.

“The number of complaints has reduced by 91 per cent, and we have no current complaints with the Ombudsman,” Mr Duffus said.

The committee decided to increase its scrutiny of the ATO earlier in the year following a spike in complaints about the revenue collector last year, many related to delays in issuing tax refunds.

Refunds were delayed from the beginning of 2010 while the ATO

undertook a large scale upgrade of its computer systems known as the Change Program.

Subsequent teething problems created a knock-on effect throughout the year and into tax time, leading to some people having their tax refund delayed by more than six months.

The ATO says things are now back to normal, with almost 3.4 million refunds issued by August 21 this year.

The improvement has been shown in a drop in complaints on hand from 4,501 at 30 June 2010 to 962 at 30 June 2011.

However while complaints have dropped, the ATO is currently dealing with more than 3,000 cases involving compromised tax file numbers as it enters the peak period for tax return processing.

Around 300 have been outstanding for more than 90 days, although in most of those cases a new tax file number has already been issued.

AAP/ONE



This follows an instance earlier this year where more than 900 compromised tax file numbers were revealed to be outstanding for as much as 12 months.

Tax Commissioner Michael D’Ascenzo (pictured) told the special hearing all of those 900 tax file numbers had since been reissued.

“The average time to reissue a TFN is under 28 days,” Mr D’Ascenzo said. •

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THINKSTOCK



ICE BREAKER: Heavy oil ban to help save pristine environment

Boost for Antarctic protection

Treaties target risks from oil and tourism.

Federal parliament's Treaties Committee has recommended that Australia ratify two international agreements aimed at boosting the protection of the pristine Antarctic environment.

The committee has supported an amendment to the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships. The amendment prohibits the use and transport of heavy fuel oils in Antarctic seas.

"Heavy fuel oil pollution poses a particular risk in the cold, pristine Antarctic environment," committee chair Kelvin Thomson (Wills, Vic) said.

"Now is the time to act to stop growing cruise ship activity in the Antarctic from increasing the risk to the Antarctic environment."

Heavy oil spills from ships cruising Antarctic waters occurred in 2007 and

2008. Due to the extreme weather conditions in the region, such spills pose a significant environmental hazard as oil decomposition is very slow. Clean up costs are also significantly higher.

The Australian Maritime Safety Authority will be responsible for enforcing standards through port inspections and by liaising with international partners to ensure ships registered in other countries are complying with the standards.

Without Australian ratification of the treaty amendment, ships carrying heavy fuel oils could operate unregulated in the Antarctic and this could have significant financial and environmental consequences for Australia.

In supporting the amendment, the committee expressed concern that a large proportion of vessels will be exempt from the new standards. These

include vessels engaged in search and rescue operations and ships owned and operated by governments, such as naval vessels, auxiliaries and research vessels. The committee said the Australian Maritime Safety Authority should monitor the number of exempt ships carrying heavy fuel oils in the region to see whether the provisions of the exemption need tightening.

The committee has also supported three amendments to the Antarctic Treaty, to specifically guard against the impacts of encroaching tourism. The amendments will establish an environmental liability regime so that those operating in the Antarctic have enough funds to repair environmental damage they have caused. They will also require tourist operators in the Antarctic to have contingency plans and insurance to pay for medical emergencies occurring in the region. They will also require mandatory regulations relating to health and safety, previously self-imposed by the tourism industry. •

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NEWS



GLOBAL STOCKTAKE: *Concerns about diplomatic under-representation*

Diplomatic audit

The work of Australia's international diplomatic missions will be examined by a new inquiry into Australia's overseas representation.

The inquiry by federal parliament's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee will review the location, staffing and activities of Australia's diplomatic missions, including the use of technology to conduct diplomatic work.

"The use of new technologies offers a range of possibilities and has the potential to enhance Australia's footprint and diplomatic impact in a cost effective manner," said Foreign Affairs subcommittee chair Nick Champion (Wakefield, SA).

While the committee will review ways to improve Australia's virtual diplomatic reach, some experts are concerned about Australia's physical diplomatic presence overseas.

International relations expert Dr Paul Monk told an earlier committee review that Australia's representation overseas is facing "severe incapacitation" due to a relative decline in funding.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is responsible for running and staffing 89 embassies, high commissions, consulates-general and multilateral missions around the world.

This is less than all but four of the 34 member nations of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the members of which average 150 missions.

"Being part of the quite powerful networks associated with the United States and Britain would have led me to think that Australia should have stronger representation rather than being down along with Slovakia and Luxembourg," Dr Monk said.

A research fellow at the Lowy Institute, Alexandra Oliver, has also shared concerns about Australia's diminishing diplomatic representation with the Foreign Affairs subcommittee.

"The glaring example there is India, where we maintain one post in Delhi. In Latin America we have opened a new post in Lima in the last couple of years but we still maintain only five in Latin America."

Mr Champion said increasing Australia's representation overseas would be examined in the context of previous inquiries into Australia's relationship with Africa and a review of the DFAT annual report 2009–10.

"While the committee recommended in the Africa report that Australia's diplomatic representation in Africa be increased, it recognised that a broader review of overseas representation was needed."

Mr Champion said the new inquiry will enable the committee to examine these issues in greater depth. •

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ACCESS TO HUNGARIAN BENEFITS

An agreement between Australia and Hungary to make social security benefits available for 5,000 former Hungarians now living in Australia has won approval from federal parliament's Treaties Committee.

The agreement is one of a number of social security agreements Australia has negotiated with Eastern European countries, from which Australia accepted a significant number of refugees in the decades following World War II.

"The agreement provides access to Hungarian age, disability or survivor's benefit for the estimated 5,000 Australians of Hungarian descent who have an entitlement to any of these benefits," committee deputy chair Senator Simon Birmingham (SA) said.

"The agreement will also mean that people who move between Australia and Hungary during their working life will have their entitlements recognised by both countries."

So far Australia has negotiated 26 social security agreements with other countries, which is important for a multicultural nation with nearly a quarter of its population born overseas and 40 per cent of its aged population also hailing from overseas. The agreements overcome barriers to pension payments, such as citizenship requirements, minimum contribution periods and current country of residence.

Peter Hutchinson from the International Branch of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs told the committee there are almost 23,000 Hungarian-born people living in Australia.

This proposed shared responsibility agreement is aimed at addressing gaps in social security coverage for people who have moved between Australia and Hungary. •

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More detail needed on NBN

Six-monthly progress reports sought on rollout.

APFONE



MEASURING UP: Maximising return on investment for taxpayers

The parliamentary committee overseeing the rollout of the National Broadband Network is demanding more detailed information from both the federal government and NBN Co on the actual cost and progress of the multi-billion dollar project.

The first report of the Joint Standing Committee on the National Broadband Network called for six-monthly reports on the progress of the NBN rollout.

The committee wants these reports to use established key performance indicators and performance measures, with the first due at least three months before the committee is next due to report to parliament.

The committee recommended NBN Co publish a detailed account of the impact on timing and budget of the rollout caused by delays in finalising deals with Telstra and Optus.

It also wants NBN Co to publish timeframes for the rollout of NBN

services to regional and remote areas and a commitment to communicate these timings to those areas.

NBN Co should also investigate the impact of the NBN on satellite broadband services, and make contingency plans against any potential reduction of broadband capacity in regional and remote areas as a consequence of the NBN rollout.

The report also called on government agencies to ensure they are ready to deliver services through the NBN, prior to being connected to the new network.

In a dissenting report, the Coalition members of the committee claimed NBN Co lacked accountability and was able to hide too much information behind claims of confidentiality.

These MPs said the committee had been provided with insufficient resources to properly scrutinise NBN Co and the rollout, and that NBN Co had failed to comply with the government's

statement of expectations in several important areas.

In response, committee chair Rob Oakeshott (Lyne, NSW) told parliament those calling for greater scrutiny through monthly or quarterly reports from NBN Co were misinterpreting the role of the committee.

"The majority of committee members, however, recognised that the committee is not a board of directors, that its parliamentary oversight role is broader and that, as its reporting requirements are twice yearly, performance measures reported by NBN Co. should be likewise," Mr Oakeshott said.

He said the political debate around the NBN was obscuring the fact that in his belief the NBN once built will be a significant asset on the financial books of the taxpayer.

"An initial spend on any asset – anything from a house to business investment – can lead to a much larger return in the future if the asset is built efficiently and effectively and if private equity is engaged in the right way at the right time," he said.

"With that in mind, this report flags that the committee ... will seek to satisfy itself about the government's view of where the points of entry are for private investment alongside public investment and to make sure maximum return on the government's investment is secured on behalf of Australian taxpayers."

Mr Oakeshott said while the focus has been on the cost and the complex engineering task of building the NBN over nine years, there are a number of critical secondary issues which should also be prioritised by the government for the NBN to deliver maximum value.

"These include issues such as: Australian content and copyright law, individual privacy and national security, taxation administration, government use of the internet generally, and timely and relevant data collection opportunities that now present themselves." •

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Muddied waters

A problem with flood insurance identified in a report 11 years ago is still causing distress to flood victims at a time when help is needed the most. Story: Georgie Oakeshott

A stinking, muddy trail of destruction wasn't the only thing left behind by the floods which devastated parts of Queensland in January this year.

A torrent of emotions also swept through the shell-shocked communities of the sunshine state where the total number of people impacted by last summer's wild weather was greater than any other natural disaster in Australia's history.

For many people trying to rebuild their lives, their grief and despair turned to anger and frustration the minute their insurance companies got involved.

Instead of extending financial assistance at a time of need, insurance companies were telling hundreds of flood victims they were not covered. Storm damage yes, but flood damage no.

This left hundreds of people scratching their heads and asking the obvious question: would there have been a flood without the storm?

Other Queenslanders were even more perplexed when told they had cover for flash flooding but not riverine flooding.

Months later, hundreds of bewildered flood victims are still locking horns with their insurance companies in a lengthy and complex process of dispute resolution, poring over hydrological reports to establish the exact cause of their piece of the flood.

An unknown number of others – potentially hundreds – never made it this far. Tired of the run-around and suffering 'claim fatigue', they simply gave up because it all seemed too hard.

In its defence, the insurance industry points to a summer of unprecedented natural disasters which stretched the resources of insurers dealing with tens of thousands of claims.

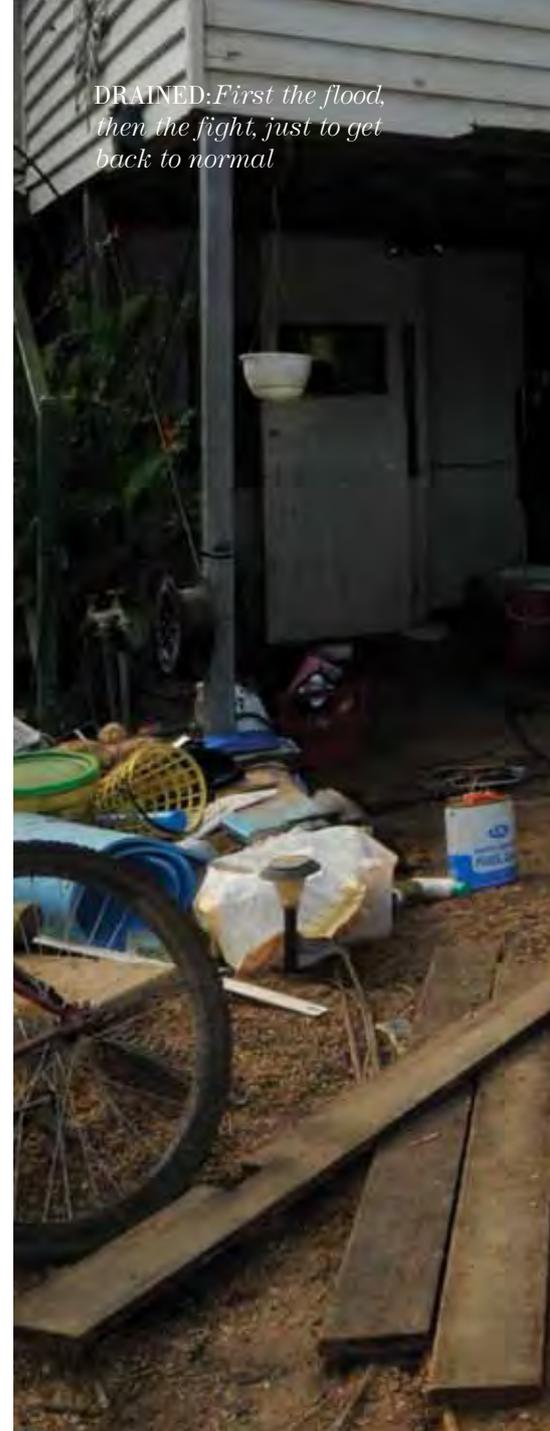
By June this year the insurance industry had received more than 180,000 claims with an insurable cost of more than \$4 billion.

The biggest hit came from the Queensland floods, which alone accounted for 56,000 claims with a cost of \$2.5 billion.

Adding in the impact of Cyclone Yasi in far north Queensland, flooding and severe storms in Victoria, and bushfires in Western Australia, by June this year the insurance industry had received more than 180,000 claims with an insurable cost of more than \$4 billion.

The Insurance Council of Australia says the Christchurch earthquake was also largely underwritten by Australian based interests, further stretching the industry's resources.

DRAINED: First the flood, then the fight, just to get back to normal



Given that flooding leads to a higher volume of claims which take longer to process due to their complexity, delays in processing claims following Queensland's flood event were inevitable. But the insurance council says 99 per cent of residential claims from the Queensland floods had been assessed by June, with only 200 yet to be determined.

The exact number of unhappy customers now involved in internal dispute resolution or external dispute resolution (known as IDR and EDR) is unclear. However it is anticipated around 700 cases will be brought forward for EDR as a result of the Queensland events. That's 700 very angry people.



“Deceitful” is how one woman described her insurance company which she says left her family in hell. “Evil” is another description used.

“We lost everything in this flood, all we own and our home,” says one Queenslander. “It has shattered our lives but in the beginning we thought we could get through because we were insured. The reality is that we were at the mercy of a greedy insurance company that deceived us and lied to us.”

Personal accounts like these are now being examined by a parliamentary committee which is investigating the operation of insurance companies during disaster events.

The inquiry by the House of Representatives Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee is looking at the

“The reality is that we were at the mercy of a greedy insurance company that deceived us and lied to us.”

insurance industry’s handling of the full spectrum of disasters, although flood victims have sent in the majority of submissions, often with more questions than answers.

“How are insurance companies allowed to run businesses in flood prone areas with policies that exclude flooding? Is this not cheating the gullible?”

“How can they settle the claim for a vehicle which was (in the garage) inside the house and deny the claim for the house itself?”

“How can the insurance company differentiate between damage done by floods and damage done by storms for home and contents?”

Mayor of Ipswich Paul Pisasale has given the parliamentary committee



a scathing assessment of the actions of some companies which provided insurance to the 1,000 damaged homes in his region.

“Insurance companies actually created a more devastating effect on the community than the disaster itself,” he says.

Committee chair Graham Perrett (Moreton, Qld), whose own electorate saw water over the floorboards in more than 5,000 homes, insists the inquiry is not a witch hunt.

“We all know that we need a strong insurance industry, however we also want to know that we can respond appropriately to future disasters from the lessons we have learnt from recent disasters,” Mr Perrett says.

As well as looking at the dispute process, the inquiry is examining the communication of claims processing arrangements; the timeliness of claims processing; and the impact of third party consultants on timeframes for claims processing.

“The committee is concerned about the length of time it has taken for the insurance industry to process many claims, and about the claims handling process more generally. We are also concerned about the widespread mismatch between what people thought their insurance policies covered and the outcomes of their claims,” Mr Perrett says.

MISMATCH IS NOTHING NEW when it comes to understanding of insurance coverage. More than a decade

“Insurance companies actually created a more devastating effect on the community than the disaster itself.”

ago insurance industry regulator, the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC), called the flood policy confusion a serious problem which needed addressing.

ASIC’s 2000 report *Consumer understanding of flood insurance* warned that insurance companies needed to improve the way they explained flood cover to ensure they clearly differentiated between flood damage and other storm damage.

The report noted that under section 35 of the Insurance Contracts Act insurers have an obligation to inform a consumer clearly about technical policy distinctions.

It also pointed out that under the ASIC Act, a corporation must not engage in conduct in relation to financial services that is misleading or deceptive, or is likely to mislead or deceive.

Furthermore under the industry’s own General Insurance Code of Practice, a key objective is to facilitate

COPING AS BEST THEY CAN:
Resourceful Queenslanders put to the test

the education of consumers about their rights and obligations under insurance contracts. In fact the code specifically requires insurers to express policy documentation in plain language and to design and present policy documentation with the aim of assisting comprehension by consumers.

ASIC’s report called for the introduction of a standard definition of flood, because different wording in different policies by different companies was – and still is – confusing.

Eleven years after ASIC released its findings, Queenslanders are telling the committee, “the definitions of flood are so confusing they seem designed to outwit you” and “nowhere does it say if you’re flooded you’re buggered”.

But despite the ongoing confusion, ASIC senior executive Greg Kirk says things have improved since 2000.

“I know they [insurance companies] have made attempts to make, in particular, the issues around flood cover clearer in their policies. Looking back at the situation in 2000, things have certainly improved. That is not to say that all understand (a) whether their policy covers flood and, if it does or does not, (b) what in fact flood means,” Mr Kirk says.

“In terms of getting information to consumers, that is a very difficult task. The distinction between floodwater

NEWSPIX



DESPAIR: *More questions than answers over flood damage*

and stormwater is a difficult one even for hydrologists, and there has been variation in where that line is drawn by different insurers and the different interpretations and clauses used in their policies.”

He says the insurance industry made an attempt to introduce a standard definition of ‘inland flood’ in 2008 but that was knocked back by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission on the grounds it could increase consumer confusion rather than alleviate it.

The Insurance Council of Australia has pledged to try again, announcing in July this year that the industry will adopt a common definition of flood. It is also aiming to increase the number of policies which include flood cover from 54 per cent currently to 84 per cent by January 2013.

Insurers are also working with the federal government’s Natural Disasters Insurance Review, which is also looking at the need for standard definitions and industry reforms.

Not surprisingly there is widespread support for the adoption of a standard definition of flood, including from the Queensland government, which describes it as the most prominent lesson from the summer of disasters.

“Across Queensland, many thousands of people who in good faith believed that their comprehensive insurance included flood cover were shocked to find that their policies accommodated flash but not riverine flooding, a concept which had not previously been subject of public discussion or general community knowledge,” Queensland MP Rachel Nolan says.

“The Queensland government supports the Australian government’s efforts now to strengthen regulation. In particular we advocate the adoption of a standard, clearer definition of flood.”

ACCORDING TO ONE FLOOD victim on the NSW north coast, the difference between a successful and

ISTOCK



ROB WILLIAMS APN



unsuccessful claim during this year's events came down to this very question of definition.

"We had surface water from a hill behind us, from drainage lines in the hills south of our property and also a creek to the east," the parliamentary committee was told.

"We had video evidence and physical evidence from the debris. It could easily have gone the other way for us, based on definitions and the individual assessor's opinion. An elderly couple 2km downstream of us were knocked back and it took them 12 months of appealing before they were successful. Same event, same insurer, slightly different circumstances and policy, and ultimately definition of flood."

Personal experiences such as these have consumer law advocates also calling for clarity, demanding it is time to call a flood a flood and give Australians a fair go on their insurance.

In a 12-point plan released in February, consumer and legal organisations called for the development of a fair and easily understood standard definition of flood to be used in all Australian household insurance policies.

"We know what needs to be fixed if Australians are going to get a fair go from their insurers," says the Insurance Law Service's principal solicitor Katherine Lane. "The recent floods have highlighted once again the disastrous impact of not having a fair standard flood definition in all insurance policies."

Following the Queensland floods, the Insurance Law Service joined forces with Legal Aid Queensland, Legal Aid NSW and Caxton Legal Service to work on an estimated 700 cases. They say the fact that so many people thought they were covered but were not was a major failure in insurance coverage.

They are also concerned about 'discouragement', where consumers simply give up on claims because they



are led to believe they are futile. While the number of abandoned claims is unknown, the law service has anecdotal evidence of people being advised by their insurer they cannot make a claim because they are not covered for that disaster event.

"Many consumers are told their claim is not covered and believe (at that time) that a claim has been made and rejected and that is the end of the process," the Insurance Law Service submission says.

"In fact, no claim has been made or recorded and staff of the insurance company have improperly (without evidence or detailed information) misled the consumer about their rights to claim and go to external dispute resolution (EDR)."

Industry regulator ASIC is concerned about these reports and has made recommendations to stamp out the practice, unless it is a very clear cut case. ASIC's Greg Kirk says it is actually better for a consumer to be told up front if their claim is outside their policy.

For many Queenslanders who were not immediately discouraged and decided to persevere, the claims process has been long and frustrating.

Common complaints include difficulty getting concrete answers from insurers as well as difficulty making contact by phone. One person described how they were told to call between 2 and 3 o'clock in the morning to avoid phone congestion and were still not able to get through. For many, it felt as though their claims disappeared into a black hole.

"The stress of waiting and not knowing when we would have a home has nearly destroyed my family. The emotional cost of this is just as significant as the financial cost," says one Queenslanders.

"People's lives are on the line and it's the emotional stress of waiting six and seven months for an answer, as much as the financial stress, which is devastating," says another.

The parliamentary committee is investigating the claims handling process and in particular the industry requirements as set out in the General



GETTY

CLEANING UP: *The definition of flood remains messy and needs attention*

Insurance Code of Practice. These include minimum response times, advising people on the progress of their claim and responding to disasters in a fast, professional, practical way and with a compassionate manner.

The Insurance Council of Australia has singled out communication as a priority for improvement.

“In terms of communication with customers, to make sure they understand what their policy actually covers because there were some concerns about that, and also about how their claim is progressing and keeping them informed,” says the council’s CEO Rob Whelan.

“The definitions of flood are so confusing they seem designed to outwit you.”

“We do as much as we can, as fast as we can but there are limitations, and the industry was stretched by last summer’s events.”

THERE ARE MANY REASONS why flood claims result in more delays and more disputes than other disasters.

The Insurance Council of Australia says disruptions to roads and additional hazards such as damaged utilities may make it difficult for assessors to access properties; and the unique damage caused by flooding sometimes requires expert opinions.

But community law group, the Insurance Legal Service, says there are other factors at play, including flood exclusion being buried in most policy product disclosure statements; no targeted disclosure over the phone or internet when people are buying their policy; and the fact that many Australians have no idea of their risk of flood.

According to the Financial Ombudsman Service – which is the provider of the external dispute resolution process – when insurers deny claims for flood it raises the questions of whether flooding was caused by a flood or a storm, whether sections 35 and 37 of the Insurance Contracts Act were satisfied, and what representations were made at the point of sale and what their ramifications are. These questions can be so complicated the ombudsman doubts the introduction of standard definitions will cure the confusion.

“Unfortunately, cleaning up and having a single definition of flood will not remove the question of flood or storm, because stormwater is traditionally runoff water; flood is inundation from water escaping the banks of a river. That is in very broad terms, and that is how the standard definition is heading,” says John Price, Ombudsman General Insurance.

“So there is probably a broader piece of work that needs to be done

around insurers, if they are not going to provide flood cover, clearly identifying what they mean by storm and what water coming out of a storm drain, if it is backwater from a flood, is considered flood water. There are court decisions around that, unfortunately. That needs to be clarified.”

Insurers are calling for mitigation works, with the Insurance Council of Australia releasing a 10-point plan to tackle disasters. It recommends the provision of adequate flood data, including an open source, nationally consistent, accurate mapping of flood risks; improvements to land-use planning; better building standards; and upgrades to community infrastructure.

The council’s Rob Whelan says the lack of data is one of the reasons there has been a problem with flood insurance over such a long period of time.

“Progressively we’ve been putting that data together and since 2006 approximately 3 per cent of policies in the market covered this type of flood. This year over 50 per cent do and by the end of 2012 we estimate about 80 per cent of policies will – and that’s as a consequence of information and data being available for insurers to actually quantify the risk and therefore price the risk, and so it has been about getting accurate and available information to be able to put the policies into effect.”

It’s now up to the parliamentary committee to wade through the muddied waters of this emotionally charged inquiry, with a report due early next year. •

Shortly before the publication of this article the federal government announced that it would legislate a standard flood definition.

FOR MORE INFORMATION on the inquiry into the operation of the insurance industry during disaster events, visit www.apf.gov.au/spla or email spla.reps@apf.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 2358.

NOMADS OF THE BOOM

A travelling workforce brings with it both benefits and baggage.

Story: Emma O'Sullivan

It's easy to see why a city worker down on his luck and short on experience would quickly snap up one of the thousands of lucrative mining jobs on offer.

Anyone who does a quick web search will soon be bombarded by ads promising wages of close to \$100,000 a year for unskilled positions, with much more on offer for engineers, geologists and project managers.

In contrast to struggling industries like manufacturing and tourism, mining companies are practically begging people to join their ranks as the resources boom continues to steam ahead at a frenetic pace.

And the demand for workers is mind-boggling. According to the Queensland Resources Council (QRC), over 3,600 positions are vacant in its state and that number is set to increase over the next four years.

"The mining boom has a very uneven impact."

In Western Australia it is estimated 33,000 more people will be needed in the next 18 months to work on projects already under way, on top of the 90,000 already employed in the sector.

But before you are sold by the big pay packet, it might be worth considering the potential downside.

For starters, you may end up living away from your family for a substantial part of the year. You're stuck in a remote outpost, or offshore, ploughing through 12-hour shifts for a month straight while you miss out on seeing your kids grow up.

As your family struggles through the daily routines of life without your help, you may feel isolated and lonely.

That's because you are now a non-resident worker or, as they're known in the business, a 'fly-in fly-out' (FIFO) or 'drive-in drive-out' (DIDO) employee.

AAPONE



GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY: *Fly-in jobs are booming*

Although the practice is used in other rural industries, the resources sector is becoming increasingly dependent on FIFO workers.

Families who sign up to the FIFO lifestyle do so for several reasons. It may be a way to pay off the mortgage quickly or to get off the debt treadmill.

But is everyone prepared for the hardships the job might bring? Are companies doing enough to support their workers? And how much truth is there to reports that large numbers of FIFO employees are contributing to social and economic problems in some regional communities?

These are just some of the issues the House of Representatives Regional Australia Committee will consider in its latest inquiry established in the wake of several calls from within and outside parliament for a thorough examination of FIFO workforce practices.

“Already we have heard concerns about air safety, health funding, taxation, family and relationship breakdown and the loneliness of the FIFO bachelor,” committee member Barry Haase (Durack, WA) told federal parliament.

“The cost of housing, antisocial behaviour and how to optimise the FIFO/DIDO experience for families are also on the committee’s agenda.

“It turns out to be almost a love-hate relationship. The practice suits some incredibly well and it does not suit others.

“The drain of skills out of rural communities to FIFO and DIDO workforces is causing major problems in some areas and yet, for those who are developing resources in Western Australia, often the only way is to deploy a FIFO workforce.”

Nicole Ashby, founder of the support group website, FIFO Families, welcomes the inquiry. She has been living life as a ‘FIFO wife’ for the past three years.

Ms Ashby lives in Perth where around 45,000 resource employees are FIFO workers, including her husband Joe who spends one month on an offshore oil rig before coming home for four weeks.

She established her website when she realised there was inadequate support for families in the same situation as hers.

Through the website, families around Australia are able to get in touch, attend social events and form friendships. Ms Ashby says forming a connection to other FIFO families is crucial.

“The feedback I get from other members is that sometimes they also feel judged by people that aren’t FIFO,” she says.

“They think that you’ve got loads of money and you’ll get comments like, ‘how could you do that to your family’, ‘I couldn’t be away from my husband’, and ‘what about the kids?’”

A quick browse of the FIFO Families online chat forum reveals that relationship issues, such as trust, resentment and the strains of separation, are a hot topic.

“You’ll get comments like, ‘how could you do that to your family’.”



GETTY

TAKE YOUR PICK: *Many workers have no choice but to commute*

“There’s often discussions about, ‘well my husband’s on a mine site with women and he’s out there for two weeks and he’s only home for one week so he’s away more than he’s home and there’s alcohol on the mine site’, and that’s an issue for a lot of women,” Ms Ashby says.

People also ask why families choose to live apart, instead of moving to communities closer to where the job is located.

For Nicole Ashby it’s impossible to live on an oil rig, but for others the rents in some crowded mining towns are too high and the facilities might be lacking.

“In Karratha and Port Hedland, the rent is like \$2,000 a week so that’s a huge obstacle right there,” she says.

Families are free to choose whether or not they enter the FIFO lifestyle, but Ms Ashby warns people should be prepared for some tough times.



FAR OUT: Remote locations are part of the FIFO lifestyle

And she thinks companies and governments should help FIFO families by funding services and programs to support families. One example she cites is the need for more flexible day care options.

“For example, when the father is home from work, they may not want to place a child in day care but prefer to spend time with them, but the day care spot is more often than not a permanent spot and must be paid for,” she says.

Ms Ashby also believes consideration should be given to abolishing some of the tougher rosters, such as four weeks away and one week home.

While many mine sites in WA are so remote workers have no choice but to commute, the state of affairs in Queensland’s coal-rich Bowen Basin is a different story.

Containing the largest coal reserves in Australia, the basin stretches about 60,000 sq km across the centre of the state. According to the QRC there is a staggering \$115 billion worth of new projects on the books.

“The industry is on the cusp of an enormous growth opportunity here and nationally, and new recruitment approaches will be required,” the QRC’s Greg Lane says.





FAR FROM HOME:

Separation from family is a downside

For some, the feeling is that the town is not seeing its fair share of the wealth it's helping to generate.

There are already 15 established communities in the basin, including the town of Moranbah, which is located near several mines. Moranbah has about 8,000 people and was built in 1971 to service the nearby Goonyella and Peak Downs Mines.

The community is part of the Isaac Regional Council which has around 22,000 permanent residents. But with so much activity in the area, FIFO and DIDO workers blow this number out by a further 10,000.

Figures published in 2010 by the Office of Economic and Statistical Research showed that house prices in Moranbah are more than double that of Brisbane. The cost of goods and services in Moranbah is 13 per cent higher than in Brisbane making it one of the most expensive places in Queensland to live.

In light of those figures, it's easy to see why in Moranbah the issue of non-resident employees is a contentious one. Residents are concerned that the high number of FIFO workers is simply not sustainable, leaves local businesses out in the cold and exacerbates the housing shortage.

For some, the feeling is that the town is not seeing its fair share of the wealth it's helping to generate.

Many of these issues came to a head this year when BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) sought approval to build a high-quality coking coal mine south east of Moranbah which will require 2,000 employees to build and 500 to operate. It had wanted to bring the whole workforce in from other areas, a move which caused considerable local angst.

Conditions were eventually imposed on the company which will require it to have at least 80 per cent of its workforce across all operations in the region to live in the area they work. The company must also build 400 new homes by June 2013, including 160 in Moranbah.

But that doesn't stop some residents from worrying about the impacts, including council mayor Cedric Marshall. While he agrees mining activity is a good thing for regional areas like his, he is concerned about the rapid pace of mining expansion and what that means for Moranbah.

"When they fly-in fly-out ... they go straight to work, they do their roster system, they leave work, get back on the plane and head home. There's not a lot of income into our region from FIFO workers," Mr Marshall says.

"I think the [federal] government needs to have a look and see if we can control this a little bit. It's just willy-nilly issuing [mining] permits to everyone to go out there and there doesn't seem to be any control over it."

The QRC's Greg Lane says in 2009–10 its members spent more than \$17b on goods and services in Queensland and advocates for a fair return of royalties collected by state governments to the resource-rich regions.

"Queensland resource sector companies pay in the order of \$7b a year in state royalties and federal corporate taxes and it's clear that not enough is being reinvested in the regions where that revenue originates," he says.

"We keep making the point alongside organisations such as the Local Government Association of Queensland that if resources communities are seen to have facilities and services comparable to coastal centres more people will be willing to move there."

Professor Kerry Carrington of QUT's school of justice is sceptical of some claims from industry that they are adequately investing back into communities and is also critical of state governments.

She was involved in a three-year study of six regions across Australia, five of which were impacted by rapid socio-demographic changes due to resources sector development. The study found FIFO communities were struggling with violence fuelled by excessive alcohol consumption and high stress among workers.

More recently Professor Carrington conducted a survey of communities in the Bowen Basin which found several adverse economic and social impacts on towns like Moranbah.

"The mining boom has a very uneven impact," she says. "They're generating huge economic prosperity for the industry itself and state governments are raking in record royalties."



GETTY

TAKING OFF: *Thousands of workers are flying to their workplaces each week*

“But you get the mining communities and those little communities further on sort of lumbered with a whole new set of burdens – massive increases in housing affordability, increase in living costs, rents soar, but their quality of life declines.”

She believes the Commonwealth government must intervene because the states, which approve licences and collect royalties, have a fundamental conflict of interest.

“There’s an absolute clear and dire urgent need for a national policy framework to guide the sustainable development of resources and resource stocks so that they can harness some of the benefits for rural and regional Australia [but also] the very long-term interest of all Australians,” she says.

Unsurprisingly, many parts of the industry do not agree with Professor Carrington’s findings. Bruce Campbell-Fraser from the Chamber of Minerals and Energy of WA says he thinks there has been some “sensationalist” reporting on the issue – especially on the supposed impacts on FIFO workers.

“Perhaps historically practices have been a bit poor but certainly we see in the WA context FIFO rosters being good for families and there being additional support for families.

“Companies are far more aware about retaining our workforce so making sure that not just the employee is happy but there is support and other things there for the family of that employee as well.”

Ultimately it also comes down to where people want to live, and for most workers that is in the cities, says Mr Campbell-Fraser. He points out that in the 1920s 43 per cent of people were living in metropolitan areas in contrast to 70 per cent today.

“It’s also a work-life balance for many people. They can have a roster that when they’re at work they’re at work but when they’re at home they’re a long way from work and they can’t just be called in to participate because someone’s sick.”

The QRC’s Greg Lane agrees. “It is evident from our members’ experiences that families put a high value on educational and other social services, which they perceive as more attractive in a number of coastal centres.”

The committee will have much to consider as it seeks to strike a balance for all. •

FOR MORE INFORMATION on the inquiry into ‘fly-in fly-out’ work practices in regional Australia visit www.aph.gov.au/ra or email ra.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4162.

Yen for trade



ISTOCK



Australia's economic relationship with Japan has a long history, extending well back into the nineteenth century. In 1865, three years before the Meiji Restoration, the first trade between the two countries was recorded, when a shipment of Australian coal arrived in Japan. By 1879, western-style uniforms had been introduced into Japan for soldiers, policemen, postal workers and railway workers. In order to supply the uniforms and meet the growing demand for western clothes, Japan began to import wool from Australia.

Those first shipments of coal and wool sowed the seeds of an economic relationship that grew and diversified in the period after the Second World War to become one of the most successful in Australia's history. Following the signing of the visionary Australia-Japan Agreement on Commerce in 1957, trade between the two countries increased rapidly. By 1967, Japan had become Australia's largest merchandise export market – a position it subsequently occupied for over forty years.

While China overtook Japan in 2009 as Australia's largest export destination, Japan is set to remain one of Australia's most important trading partners for a long time to come.

THE AUSTRALIAN AND JAPANESE ECONOMIES are highly complementary, and this is reflected in the trade relationship.

In 2010 Australia's two-way trade with Japan was worth \$66.1 billion, equivalent to more than five per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). Australia's total exports to Japan amounted to \$45.7 billion, and its imports from Japan to \$20.4 billion.

An economically vibrant Japan is unambiguously good for Australia.

Australia's major merchandise exports to Japan include coal (\$14.8 billion), natural gas (\$8.7 billion), iron ore (\$8.6 billion) and beef (\$1.7 billion). Major services exports include tourism (\$0.8 billion) and transport (\$0.6 billion).

Australia is the largest single supplier of primary energy to Japan, providing many of the resources – such as coal, iron ore and natural gas – that have enabled Japan to become a leading exporter of industrial goods to the world. Australia is also one of the major suppliers of food to Japan: most of Japan's *udon* noodles are made from Australian wheat; Japanese beer relies heavily on Australian malting barley; and 'Aussie beef' plays a key role in Japan's food service industry.

At the same time, Japan ranked as Australia's third-largest source of merchandise imports in 2010 (after China and the United States), worth \$18.2 billion. The automotive sector dominates this trade, with Australia constituting the



There's plenty more that can be achieved from one of our longest and strongest trading relationships, writes Australia's Ambassador to Japan, Bruce Miller.



ISTOCK



SUPPLY CHAIN: Aussie exports range from coal and gas to beef and barley



AAPONNE

third-biggest market for new passenger motor vehicles manufactured in Japan.

The economic relationship between Australia and Japan is not only about trade. Japan has been Australia's third-largest foreign investor for many years (after the United States and the United Kingdom). The total stock of Japanese investment in Australia at the end of 2010 was \$117.6 billion, almost twice as large as that of China (including Hong Kong). When both trade and investment are included – and taking account of both the depth and breadth of that investment, which has been critical to the development of Australia's most important industries – Japan could still be considered to be Australia's most important economic partner overall.

Japanese demand for Australia's resources – and the accompanying investment – has contributed enormously to the development of Australia's mining industry. In the area of agriculture, over 40 per cent of 'Aussie beef' imported

into Japan comes from Japanese-owned farms in Australia. Kirin Holdings now owns Australia's largest dairy company, as well as some of Australia's largest beer producers. In the field of manufacturing, Toyota not only exports passenger vehicles to Australia, but – through its in-country production facilities – is also the largest producer of these vehicles in Australia. Furthermore, Japanese investment is increasingly targeted at using Australia as a springboard into the emerging economies of Asia. Japanese investment has been remarkable for its breadth, continuity and steady expansion over time, regardless of fluctuations in the global economic situation.

A MAJOR CHALLENGE CURRENTLY FACING the Japanese government is managing the recovery and reconstruction effort following the terrible earthquake and tsunami disaster of 11 March 2011, which has left over 22,000 people dead or missing, and has had such a damaging effect on the economy, especially the agriculture and energy sectors.

Australia is well placed to help Japan meet its future energy needs.



This challenge, however, also represents an opportunity, both for Japan and for Australia. For Japan, the task of rebuilding after the earthquake and tsunami is an opportunity to adopt new ways of doing things; to implement reforms that will rejuvenate and strengthen the Japanese economy – including the agriculture sector – over the longer term. The pursuit of these reforms is very much to Japan's long-term benefit – and Australia's – since an economically vibrant Japan is unambiguously good for Australia, and the broader Asia-Pacific region.

For Australia, the events of 11 March require that we support Japan in its process of reconstruction and reform. For example, a wide-ranging debate on energy policy is under way in Japan in the wake of the crisis at the Fukushima nuclear facility, and Australia – as an established and reliable exporter of energy – is well placed to help Japan meet its future energy needs. Australia's strong reputation as a supplier of safe and high-quality food products means it is in a position to assist in this area as well.

The Australian education sector, too, may be able to support both Japan's efforts at internationalising tertiary education and its training needs for a more global workforce. Collaboration between Japanese and Australian education institutions has always been strong, including in student exchange and research collaboration. In 2010, 11,818 Japanese students enrolled in Australian courses, and an estimated 20,000 more travel to Australia each year and study English language as part of their stay. In view of this strong trade in knowledge and ideas, education was a focus of Prime Minister Julia Gillard's April 2011 visit to Japan. The Prime Minister announced a package of assistance aimed at boosting Japan's efforts to internationalise its tertiary education sector by

ECONOMIC SUMMIT: *Japan is arguably our most important overall economic partner*

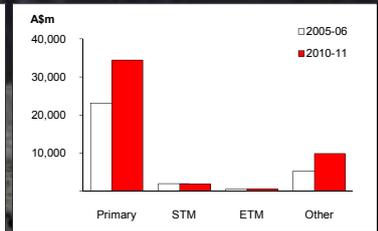
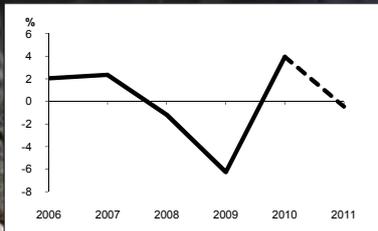
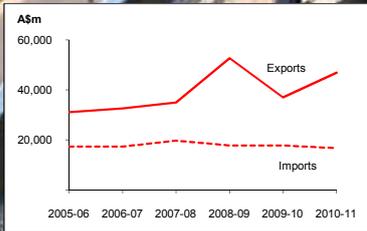
supporting two-way student exchange as well as research and professional collaboration between Australia's and Japan's tertiary sectors, with a particular focus on disaster-affected areas. Australia is a world leader in international education and is able to work with Japan as it reshapes its tertiary sector to provide Japanese industry with international graduates who have the skills needed for modern workplaces.

IN 2007 – 50 YEARS AFTER THE SIGNING OF THE historic Australia-Japan Agreement on Commerce – Australia and Japan started negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The idea behind an FTA is to take the trade relationship between the two countries to a new level, and achieve a high-quality, comprehensive agreement that will lay the foundations for an even stronger economic partnership over the next 50 years and beyond.

An Australia-Japan FTA represents an important opportunity for Japan to undertake liberalising reforms that – as econometric modelling conducted jointly by the Australian and Japanese governments in 2005 concluded – could increase Japan's GDP by around \$27 billion over 20 years, and Australia's by about \$39 billion over the same period.

Realising these benefits will require the removal of trade barriers. For Australia, significant improvements in market access for our exports of goods and services to Japan will be critical to the future long-term growth of the bilateral

THE COAL FACTS: Australia is Japan's largest single supplier of primary energy including coal exports worth more than \$14 billion in 2010



GRAPHS (left to right): Australia's merchandise trade with Japan; Real GDP growth; Australia's merchandise exports to Japan. Source: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

economic relationship. In particular, the elimination of tariffs on agricultural products is a key objective for Australia in the FTA negotiations.

Australia is also seeking an FTA that improves operating conditions for Australian service suppliers, facilitates investment and enhances protections for investors and intellectual property rights. The reduction of trade barriers and the creation of a more stable and transparent trading and investment environment will make it easier and cheaper for Australian businesses to export their products and services to Japan.

THE TIES BETWEEN THE AUSTRALIAN AND Japanese business communities are already strong and long-established, but there is considerable potential to expand them even further, including in relation to third countries. Increasingly, Australian companies are exporting to Japanese firms in third countries, including China. There is real scope for Australia to benefit from existing trade links and shared business culture to build partnerships with Japanese companies to secure business in third markets.

Another important initiative is being jointly undertaken by the Australia-Japan Business Cooperation Committee (AJBCC) and its Japanese counterpart, the Japan-Australia Business Cooperation Committee (JABCC). These organisations – which will celebrate the 50th anniversary of their establishment next year – are working together to promote the public-private partnership model of infrastructure financing in Japan and in third countries. They have undertaken numerous missions from Australia to Japan and vice versa, as well as joint missions to India and Indonesia.

In February this year Australia and Japan agreed to launch a new dialogue to promote public-private infrastructure

The elimination of tariffs on agricultural products is a key objective for Australia.

cooperation. The first round was held in March in Tokyo. Attendees from business and government discussed opportunities for cooperation in infrastructure investment and development, and identified ways that Australia and Japan could benefit from each other's comparative advantages. A second dialogue was held in Tokyo in October, and participants are keen to host a third round in March 2012.

The trade and investment relationship between Australia and Japan has deep historical roots, and has evolved over time to become arguably Australia's most important overall economic partnership. While much has already been accomplished, more can still be achieved. One important milestone in the further development of the relationship would be the conclusion of a high-quality and comprehensive FTA. But there are also numerous other ways in which Australia and Japan can build upon their existing ties to establish an even stronger partnership to the mutual benefit of both countries.●

Federal parliament's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee is reviewing Australia's trade and investment relationship with Japan and the Republic of Korea. **To find out how to contribute** to the review and for more information visit www.apf.gov.au/jfadt or email jscfadt@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 2313.

THE LAW

Harmony hope for work safety

Model legislation aligns standards.

National companies will have reduced compliance costs and workers will enjoy consistent safety standards throughout Australia under new work health and safety laws introduced in parliaments around the country.

The Work Health and Safety Bill 2011 represents the Commonwealth component of the national harmonisation of occupational health and safety (OH&S) laws being undertaken by federal, state and territory parliaments throughout 2011.

The Commonwealth legislation only applies to federal government and former government agencies, as well as other companies and organisations currently covered by Commonwealth OH&S law.

However uniform legislation has been produced for each Australian parliament, allowing work health and safety standards to be aligned in all jurisdictions for the first time since modern OH&S laws were introduced in Australia during the 1970s.

The model bill introduces some significant changes for Commonwealth OH&S law, including penalties as high as five years imprisonment for serious breaches of the law.

Commonwealth workers will also have the right to cease work if they have reasonable concerns that carrying out the work would expose them to a serious risk to their health and safety.

For companies operating across state and territory borders, the changes mean no longer having to satisfy different safety standards and resolution processes depending on where they are doing business.

Regional Development Minister Simon Crean said harmonising work health and safety laws across Australia will cut through red tape for business and even potentially save lives at work.

“This new framework will replace nine separate occupational health and safety acts and over 400 pieces of occupational health and safety regulation which currently cause unnecessary confusion, complexity and higher costs for many businesses,” Mr Crean said.

“The national system will harmonise work health and safety laws so that they are consistently enforced by regulators, facilitating a stronger partnership with business to minimise the risks of workplace injuries and deaths.

“Having different OH&S systems creates a regulatory burden on businesses, increases red tape and means that workers are at risk of poorer safety standards than their counterparts in other states. In 21st century Australia, workers and businesses deserve better.”

Coalition parties support the general principle behind OH&S harmonisation, but are concerned about measures in the model bill they say remove the right to silence for those charged with workplace safety offences.

Shadow Minister for Employment Participation Sussan Ley said the right to silence and protection from self-incrimination are basic human rights that stop abuse of power.

“This protection is a right we all have and is essential to community confidence in our criminal justice system and the rule of law,” Ms Ley said. “The model OH&S laws take away the right to silence and protection from self-incrimination.

“This will apply not only to employers but also to all managers and workers in workplaces. It will grant powers to OH&S inspectors that are not even available to the police.”

Ms Ley also took issue with the removal of the term ‘control’ from the legislation when defining duty of care as it applies to individuals and organisations.

“These are landmark reforms which have been long in the making.”

“The removal of the word ‘control’ not only creates confusion over who is responsible for what in work safety but is a major shift away from known OH&S principles in all Australian jurisdictions, except New South Wales,” Ms Ley said.

“People understand in a practical sense that if they control something, or even share control, they are responsible.

“With the word control removed, clarity and focus on personal responsibility for safety is diminished and becomes confused. This works against the objectives of achieving safe workplaces.”

The Coalition unsuccessfully moved various amendments to address these concerns, but ultimately supported the legislation in the House and Senate.

Mr Crean called on all parliaments to support the model legislation unamended, saying it will save nationally operating businesses \$179m per year and realise a reform that has been on the agenda for more than 30 years.

“Support for this legislation is support for a balanced and nationally harmonised framework to secure health and safety for all Australian

“This new framework will replace nine separate occupational health and safety acts”

SAFETY FIRST: *Workers will enjoy consistent safety standards*

THINKSTOCK



workers and Australian businesses into the future,” Mr Crean said.

“These are landmark reforms which have been long in the making. Nationally harmonised work health and safety laws were first raised by the Whitlam government in 1974.”

The current push for uniformity began in 2008 when the National Workplace Relations Ministers’ Council (WRMC) agreed to develop the architecture for a national scheme, an approach endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments.

The plan gathered momentum when the WRMC released a draft model Occupational Health and Safety Bill in September 2009.

Following extensive consultation with the community and input from Safe Work Australia, the final model Work Health and Safety Bill was produced during December 2009, and has since been introduced into several state and territory parliaments.

However while most state and territory governments have signalled they will support the legislation, potential amendments and opposition in all parliaments means challenges remain for the full alignment of workplace laws.

“The potential benefits of harmonisation must not be outweighed by increasing regulation”

The legislation needs to pass unamended through all nine Commonwealth, state and territory parliaments for national harmonisation of OH&S laws to occur by the beginning of next year.

Western Australia has yet to commit to introducing the model legislation at all, stating that its position on the new framework is under review.

The legislation also faces opposition from some business

groups, including the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI). In a public submission ACCI said it supports the process of harmonisation, but not at any cost.

“Industry commends the effort to eliminate inconsistencies and duplication in WHS [Work Health and Safety] legislation across states,” ACCI said in its submission. “However, the potential benefits of harmonisation must not be outweighed by increasing regulation and accompanying administrative and regulatory burdens.

“The danger is Australia could end up with better harmony in work health and safety regulation but see business suffocating in red tape.”

The model legislation was passed by federal parliament on 24 November 2011. It has also been introduced into the ACT, South Australian, Queensland and New South Wales parliaments, with the new arrangements due to come into force from 1 January 2012. •

THE LAW

SUPERANNUATION

Agency switch for release of super

Common sense solution, says industry.

Medicare Australia will become the sole agency administering the early release of superannuation on compassionate grounds under changes to superannuation law passed by the House of Representatives.

Generally superannuation benefits are preserved until an individual turns 55, but can be released early in limited circumstances such as urgent medical treatment, impending mortgage foreclosure or to cover palliative care costs.

Currently Australians who need early access to their super must apply to the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority (APRA), or to the Australian Taxation Office for self-managed super funds.

Assistant Treasurer Bill Shorten said the administration of compassionate early release does not sit well with APRA's main role as the regulator of Australia's financial services industry.

"Medicare Australia is better suited to administer this function, and after it becomes formally responsible for administration of early release on compassionate grounds, there may be scope to considerably streamline the function," Mr Shorten said.

The Australian Superannuation Funds Association (ASFA) welcomed the move, saying it is common sense for early release to be administered by a body that already has a customer service operation in place.

The amendments do not make any change to the strict criteria for early release of super on compassionate grounds, which Shadow Treasurer Joe Hockey said was crucial to Coalition support of the amendments.

"Superannuation must remain the savings for retirement, and it should only be in extreme circumstances that the funds can be withdrawn," Mr Hockey said. •



LAWS THAT SUIT THE TIMES: *Modernising extradition*

EXTRADITION

Reforms to streamline extradition process

Balance sought between efficiency and safeguards.

The extradition process will be streamlined and greater protection offered for those facing potential persecution for their gender or sexual preference under amendments proposed to Australia's extradition laws.

The Extradition and Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation Amendment Bill 2011 will also increase resources available to joint international investigations, as well as strengthening protections against assisting investigations where torture or the death penalty may be applied.

The chair of the House of Representatives Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee, Graham Perrett (Moreton, Qld) said the reforms would modernise Australia's laws on extradition and mutual assistance processes.

"The bill as proposed achieves an effective balance between streamlining processes and maintaining safeguards," Mr Perrett said.

Acting committee deputy chair Sharman Stone (Murray, Vic) stressed

the bipartisan nature of the committee report, describing the amendments as a notable improvement to current extradition and mutual assistance laws.

"It is not just streamlining; we believe it is a very significant movement forward to ensure that Australia has special measures to ensure that in extradition we uphold the rights of individuals to be treated properly before our law and also that their human rights are observed in other jurisdictions," Dr Stone said.

The amendments are generally supported by legal and human rights groups, although the Australian Human Rights Commission considers that protections against torture and the death penalty should be expanded to cover cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment.

Other changes to reduce extradition delays include allowing a person to waive the extradition process, and extending the possibility of prosecution in Australia as an alternative to extradition. International proceeds of crime actions will also be simplified. •



THINKSTOCK

CYBERPRINT: Using computer data to track criminals

CYBERSAFETY

Increased powers to trace cybercrime

Legislation to allow data exchange with other countries.

New powers to fight cybercrime will be given to Australian law enforcement agencies under legislation passed by the House of Representatives.

The Cybercrime Legislation Amendment Bill 2011 empowers authorities to request the preservation of specific communications, and to work with international agencies to collect data and exchange information.

The amendments are necessary for Australia to accede to the Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime, the only binding international treaty covering the area.

After the legislation is approved by both houses, Australia will join nearly 50 nations as signatories to the convention, including Canada, Japan and the United States.

Federal Attorney-General Robert McClelland said acceding to the convention is crucial to help Australian agencies better prevent, detect and prosecute cyber intrusions and criminal activity conducted over the internet.

“The increasing cybercrime threat means that no nation alone can

effectively overcome this problem and that international cooperation is essential,” Mr McClelland said.

However civil liberty groups have raised concerns about the amendments in submissions to the Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety, particularly in relation to preserving communications ahead of a warrant being issued.

Australian law enforcement agencies will be able to require carriers to preserve stored communications for up to 90 days where they believe a serious offence has been committed.

Information preserved could include computer data, as well as emails, SMS messages and other communications transmitted through the phone or internet provider.

The Australian Federal Police will also be able to require carriers to preserve communications on behalf of foreign law enforcement agencies, under the mutual assistance obligations of the Convention on Cybercrime.

While carriers will be required to preserve communications on request, law enforcement agencies will only be able to access the

communications once they are granted a relevant warrant.

Agencies will also be required to take into account privacy considerations and determine there are reasonable grounds that a carrier holds relevant communications before making a preservation request.

These protections don’t go far enough for groups such as the Law Council of Australia, which expressed concern about the proposed threshold tests for preserving communications.

Communications will be able to be preserved if agencies reasonably believe they relate to a serious offence punishable by at least three years imprisonment.

The Law Council is concerned that the seriousness of the offence only needs to meet this threshold under the laws of the country requesting the information.

“Such penalties may be considerably out of sync with, and much more severe than, the penalties imposed in Australian jurisdictions for like conduct,” the Law Council said in its submission.

The New South Wales Council for Civil Liberties also holds serious concerns about sharing information with foreign law enforcement agencies.

“Chief among these concerns is that some requesting parties employ torture and the death penalty,” the council said in its submission. “Information sharing that results in a person being subject to torture or the death penalty is under no circumstances acceptable.

“A second significant worry is that covert surveillance of a suspect already comes at the cost of privacy; sharing that information with overseas law enforcement significantly increases the breach of privacy this represents.”

Mr McClelland downplayed the impact of the amendments on privacy and international justice, stating that assistance to foreign agencies is subject to protections under the Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters Act.

Shadow Minister for Justice Michael Keenan said the Coalition supported the objectives of the bill and was broadly satisfied with the safeguards in place around the legislation, ensuring its passage through the House. •



Two centuries ago 850 distinct languages and dialects were spoken across Australia. The original custodians of this continent were fluent in five, 10 or even more.

Today only 145 of these ancient tongues still exist, and 110 of them are critically endangered.

Two years ago, in an effort to stem a decline that started from the very moment Europeans arrived, the federal government urged immediate action to keep Aboriginal languages alive and to support Indigenous Australians connect with their language, culture and country.

That connection is vital to ensure cultural survival, according to submissions made to a parliamentary inquiry examining language learning in Indigenous communities.

is at the core of cultural identity and pride. If you don't have language, you don't have traditional law or culture and our connections to country. Certain concepts cannot be translated at all; others lose subtlety and nuance in the shift from one language to another."

Through its inquiry the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee wants to find out about the benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages, the contribution of Indigenous languages to closing the gap in Indigenous disadvantage, and the potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education. The committee is looking at measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language. The educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities, and measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services are also being examined.

LOST FOR WORDS

THE ANCIENT LANGUAGES OF THIS LAND ARE
STRUGGLING TO FIND THEIR PLACE IN A MODERN WORLD.

STORY: GEOFFREY MASLEN

Located 460 kilometres from Darwin, the remote town of Wadeye is the sixth largest in the Northern Territory. The population of around 3,000 residents includes 20 land-owning groups speaking many languages including Marringarr, Magati Ke, Marri Amu, Marri Tjevin, Murrinh Nhuwanh and Murrinhpatha.

The message from community members to the House of Representatives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee is strong and clear: "We want to talk in the languages we speak, hold them strong and teach our children in them. We don't want to have to leave part of ourselves at home when we come to school."

"We don't want our languages and our culture wiped out," they say in their submission. "We see in communities near us, they speak only English and have lost their language. We don't want this to happen here. We know who we are. We are not white people, we are black people and we know much about our land, our stories, our clans, our foods, that we want to teach our children. We have a lot of knowledge that you don't find in white English culture that is important to us."

It is a message echoed by the Papulu Apparr-kari Language Centre, based in Tennant Creek and representing 16 language groups of the Barkly region.

"Language is the meaning of things," their submission states. "Knowledge of language and recognition of its value

"Knowledge of language and recognition of its value is at the core of cultural identity and pride."

The overwhelming view expressed in the 100 plus submissions received to date is that children should be initially taught in their home language and that much more needs to be done to ensure not only the survival of the languages still being spoken but also the revival of those dying out.

John Hobson, coordinator of Indigenous languages education at the University of Sydney's Koori Centre, says in his submission that the benefits of giving attention to and recognising Indigenous Australian languages does not have to be spelled out yet again.

"Australia needs to move forward in this urgent issue, not remain locked in a loop of inaction," he says. "By giving substantial attention and recognition we may yet be able to save some of the languages, rather than remaining on track to be the world's worst steward of Indigenous cultural heritage."

The neglect and historical repression of Indigenous languages has been a core component in creating the gap the federal government now seeks to close, Mr Hobson says. By largely providing English-only schooling to children who live



CONNECTION TO COUNTRY: *Indigenous language learning helps keep traditions alive*

in non-English speaking communities, various governments over the past 200 years have directly overseen the inadequate education of generations of Indigenous Australians.

“They have effectively ensured that people fail to acquire fully functional versions of either their own language or English, thus confounding their educability for life. If the government wishes to use education to close the gap it should act to ensure high-quality mother tongue education is provided to those children who enter with English as a second language. If children receive a good primary education in a language they understand, they will acquire literacy and numeracy and an understanding of school processes that will allow them to subsequently acquire English as a second language sufficient to function satisfactorily in the world they occupy.”

Dr Michael Christie, a professor of education at Charles Darwin University, notes that Aboriginal languages are the only ones in the world to have evolved over the millennia to engage specifically with Australia’s natural and cultural environments. Professor Christie says environmental management and the preservation of biodiversity currently and into the future will be greatly enhanced by the indigenous knowledge of Aborigines who retain their traditional languages and practices.

“The continued use of [Aboriginal] languages in schools contributes to the possibilities of remote school-leavers becoming employed in this natural resource management work on country,” Professor Christie says. “[These] languages in schools contribute to high attendance rates through bringing together school and community, particularly community elders, parents and grandparents. Low attendance rates in schools will only be solved by redressing the

“To be without language is to be without culture.”

increasing dislocations between schools and the communities they serve.”

Not surprisingly, a significant proportion of the submissions come from the Northern Territory. While the Territory has only one per cent of the Australian population, it has the largest number of Indigenous language speakers – nearly 56,000 Aboriginal people, or more than half of Australia’s total.

Attracting its fair share of criticism in submissions is the 2008 decision by the Northern Territory government requiring teachers in its schools to conduct classes only in English for the first four hours of each day. This decision effectively dismantled the Territory’s bilingual education program, notably in remote communities where local languages are still spoken.

The Territory government argued the policy was necessary to ensure children could speak English well enough to go on to further education or get a job. But many critics see the decision as a knee-jerk response to the first set of nation-wide literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN) test results indicating that Aboriginal children in remote area schools were performing poorly in literacy and numeracy.

“Alarmed by the publication of national test averages in September 2008 showing Territory students, particularly those in remote rural areas, were lagging behind, the government abandoned its commitment to support bilingual programs and introduced a new ad-hoc policy the following

ISTOCK



ISTOCK



CULTURAL IDENTITY: *Language learning is a vital part of understanding who we are*

month,” says Dr Brian Devlin, an associate professor of bilingual education and applied linguistics at Charles Darwin University.

In his submission to the inquiry, he points out that for many children in remote schools English is rarely used in their communities outside the classroom. While at school they are actually learning English as a foreign language.

A commitment to Indigenous language learning is critical for the survival of the remaining languages.

Another critic, Professor Rachel Nordlinger, says the Territory government’s decision has been devastating for bilingual education. “It has had all sorts of effects, not just the end of bilingual education and what that meant for the kids learning their own language but also for the professional and Indigenous teachers who had worked in the system for 20 years and who were suddenly no longer required – or reduced to acting as translators at the end of the classroom while the white teacher taught in English.”

A linguist at the University of Melbourne, Professor Nordlinger has been studying Aboriginal languages for more than two decades, visiting communities in northern Australia for weeks at a time and often recording the voices of the last speakers to try to ensure elements of their language are saved.

“What was flawed in the Territory government’s reaction was that it was not the bilingual program causing the bad test results,” she says. “Until the program was abandoned, children were taught literacy and numeracy in their home language up to grade two or three while learning oral

English. Then, as literacy teaching started in English, they could transfer their understanding of literacy and numeracy in the home language to English which they learn as a second language.”

As the House of Representatives committee charts the way forward for language learning in Indigenous communities, the submissions from those communities are helping in the collection of a unique body of evidence about the current teaching of Indigenous languages. A common emerging view is that a commitment to Indigenous language learning is critical for the survival of the remaining languages and the cultural health of the communities in which those languages are currently spoken.

In the words of the Papulu Apparr-kari Language Centre: “To be without language is to be without culture.” •

“If children receive a good primary education in a language they understand, they will acquire literacy and numeracy.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION on the inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities, visit www.aph.gov.au/atsia or email atsia.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4559.



RECLAIMING PARADISE

FACING AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE, PACIFIC ISLANDERS ARE TAKING STEPS TO DEAL WITH THE IMPACTS OF A CHANGING CLIMATE. STORY: JEREMY KENNETT



Back in 1975, things were simpler in the Pacific islands. Phosphate mining was still king in Nauru, with exports of the valuable fertiliser giving its people one of the highest per capita incomes in the world.

Samoa was well into its second decade of self-rule, after becoming the first nation in the Pacific to declare independence in 1962.

Fiji was also a newly independent nation with all the hopes its new status carried.

And on the idyllic beaches of Micronesia, the biggest worry seemed to be for tourists watching out for falling coconuts.

But on the other side of the globe, scientists were just starting to identify a problem more than 100 years in the making – a problem that left unchecked could spell the very end of human habitation in the Pacific.

On 8 August 1975, climate science pioneer Professor Wallace S Broecker published a paper in academic journal

Science entitled ‘Climatic change: are we on the brink of a pronounced global warming?’

Professor Broecker contended the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere had been rising rapidly since the Industrial Revolution of the early 1800s and would soon lead to large shifts in average temperatures.

“We normally have cyclone seasons, now we don’t have cyclone season anymore, it comes anytime.”

While Professor Broecker’s analysis is now part of mainstream climate science, at the time he said there was not enough evidence to predict what the consequences would be for agriculture and sea level rises.

Now those consequences are emerging, particularly on Australia’s doorstep, as Pacific islanders deal with the realities of a rapidly changing climate. They are at the



coalface, so to speak, working to adapt to sea level rises, coastal erosion and ever increasing natural disasters.

With so many small states scattered across the vast Pacific Ocean it's unwise to generalise about the impacts of climate change. What is already a problem for Micronesia may not yet be an issue in the Solomon Islands.

While the very viability of low lying coral atolls could be endangered if sea levels continue to rise, for volcanic island nations with higher ground the issues are more about adapting to life with less.

Yet the clear message from a recent regional climate change workshop organised jointly by the Australian parliament and the Inter-Parliamentary Union was that, regardless of geography, all Pacific island nations face some form of threat and they shouldn't be left to deal with the consequences on their own.

As a mixture of volcanic and coral islands, the Kingdom of Tonga has more highlands than most in the Pacific. But rapidly changing weather patterns has still left its people constantly under threat.

Tongan Environment and Climate Change Minister Lord Ma'afu says climate change is becoming as big a threat as the cyclones and floods that have historically plagued the nation.

"At present natural disaster is foremost, and second is climate change," he says. "But eventually climate change will be up there at the same level with natural disasters."

Climate change is also making the cyclones that strike Tonga more dangerous and unpredictable.

"We normally have cyclone seasons, now we don't have cyclone season anymore, it comes anytime, and it's not a surprise to the people anymore."



ISTOCK

Increasing frequency and severity of tropical storms is a major issue right across the Pacific, from sub-tropical Tonga in the south to the vast archipelago of the Philippine islands in the north.

Covering a chain of more than 7,000 islands, the Philippines is no stranger to natural disasters, from earthquakes to floods to frequent volcanic eruptions.

However Filipino congressman Dr Danilo Fernandez says typhoons are becoming the most serious threat as the impacts of climate change begin to make themselves felt.

"Climate change is really being felt by our country," Dr Fernandez says. "We are seeing a lot of typhoons, up to 20 typhoons are hitting the country each year."

'Super typhoons' are also becoming more common, leaving widespread devastation in their wake.

"There are not only the economic losses, but also the deaths incurred. We lost 958 people and 84 missing and 84 injured," Dr Fernandez says.

"Over the last 20 years this is not happening to the Philippines, but now we have really felt the climate change and every typhoon that hits our country is more and more devastating."



Tonga is replanting mangroves along its coastline and changing planning laws to limit coastal erosion.

Beyond the human cost and damage to homes and infrastructure, the floods caused by typhoon activity are also threatening the Philippines agricultural areas.

“The problem is you have typhoons, the floods stay in the area then the crops and agricultural lands are being damaged, and this causes problems with food security especially in the far flung areas of the country.”

The slow but inexorable sea level rises in small nations like Tuvalu and Micronesia are certainly less dramatic than the super typhoons and cyclones lashing their larger neighbours. But the long-term impacts on food security in these countries could be even more damaging.

Micronesia Vice-Speaker Berney Martin says the impact of even the small sea level rises seen so far has been significant.

“The salt water intruded into the taro patches, which is one of the main crops in the islands, and it really destroyed all the taros,” he says.

“Those that were affected are now relying on contributed food from neighbouring islands, and also imported food.”

Salt water has also started to seep up through the ground in Tuvalu, destroying the root and vegetable crops that form the basis of the local diet.

Coastal erosion is also having an impact, allowing waves to sweep right over some parts of the islands, taking away valuable topsoil and threatening to cut main settlements in two.

Tuvalu Transport and Communications Minister Kausea Natano says the effects of climate change are putting at risk the very viability of his country.

“If nothing is done our whole country is under threat,” he says. “Foodstuffs, root crops and vegetation will be destroyed by salt water.”

Neither Tuvalu nor Micronesia has sufficient higher ground to sustain their people if sea levels continue to climb.

“There are a few highlands, but they’re not enough for all the people if they were to move to higher grounds,” Mr Martin says. “Most of them are living on low level coral islands.”

“We are hoping that we can obtain technical assistance, and of course a funding source to purchase more food for these people. We are very concerned right now.”

While the situation looks dire, the emerging science of climate adaptation may offer some hope for the future for the Pacific island states most at risk.

CSIRO is leading the way in this new field, which focuses on ways to best adapt to a changing climate, rather than fighting to prevent change happening.

Dr Craig James from CSIRO’s Climate Adaptation Flagship says biodiversity in the Pacific is going to change dramatically as shifts in rainfall patterns, ocean warming and acidification, temperature change and sea level rise all take their toll.

“For their ecosystems there’s going to be changes,” he says. “Most of the Pacific countries rely on fisheries as a major source of protein, and those fisheries are going to be changing because of species responding to warmer oceans.”

“So there’s going to be pressure on human use of reef fish for food stock, and that pressure has to be managed so there’s a sustainable yield.”

But Dr James says there will be opportunities among the gloom, as some species and ecosystems thrive under the changing conditions.

“It’s quite likely that things like tuna, the pelagic fish in the open ocean, will actually do pretty well under the sorts of scenarios we’re looking at in terms of ocean change, so there’s clearly an opportunity for sustainable harvest further out from the shore line.”

“And there are also really good possibilities for more fresh water aquaculture to provide the sorts of food sources required.”

While Dr James calls for more research into climate adaptation, nations across the Pacific are already putting the theory into practice.

Tonga is replanting mangroves along its coastline and changing planning laws to limit coastal erosion, while the Philippines has passed legislation creating new environmental and emissions standards.

Samoa is taking a whole of government approach, working across ministries and government corporations to battle climate change and reduce emissions from transport and industry.

But while Pacific island nations are trying to adapt, they cannot fight the impacts of climate change alone.

“There are also really good possibilities for more fresh water aquaculture.”

“We need to ensure that big countries assist small island states with their climate change programs, because we are vulnerable people,” says Samoa’s Associate Minister for Infrastructure Tusa Misi Tupuola.

Leading economist and climate change adviser Professor Ross Garnaut says it is time Australia shouldered its share of the responsibility to protect the interests of our Pacific neighbours as strongly as our own.

“This is a problem, like collective security, in which there will be no solution unless each country plays their part,” he says. “Up until now we have demonstrably not played our part.”

But House of Representatives Climate Change Committee chair Tony Zappia says Australia is already assisting its Pacific island neighbours, and will continue to do so in the future.

“It may well be that some of these people will have to, in the long-term, start looking at other nations to migrate to,” he says.

“And if that is the case then certainly Australia would be one of the countries they would be looking to in terms of being a destination for migration.”

And Tonga’s Lord Ma’afu says while there is still no universal agreement on climate change action, the voices of the Pacific island nations are being carried by their larger neighbours.



THINKSTOCK

FISH FRENZY: Some species will do well in warmer waters



TOPICAL ISLAND: *Pacific nations can't fight the impacts of climate change on their own*



“It may well be that some of these people will have to, in the long-term, start looking at other nations to migrate to.”

“I think they’ve been heard, but the end result is ... a bit slow,” he says.

“We’ve said so much, and I think Australia and New Zealand and the countries close to us have realised the problems we’re facing and they are there for us.”

While the simple times might be consigned to the past, this sort of support could be crucial in giving Pacific islanders a better future. •

The regional climate change workshop for Pacific parliaments was made possible by funding from AusAID and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (the international association of parliaments) and was attended by representatives of the following parliaments: Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Japan, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Philippines, Samoa, Solomon Islands, South Africa, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vietnam. The Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union also participated.

FOR MORE INFORMATION on the Inter-Parliamentary Union visit www.ipu.org

Starting Over

FOR MANY MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES, ARRIVING IN AUSTRALIA IS JUST ONE STEP ON THE LONG ROAD TO A NEW AND BETTER LIFE.

■ STORY: ANDREW DAWSON

Ten years ago Sidique Bah was given an opportunity. After fleeing a long-running civil war in Sierra Leone and finding his way to a refugee camp in neighbouring Guinea, he was chosen for resettlement in Australia.

A decade on, Sidique is now helping other refugees and migrants make the transition to a new life in South Australia.

“When you come here as a refugee, one of the main things is the loneliness,” Sidique recalls.

“Most people don’t consider that, but you really feel alone, when you don’t know people around you.”

And when your native language is French, difficulty communicating adds another hurdle, particularly when it comes to finding work.

“Even if you speak the language, you speak with an accent, so you can find it a bit hard to get through, or to convince people that you are capable of doing some of the jobs that are out there,” Sidique says.

Max Fofu Folly, a former refugee from Togo, agrees. He found it took a while to adjust to the Australian way of doing things.

“I had a settling in period to learn the way people think in Australia, compared to how people think in Africa,” Max says.

To help make the journey a bit easier for those who have followed, Sidique and Max have both become involved with resettlement programs run by the Multicultural Communities Council of South Australia. They recently discussed their experiences with federal parliament’s Migration

Committee, which is conducting an inquiry into multiculturalism.

In its submission to the inquiry, the council highlights the value of sports and arts based programs as an effective way to help youth and families develop the contacts, confidence and resilience to successfully settle in Australia.

“You really feel alone, when you don’t know people around you.”

The council says sports programs encourage people to participate in a healthy activity and help families make friends and develop networks so they feel part of the wider community. Arts based projects, particularly performance theatre, encourage interaction between different groups.

“Coming from Africa, for most of them music and dance is part of their culture. When they come to Australia and that part of them is missing, it is harder for them to deal with their actual life,” Max Folly says.

“We underestimate the value of their art and how it is used in their communities.

“Think about how you can give more young people the opportunity to express themselves through their art.”

Sidique Bah believes arts based programs can help people, particularly young people, overcome the trauma of the life they were leaving behind.

“Some of them were living in camps before they came to Australia and they learnt to fend for



HOPES AND DREAMS:
*For many children of refugees,
they get their first experience
of education in Australia
(Photos: Andrew Dawson)*

FOR A BETTER LIFE:

Often humanitarian entrants who come to Australia have lived in refugee camps for a long time

themselves at an early age. Some have trauma that goes with it,” he says.

“When they find themselves here some of them end up having issues that will be very hard to deal with because of what they have been through. On a general basis I think it would be good to encourage them into some form of creativity and activity. I think that will help them.”

According to the South Australian government, people who come to Australia under humanitarian programs arrive with great hope for a bright future but are not necessarily prepared for the difficulties that arise in relation to employment, language, culture and family.

“The literature shows that young people are particularly vulnerable, with additional challenges arising from the expectations of dual cultures, consumerism, the legal system, education, family relationships and peer acceptance,” the SA government’s submission says.

Consultations the state government has undertaken with refugee communities and their service providers point to the importance of keeping family relationships intact and improving proficiency in English.

Roger Lean, acting director of Multicultural South Australia, says youth are the group that needs the greatest attention among humanitarian entrants.

“It is a very significant shift for them,” he says. “Often they have been in refugee camps for a long period of time. They have been involved in very traumatic experiences in the past. The shift to settling in our society is an enormous shift for them which is compounded by the issues associated with education and the challenge of getting employment beyond that.”

According to Mr Lean, many young people who come to Australia as humanitarian entrants have virtually no previous education experience.

“They have no literacy in any language and no notion of learning in the formal sense that we have here in Australia. As a consequence, for them to reach a level at which they can get qualifications of any sort is a massive challenge.”

Four hundred kilometres from Adelaide, in the regional city of Mount Gambier, a local primary school is getting first-hand experience of the educational challenges facing young people who arrive in Australia as refugees.

Over the past four years, many hundred Karen and Karenni refugees from Burma and a dozen or so Congolese



“Think about how you can give more young people the opportunity to express themselves through their art.”

families from Africa have resettled in Mount Gambier. Their children, often born in refugee camps, are only now getting their first experience of formal education.

Mount Gambier North Primary School principal Jane Turner says the younger students learn quickly, but those who start their education as teenagers can find it a real struggle.

“The younger children will do brilliantly. They are gifted in languages, music and sport.

“They pay attention and they want to learn. They come to the homework club twice a week. I actually have to kick



GETTY



SETTLING IN: *Former refugees Max Fofo Folly and Sidique Bah are now helping others with resettlement*



them out to send them home. They come to read and have a bit of social time.

“The older teenagers who have had no English and no education as we would see it cannot just pick it up and sit the year 11 curriculum. They just cannot. It is taking them longer to pick up English.”

According to Ms Turner, research shows that if you are a humanitarian refugee, do not speak English and have had no education it will take about seven years to learn the language.

“The challenge there is to keep the children’s hopes and dreams alive, but not to have such artificial dreams that they are not achievable immediately. There are some things they would like to do but it will take them longer to learn the language.”

In some cases that wait can seem too long and they look for alternative ways to gain the skills they need.

“We have just helped organise a job for one of the 18-year-olds because he does not want to be at school for another seven years before he can achieve anything,” Ms Turner says.

“He is working at our local supermarket. In the workplace he will learn English and he can study later on.

“They do not want to go straight into year 11 because it is a bit daunting for them so they are going into the workplace. They take a job, which may not be the job they want forever, while they learn English.”

Another of the young refugees was able to get a job at a local supermarket after getting to know the manager through a local sporting club.

Involving the community is an important part of the school’s approach to ensure the community understands what the school is trying to achieve through its new arrivals program.

“Initially some of the parents were a bit unsure about having new people in our school and asking, ‘What is this all about?’ It was not aggressively so, but you would get the quiet questions,” Ms Turner says.

“Four years down the track, my governing council are now saying things like, ‘How come we are not learning Karen as a language? How come we haven’t got welcome signs in all the languages around the school?’ We have tried not to push it too hard so that people do not say, ‘Back off’, but we have been letting our community know.”

Creating that sense of belonging is vital for all involved when it comes to starting over. •

FOR MORE INFORMATION on the Migration Committee’s inquiry into multiculturalism in Australia, visit www.aph.gov.au/mig or email jscm@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4560.



Portrait of our history

An important national collection celebrates its centenary.

EXTRA

In two years' time, the nation's capital will celebrate its 100th birthday. Throughout 2013 there will be numerous opportunities to recognise, reflect upon and commemorate some of Canberra's most engaging foundation stories, especially on and around 12 March.

For nearly 100 years, the Historic Memorials Collection at Parliament House has kept a record of the notable Australians that have made their mark on our democracy.

Governors-general, prime ministers, presidents of the Senate, speakers of the House of Representatives, chief justices of the High Court and other distinguished Australians have all added their portraits to the collection through the years.

Now the collection is approaching its own notable milestone, as it prepares to mark its centenary with simultaneous exhibitions at Parliament House and the National Portrait Gallery.

The Historic Memorials Collection was founded alongside the Historic Memorials Committee, formed on 22 December 1911 to act "as a Committee of consultation and advice in reference to the

expenditure of votes for Historic Memorials of Representative Men".

Over time the focus of the collection expanded beyond parliament to include commissioning of portraits of top members of the judiciary, as well as significant explorers and early literary figures.

The collection also makes note of important parliamentary 'firsts', with a portrait of the first female member of the House of Representatives Dame Enid Lyons, the first female senator Dorothy Tangney and the first Indigenous Australian parliamentarian Neville Bonner.

In addition the collection includes paintings of significant events in parliamentary history, such as openings of parliament, the first House of Representatives sitting in the new Parliament House in 1988, and the Centenary of Federation commemorative sitting of federal parliament in 2001.

One of the newest portraits in the collection is of recently retired senator Alan Ferguson, who served as president and deputy president of the Senate.

Senator Ferguson chose noted South Australian portrait painter Robert Hannaford to do his portrait, after admiring his work in the portraits of former speaker Neil Andrew and former prime minister Paul Keating.

The process of having his portrait done for the collection was certainly a memorable experience for the senator.

"I did all of the sittings in an old dairy or cattle shed in a small country town probably an hour and a half north of Adelaide," Senator Ferguson said. "Robert Hannaford refuses to take photographs; he does all of his painting from you actually sitting for the painting to be done.

"I went there every day for one week for three hours and then went back for two more sittings of three hours each the following week and one more later, just to do a bit of touch up.

"So there was a lot of time spent sitting in an old plastic chair, on an elevated platform in an old cattle shed, surrounded by the bits and pieces that artists always have. It was a delightful setting, and he's a wonderful chap."

Continued page 55 ►

ONE ON ONE

Out of the shadows

A country that has emerged from the shadows is eagerly developing links with our region, recently sending their parliamentary Speaker to Australia.

How do you create an open, equitable democracy in a country where corruption is so endemic that public service positions are bought, not earned, and bribes are an accepted price of doing business?

This was the situation facing the new government of Georgia following the Rose Revolution that swept them to power in 2003.

The country of Georgia, not to be confused with the US state of the same name, was an independent nation for hundreds of years prior to being annexed by the Russian empire in the 19th century, developing its own alphabet, religion and distinct culture.

However after nearly 200 years of Russian and Soviet rule, and years of civil war and political instability following independence in 1991, the country was a shadow of its former glory.

Finally the Georgian people had enough, and rose up to overthrow their government following disputed parliamentary elections in November 2003 – a revolution named for the roses protesters carried when they took over parliament.

But while the opposition National Movement party were quickly installed as the new government on a platform of democratic reform, fighting the corruption stifling the country was not so simple.

The current Chairman of the Georgian parliament, Dr David Bakradze, was part of the government elected after the revolution and remembers how deeply corruption ran in his country at that time.

“It was a pyramid, the minister was on the top and then it was going all the way down,” Dr Bakradze said during a recent visit to Sydney with a Georgian parliamentary delegation.

“Every police officer was obliged to take bribes. Part of this bribe was going to his pocket, and part was going up, to his boss. Then his boss was taking part of the bribe and sending part of the bribe again to his boss. And all this money was collecting on the top, going to the minister himself.

“So it was well organised, well structured corruption in every ministry.”

With the police at the forefront of a corrupt system that went all the way to parliament, the incoming government had to make a statement. And it did just that, sacking 25 per cent of the police force in one day soon after taking office.

“When we hired new recruits to take their places the president himself attended the exams, to show how serious we were about ending corruption in the police force.”

Dr Bakradze said there was a huge backlash against their actions from those with vested interests in the system, including death threats for many MPs.



BUILDING RELATIONS: *Chairman of the Georgian parliament, Dr David Bakradze*

But he said such bold moves have more than paid off, with organised corruption being completely destroyed in the eight years since the Rose Revolution.

“Single cases still happen, but what matters is that there is no organised corruption,” Dr Bakradze said.

“We still have a lot of officials arrested for corruption, and the fight continues, but the main achievement is that the system is destroyed.”

Dr Bakradze said the evidence of Georgia’s progress is plain to see, pointing to an upcoming World Bank publication on fighting corruption which uses Georgia as a case study.

Today, the Georgian parliament is looking to education to further drive democratic change and economic development in the small Black Sea nation.

One key task is to increase English language proficiency in the country, where Russian is still the most commonly spoken second language.

“We believe that to have a competitive young generation one of the basic necessary skills is the ability to speak English. In the 21st century without good knowledge of English a person cannot be competitive in the global market or in global business – that is very clear.”

Central to improving English language skills among the young is a program to bring 10,000 native English speaking teachers to Georgia to work in schools throughout the country.

“The idea is that every Georgian school, even in the most mountainous remote village, has a native speaking English teacher so that the quality of English teaching is improved.

“Among those, we expect about 1,000 teachers from Australia to come. A big group of them is already in place teaching our young people and I think that this program is going on very successfully.”

House Rules

Your key to the House

Keeping up with the business of the House of Representatives is easier if you know the paper trail you need to follow.

MOST people lament the mountains of documents they have to deal with in the course of their work day.

But without paperwork, Australia's House of Representatives would struggle to function and voters would have no idea what was going on.

In order to ensure the work of the House runs smoothly a team of staff are constantly producing and updating various important documents, which are then distributed to MPs and published on the internet for the public.

Each document has a different purpose, which can be confusing if you're not sure what exactly it is you are trying to track down.

For starters, it's worth looking at the Notice Paper which is the definitive guide to the House's agenda because it lists, among other things, all the business that is before it.

A new Notice Paper is published for each sitting day. 'Notices' indicate that a member is set to introduce a matter for consideration, such as a bill, while 'orders' have already been introduced but not fully considered.

The Notice Paper also lists questions in writing and general information about committee membership and committee inquiries.

The Notice Paper is a lengthy document in comparison to its counterpart, the

Daily Program or Daily Blue (named after the colour of paper it is printed on).

Unlike the Notice Paper, the Blue is not a formal document and does not set the order of business. Instead it is a guide to what is most likely to be dealt with on that particular day.

Ministerial statements, matters of public importance and committee reports can be found on the Blue, but will not be listed on the Notice Paper.

But what if you want to find out what happened yesterday as opposed to keeping track of what's going on today? Well that is the role of the Votes and Proceedings, the official record of exactly what has happened in the House of Representatives.

A separate record is compiled for each sitting that has been held and details the work of the House as a whole.

Items such as documents presented, motions and bills considered, messages from the Senate, and MPs present are recorded in the Votes and Proceedings.

A more familiar document for many will be the Hansard (officially titled 'Parliamentary Debates') which is basically the transcript of debates in the House and Main Committee.

Although dominated by what has actually been said in the chamber, Hansard does also record the results of divisions and the text of motions and amendments. MPs are allowed to make



COME IN: A range of documents help open the door to your House

small changes to Hansard to correct things like grammatical errors but they cannot change the meaning of what has been said.

Various documents can also be presented to the House, the most obvious one being bills.

And finally, those who love number crunching will enjoy reading the Work of the Session, which is a twice-yearly list containing statistical summaries of the sittings.

All of these documents can be found on the web at: www.aph.gov.au/house/pubs •

◀ *Continued from page 51*

Television networks are also required to broadcast films and television programs in their original English, rather than dubbed into Georgian, and the government provides full scholarships to students accepted into the world's top 50 universities.

It's all part of promoting the new face of Georgia, as a modern, open society ready to take its place among the world's advanced democracies.

"We are still a small country, but we are no longer the small, corrupt, inward looking country we were 10 years ago," Dr Bakradze said.

"We have very good relations with all our neighbours, unfortunately except Russia of course, we have very intensive economic cooperation with all our neighbours, and we have already become the regional example of reform and quick economic development.

"This is how we see our role, to be small, but to be a positive open country that communicates to the world, which is open to the world and which can play a positive role when it comes to standing on the same side when it comes to having the same values.

"We believe we stand on the right side and that's how we present and portray ourselves." •

The Wrap



SETTING THE EXAMPLE: *Women in leadership roles help to inspire others*

Equality goal for parliaments

More can be done to encourage women's participation in politics.

Equal representation of men and women should be the goal for all Australian parliaments, according to a group of women politicians who have broken through the male domination of state and federal politics.

While Australia has its first female prime minister, the group lamented that women are still seen as a novelty in parliament and are subject to more criticism than their male counterparts.

Speaking at a Commonwealth political forum in Canberra, Western Australian MP Lisa Baker said an average of less than 30 per cent female representation in parliament is not good enough for a country like Australia.

"More needs to be done to make politics attractive to women because we need more women in politics," Ms Baker said.

"Women bring a different perspective, they bring a rich and complex way of addressing issues which is sometimes different from the

way a man will address an issue and we have different life experiences."

As chair of a Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians committee, Ms Baker was the driving force behind the two-day w.comm forum at Parliament House, which gave young women from around the country a taste of political life.

She said politics is an attractive career choice for anyone wanting to make a difference in their community, but acknowledged it has clear downsides.

"This is a career which is extremely privileged. But the downside is obvious. You're entering a public life and elements of that can be very challenging."

One of these challenges is the simple act of choosing what to wear – an act that has occasionally helped some female MPs hit the headlines in a way they never intended.

One of seven women in the 17 member ACT Legislative Assembly,

Mary Porter said she was told at candidate school not to wear the colour pink because she'd be seen as weak. She said she's also often criticised for "not being mongrel enough".

"We do get criticised though more than the men, I think, because we are still a novelty and not the norm," she said.

Ms Porter said the young women at the w.comm forum had also identified party politics as a challenge to overcome.

"They haven't settled on where they might fit and they're actually quite frightened by the party machine. I think for some of them it's quite nerve racking."

Forum participant, and post graduate law student from Melbourne University, Nyadol Nyuon came to Australia in 2005 as a Sudanese refugee. Ms Nyuon said she admires the Australian political system for what it has achieved, but there's more work to be done.

"We live in a stable community, we live in a peaceful country, fundamental rights are respected ... so in a sense it works," she said.

"But as a person who has experiences as a refugee, topics such as boat people, issues of racism, Indigenous issues and human rights, I think definitely we can do better in."

Ms Nyuon said the forum helped provide a better understanding of political processes and personalities.

"I know if I was still in the refugee camp I would not have gone to university because I would not have been able to afford it, and who knows, maybe I would not have been alive.

"I'm looking forward to what I can do to say thank you to the Australian community for what it has done for me."

For that reason, politicians like Mary Porter hope that a political career is also on the radar for such young women because community work is where women politicians really excel.

"When we're not sitting I give a sigh of relief because I can get on with my real job, connecting with my community and being there for people," Ms Porter said.

"We know not all of these young women are going to be politicians, but I just hope that each one of them gets some insight that will help them make decisions, and get encouraged."

For more information on the w.comm forum and Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians, visit: www.wcomm.org •

The Wrap

Wild dog carnage continues

Six years after a parliamentary inquiry, wild dogs still plague rural Australia.

The House of Representatives has supported a motion moved by Nationals MP Darren Chester which calls for a national approach to tackle the numbers of wild dogs doing damage in rural Australia.

The Member for Gippsland in Victoria told parliament one of his reasons for moving the motion was to highlight to city dwellers how devastating wild dogs can be.

His motion called on the House to recognise the economic and environmental impact wild dogs have on rural industries and native wildlife.

It also called for acknowledgement of a need for national coordination across all governments of the management of wild dog numbers. The management of wild pests is primarily the responsibility of state and territory governments.

Mr Chester said the devastation wreaked by wild dogs on the agricultural sector added up to about \$60 million a year and piled huge amounts of stress on farmers trying to protect their livestock.

“There are graphic accounts of dogs emerging particularly from sections of public land and preying on young lambs,” he said.

“It’s obvious just from talking to these people the stress that they are facing when they encounter slaughter of stock, on an almost daily basis on many occasions.”

Tasmanian MP Dick Adams was part of an inquiry held in 2005 into wild pests which examined the use of 1080 poison.

He said he believed that recreational shooters can also play a role in keeping numbers under control.

“Hunting has been controversial in the past but I believe the sporting shooters of Australia are working to spread a more educated and balanced message about the value of hunting as a conservation tool as well as a fast and humane way of dispatching pest species.”

New South Wales MP Janelle Saffin said wild dogs have lost their fear of people.

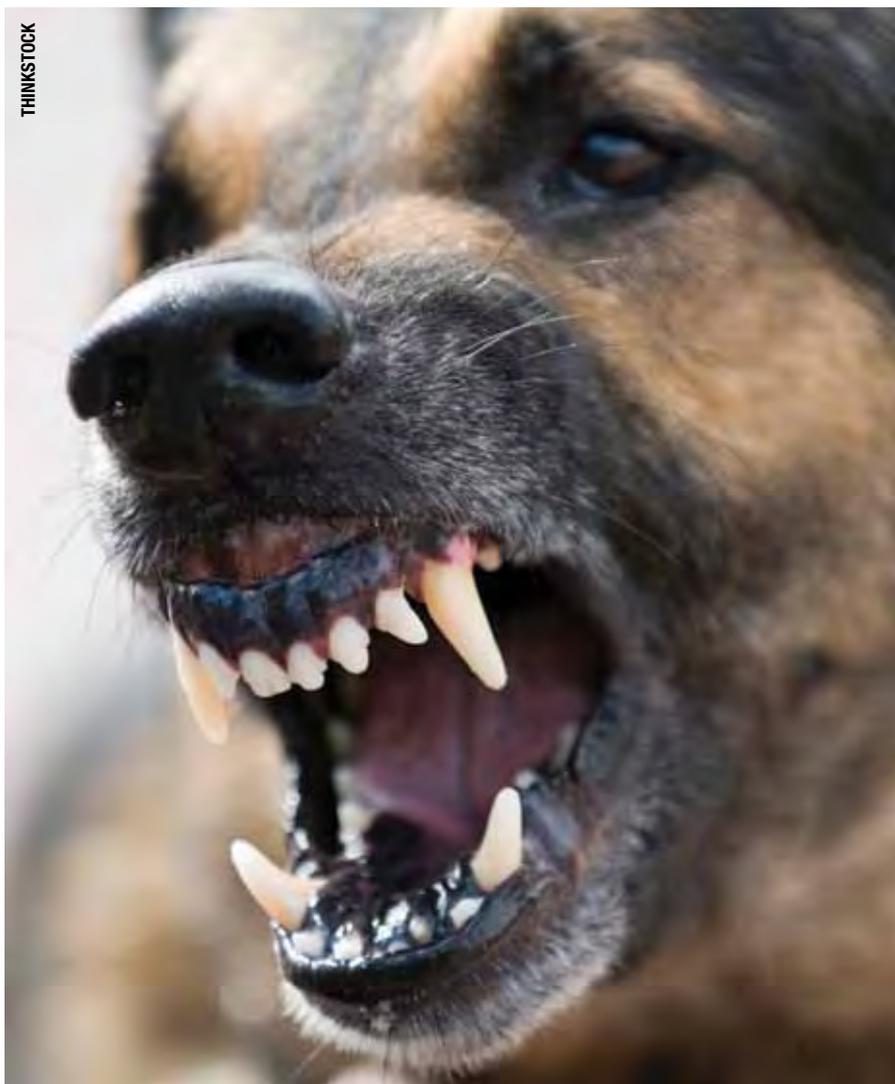
“Some people have put in control measures and some people have the guard animals, but the predation is increasing in the day time,” she said.

In 2005 a House of Representatives committee report into the impact of pest animals made 47 recommendations for improving the management of pest species such as foxes and wild dogs.

It urged the then government to reconsider its commitment to phasing out the use of 1080 poison and to make access to the poison easier for landholders.

It also wanted the NSW and Victorian governments to remove bans on aerial baiting and an improved national approach to the consistency of pest animal legislation across the country. And it made recommendations to ensure the humane treatment of pest animals.

However a formal government response has yet to be presented to parliament. The report is available at: www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/arff/reports.htm •



DOG ATTACK: Action needed on wild dogs

Question Time

A casting vote

The following is a question from a reader of *About the House*.

Question

Does the President of the Senate have a standard vote in the House of Representatives in the case of a joint sitting after a double dissolution election?

Answer

Under the rules agreed to by both houses for the joint sitting following the double dissolution election of 1974, all members and senators are given a standard vote for the proceedings, including the presiding officer, known as the chairman.

It is normal practice that the parliament's presiding officers, being the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate, do not cast a vote on legislation before the respective houses, except as a casting vote in the case of votes being tied.

In the case of the 1974 joint sitting, it was agreed that the member presiding over the joint sitting would receive a normal vote equal to that of all other members.



PRESIDING OFFICER: *Jim Cope chaired the joint sitting of parliament in 1974*

The rules established in 1974 allow for any member to be nominated as the chairman for the joint sitting, not only the current Speaker of the House or President of the Senate, and for the role of presiding officer to be decided by ballot if necessary.

In 1974 the then Speaker of the House Jim Cope was the only member proposed and he acted as chairman for the joint sitting, receiving a normal vote on each of the six pieces of legislation passed by an absolute majority during the sitting.

It is a requirement of the Constitution that all legislation presented at a joint

sitting must be passed by an absolute majority of members and senators to become law, rather than the simple majority required in normal sittings of the House and Senate.

For example, legislation could be passed by the House in a normal sitting with less than the 76 votes required for an absolute majority of the 150 potential votes, as long as the bill received more votes in favour than against.

In a joint sitting a bill would need to achieve the support of more than half of all members of the House and Senate, currently 114 of 226 possible votes.

The chairman receiving a normal vote could therefore become very important, in a case where a piece of legislation received a simple majority but fell one vote short of an absolute majority during a joint sitting of parliament.

However while the rules agreed to for the 1974 joint sitting set a precedent as the only joint sitting of parliament since Federation, neither the House or the Senate is bound to abide by those rules in any future joint sittings.

The Constitution allows for each house of parliament to establish their own rules for their sitting, whether they be joint or separate, meaning the answer to the question may be different the next time a joint sitting is held. •

Do you have a question?

If you have a question about the House of Representatives email news@aph.gov.au or write to About the House, International and Community Relations Office, PO Box 6021, Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600. Questions published in *About the House* will receive our history pack *A House for the Nation* on the first 100 years of the House of Representatives.

◀ *Continued from page 50*

Apart from recording Australia's political history, the collection also reveals changes in the history of portraiture in Australia.

Portraits from the early 20th century were often sombre in tone and reflected the dignity of the office held by the sitter. Over time, portraits have tended to become less formal and capture more of the personality of the sitter, sometimes including objects of personal significance.

However Senator Ferguson decided to stick with tradition for his own portrait. "Some people choose to have their portraits look more like photographs,

with a lot of background and all sorts of things included in the painting.

"I call them paintings rather than portraits. I chose a portrait because it is a portrait collection, and that meant there was only a portrait of myself with no trappings of any sort in the background, as you can see with many of the ones that have been painted before."

Senator Ferguson said it was a real honour to be part of such a strong record of Australia's parliamentary history.

"Since 1900, people who have been president of the Senate or speaker of the House of Representatives, or prime minister, have all had their portraits

done as a record of service in the parliament. And to be part of that is indeed an honour and one of which I'm very proud."

A number of portraits from the Historic Memorials Collection are on permanent display in Parliament House, Old Parliament House and the High Court of Australia. Special exhibitions celebrating the centenary of the collection will also be mounted in the Presiding Officers Exhibition Area at Parliament House and the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra from November 2011 to early February 2012. •

D.I.Y.

Project page for students and teachers

A PARLIAMENT THAT'S WITH IT

One of the most important functions of a parliament is to serve as a meeting place for elected representatives to come together to talk. In fact, the word parliament comes from the French word *parlement*, which means a speaking conference.

Over the years, parliaments have adapted to changes in the way we communicate, particularly with the rapid technological advances of the last few decades.

We have come a long way from the origins of the Australian parliament which date back over 1,000 years to medieval England. Back then all parliamentary communication was face to face, occasionally with sword in hand.

Today, the internet creates enormous opportunities to communicate with hundreds, even millions of people with just the click of a mouse. This high speed interaction allows direct communication between the elected and the electors, as well as increasing awareness, accountability, transparency and participation in the parliamentary process.

Well connected

Members and senators recognise the immense benefits of keeping up to date with the latest information technology. When elected they are allocated a laptop and a Blackberry. Many also already have, or soon get, their own iPad, iPhone or similar device.

This means you can send a message instantly to your local MP via email or an online form. You can find out where they are and what they are doing through their home page.

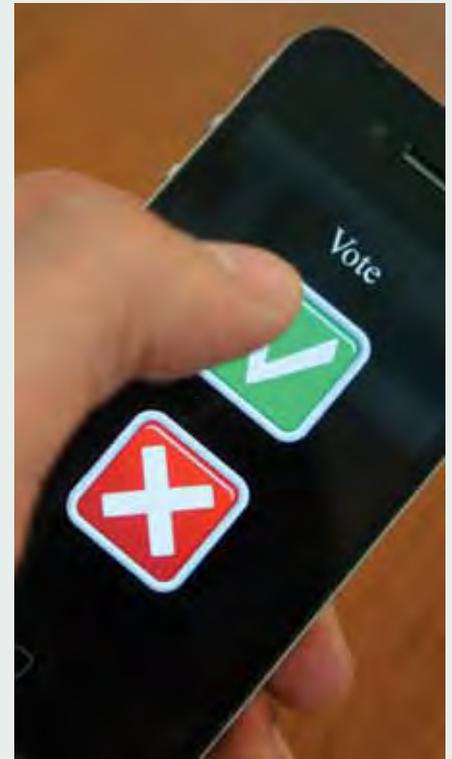
And you can download their speeches and media releases or follow them on social media.

Most members and senators have embraced social media such as Twitter. For example Kevin Rudd (Griffith, Qld) is a frequent tweeter and has more than one million followers.

One of the most prolific tweeters is Ed Husic (Chifley, NSW) who tweeted 4,719 times between October 2010 and October 2011.

The positives of using social media, email and the internet for members are obvious. Communication is quick, simple and members are able to talk directly with their constituents.

On the negative side, this can mean a massive increase in the workload for



E-VOTE: Electronic voting has been trialled



PAT CAMPBELL

MPs. For example, Rob Oakeshott (Lyne, NSW) recently received more than 10,000 emails in just one day, which is more than 400 per hour.

In the House itself, the Speaker uses a PC to communicate with the clerks (parliamentary officials), to monitor the daily program, and to keep an eye on the TV broadcast from the chamber. You will also occasionally see MPs using their iPads in the chamber, most often to keep up with news and emails, occasionally to tweet, and sometimes to present their speech.

Click here

The Australian parliament's website at www.aph.gov.au gives access to a huge amount of information on the work of the House and the Senate. You can track legislation, find out what's on, link to MPs' personal websites, get 'live minutes' of proceedings or watch webcasts of the chambers and committee meetings.

A selection of videos can also be viewed on demand, including Question Time replays and TV stories about the work members do (visit www.aph.gov.au/ath).

Social media is used for updates and announcements. You can follow the work of the House on Twitter @AboutTheHouse and the Senate @AuSenate. There is also an 'About the House' Facebook page with news on the work of the House and its committees at: www.facebook.com/athnews

Decisions in an instant

One idea explored in the past, but not yet introduced, is electronic voting in the House. Currently when there is a vote (a division), the bells ring and members rush to the chamber where a manual tally is done of MPs. This takes several minutes. Electronic voting



CHAMBER CHAT: Harry Jenkins using his PC in the House

would do away with manual counting of votes and would provide instant results for divisions. This could save time and money.

In 2003 the House of Representatives Procedure Committee recommended against the introduction of electronic voting because there would be no 'cooling off' period in proceedings; no sign of how a member is voting based on where they are sitting; the possibility of members voting for absent colleagues; and more divisions being called. The committee said it would also mean losing the opportunity for MPs to liaise with colleagues, for example ministers, while divisions are in progress.

Electronic voting at elections has also been investigated, so that any Australian, anywhere in the world could cast their vote without having to travel to a polling place. A trial was conducted at the 2007 election for selected Australian Defence Force personnel serving overseas. The Electoral Matters Committee concluded it was too expensive to implement.

The global network

Every two years, the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament based in Rome hosts an e-parliament to promote the use of information technology in parliaments around the world.

It says technology helps create stronger links between citizens and their parliaments, makes people feel more engaged and makes parliaments seem more relevant.

The centre predicts growth in online discussions, online polls, e-petitions, e-consultations on issues and e-consultations on bills. You can find out more at: www.ictparliament.org

OVER TO YOU...

Is there an 'app' you would design for the Australian parliament which you think people would use?

If you come up with a clever idea, we'd love to hear about it!

Email us at: news@aph.gov.au

House Work

Your guide to investigations by House of Representatives and Joint Committees

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee

- Language learning in Indigenous communities
Public hearings being conducted
www.aph.gov.au/atsia
atsia.reps@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 4559

Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry Committee

- Australian forestry industry
Report released 23 November 2011
www.aph.gov.au/arff
arff.reps@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 4500

Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity Committee

- Integrity testing
Report being prepared
www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/aclei_ctte/index.htm
aclei.committee@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 3419

Australia's Immigration Detention Network Committee

- Interim report released 7 October 2011
www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/immigration_detention_ctte/index.htm
immigration.detention@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 3521

Climate Change, Environment and the Arts Committee

- Australia's biodiversity in a changing climate
Public hearings being conducted
www.aph.gov.au/ccea
ccea.reps@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 4580

Corporations and Financial Services Committee

- The collapse of Trio Capital and any other related matters
Public hearings being conducted
www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/corporations_ctte/index.htm
corporations.joint@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 3583

Cyber-Safety Committee

- Interim report released 20 June 2011
www.aph.gov.au/cybersafety
jssc@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 4202

Economics Committee

- Reserve Bank Annual Report 2011 (First Report)
Public hearing scheduled for 24 February 2012
- Reserve Bank Annual Report 2010 (Third Report)
Public hearing held on 26 August 2011
www.aph.gov.au/economics
economics.reps@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 4587

Education and Employment Committee

- Mental health and workforce participation
Report being prepared
www.aph.gov.au/ee
ee.reps@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 4573

Electoral Matters Committee

- Funding of political parties and election campaigns
Report being prepared
www.aph.gov.au/em
jscem@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 2374

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee

- Inquiry into Australia's overseas representation
Submissions being sought
- Australia's human rights dialogues with China and Vietnam
Report being prepared
- Australia's trade and investment relationship with Japan and the Republic of Korea
Report being prepared
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Annual Report 2009–2010
Report released 21 July 2011
- Defence Annual Report 2009–2010
Report being prepared
- Australia's trade and investment relations with Asia, the Pacific and Latin America
Report released 22 August 2011
www.aph.gov.au/jfadt
jscfadt@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 2313

Gambling Reform Committee

- Interactive and online gambling and gambling advertising
Report being prepared
www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/gamblingreform_ctte/index.htm
gamblingreform@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 3433

Health and Ageing Committee

- Registration processes and support for overseas trained doctors
Public hearings being conducted
www.aph.gov.au/haa
haa.reps@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 4145

Infrastructure and Communications Committee

- Role and potential of the National Broadband Network
Report released 25 August 2011
- Ratio of cabin crew members on aircraft
Report released 21 November 2011
www.aph.gov.au/ic
ic.reps@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 2352

Intelligence and Security Committee

- Listing of Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the re-listing of 6 terrorist organisations
Report released 22 August 2011
- Administration and Expenditure No. 9 (2009–2010) – Australian intelligence agencies
Report being prepared
www.aph.gov.au/pjicis
pjicis@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 2360

Law Enforcement Committee

- Commonwealth unexplained wealth legislation and arrangements
Report being prepared
www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/le_ctte/index.htm
le.committee@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 3419

Migration Committee

- Multiculturalism in Australia
Public hearings being conducted
www.aph.gov.au/mig
jscm@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 4560

National Broadband Network

- Rollout of the National Broadband Network
First report released 31 August 2011
Second report released 24 November 2011
www.aph.gov.au/jcnbn
jcnbn@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 2322

National Capital and External Territories Committee

- The administration of the National Memorials Ordinance 1928
Report released 23 November 2011
www.aph.gov.au/ncet
jscncet@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 4355

Petitions Committee

www.aph.gov.au/petitions
petitions.committee.reps@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 2152

Procedure Committee

- Procedural changes implemented in the 43rd Parliament
- Maintenance of Standing Orders
www.aph.gov.au/proc
procedure.committee.reps@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 4670

Public Accounts and Audit Committee

- Auditor-General's reports nos. 16–46, 2010–11
Report released 24 November 2011
- National funding agreements
Report released 24 November 2011
www.aph.gov.au/jpaa
jcpaa@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 4615

Public Works Committee

- Construction of Projects Two and Three of the Christmas Island New Housing Program
Submissions being sought
- LAND 17 Phase 1A Infrastructure Project
Submissions being sought
- Proposed Royal Australian Air Force Base East Sale Redevelopment, Sale, Victoria
Submissions being sought
- Proposed HMAS Albatross Redevelopment, Nowra, NSW
Submissions being sought
www.aph.gov.au/pwc
jcpw@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 4636

Regional Australia Committee

- Use of 'fly-in, fly-out' (FIFO) workforce practices in regional Australia
Public hearings being conducted
www.aph.gov.au/ra
ra.reps@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 4162

Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee

- Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
Submissions being sought
- Operation of the insurance industry during disaster events
Report being prepared
www.aph.gov.au/spla
spla.reps@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 2358

Treaties Committee

- Treaties tabled on 2 November 2011
Submissions being sought
- Treaty tabled on 13 October 2011
Report released 22 November 2011
- Treaties tabled on 20 September 2011
Report released 22 November 2011
- Treaties tabled on 13 September 2011
Report released 22 November 2011
- Treaties tabled on 23 August 2011
Report released 22 November 2011
www.aph.gov.au/jsct
jsct@aph.gov.au
(02) 6277 4002

A number of committees are conducting inquiries into legislation before parliament. Details of current bills inquiries can be obtained from committee websites.

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