

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

1.1 On 13 May 2008, the Senate referred the following documents to the Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport (the committee) for examination and report in relation to the Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry portfolio and the Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government portfolio:

- Particulars of proposed expenditure in respect of the year ending on 30 June 2009;
- Particulars of certain proposed expenditure in respect of the year ending on 30 June 2009;
- Particulars of proposed supplementary expenditure in respect of the year ending on 30 June 2008; and
- Particulars of certain proposed supplementary expenditure in respect of the year ending on 30 June 2008.<sup>1</sup>

1.2 The committee was required to report to the Senate on its consideration of the 2007-2008 additional estimates on 24 June 2008.<sup>2</sup>

1.3 The committee considered the Portfolio Budget Statements 2008-2009 for both portfolios at hearings on 26, 27, 28 and 29 May 2008. The hearings were conducted in accordance with the agreed agenda as follows:

- Monday 26 May 2008 – Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry portfolio;
- Tuesday 27 May 2008 – Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry portfolio;
- Wednesday 28 May 2008 – Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government portfolio; and
- Thursday 29 May 2008 – Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government portfolio.

1.4 The committee heard evidence from Senator the Hon Nick Sherry, Minister for Superannuation and Corporate Law, and Senator the Hon Jan McLucas, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Ageing, both representing the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, and Senator the Hon Stephen Conroy, Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy,

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1 *Journals of the Senate*, No. 11, 'Particulars of Proposed and Certain Expenditure for 2008-2009 and Particulars of Proposed and Certain Supplementary Expenditure for 2007-08 Documents-Reference of Estimates to Committees', entry no. 33, 13 May 2008, p. 365.

2 *Journals of the Senate*, No. 2, 'Committees-Estimates Hearings', entry no. 8, 13 February 2008, p. 98.

representing the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government. Evidence was also provided by Dr Conall O'Connell, Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Ms Susan Page, Acting Secretary of the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, and officers representing the departments and agencies covered by the estimates before the committee.

1.5 The committee thanks the ministers, departmental secretaries and officers for their assistance and cooperation during the hearings.

### **Questions on Notice**

1.6 In accordance with Standing Order 26(9)(a), the committee is required to set a date for the lodgement of written answers and additional information. The committee requested that written answers and additional information be submitted by Friday 18 July 2008.

1.7 The committee notes its disappointment that none of the questions taken on notice during the committee's examination of the 2007-2008 additional estimates were answered by the deadline set. The committee reminds portfolio departments and agencies that providing answers to the committee only days before the following estimates hearings, or in some cases, on the day of the subsequent hearings, is not acceptable practice. The committee emphasises its expectation that all answers to questions taken on notice during its examination of the 2008-2009 budget estimates will be submitted by the date set.

1.8 The committee further notes its dissatisfaction with the standard of a number of the responses provided to questions on notice from the 2007-2008 additional estimates. Senators raised this issue on a number of occasions throughout the estimates hearings across both portfolios, noting that many of the answers were unhelpful and provided little or no useful information.<sup>3</sup>

1.9 During the hearings the committee also emphasised that referring senators to a website hyperlink is an inappropriate way of responding to questions on notice.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the hyperlinks that were provided in the responses direct the committee to a general homepage as opposed to the particular page containing the information requested. The committee observed that in some instances the particular detail requested on notice was not available on the website referred to, and consequently the committee remained unable to obtain the information it was seeking.<sup>5</sup> The minister indicated that the Prime Minister, on behalf of all ministers, had provided an answer to

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3 *Estimates Hansard*, 26 May 2008, pp 4-5; *Estimates Hansard*, 28 May 2008, pp 8-9, 97 and 110-111.

4 *Estimates Hansard*, 26 May 2008, pp 4-5; *Estimates Hansard*, 28 May 2008, pp 8-9, 97 and 110-111.

5 *Estimates Hansard*, 28 May 2008, pp 110-111.

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all questions throughout the estimates process requesting a list of election promises, which stated:

The election commitments made by Federal Labor, the great majority of which were accompanied by an estimate of costs, are on the public record. The Administrative Arrangements Orders issued by the Governor-General on 3 December 2007 and 25 January 2008 list the matters dealt with by each Department of State.<sup>6</sup>

However, the minister undertook to raise the matter of unsatisfactory answers regarding portfolio related issues with the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government.<sup>7</sup>

1.10 The committee reiterates that referring senators to websites it is not an acceptable manner of responding to questions on notice, and expects that the department will provide appropriately detailed, relevant and up-to-date information in response to questions on notice in the future.

### **Additional information**

1.11 Answers to questions taken on notice at the committee's budget estimates hearings, and any additional information received will be tabled in the Senate in separate volumes entitled 'Additional information relating to the examination of budget estimates 2008-2009 – May 2008 – Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport'. Documents not suitable for inclusion in the additional information volumes will be available on request from the committee secretariat.

1.12 Copies of the Hansard transcripts of the hearings are available from the committee's website. Answers to questions on notice and additional information received from the departments will also be posted on the committee's website at a later date.

### **Note on references**

1.13 References to the Hansard transcript are to the proof Hansard, therefore page numbers may vary between the proof and the official Hansard transcript.

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6 *Estimates Hansard*, 28 May 2008, pp 8 and 111.

7 *Estimates Hansard*, 28 May 2008, pp 8-9 and 110-111.

