

AUSTRALASIAN STUDY OF PARLIAMENT GROUP NEWSLETTER: FROM THE PRESIDENT

May 2017

Dear ASPG Colleagues,

This newsletter is being sent to alert the organisation to a structural matter that members need to think through prior to the forthcoming AGM, to be held in Tasmania in September (in conjunction with the Australasian conference). There are also a few other matters I would like to bring to your attention.

Structure of the organisation

The Australasian Study of Parliament Group (ASPG) has been grappling with the type of organisation it wishes to be for a couple of years now. The issue was discussed again at a recent teleconference meeting of the national (Australasian)¹ executive. All members attended (vice president Lesley Ferguson; secretary Kirsten Robinson; treasurer Malcolm Prentice; and president Colleen Lewis). At the meeting, I expressed the view that the structure of the organisation should be debated at the forthcoming ASPG executive meeting and resolved at the Annual General Meeting (AGM) in September 2017.

We need to come to a decision on this fundamental question as nearly all other determinations emanate from it. I think we can arrive at the best, or at least better decision, if chapters do not canvass other chapters to support their preferred position. I hope you don't mind me saying this, but I am trying to avoid a potentially

¹ I have inserted (Australasian) in bracket after national here as 'national' does not recognise New Zealand. I am suggesting that we need to change the word from national to Australasian. I appreciate that doing so will require an amendment to the constitution. Something you may wish to think about prior to the September AGM.

damaging situation whereby blocs emerge that have the potential to split the organisation into opposing camps.

The following are some of the issues that will be impacted by whatever decision ASPG members make at the forthcoming AGM. But first, a brief recount of history. The discussion to date has been largely driven by financial matters. States that have put enormous time and effort into creating vibrant chapters, with an impressive membership base, have expressed the view that they do not wish all their membership dues to be sent to a national body, especially as funds were going into a term deposit account rather than being returned to chapters to facilitate further growth. This is a very valid point of view and one I understand and respect.

To address those concerns while we also grappled with resolving the broader issue of the structure of the ASPG, chapters that contributed all their membership fees to the 'national' body had them returned so they could spend the funds on growing their chapters. I supported that decision when it was made a few years ago, as the distribution of the ASPG's journal was generously subsidised by the Federal Parliament and no money had been expended for some time on updating the website. You will recall that the subsidy finished a little over 12 months ago and ASPG members approved funding for a complete overhaul of our website. As a result we have expended funds from the Groups' term deposit account and will continue to do so each year unless we move to an electronic version of the journal. The new website (of which more later) could facilitate such a move.

Given the above issues, I have been giving the structure issue further thought and offer the following for your consideration.

I am now questioning whether we are looking at the structure issue through a slightly distorted lens, which focuses solely on finances? Our very name indicates that we are an Australasian organisation incorporating all Australian states and territories and New Zealand. We have a 'national' executive, an Australasian journal and hold an annual Australasian conference. Does that mean that we are more

than the sum of our parts and that access to funds is clouding the real issue, which is whether the Australasian Study of Parliament Group wishes to be an Australasian organisation or whether it wants to consist of a series of independent state and territory chapters and the New Zealand chapter?

If we decide to be a series of independent chapters, each chapter will raise their funds through membership dues. They would then retain all their funds (including corporate fees) to spend as they see fit. If chapters wish to have an Australasian identity they would need to agree to return a certain amount to finance the ASPG's journal, its website, the attendance of the president and *Australasian Parliamentary Review's* (APR) editor at the ASPG annual conference, plus a very small amount to cover administrative costs that arise from time to time (i.e. a levy).

However, if we are to be a series of independent chapters, what is the need for a 'national' executive, an Australasian conference or a journal that is Australasian in nature? Each state/territory and New Zealand could run their own conference and publish their own journal and there would seem to be little point in having a 'national' executive.

Other issues arise regarding our structure. For example, how is equity to be achieved? By that I mean how can small chapters submit an equal share to the 'national' body to allow chapters to maintain all of their membership fees but contribute to maintaining an Australasian identity? At the moment, we could use some of the funds in the term deposit account, but as mentioned previously, the costs associated with printing and distributing the journal twice a year and establishing and maintaining a relevant and informative 2017-style website, and the expenses involved in the president and editor attending the Australasian conference, means that the funds in the term deposit will be dissipated over time. What happens when we reach that position?

Another sticking point in the discussions to date has revolved around corporate membership vs individual membership. In other words who should get what and give how much to whom?²

It is the opinion of the 'national' executive that the above issues can be resolved without discarding the federated nature of our Group. Of course the 'national' executive appreciates that states, territories and New Zealand require funds to grow their chapters by hosting eminent speakers who are experts in aspects of parliamentary studies and to provide refreshments to the members who attend these events. But this can happen quite easily in these days of electronic transfers, without moving away from the federated nature of the organisation.

I have given this matter considerable thought and am concerned that if we opt for an independent chapters model, even if it is based on chapters agreeing to subsidise an Australasian presence, the Australasian Study of Parliament Group will be weakened and could, over time, disintegrate. Having said that, I am happy to be convinced otherwise and will fully respect and work hard toward achieving whatever members of the ASPG prefer.

Australasian Parliamentary Review

On another matter, I wish to advise that I will be stepping down as Editor, *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, after the next edition is published in June/July 2017. The constitution does not require an election for the editorship, but I would like to encourage members to consider taking on the role. I should alert you to the fact that it can be a somewhat demanding role at times, so if you have many work commitments it is probably not the role for you. However, should that not be the case please let me know and I am happy to discuss the workload involved in taking on the role. I would, of course, be

² Where a chapter directs any corporate fees it receives (or pays) to the 'national' organisation, it is proposed that they be credited to the assessed levy commitment of that chapter.

around to help in the background until whoever takes on the editorship becomes familiar with the tasks that the role involves.

Other Executive Positions

Nominations will be called in June for the four core ASPG executive positions of president, vice president, secretary and treasurer. Elections will be held at the AGM in September and the period will be for two years. Kirsten Robinson has advised that due to work pressures and other commitments she will not be standing again as secretary. Kirsten has and continues to do an outstanding job as secretary and hence as a member of the core executive team. I will have more to say about Kirsten's significant contribution to the ASPG at the AGM.

ASPG main website

The website working group, chaired by the vice president, Lesley Ferguson, continues to work diligently toward finalising the new look website. The working group has set an aspirational time of mid to late May 2017 to launch the new website. Thank you to all those chapters who have responded to requests for information to populate the new website and to those who have agreed to act as the website administrators for your chapter. The training of these administrators in managing their chapter's area on the website is a key part of the website project.

The working group is also working with the web developer to implement a new secure online membership database and management system, being developed in "Silverstripe". This system will be integrated with the new website and will replace "Groupspaces".

Pacific Parliaments

At the moment we are an Australasian organisation but have no formal links to any Pacific Parliaments. This is something the organisation may wish to consider changing. I say this because we could learn much from these Parliaments and an exchange of ideas might assist Pacific Parliaments, in the same way as Australian states,

territories and New Zealand help each other. We broaden our knowledge about other Parliaments and their challenges by being part of the ASPG and at times can assist each other with addressing those challenges. If this is something we would like to pursue, we need to think of how we might attract funding to help achieve this objective. I would welcome your thoughts and especially ideas for possible funding at the forthcoming AGM.

I look forward to seeing you all in Tasmania in September for what is shaping up to be a very interesting, informative and fun conference.

I hope this newsletter finds you well and that life is being kind to you all.

Kind regards

Colleen Lewis
President, ASPG.