

Report from Workshop 2: A Framework for Discussion: Parliaments Executives and Integrity Agencies: In what ways can opposition parties encourage executive accountability to Parliament?¹

Several in the group felt that the question itself was inappropriately phrased. Comment was made about the use of the word ‘parties’, and that ‘opposition’ was broader than just parties. It was observed that it is too limiting to consider ‘opposition’ in just party-political terms. Opposition was a fluid concept that changed from time to time — not a ‘frozen moment in time’. Issues often reflected competing community interests, and even within governments there were different stances. Policies were not always dissimilar, so holding a government to account, while necessary, was not a sufficient approach.

It was noted that members of Parliament were often not ‘parliamentarians’. As members are seeking to win elections and become part of government, their focus tends to be on the community and constituents rather than on the institution of Parliament, which does not directly produce rewards from constituents.

It was agreed, nevertheless, that there is an uneven playing field, with the government setting the agenda. Moreover, it sometimes took oppositions time to adapt to their new role and identity. Oppositions needed an enhanced capability to respond to government initiatives and better resourcing. This included more resources being made available for library, research and information services, and also the bolstering of committee staff to provide an independent source of information and advice and reduce reliance on government resources. Instituting

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: Milton Hollard, Clerk-Assistant, House of Representatives, New Zealand

additional funding for shadow ministers, away from party leader control, was another suggestion.

It was noted that the advent of minority governments may lead to better resourcing because support deals between parties would be necessary, often to the benefit of all parties. Enabling opposition members to hold certain positions, such as committee chairmanships, would contribute to the better scrutiny of the executive.

The capacity of members to carry out their parliamentary roles was discussed. Capacity-building initiatives, such as Dr Ken Coghill's mentoring programme and induction sessions, such as that conducted by the New Zealand Office of the Clerk, had a contribution to make. The Westminster system allowed an apprenticeship for members, but at the same time Parliament was not about having cadres; independently sourced training is needed. Improving procedures to ensure suitable candidates were selected was another matter deserving attention (including, a member of the group suggested, IQ tests).

A fundamental-reformist view put forward was that a member's tenure should be limited to 15 years and the rules of the game changed, with a proportional representation system of elections instituted for Lower Houses. New Zealand's experience with MMP was that things settled down and that parties were judged on the credibility of their selection of candidates.

It was agreed that parliamentary education — civics — had an important role to play, including raising awareness through schools. There was a lack of understanding about the role of Parliament and what members could effectively do, and such education may help lead to the public having a more accurate perception of Parliament and more respect for it. At the same time it was suggested that the good sense of the public and should not be underestimated. Better standards of representation in legislatures could lead to oppositions being better able to obtain accountability from the executive. ▲