

Parliamentary Committees: Building a Bridge between Parliament and the Public

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Introduction

Under the Westminster system, Australian parliamentary committees (committees) offer one of the few tangible ways in which individual members of the public can actively participate in parliamentary processes.

This paper will consider the role committees play in building the bridge between the Australian Parliament and the public, and will touch on:

- the way in which the committee process engages the public and the practical matters that arise during inquiries;
- the role of both committee and secretariat in educating the public about parliamentary processes; and
- managing public expectations about what committees can achieve.

We will also note a number of other issues, including the media's role in informing the public about the work of committees.

While we acknowledge that organisations, large and small, also provide valuable input to committee inquiries, we will focus on the interactions between parliament and the individual, via the committee process.

Background

The importance of participation by individuals and organisations to Australia's parliamentary committee inquiries cannot be understated. Without the evidence provided by submitters and witnesses, committees would have little option but to review information already available.

Put simply, without people contributing information to an inquiry, a committee could find itself with very little to work with. For this reason, a high value is placed on written submissions and in-person evidence and it makes the relationship between committees and the public an important one that is worth developing.

However, the committee system has not always played the role it does today in engaging the public, but has grown into that role through a series of reforms. The Australian Parliament developed its committee system over time throughout the 20th century, with both the House and the Senate committee systems evolving into what we have now. The last major reform of Australia's parliamentary committees occurred in 1994, when the Senate created two parallel systems: legislation and estimates committees (to be chaired by

government members) and reference committees (to be chaired by non-government members).¹

It is also worth noting that not all parliamentary democracies encourage public engagement through their committee system. For example, in contrast to Australia and other Westminster democracies, the committees of the German Federal Parliament – the *Bundestag* – are not generally used as a way of engaging the public.

Bundestag committees focus on informing committee members and thereafter their parties about particular specialised areas of policy and on proposed bills. Much of the committee work is inviting speakers and delegations for briefings and round table discussions on proposed bills and specific issues, which are then reported back to the members' party colleagues.

The general public in Germany may contact their elected representatives who sit on committees, and engage with relevant organisations invited to committee hearings, but they do not generally contribute directly to committee inquiries. In contrast to Australian committees, the *Wortprotokolle* (Hansard) of the meetings and briefings are not generally published. This suggests that engagement with the public is not the main focus of *Bundestag* committees. This also applies to the German Federal Upper House – the *Bundesrat*.²

The work of committees

Harry Evans, former Clerk of the Senate, observed that while anyone can inquire about any subject, the ability of parliamentary committees to do so is guaranteed because they are granted significant power to explore issues the chamber refers to them.³

The Standing Orders of the House of Representatives and Senate, respectively, provide for most parliamentary committees and their powers.⁴ Standing Orders give committees the power to inquire, to speak to witnesses and to request documents. They allow committees to conduct inquiries in a largely unfettered manner.

Corresponding protections exist for those who cooperate and provide information to committees - the Parliamentary Privilege Resolutions, which include procedures observed by committees for the protection of witnesses.

Such protection is of critical importance to committee members and public participants alike because without it, people would undoubtedly be far less willing to publicly provide evidence to committees. Anecdotally, many of the questions fielded by secretariat staff relate

¹ Halligan, J., Power, J., & Miller, R., "The Three Committee Systems of the Australian Parliament – A Developmental Overview?", ASPG Parliament 2000 – Towards a Modern Committee System 2001, University of Canberra, pp. 112 – 114.

² More detailed information about the German committee system can be found at **Attachment A**.

³ Evans, H., "The Parliamentary Power of Inquiry: any limitations?" *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, Volume 17(2), Spring 2002, p. 1.

⁴ Senate Standing Order 25 sets out the powers of legislative and general purpose committees; see the Australian Parliament House website, "Senate Standing Orders", <http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Chamber_documents/Senate_chamber_documents/standingorders/b00>; accessed 26 June 2017 and Australian Parliament House website, "House of Representative Standing Orders", <http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/House_of_Representatives/Powers_practice_and_procedure/House_of_Representatives_Standing_Orders> accessed 26 June 2017.

to parliamentary privilege and the protection afforded to those who volunteer information to committees.

Thus empowered, the Australian Parliament engages with the public through a large number of committee inquiries in both houses. During the 44th Parliament (12 November 2013 – 9 May 2016), House committees tabled 319 reports⁵ and Senate committees tabled 524 reports,⁶ including ‘bills inquiries’ which tend to be more routine and have a shorter timeframe for completion. Senate practice differs markedly from House committees, for which a bills inquiry is unusual.

During the 44th Parliament, the total number of reports produced by parliamentary committees was 843 – an average of approximately 6.5 reports per week over the 130 calendar weeks. When the analysis is further narrowed to sitting weeks only, the impressive figure of 16.2 reports per sitting week is revealed.⁷

As of 13 September 2017, during the 45th Parliament, Senate and House of Representatives had a combined total of 67 committees, 128 public inquiries and 24 open public submissions.⁸

These figures represent a large number of secretariat staff managing a huge body of work consisting of inquiries ranging across a broad subject matter. It translates into many interactions with the public via submissions, public hearings and general inquiries.

Submissions

Importantly, most individuals decide voluntarily to become involved in committee inquiries. Committees rarely try to insist on participation, although they may encourage it with invitations to make a submission or appear as a witness. Indeed, committees often limit advertising for submissions to their webpage, although if an inquiry is of particular public interest media coverage can help spread the word.

With this in mind, the high numbers of submissions received by committees across both houses suggests that a significant proportion of the Australian public is interested in the work of Parliament and wants to contribute to its decision-making processes. It also suggests that people who are committed to a cause will take steps to keep informed about relevant parliamentary activities.

The amount of voluntary participation through submissions alone can demonstrate the level of public interest in an inquiry, with some committees receiving hundreds or even thousands of individual written submissions.

Written submissions from the public are valuable to committees for a number of reasons: they are the first point of contact between committees and the community; they can help a

⁵ Australian Parliamentary Library, “44th Parliament in review”, Research Paper Series, 2016-17, 24 November 2016, <<http://apo.org.au/system/files/70794/apo-nid70794-73256.pdf>> accessed 30 June 2017.

⁶ Numbers sourced from the Senate Senior Clerk’s Office, June 2017.

⁷ Our analysis takes into account only non-procedural standing, select and joint committees.

⁸ Inquiry figures are regularly updated on the Committee webpage: <http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees> accessed 13 September 2017.

committee gauge public interest in a topic; and while committees select witnesses, anyone can make a submission to an inquiry,⁹ doing so at the expense of their own time and effort.

In advertising for submissions, committees are essentially throwing open the door to the public, knowing most submissions will be published and hoping to gain insight into the public's views.

Members of the public may approach an inquiry with no claim of expertise, but with a personal interest in an issue or a role as a community representative. Through their contributions to inquiries, these people can provide perspectives that might otherwise not come to light. A number of inquiries in recent years have demonstrated this.¹⁰

The emergence of online submission campaigns

The growing presence of activist groups with a strong online presence is a relatively new aspect of public engagement. It is not uncommon for committees to receive form letters and emails from online campaigns, resulting in hundreds or thousands of documents which must be dealt with before an inquiry concludes.

For example, the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties (JSCOT) secretariat reported that between 4 March and 9 May 2016 it received:

- 11,859 emails via one website;
- 4,559 emails via a second website;
- 61 short emails from individuals; and
- 255 “normal” submissions made via email, hard copy letters or the website.¹¹

At its busiest, the JSCOT secretariat received 17 emails per minute from the campaigns, drowning out all other email correspondence. While triage processes were put in place to cope with the emails, the sheer number of emails received caused a huge amount of additional work for the secretariat.

Similarly the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) inquiry into the 2016 election received thousands of emails via an online campaign. An e-form was placed on a web-site with suggested words for individuals to use in expressing support for the organiser's views. This resulted in almost 4,000 same or very similar emails landing in the committee inbox.

⁹ Morris, J., & Power, S., *Factors that Affect Participation in Senate Committee Inquiries*, Parliamentary Studies Paper 5, Parliamentary Studies Centre, Crawford School of Economics and Government, ANU College of Asia & the Pacific, ANU, <http://www.parliamentarystudies.anu.edu.au/pdf/publications/PSP05_Morris_Powers.pdf>, accessed 28 June 2017, p. 2.

¹⁰ For example: during the 2015 Senate committee inquiry into Technical and Further Education (TAFE), students gave evidence at hearings about their experiences of the TAFE system and personal opinion on what could be improved; similarly, students gave evidence during the 2014 Senate legislation committee inquiry into the Higher Education and Research Reform Bill. In both cases, the value of the evidence from students was twofold: first, it provided a vastly different perspective from that of academics, TAFE administrators, industry experts and union representatives. Second, it demonstrated to the committee that the issues at the centre of the inquiry were so important to students they were willing to take the time to become publicly involved.

¹¹ Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, *Report 165, Trans Pacific Partnership*, pp. 31 – 32, <http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Treaties/TransPacificPartnership/Report_165> accessed 13 September 2017.

In addition to the practical challenges faced by secretariats in managing large numbers of submissions, committees must also make decisions about whether to accept and publish submissions. While committees tend to want to ensure that the voices of all submitters are heard, they also realise that time and resources are limited and that there is limited value in publishing thousands of identical or near identical emails.

Publishing a representative sample of submissions received *en masse* via online campaigns has become a fairly standard practice. It allows committees and secretariats to efficiently manage vast numbers of same or similar submissions received all at once, and still gives the submitters a voice, if only a collective one.

As an aside, however effective mass submissions may be in ensuring the campaign organiser is noticed by the committee, in our view, they are arguably less useful to committee inquiries than submissions that thoughtfully address the Terms of Reference. This is because mass emails tend to be very brief, are often simply a statement of the organiser's view, and as a matter of practicality, they require an inordinate amount of secretariat resources to manage.

These sorts of online campaigns also raise questions about the actual level of engagement of individuals who simply click a button on an organiser's website, rather than take the time to consider the inquiry and express their own views.

Witnesses

The second main way that the public engages with committees is when people appear as witnesses at a public hearing. Hearings enable committee members to engage in dialogue directly with individuals and to explore in more depth the issues raised in a person's submission.

For many individual witnesses, appearing before a parliamentary committee is a unique experience and provides a golden – and generally positive – opportunity to connect with the Australian Parliament. Anecdotally, many witnesses appreciate the chance to put their views to a committee at a hearing, believing it an important part of a process to affect change in areas important to them.

However, while individual witnesses can provide useful evidence to committees at hearings, they also tend to be less experienced than expert witnesses. Although committee hearings and round table sessions may be less intimidating and more effective than more formal hearings, it has also been suggested that witnesses can be subject to intense questioning – or grilling – which they may find rude, hostile and regard as a personal attack.¹² This can be a barrier to participation.

Further, despite their inherent value to committee inquiries, there can be practical challenges to inviting witnesses to appear at hearings. Committees may consider the same or similar issues repeatedly and may invite the same peak bodies or expert witnesses to give evidence

¹² Burton, K., "Community Participation in Parliamentary Committees: Opportunities and Barriers", Research Paper 10 1999-2000, Politics and Public Administration Group, 30 November 1999, <http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp9900/2000RP10> accessed 26 June 2017.

on each occasion because they are relevant to the inquiry. It may appear as though an exclusive witness group has been deliberately created, but in reality, it is often simply a case of limited relevant witnesses being available.

The sheer number of inquiries may also lead to fatigue amongst industry bodies and experts who are called upon to provide input to multiple inquiries. These organisations and individuals may simply not have the time or resources to respond with fresh information to each inquiry. This can lead to recycling of submissions and questions about their value. However, this is less likely to occur in dealing with members of the public who tend to pick and choose which issues and inquiries interest them.

Expectations and education

Another practical challenge for committees and secretariats is managing the expectations of submitters. Misconceptions may arise because of a misunderstanding of the committee's role, including that:

- committees can direct the Executive;
- committees can resolve individual complaints;
- making a submission entitles a submitter to be heard in person; and
- the committee must accept submissions on the submitter's terms.

For example, from time to time, a member of the public will contact a committee with an expectation that it will help them resolve a particular problem. Anecdotally, the sorts of problems raised with committees often relate to issues around the application of legislation to an individual's personal circumstances, government departmental decisions, or because of some perceived injustice. Some individuals make submissions with an expectation that the committee will help them resolve a matter, or that the committee can act as a review body for government or court decisions.

On most occasions, the secretariat deals with these queries by providing information about the work of the committee and the limitations of the committee system in addressing individual concerns. On some occasions, however, an individual will have multiple contacts with the secretariat as they try to resolve their problem, or argue that the committee should do more to assist.

Another issue that sometimes arises is when submissions are lodged that contain adverse comment about third parties. Committees may decline to accept or publish such submissions, or may seek a response from the third party mentioned. When this happens, it is not uncommon for the individual submitter to contact the secretariat about why their submission has not been published or because they want to know how to draft a submission that is more likely to be accepted and published, but which still captures the message they wish to convey.

Secretariats typically assist a significant proportion of the public who make contact about these sorts of issues by providing information and advice about the process and often, by providing advice about drafting submissions: address the Terms of Reference, keep it

relevant, and refrain from including remarks that may be interpreted by the committee as adverse comment against a third party.

In this way, public engagement through parliamentary committees can also serve to educate people about the parliament generally and about its committees in particular. This contact is just as important in building a relationship with the public as is receiving evidence from the public, and secretariats generally welcome the opportunity to discuss these matters with interested members of the public.

A committee and its secretariat therefore play an important part in increasing public awareness and understanding about the parliamentary committee system and the role of parliamentary committees.

Reaching the public

Over the last twenty years, a great deal of thought has been given to the role of committees in connecting the public with parliament. In recent years, numerous committee inquiries have captured the attention of the public through media coverage and new ways of communicating have changed how we give and receive information.

The traditional media landscape has been volcanically disrupted in the last two decades by the new continents of the internet and social media. Newspapers have been increasingly replaced by Twitter, Facebook, and internet media like Breitbart and BuzzFeed.

So, what is a parliamentary committee to do to engage effectively with the public in 2017? The obvious answer is that if it works, do it. But what actually works in today's environment? What age groups and demographics are most likely to show interest in the work of parliamentary committees and what media do those age groups and demographics access most for their information?

The answers to these questions are not clear. But what is clear, is that in today's age of social media, more consideration must be given to how best to engage with the public through those mediums.

At the 2015 ASPG Conference, Dr Martin Drum, Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of Notre Dame, Australia, made a number of observations. These included:

- Committees tended to use traditional advertising, especially in print media, and media releases. Most committees sent letters directly to stakeholders whom they knew would be interested;
- There is usually information available on the committee websites, though Twitter and Facebook are being used in a limited fashion;
- All of these processes were good at reaching people who routinely participate in parliamentary inquiries, but not so useful in reaching different demographics, especially those who might be prepared to contribute for the first time;
- If an individual or organisation was already prominent in a given field they were likely to be contacted, but if not they may not even know about an inquiry; and

- Whilst the move to use Twitter and Facebook is positive, a quick search of relevant Twitter accounts shows relatively low follower numbers, for example the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council of WA, for example, have in 2017 approximately 1,000 followers each (roughly the same number as in 2015) and many of whom overlap.¹³

In our experience, committees routinely make use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter to publicise upcoming public hearings or the publication of reports. Many individual committee members also use their own websites and social media accounts to spread the word about their committee's latest activities and achievements.

Most recently, we have produced a number of short videos in which committee members speak about an inquiry. For example, a chair and deputy chair may explain the inquiry and provide more information about what information would assist the committee. These videos are uploaded to the committee's webpage and distributed through social media.

Given that one intended function of the committee system is to 'take parliament to the people', some commentators argue that committees should seek to use innovative and experimental methods in order to achieve this outcome and suggest a number of reforms with this in mind.¹⁴

Although making greater use of the internet has been recommended, information suggests that advertising has yet to achieve substantial results in increasing public engagement with parliamentary committees. Other suggestions for more innovative advertising through traditional media like radio and newspapers have either not occurred, perhaps because of cost, or because they are not viewed as effective.

Some parliaments are seeking to address a lack of community engagement, which suggests a recognition of the need for committees to be accessible to the public, and the value that public participation can add to committee work. For example, the United Kingdom's House of Commons has tasked its Liaison Committee to champion public engagement. Among other things, it has a specific mandate to:

*... assist the House of Commons in better engaging with the public by ensuring that the work of the committee is accessible to the public – and to identify further ways in which they can improve the quality of their work by strengthening opportunities for participation.*¹⁵

Since taking up this participatory leadership role, the Liaison Committee has commissioned a research report into public engagement in select committees, which recommended that a more "vibrant and systematic approach to public engagement" be adopted.¹⁶

¹³ Drum, M., "How Well Do Parliamentary Committees Connect With the Public?", 2015 ASPG Conference, Wellington, <<http://www.aspg.org.au/conferences/wellington2015/Paper-How-Well-Do-Parliamentary-Committees-Connect-with-the-Public-Drum-pdf>>, accessed 20 June 2017.

¹⁴ Burton, K., "Community Participation in Parliamentary Committees: Opportunities and Barriers", Research Paper 10 1999-2000, Politics and Public Administration Group, 30 November 1999, <http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp9900/2000RP10> accessed 26 June 2017.

¹⁵ UK Parliament, Commons Select Committee webpage, "Select committees should leave Westminster bubble more often", <<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/liaison-committee/news-parliament-2015/first-special-report-published/>> accessed 27 June 2017.

It is also worth briefly considering how public perceptions of parliamentary committees can impact on engagement. One observer noted that one of the main problems with attempting to publicise parliamentary activities and achieve greater public interest is the attitude that individuals may have towards the parliament and politicians and suggested that *“the public has a distrust of parliamentarians and a cynical attitude towards activities of the parliament.”*¹⁷

There may also be a perception by some that parliamentary activities have little relevance to a person’s day-to-day life, although there may be exceptions with regard to contemporary community issues, such as voting, disability support or education. Participation in committee processes may help change this perception, particularly when a person’s experience is meaningful and positive. Dr Drum noted:

*Central to raising awareness is increasing participation in committee processes. When people are involved in a consultation process they take an interest in the outcomes associated with it, regardless of the media coverage. That is, if someone writes a submission relating to a parliamentary inquiry they will take a much stronger interest in what happens next. They will be interested in its findings. Even if those findings are not to their complete liking, they will be much more aware of what committees do, and how they operate.*¹⁸

Conclusions

The parliamentary committee system affords the Australian Parliament an effective way to engage with and educate the general public through participation in inquiries. It is an important mechanism for allowing direct public input into parliamentary processes, and an avenue through which the parliament can gauge public opinion and build relationships with individuals and organisations.

Importantly, committees and their secretariats have a key role to play in educating the public about the committee process and the role of parliamentary committees. The contact that committees and secretariats have with members of the public can help shape opinions and perceptions, and contribute to a deeper understanding of the work that parliament undertakes on a regular basis.

The value of public participation in committee inquiries is not just that people provide evidence, but they add context and can help committees achieve clarity about priorities and community support for policy and legislation. Through public participation, committees become better informed about what issues are actually important to the public, and can make efforts to ensure the parliament is in tune with the public.

¹⁶ Hendriks, C.M., & Kay, A., “Connecting citizens to legislative deliberations: public engagement in committees”, The Crawford School of Public Policy, ANU, Paper for presentation at 2015 Australian Political Studies Association (ASPA) Annual Conference, 27-30 September 2015, Canberra, p. 10.

¹⁷ Burton, K., “Community Participation in Parliamentary Committees: Opportunities and Barriers”, Research Paper 10 1999-2000, Politics and Public Administration Group, 30 November 1999, <http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp9900/2000RP10> accessed 26 June 2017.

¹⁸ Drum, M., “How Well Do Parliamentary Committees Connect With the Public?”, 2015 ASPG Conference, Wellington, <<http://www.aspg.org.au/conferences/wellington2015/Paper-How-Well-Do-Parliamentary-Committees-Connect-with-the-Public-Drum-pdf>>, accessed 20 June 2017.

Modern communication platforms, including social media, are increasingly important in connecting with the public, and it is apparent that much more can be done to make effective use of these platforms in developing a relationship between the parliament and the public.

It may be that a rethink of the ways in which committees engage with the public would be useful to expand the parliamentary audience and to ensure that committee engagement with the public continues to be a key plank in the bridge spanning between parliament and the public.

Committees and their secretariats therefore have a golden opportunity to connect with the public through the work of committees, and in doing so they can help facilitate more meaningful participation and dialogue with the public. Conversely, they can enhance the views and experiences of individuals who wish to connect with parliament through the work of committees. Ultimately, parliamentary committees can be used effectively to build a bridge between public and parliament.

Parliamentary Committees in the Federal Republic of Germany¹

Introduction

During July and September 2016, I had the pleasure of doing a seven week secondment to the German Federal Parliament – the *Bundestag*. I learnt a lot and, working for the Committee Office here in Australia, I was particularly interested in how committees work in the German federal system and what the similarities and differences are to those of the Australian Parliament.

One fundamental difference between the two countries is that the German committee system is not intended or designed to be a conduit for public input or engagement.

Bundestag Standing Committees

In the *Bundestag*, the Committees tend to mirror the structure of the Federal Government: in general, there is a dedicated permanent committee for each ministry. Under the current 18th *Bundestag*, there are 23 standing committees. Committee secretariats are also structured very similar to Australia with a secretary and research workers as well as office administrative staff.

However, unlike Australia the Committees aren't so much about public enquiries rather they are about informing the members and thereafter their parties about particular specialised areas of policy and on proposed bills. Much of the Committee work is inviting speakers and delegations to have briefings and round table discussions. The general public can and do contact their elected representatives, and engage with relevant organisations invited to committee hearings, but they do not generally contribute directly to committee inquiries. Committees also travel as delegations to visit areas that are relevant to their field of interest – including overseas. Also unlike Australia, the *Wortprotokolle* (Hansard) of the meetings and briefings aren't generally published. So, engagement with the public is not what the *Bundestag's* Committees are about.

There is little interaction between *Bundestag* and *Bundesrat* (the Upper House) committees though on occasion there is, for example, cooperation in the field of development aid as some of the federal states also have some foreign aid programmes.

Special inquires – *Bundestag* 'Committees of Inquiry'

In contrast to the Standing Committees, the *Bundestag* may, and must, set up a 'Committee of Inquiry' on a motion supported by one quarter of its Members. Most committees of inquiry examine specific issues, such as possible misgovernment, maladministration and possible misconduct on the part of politicians. In many ways, they are similar to an Australian Select Committee. They may question witnesses and experts and request that further investigations be carried out by courts and administrative authorities. Committees of inquiry summarise their results in reports that are presented to the parliament and thus published and made public.

¹ <<https://www.bundestag.de/en/committees?url=L2VuL2NvbW1pdHRIZXMvMTk3Njcw&mod=mod479046>>; <<https://www.bundestag.de/en/committees/bodies/inquiry/inquiry/197686>>; <<https://www.bundestag.de/en/committees/mediation>>; <<https://www.bundestag.de/en/committees/joint>>; and <<http://www.bundesrat.de/EN/organisation-en/ausschuesse-en/ausschuesse-en-node.html>> all accessed 9 August 2017

***Bundesrat* (Upper House or 'Federal Council') Committees**

Generally, all draft legislation is first discussed in the *Bundesrat's* committees, irrespective of whether it is submitted by the Federal Government, the *Bundestag* or one of the federal states. Legislation is examined in-depth by ministers from the states with the relevant policy expertise, or by officials from their ministries acting on their behalf.

The *Bundesrat* has 16 committees. Like the *Bundestag*, the *Bundesrat* committees are allocated areas of responsibility that broadly correspond to the policy areas addressed in the various federal ministries. That means that the Federal Government's expert knowledge is complemented directly by the expertise of the federal states, the *Länder*.

Part of the ongoing dialogue between the Federation and the federal states also unfolds in the committees; the Federal Chancellor and all Federal Ministers are entitled (and have a duty to do so if requested) to attend committee meetings. They also have speaking rights in these meetings.

Expert committees, such as the Committee on Economic Affairs or the Finance Committee, are generally made up of the relevant ministers from the federal states or by "delegated commissioners", i.e. expert officials from the ministries in the federal states.

Draft legislation is examined in great detail as this is where the federal states can exercise legislative oversight, and contribute to shaping and improving bills proposed by the government or the European Union.

The committee meetings are not public, as discretion is vital for open and frank debates, particularly as confidential issues may also need to be addressed.

***Bundestag* and *Bundesrat* - 'The Mediation Committee'**

The Mediation Committee acts as an intermediary between the *Bundestag* and the *Bundesrat*. The Mediation Committee consists of 16 members of the *Bundesrat* and 16 Members of the *Bundestag* whose number reflects those of the parliamentary parties.

Its job is to find consensus between both houses when acts adopted by the *Bundestag* fail to find a majority in the *Bundesrat*. If the Mediation Committee's decision deviates from that of the *Bundestag*, it is necessary for the plenary to vote again on the legislation.

If an act requires the consent of the *Bundesrat* (n.b. some don't), the *Bundestag* and the Federal Government may also demand that the Mediation Committee be convened to resolve the deadlock.

The 'Joint Committee' - something very different to Australia

The Joint Committee of the *Bundesrat* and the *Bundestag* has 48 members, two thirds of whom are Members of the *Bundestag* and one third members of the *Bundesrat*. The Joint Committee is intended to act as Germany's emergency parliament if obstacles prevent the *Bundestag* from meeting in good time when a state of defence is declared.

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BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Ms Julia Agostino has been a Committee Secretary since 2013 when she joined the Australian Senate. During her time there, Julia worked with the Education and Employment Committee, the Joint Committee on Corporations and Financial Services, and the Select Committee on Certain Aspects of Queensland Government Administration related to Commonwealth Government Affairs.

In 2016, Julia moved across to the House of Representatives as Committee Secretary for the Joint Select Committee for Electoral Matters and the House of Representatives Employment, Education and Training Committee. More recently, Julia and her team have become the Secretariat for the House Select Committee on Regional Development and Decentralisation.

Prior to working with the Australian Parliament, Julia worked in various legal, policy and government relationship roles with both local and Commonwealth government, including with the Commonwealth Ombudsman's office.

Julia holds degrees in Arts and Law and has a Masters in Government and Commercial Law. In 2012, Julia was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to assess local government strategies for transitioning communities.

Dr Andrew Gaczol has been a Senior Research Officer in the House of Representatives since 2010 having also completed a 12 month secondment to the Australian Senate during 2007. Andrew has also acted as Inquiry Secretary on several occasions. During July - September 2016, Andrew completed a seven-week secondment to the German Federal Parliament - the *Bundestag*.

Prior to working with the Australian Parliament, Andrew worked at the Department of Defence as an intelligence analyst with the Defence Intelligence Organisation for four years and an Assistant Director in the International Policy Division for three years.

Andrew is a graduate of the University of Adelaide, and has two post-graduate degrees: a PhD from the Flinders University of South Australia and an MPhil from the University of Cambridge - both in International Relations.

In 2015, Andrew published his first book through Ginninderra Press - a biography of his father's experiences as a refugee and immigrant.