



Clerk's review

This report documents the performance of the Department of the Senate for 2010–11.

Overview

With a general election occurring in August 2010, in some respects the year was a typical election year with a dip in legislative and committee activity in the first quarter. However, the formation of a minority government in the House of Representatives on the basis of several agreements on parliamentary reform between the Government and non-aligned members meant that the demand for advice was undiminished. Furthermore, the Government’s decision to propose early July sittings in 2011 for the Senate required intensive planning to ensure a smooth transition between the old Senate and the new. Once the Parliament resumed after the election, committee activity recommenced at a level exceeding the record levels of committee activity experienced in the two preceding years.

Evaluation

Every two years the department conducts a survey of senators to help us evaluate our services and to ensure they are effectively targeted. The 2011 survey results affirmed that senators continued to value the services they receive from the department with very little dissatisfaction recorded. The survey process includes interviews with a sample of senators and this is always a valuable source of feedback which enables us to fine-tune our services. Close contact between senators and departmental staff throughout the year, however, ensures that informal feedback is both common and continuous. Retiring senators in their valedictory speeches were unanimous in expressing their gratitude for the support they had received during their time as senators, particularly from chamber and committee staff, not to mention those who provide the daily services on which senators rely.

The structural review and its outcomes

Domestically, we completed the structural review commenced midway through 2009–10 and by the end of 2010–11 had implemented its major recommendations. Leading the structural review team was the acting

Deputy Clerk, Mr Cleaver Elliott, who commenced retirement leave in January 2011 and formally retired in August 2011. Cleaver served the Senate for more than 30 years, most of which he spent in senior management positions and during which time he led all of the department's structural divisions. His service to senators in each of these roles was of the highest quality but he is perhaps best known in wider circles for his innovative training methods and his ability to infuse potentially dry subject matter with both humour and memorable insight. Cleaver also pioneered the use of video extracts of Senate and committee proceedings for training purposes, compiling a large body of work which could be tailored to particular audiences.

Cleaver's retirement and my decision not to permanently fill the Deputy Clerk's position while we completed the structural review meant that at the beginning of 2011 there were two substantive vacancies for SES positions, one at the SES Band 1 level and one Band 2 position. In the recruitment process, I was assisted by one of my State colleagues and by a partner from the firm providing the department's internal audit services. The result was that Richard Pye was promoted from Clerk Assistant to fill the Deputy Clerk's position, leaving two substantive Band 1 (Clerk Assistant) vacancies that were filled by Chris Reid on internal promotion and Bronwyn Notzon who moved to the parliamentary service at level from the Attorney-General's Department. These changes to the department's SES staff are the most significant in scale since 1988 following the appointment of my predecessor, Harry Evans. They represent generational change and provide the department with the leadership and expertise to support the operations of the Senate and its committees into the future. In particular, the Deputy Clerk's position, redesigned following recommendations in the structural review, has been reintegrated into the department's governance framework where it performs a vital role.

Generational change has been occurring throughout the department, bringing with it considerable loss of corporate knowledge. Consequently, another focus of the structural review was on equipping the department to enhance and manage its knowledge resources. One component of the solution is the learning and development framework within which a wide range of procedural training and training in skills for the workplace has been organised. Structured as a six-monthly calendar, the framework offers staff numerous options to enhance their knowledge and skills. In the context of the department's performance communication scheme, staff and their supervisors identify specific development needs with the goal of completing 21 hours of training over the annual performance

cycle. Staff of all three parliamentary departments are able to participate in various aspects of the training programs run by each department, thereby minimising duplication and increasing efficiency.

A second component of the department's strategy to enhance and manage its knowledge resources was the creation of an information office. The Senate Public Information Office (SPIO) was established under the leadership of the Deputy Clerk to provide a greater strategic focus to our delivery of information to the public, particularly through the medium of the upgraded parliamentary website, delivery of which is now expected during the next financial year. Although the Appropriations and Staffing Committee supported a new policy proposal to seek modest funding for the office, the Government rejected the bid and the office will now be established on a small scale using reallocated and re-prioritised resources.

With the redesign of the Deputy Clerk's position, the launch of the learning and development framework and the establishment of SPIO, the recommendations of the structural review have been largely implemented.

Budget outcome

Although the financial statements show that the department finished the year in deficit, when allowances are made for approximately \$800,000 in depreciation, the department actually recorded a modest surplus, characteristic of an election year when there is a reduction in committee activity, in particular, and its associated costs. The final year outcome includes an amount for the new joint select committee on problem gambling for which the department received increased funding through a new policy proposal. The 2010–11 financial year was also the last of three financial years in which the department was subject to the additional two per cent efficiency dividend. From next financial year, the efficiency dividend will return to 'normal' levels. Its impact on small agencies in particular has been the subject of criticism, especially where essential services are threatened through lack of funds. For the most part, the Senate Department has been able to operate within the discipline imposed by the efficiency dividend but it is clearly not a policy that is sustainable in the long term.

Parliamentary training

In last year's review, I expressed concern about the growing incidence of lack of knowledge of basic parliamentary powers and processes amongst some public servants and advisers that had the potential to impede the effective operations of the Senate. Concerted efforts have been made to

expand the range and flexibility of the training we offer and I have also had discussions with the Public Service Commissioner on closer collaboration on the parliamentary content of public service training.

After the commencement of the 43rd Parliament, the Privileges Committee re-adopted its previous reference on the adequacy of the Government's guidelines for witnesses appearing before parliamentary committees, with expanded terms of reference. An outcome of this process is that the existing guidelines, which date from 1989, are to be revised and the committee is awaiting a draft of the proposed revision to assess its adequacy.

Highlights

As is usual, the year witnessed many highlights.

The election break provided an opportunity to undertake some longer term project work including on elements of the procedural curriculum underpinning the new learning and development framework. Several important Committee Office manuals were revised, the online version of the annotated standing orders was updated and new role-plays for both internal and external training programs were developed. A database of Clerk's advices was compiled for internal use and work level standards, against which all departmental positions are assessed, were finalised.

Arrangements for the opening of the 43rd Parliament on 28 September 2010 were successfully made. The opportunity was taken to hold a pre-orientation seminar for senators-elect, to coincide with the opening of Parliament, to which all senators-elect had been invited. The seminar included an overview of the Senate, its origins and functions, briefing sessions on entitlements and facilities, and sessions on setting up an office.

New communication vehicles were launched, with a new-look, online staff bulletin and a newsletter for senators covering items of procedural and administrative interest. The newsletter was accompanied by a supplement for senators-elect, conveying information in the lead-up to the commencement of their terms as senators.

Volume 3 of *The Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate* was launched by the President of the Senate, Senator the Hon. John Hogg, on 25 October 2010, the first such launch to be attended by any of its subjects. Volume 3 covers senators who completed their terms of service

between 1962 and 1983. Work continued on preparing the text of volumes 1 and 2 for online publication. Several of the department's exhibitions are now also available online.

The department participated in Parliament House Open Day on 18 September 2010, timed to coincide with Canberra's annual floral festival, Floriade. More than 5,000 visitors inspected the many displays and participated in tours of the gardens, chambers, the President's suite and the Cabinet room. Senators and senior officers of the department gave talks to groups on the floor of the Senate chamber on the hour.

A conference to mark the 40th anniversary of the Senate committee system was held in November 2010. The proceedings of the conference were published in the department's journal, *Papers on Parliament*.

The Parliamentary Education Office delivered programs at Parliament House to more than 90,000 students in more than two and a half thousand groups. Many more students were able to participate in the office's popular outreach programs and to obtain information from the website. The PEO collaborated with the Australian Government Solicitor to produce a new edition of the ever-popular pocket Constitution, launched by the President of the Senate and the Attorney-General on 9 February 2011.

Senate committees continued to embrace technological change in searching for more efficient ways to operate. Internal document management systems and communication portals, known as SCID and CommDocs, continued to be extended to more committees and Skype was used for the first time to enable a senator to participate in a public hearing from a remote location. Previously such participation had been limited to audio technology.

The department's enterprise agreement came into effect on 15 July 2010. It has a nominal expiry date of 30 June 2012 and provides a three per cent pay rise in each year, subject to achievement of individual work performance targets and in recognition of productivity improvements.

Intensive preparations were undertaken for the Senate changeover at the end of the financial year. As well as logistical planning for accommodation and services, the department developed a three-day orientation program to be held in the second week of July. Because the orientation program was scheduled to occur after the first few sitting days for new senators, the department prepared a DVD explaining what the

new senators could expect in their first few days, including procedures for their swearing-in and for electing a new President and Deputy President. Basic procedure was also covered.

Outlook

Supporting new senators will be the immediate focus of the new financial year. Another focus will be planning for the establishment of the Parliamentary Budget Office under the *Parliamentary Service Act 1999*, with the Deputy Clerk participating in a high-level working party to implement the new arrangements. We will continue to monitor committee activity closely to ensure that resources are deployed to areas of greatest need, and to be mindful of the welfare of staff working in pressure areas. Planning will commence for a new enterprise agreement with staff, to take effect in the second half of 2012.

We also hope to make further progress in updating our information resources and management capability, through the SPIO as well as through the new parliamentary website and the technology that it will enable. By this time next year, we expect to have experience in using social media to publicise the work of the Senate and its committees, and to have developed ideas to allow a broader cross-section of the Australian community to have direct access to proceedings.

My thanks go to all staff who worked so hard throughout the year to achieve the department's performance targets and to support the Senate and its committees so effectively. Their knowledge is the key to that performance. I also thank colleagues in the Department of the House of Representatives and the Department of Parliamentary Services for their cooperation and support.

In closing, I pay tribute to long-serving staff member, Neil Bessell, who died unexpectedly in July 2010. Neil served the department in many capacities, particularly as a committee secretary and Senior Clerk of Committees, and was well known throughout the parliamentary world for his role as secretary to Australia's delegation to the Inter-Parliamentary Union. He is sadly missed.

Rosemary Laing
Clerk of the Senate