

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No. 1

Friday 17 September 2004

Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio area

THE LEGISLATURE

The Committee met at 4.30 p.m.

MEMBERS

Reverend The Hon. G. K. M. Moyes (Chair)

The Hon. D. T. Harwin
The Hon. E. M. Roozendaal
The Hon. I. W. West

The Hon. P. T. Primrose
The Hon. J. F. Ryan

PRESENT

The Hon. Dr Meredith Burgmann, *President of the Legislative Council of New South Wales*

Mr J. Evans, *Clerk of the Parliaments*
Mr G. McGill, *Financial Controller*
Mr D. Draper, *Manager, Food and Beverage*
Mr A. Shariat, *Manager, Information Technology Services*

CORRECTIONS TO TRANSCRIPT OF COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS

Corrections should be marked on a photocopy of the proof and forwarded to:

**Budget Estimates secretariat
Room 812
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000**

CHAIR: I welcome you all to this public hearing of General Purpose Standing Committee No. 1, and following some procedural matters we will start irrespective of whether all members are present. Members are advised that there is no provision for written questions, and any questions must be lodged in the House in accordance with the usual procedures. The Committee has previously determined that witnesses are to be requested to provide answers to oral questions taken on notice during the hearing within 35 calendar days. The media would be aware of the usual broadcasting requirements. I declare the meeting open to the public. I thank Madam President and personnel from her department for attending this afternoon. Mr McGill, did you receive a summons from me to attend this afternoon's hearing?

Mr McGill: I did.

CHAIR: Madam President, do you wish to make an opening statement?

The PRESIDENT: Yes I would, actually. Because of incidents in the past few months it is obvious that Parliament is taking on board issues to do with security. However, it would be best if members did not ask me questions about Parliament House security. I am very happy for members to visit me in my office, where the head of security and I will give them a thorough briefing in the privacy of the office.

CHAIR: That is wise, thank you. Government members may now ask questions.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Madam President, can you please advise what actions have been taken to conserve and update the Parliament House art collection?

The PRESIDENT: There is a general belief that Parliament has a wonderful collection of art, but when we looked at it was a very static collection. Basically it had been collected in 1979, when the new building was constructed. There were a few historic pieces from earlier, but basically it was a 1979, white, male, Anglo collection, and a lot of it was in very bad condition. We have undertaken a few steps to remedy that. I reconvened an art committee about halfway through last year, and the committee has done a number of things. We are resting, conserving, and reframing the Max Dupain work, which will be quite an expensive process. As they are wonderful photographs we think that is necessary.

I have discovered that it is not good for photographs to not be put into the dark for some time. They really need to be rested, put to bed for a while. Last year a new controlled environment storage facility was installed, because the art works that were not on the walls were not in very good storage. We have spent \$40,000 on an air-conditioning system for the storage facility. We have had a meeting with Edmon Capon about what we should be doing to make the art collection more relevant and less static. He suggested that what we were doing was correct, but he thought we should have what is called a horizontal collection as opposed to a vertical collection. That means, basically, we should try to have a collection that represents the diversity of the arts in New South Wales.

That means we should be moving away from white, Anglo, males and concentrate especially on areas such as New South Wales indigenous artists, women artists, and artists from non-English-speaking backgrounds. That is exactly what we have been doing. We have bought a number of New South Wales artists' works and also a few works that have a particular resonance with parts of New South Wales. For instance, we bought two works that depict Gunnedah in drought, which have been very popular. We also bought two works of waratahs, the State's floral emblem. The Aboriginal works we bought have been very popular, especially one by Elaine Russell that depicts roo hunting. We did not put that up until Richard Jones had left Parliament.

We are very serious about representing New South Wales indigenous artists. We are not an art gallery, we are a public institution, and we should show the art of New South Wales on the walls. New South Wales indigenous artists are in despair about the way art from the central desert has become such a boom, yet the wonderful art produced in New South Wales is not getting credit. We have undertaken steps towards having a Parliament House indigenous art competition for New South Wales indigenous artists.

It would be an acquisitive art prize. We are seeking to do it in conjunction with Campbelltown Art Gallery, which is very appropriate because the largest number of indigenous artists live in that area. Most indigenous people in Australia live in the western areas of Sydney. Also, they have had a lot of experience in running a very successful art prize called the Fishers Ghost Art Award. We have already talked to the people at Campbelltown and they are very excited about the idea of us running an art prize with them. We are also looking at getting a wonderful master calligrapher to do a calligraphy piece for us. This arose out of the Chinese calligraphy exhibition that was very popular earlier this year.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Following on from that, can I suggest that some inquiries be made with Macquarie University about the indigenous art prize, because it is currently running one out there at the moment?

The PRESIDENT: Is that a New South Wales indigenous art prize?

The Hon. IAN WEST: I think it is. I suggest that contact be made with the Vice-Chancellor, Di Yerbury, to see if there is a possibility of linking in there. What measures have been taken to utilise the Fountain Court as a public exhibition space and facility for community organisations and New South Wales artists?

The PRESIDENT: As you know, the Fountain Court had become extremely cluttered over previous years. It had become full of wooden installation display cases. The works on the walls had never been changed. So, two of the four walls always had the Max Dupains, a very large picture of the Queen and the collage, the very large collage. We took those down and put them in other areas of Parliament where I think they look better, and that has given us the entire wall space for exhibitions. This has been a terrific change. Previously, when people wanted to put up pictures, they had to bring in panels and the panels were really ugly. It often looked like a school fete. Now we can have all the artwork on the walls in Fountain Court and it looks terrific.

In December 2003 we installed a hanging system so that all works can be hung on the walls. Everyone says it is an excellent hanging system, very easy to work with. We now have a monthly schedule for shows. It is very much easier for the people putting on the shows to do so without too much input from Parliament House staff. Previously, too much of our own staff time was used helping community groups put up their exhibitions. Now it can be done with minimal supervision. This is now so popular it is booked up to the end of next year. It really is a very popular exhibition area.

The new policy ensures a high artistic and curatorial standard, a fairer distribution of exhibition times among artists and community groups and a focus on issues relevant to the New South Wales community and/or providing exhibition opportunities for New South Wales artists. Successful exhibitions we have had in the past year have been the Moree Plains exhibition, which a lot of you will remember, the calligraphy exhibition, the Professional and Magazine Photographers Association exhibition, the Sydney Foreshore exhibition and the current Egyptology exhibition—

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Which is excellent.

The PRESIDENT: From the alma mater of some of us—Macquarie University.

The Hon. IAN WEST: The best in the world.

The PRESIDENT: The Centre of Egyptology at Macquarie University is—

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: It is an excellent exhibition. Last night I wrote to them saying so.

The PRESIDENT: It is terrific. I love the video going. While we are talking about artworks, the Artworks Committee has ended up being a bit of a liaison committee.

The Hon. ERIC ROOZENDAAL: Who is on that committee?

The PRESIDENT: The Speaker and the President, the Clerks, Warren Cahill, Yvette Andrews from my office, Leanne Shedden from the Speaker's office, the head of Building Services, the curator, the part-time curator we have, and the archivist. It tends to be almost a de facto discussion about how the building is working. I found it tremendously useful to be able to discuss issues to do with the public spaces of the building. We are also photographing all our works and cataloguing them on a Vernon online system, which is the best artistic online system to have. Very shortly—this is a big announcement, so is a pity there are no media—the stickers will be removed from the front of the paintings and replaced by a barcode on the back. In the past we have been the laughing stock of all of the art galleries in Sydney about the fact that we have property stickers on the front of our artworks.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: It is like getting a painting that I asked to be put in my office. It was put behind a bookcase.

The Hon. ERIC ROOZENDAAL: Who selects the artworks?

The PRESIDENT: The committee does. We try to stick to the criteria. We have to feel there is a resonance with New South Wales and the Parliament. We try to get a more representative lot of our art than we have had in the past. When we went around and looked at them, they were almost entirely white male. In 1979, as you can see, these were very popular. I think they are David Aspdeus.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: May I say about that foyer area—and this is more of comment because I do not get much opportunity—that as we increase security, and we understand why, one of the things I found that is a great counter to that is the coffee cart, which I know we have discussed. Again, I think it is worthwhile from a personal point of view putting on record how welcome that is in Parliament, just simply by the use it gets, as well as the cheery disposition, to use that term, of the people there. It is really good at promoting a good feeling around Parliament. You just have to listen to the conversations of the people who run it and it brings a different character to the feeling of the foyer. I only get positives from people when I talk to them about it.

The PRESIDENT: Thank you for that, Mr Primrose. When I die, I will know one of my achievements that will be noted in my obituary will be bringing good coffee to the hard-working staff of Parliament.

CHAIR: I have had some people tell me that they have accessed the public gallery in the Legislative Council through the very front door without going through any of the security checks?

The PRESIDENT: Yes. I am sure that is not true but can we talk about that at another time?

CHAIR: That is a security issue.

The PRESIDENT: Yes, and there is an attendant there at all times.

CHAIR: I also express my appreciation. I wrote to you, Madam President, and also to the Clerk, about increasing the number of computer benches in the Legislative Council Chamber. I thank you that that was done. As you know, I do use them and they are very good.

The PRESIDENT: In relation to upgrading services around Parliament, we have been successful in upgrading the television and audio system in the Chamber. You might not remember, but older members might remember, that the television system in the Legislative Council was so poor that you could not see who was in the Chamber. We are about to have a further upgrade, in that we will have video titling. So people watching proceedings in their offices or in other government buildings to which proceedings are broadcast will know who is speaking. So we will have a titling system, just as there is a titling system in the Legislative Assembly.

The Hon. ERIC ROOZENDAAL: I understand that a committee was established under your jurisdiction to look into information technology. Is that right?

The PRESIDENT: Yes.

The Hon. ERIC ROOZENDAAL: I am interested in hearing in particular about broadband access.

The PRESIDENT: I am always delighted to hand over to our wonderful information technology [IT] manager, Mr Ali Shariat, for any questions about IT.

The Hon. ERIC ROOZENDAAL: I understand that some recommendations were made. Perhaps you could enlighten us on how they are being implemented?

Mr SHARIAT: What do you mean specifically when you refer to broadband?

The Hon. ERIC ROOZENDAAL: I understand that a committee looked into this issue and recommended that there be broadband access for all members of Parliament.

Mr SHARIAT: The President has an information technology group. Through that group one of the recommendations was to look at the possibility of the use of broadband for members accessing information in Parliament. This was a two-stage process for us. Initially, we wanted to upgrade to have our own access to the Internet. We looked at several providers. I do not know whether you know that we are currently using the central corporate services unit to access the Internet.

We have had a look at other providers and we are about to sign an agreement with the recommended provider. Currently, the Crown Solicitor is looking at that contract. Once that is completed we will have a platform for accessing a more secure environment that is exclusive to Parliament. In the second stage we will be looking at providers who are able to give us reasonable service to broadband in New South Wales.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: That will be great.

The Hon. ERIC ROOZENDAAL: Are there any moves to review the sitting hours to make them more family friendly?

The PRESIDENT: The Leader of the Government in the lower House put out a discussion paper relating to sitting hours. It becomes relevant to us and to budgetary considerations in that any unilateral decision on sitting hours in the lower House would have an enormous effect on our budgets. If the Legislative Assembly decided to sit different hours to the hours that the Legislative Council sits, it would have a huge effect.

We have estimated that we spend half a million dollars a year on overtime costs related to sitting hours. If the Legislative Assembly changes its hours without discussing it with us, we may well find that those costs will escalate, or that we will be spending \$500,000 a year on just one House. I have written to the Leader of the House, Carl Scully, and I have asked him to consult with us before any decision is made on the sitting hours of the Legislative Assembly. That is the only budgetary consideration in relation to sitting hours.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: We have discussed on many occasions family friendly sitting hours. On behalf of members, particularly country members and those who do not live in Sydney, I know they would be keen to have an input into what is considered to be family friendly sitting hours. Family friendly hours for people who live in Sydney are not family friendly hours for those of us who do not go home during sittings.

The PRESIDENT: That is always a problem. I have always despaired of trying to get a compromise that suits everyone. As I have said, there is no point in the Legislative Assembly changing its sitting times without consulting with us. That is what it was attempting to do. I have written a reasonably curt letter to Carl Scully telling him to consult with us.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: How much has the provision of relief staff for members of the Legislative Council cost this year?

The PRESIDENT: That is an excellent question. As members know, it has been a really difficult situation for members of the Legislative Council who have only one staff member. Basically,

backbench Labor and Coalition members have only one staff member. When that member of staff was away and there was no provision for relief staff, members had to stand in queues and lick postage stamps. Frankly, it was very poor use of members' time.

It was very difficult for staff because they felt pressured to take holidays only at a time that suited a member. So it has been real problem for at least 10 years. Last year we were successful in getting \$110,000 for relief staff. Of that \$110,000, only \$36,245 has been spent, which means that members' staff have not improperly taken advantage of the fact that there is now provision for relief staff. So it shows that what we wanted to achieve has been properly implemented.

CHAIR: For other staff or people working within the Parliament who do not belong to the Parliament, for example, journalists, it is important that their facilities are also carefully upgraded and looked at. I have noticed in my visits to the journalists' rooms that they are not really of a standard that is provided by most commercial organisations. Could you put that on the agenda of your House committee to look at?

The PRESIDENT: The rather poor conditions for journalists has concerned me for a long time. We could move in the direction in which other parliaments have moved. I understand that the Federal Parliament and a number of State parliaments charge media outlets for the use of rooms. If we did that we could, of course, spend the money that we received on upgrading their facilities. I have been reluctant to do that. I think the Parliament should provide space for journalists and that they should not have to pay for it, because it is public space.

But we have a very tight budget. This year we have had another cut of \$1.8 million. Given that a huge proportion of our budget is fixed costs, like the wages of staff and members, that translates to a 7 per cent or 8 per cent cut to our budget. When those sorts of severe cuts occur it is difficult to use that money to fix up journalists' facilities. I agree with you: their offices are not good and occupational health and safety issues are involved. We certainly are keeping in mind that it is an area that needs upgrading.

The Hon. IAN WEST: President, what has been done to reduce the consumption of water in terms of the current environment?

The PRESIDENT: Bob Walker, the Building Services Manager, has been very diligent in looking at water consumption issues right throughout the year. I will start with the grounds of the gardens, because I know there have been stories in the popular press, shall I say, about us wasting water on the gardens. Soaker hoses have been installed where practical. They have replaced the existing automatic sprinkler system, so there is less evaporation. We have used water crystals where practical and extra mulching where appropriate. We have selected drought-tolerant annuals rather than more exotic species. We are allowing the lawns to grow higher to prevent loss of moisture and we are using sea salt to increase the moisture-holding capacity of the soil.

We have a new airconditioning unit, which will be more economical to run, and it operates on an ozone-friendly refrigerant. Flow reducers have been fitted to most common toilet hand basins within Parliament House and this year the flow reducers will be fitted to shower heads. In partnership with Sydney Water a consultant has been engaged to undertake an audit of our water usage. A draft of the audit report is expected next month. The auditor looked at how much water is used and checked to see if there was any unexplained usage of water through leaking taps and systems. My understanding is that testing has already been done and I am pleased to tell you that Parliament House does not leak.

We are basically auditing our water usage and putting in place a number of ways to save water. We have been bombarded with a lot of literature from a fellow who runs a waterless urinal. That has been tested. We have a few concerns about it because although it would save water it would work out much more expensive. We are worried what the chemical will do to the pipes in Parliament House, because we have a lot of old copper pipes. Until we find out what effect it will have on the pipes we are going to hold signing off on that one. But we are still interested in looking at it.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: Are you able to tell us what the difficulties, if any, have been with implementing any additional requirements from the Auditor-General or the extra form-filling that has arisen from the more detailed requirements of the Parliamentary Remuneration Tribunal [PRT]?

The PRESIDENT: Do you mean form-filling by members?

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: Or even the Parliament. How does the Parliament cope with members having to fill out a great deal more forms or assessing more forms from members claiming logistic support allowances?

The PRESIDENT: It has been very, very difficult for the Legislative Council staff, and I assume also for the Legislative Assembly staff, to deal with the added requirements of the PRT. I will talk to the financial controller. In former years a few extra staff were added to the financial controller's area, but they were not given any extra this year. In actual fact, the number of forms is snowballing and they are struggling.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: Has there been any difference in expenditure by members using support allowances as a global budget as opposed to the way the Parliament budget used to look when members claimed for items individually, such as air tickets, phone calls and so on?

The PRESIDENT: Has global budgeting made a difference to the overall amount that members have spent?

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: Yes.

The PRESIDENT: We will get back to you on that one. We will take that question on notice.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: Many members would have noticed that particularly on weekends access to the Internet, the capacity to read e-mails, and the capacity to do research from the Parliamentary Library has been hampered no end by what seems to be endless upgrades of the computer system. Is that going to come to an end or is it a feature we will have to accept as a regular part of the system and that the system will be out of commission at least one week in every month?

The PRESIDENT: I am very pleased to announce that is coming to an end. At the moment our contract with a new Internet service provider is in the hands of our solicitors. As soon as that contract is signed and is in operation we are very much hoping there will be no further outages. That is coming to an end.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: Will it be possible for a seamless transition from our current Internet service provider to the new one or will there be a significant reconfiguration of the systems?

Mr EVANS: I understand it will be a seamless transition. If I could add to what Madam President said and also to an answer to given earlier, once we have the new Internet service provider in place we then propose to go down the path of giving members broadband access to Parliament House.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: From off site?

Mr EVANS: From electoral offices and home offices.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: That is very welcome, for no other reason than for those of us who are members of numerous committees. I cannot download material because of the sheer volume. I know other members I have discussed this matter with all have the same problem. That is good news.

The PRESIDENT: I thought it was a good news story.

CHAIR: Thank you, Madam President. I remind the officers they are to supply answers to the questions on notice within 35 calendar days. If any departmental officers are required for further hearings we will contact you. Thank you, Madam President and your department, for all you do week by week, and for attending this afternoon.

The Committee proceeded to deliberate.
