

REPORT FROM WORKSHOP 1: A Framework for Discussion: Parliaments Executives and Integrity Agencies: How can public accounts committees work more effectively to scrutinise the Executive¹

Introduction

The group firstly asked itself whether the Public Accounts Committee should be scrutinising the Budget Estimates, whether it was the right model and whether an Estimates Committee specifically set up for that purpose only would be a better model. The group had representation from the New Zealand, Northern Territory, Fiji, Samoa, Western Australian, and Tasmanian parliaments and an academic based in Victoria. There was naturally a focus on the models with which the group were most familiar. A number of issues were raised in relation to the question.

Two distinct models were discussed:-

Estimates Committee specifically constituted to examine estimates.

The committees generally operated for a limited time period, provided opportunity for a significant number of members of parliament particularly the opposition to be involved in the process because more than one estimates committee operated at the same time and were the committee of choice for the examination of estimates in the smaller jurisdictions, e.g., Northern Territory, Western Australia and Tasmania. This model spreads the workload and may be more inclusive.

¹ Report from Australasian Study of Parliament Group, 28th Annual Conference, Wellington, New Zealand, 28–30 September 2006, Parliamentary Control of the Executive: the People and the Money; Rapporteur: Heather Thurstans, Clerk, House of Assembly, Parliament of Tasmania; spokesperson: Professor Kerry Jacobs.

Subject Specialisation Standing Committee.

These standing committees have responsibilities in a portfolio area which examines that part of the estimates related to their particular subject area. This model was underpinned by the expertise and depth of knowledge of committee members and staff in the subject area, e.g., New Zealand.

In Fiji examination of estimates took place on the floor of the House and in the party room. It was disappointing that there was no representation from a jurisdiction where a standing Committee of Public Accounts was responsible for examining the Estimates as well as their long standing inquiry role as is the case in Victoria.

There was no general consensus on what is the best model. Group members were supportive of the process in which they were a stakeholder and considered that the parliament and their members had developed a model which best suited their own needs.

There were a number of aspects of the scrutiny process which were considered critical to the effectiveness such as:-

Time management — is the time allocated an impediment to good scrutiny?

The general feeling was that sufficient time was allocated — the management of the time relied on the skill of the Chair, good opposition and focussed, well directed questioning. One jurisdiction follows a convention that government members cannot ask questions leaving more time for opposition scrutiny. This was not supported by all members of the group. The use of ‘Dorothy-Dixers’ or ‘patsy’ questions is part of the parliamentary process and is accepted as part of the scrutiny process in committees.

Resources — appropriate advice, sufficient staffing and access to the Auditor-General were cited as essential elements to effective scrutiny;

Training — this is an important element such that the Estimates process itself was considered ‘training’ for newer members. Financial knowledge is important but not necessarily paramount. The use of accrual accounting has changed the process and can be more difficult to follow for some committee members;

Open to Public — it is important that whatever the process the scrutiny process should be open to public eyes, including the mass media; and

Chair — A strong bipartisan Chair enhances the scrutiny process. Group members cited committee management tension and the marginalisation of Independent members in some committees.

Political Point scoring, turning the proceedings into a Media circus, and even maintaining space for Independents, were discussed by the group who felt each could endanger the process to the point where it could become captured by political and media attention. ▲