

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No. 3

Thursday 4 September 2003

Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio area

FAIR TRADING

The Committee met at 5.30 p.m.

MEMBERS

The Hon. A. R. Fazio (Chair)

The Hon. M. J. Gallacher
The Hon. C. M. Robertson
The Hon. J. S. Tingle

The Hon. M. J. Pavey
The Hon. I. W. West

PRESENT

The Hon. R. P. Meagher, *Minister for Fair Trading, and Minister Assisting the Minister for Commerce.*

Office of Fair Trading

Mr D. O'Connor, *Commissioner*

Mr M. Silk, *Assistant Commissioner, Management Services*

Mr B. Given, *Assistant Commissioner, Operations*

Mr R. Stowe, *Assistant Commissioner, Policy and Strategy*

Mr L. Le Compte, *General Manager, Home Building Service*

Department of Commerce

Ms K. McKenzie, *Director-General*

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CORRECTIONS TO TRANSCRIPT OF COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS

Corrections should be marked on a photocopy of the proof and forwarded by 30 September 2003 to:

**Budget Estimates
General Purpose Standing Committee Secretariat
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000**

CHAIR: I declare this meeting open to the public. I welcome you to this public hearing of the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 3. Firstly, I wish to thank the Minister and departmental officers for attending today.

At this meeting the Committee will examine the budget expenditure for the portfolio areas of Fair Trading, and I propose to address the Minister's portfolio responsibility for the operations of the Office of Fair Trading, which is now an entity of the Department of Commerce.

The Minister for Fair Trading shares dual administration of the Home Building Act with the Ministry for Commerce. The Minister has day-to-day operational responsibility for the administration of the Home Building Act and the operations of the Home Building Service. The Minister for Commerce has overall sole responsibility under the Home Building Act, that is sole responsibility for home building insurance, BidCorp, which is the HIH rescue team, and the Fair Trading Administration Corporation. This is consistent with the Minister for Commerce's other responsibilities for insurance matters.

This matter was also explained at the estimates hearing the other evening attended by the Minister for Commerce, and that is to ensure that Committee members are aware of the various subjects which are permissible at tonight's hearing. Therefore, issues that come under the responsibility of the Minister for Commerce are not for this Committee's inquiry. So we are concentrating on the Fair Trading aspect and not the responsibilities of the Minister for Commerce. I will give you a copy of this, if Committee members would like to have a copy to refer to during this evening's proceedings.

Before questions commence, some procedural matters need to be dealt with. In terms of the allocation of questions, which remains in the hands of the Chair, I have decided to allocate questions in approximately 20 minute sessions to the Opposition, Crossbenchers and Government members.

In accordance with Part 4 of the resolution referring budget estimates to committees, the Committee requires evidence to be heard in public. The Committee has previously resolved to authorise media to broadcast sound and video excerpts of its public proceedings, and copies of these guidelines are available from the attendants.

I point out that, in accordance with the Legislative Council's guidelines for the broadcast of proceedings, only members of the Committee and witnesses may be filmed or recorded. People in the public gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photos. In reporting the proceedings of this Committee, you must take responsibility for what you publish or any interpretation you place on anything that is said before the Committee.

There is no provision for members to refer directly to their own staff. Whilst at the table, members and their staff are advised that any messages should be delivered through the attendant on duty or through the Committee clerk.

For the benefit of members of Hansard, could departmental officers identify themselves by name, position and department or agency before answering any questions referred to them. When a member is seeking information in relation to a particular aspect of a program or subprogram, it would be helpful if the program or subprogram is identified. Is the lower house sitting this evening, Minister?

Ms MEAGHER: Yes, it is.

CHAIR: Would you be required to attend any divisions?

Ms MEAGHER: No. We are in private members chambers and then the house will rise.

CHAIR: I declare the proposed expenditure open for examination. Minister, would you like to make a brief opening statement?

Ms MEAGHER: Yes, I would, Madam Chair, thank you. As you have just outlined, there have been some changes to the portfolio of Fair Trading since the re-election of the Carr Government in March this year. The Government created a new Department of Commerce bringing together a range of agencies within the Office of Fair Trading. The Office of Fair Trading continues its core functions of consumer

awareness, licensing enforcement of more than 50 pieces of legislation, including our flagship legislation, the Fair Trading Act.

As Minister for Fair Trading, I am responsible for the operation of the new Office of Fair Trading. I have expressed in numerous forums that this change does not affect the primary role of the Office of Fair Trading, that of protecting consumers in a robust market place.

As the Minister assisting the Minister for Commerce, I also share dual administration of the Home Building Act. As the Chair outlined, I have day-to-day operational responsibility for the administration of the Home Building Act and the operations of the Home Building Service, which was established on 1 July this year. This specifically includes regulations work, issuing of licences, certificates and owner builder permits, resolving disputes, disciplinary proceedings and compliance. These functions are in keeping with my responsibilities under the Occupational Licensing Scheme, such as for real estate agents.

Part of the rationale of the Department of Commerce is to ensure a wholistic approach to addressing issues which are across the portfolio in nature. The Minister for Commerce, who already has carriage over insurance matters, is well placed to respond to home warranty matters.

Another example is that of strata reform. Although the day-to-day administration of the Strata Management Act remains under my jurisdiction, the Minister for Commerce is overseeing the Government's policy on further reform as it crosses numerous Government portfolios, including Planning.

I would like to close with a clarification on the issue of media monitoring in the Office of Fair Trading. I am advised that during the 2002-2003 financial year the Office of Fair Trading spent \$63,037 on monitoring services for print and electronic media. I understand another figure of more than \$100,000 has been quoted. This is inaccurate.

Thank you, and I would be happy to take questions.

CHAIR: Would Members of the Opposition like to commence the questioning?

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Thank you, Madam Chair. Minister, as part of the national competition policy review of the Retail Leases Act 1994, consultation was held at 10 locations across the State and submissions were sought. In what specific media and on what dates were these meetings advertised?

Ms MEAGHER: I do not administer the Retail Leases Act.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Is the Home Building Service office fully staffed and operating as promised by Minister Aquilina on 29 October 2002 when he said that it would be in place by July 2003?

Ms MEAGHER: The Home Building Service came into operation on 1 July and is in full operation.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Has the levy on building licences which will fund the Home Building Service been implemented and could you please provide details of when the levy was introduced, the cost of the levy to individual builders, funds raised since that date and the total amount of funds intended to be raised for this financial year?

Ms MEAGHER: I am sorry, could you just list those more slowly again?

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Yes. Has the levy on building licences, which will fund the Home Building Service, been implemented and could you please provide details of when the levy was introduced, the cost of the levy to individual builders, funds raised since that date and the total amount of funds intended to be raised in this financial year?

Ms MEAGHER: The majority of the increase is a result of the 21.5 percent levy which has been imposed on the implementation of reforms and issues deriving from the Campbell inquiry, including establishing the Home Building Service. The estimated costs of the operations of the Home Building Service for the year 2003-2004 is \$14.8 million. Approximately \$5 million of that amount will be raised

through the levy on licence application and renewal fees. The remainder will be met from the budget allocation for the Office of Fair Trading.

The increase will mean, for example, that the application fees for a contract or licence for a builder operating as an individual sole trader will increase by \$95. If that builder constructed five houses in a year and passed on the cost of the additional licence fee, it would add \$19 to the cost of each house. The fee for individuals making application for a contractor licence as a tradesperson will increase by \$39. If that trade contractor did 20 jobs in a year and passed on the cost of the additional licence fee, it would add \$1.95 to each job. The benefits and savings that will be derived from the establishment of the Home Building Service will more than compensate for this fee increase.

As part of the establishment of the Home Building Service 26 new building inspectors have been appointed across New South Wales. These new inspectors will resolve building disputes, undertake on-site inspections, issue rectification orders and ensure that builders are doing the right thing. Consumers and builders will now have the opportunity to resolve their differences on site quickly and efficiently. This will occur at the front end of the building process, before the dispute escalates into a major problem.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: The \$14.8 million that has been raised, to what date was that?

Ms MEAGHER: 2003-2004.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: How many staff have you got at the Home Building Service?

Ms MEAGHER: The total budget is \$14.8 million, as I have stated.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: That is what you presume you are going to raise over this financial year?

Ms MEAGHER: Yes, that is right. The whole budget is \$14.8 million. The levy is 10 percent. So that is \$5 million towards the total budget figure.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Sorry, 10 percent of 14.8 is 1.4, isn't it?

Ms MEAGHER: \$9.8 million comes from consolidated funds. \$5 million comes from the 10 percent levy on the building licences. 149 staff will be employed.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: 149 staff; how many have you got employed now?

Ms MEAGHER: Approximately 135 and recruitment is continuing.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: And how many of those are building inspectors?

Ms MEAGHER: 26 building inspectors.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: And what is the rest made up of?

Ms MEAGHER: A range of responsibilities.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: A range; what was that figure again for inspectors?

Ms MEAGHER: 26.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: 26 building inspectors, so there are about 100 administrative staff, is there?

Ms MEAGHER: General Manager and executive assistant, they are two positions; operations and governance, 14 positions -

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Are these actually filled, Minister, are they?

Ms MEAGHER: I have already answered that, Mr Gallacher.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: I didn't hear it, Minister.

Ms MEAGHER: I answered that there are 135 who have been employed and recruitment is continuing. I am now giving you the breakdown of the positions that have been allocated.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: That have been filled?

Ms MEAGHER: No, not filled, allocated.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Can you tell us how many have actually been filled, Minister?

Ms MEAGHER: I just that said that, Mr Gallacher.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Minister, whilst you are answering those questions, where you are now giving us the breakdown, you are giving us budgeted figures. Can you also give us the actual whilst you do it? So if you have got 14 budgeted and you have got 10 people actually filling positions, that would be very helpful, thank you.

Ms MEAGHER: I will run through the breakdown of the staff. General Manager and executive assistance are two positions; operations and governance is 14 positions; dispute resolution and inspections 32 positions; building investigations 24; regulatory analysis and assessment seven; licensing, insurance and industry standards 51; insurance services 19 positions.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Thank you, Minister. Could you now go back down through that list and tell us also for the positions there how many actual people you have in each one of those positions?

Ms MEAGHER: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: In other words, you do not know, Minister?

Ms MEAGHER: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Minister, you may have noticed there has been quite a deal of concern within the community about the home builders warranty situation. I know it doesn't actually fall under your portfolio per se, but are you hearing from the 140 or so people who are employed under the Home Building Service area that they are concerned about the number of owner builders who are not taking home warranty insurance because they cannot afford it and they want to get their work done and they go and take TAFE courses and all those sorts of issues?

Ms MEAGHER: Domestic and international pressures on the current insurance market have meant that a number of licensed building contractors have not been able to secure home warranty insurance. Other sections of the insurance market, such as public liability and professional indemnity insurance, are undergoing similar experiences.

As a consequence of the collapse of the HIH Insurance Group in March 2001 and the withdrawal of Dexta Corporation from the insurance marketplace in 2002, there are two insurers presently providing home warranty cover: Royal Sun Alliance and Reward Insurance.

In May this year the Minister for Commerce announced an inquiry into the New South Wales home warranty insurance scheme. Mr Richard Grellman is conducting that inquiry.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: When is that inquiry due back?

Ms MEAGHER: The inquiry is looking at whether the existing legislative framework governing home warranty insurance is effective for consumers and industry. Mr Grellman is due to submit his final report by 30 September 2003.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Minister, I was just asking you whether any of the officers in this new Home Building Service area have spoken with you as employees of the department to talk about any problems they see with owner builders avoiding having to pay home warranty insurance because they cannot actually find a builder that can get insurance. Is this an issue that has come up?

Ms MEAGHER: No.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Not at all? The Home Building Service within the Department of Consumer Affairs does not feel that this is an issue?

Ms MEAGHER: It has not been reported to me, and that was your question.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: It has not been reported? I find that amazing actually. 145 staff out there at the moment--

CHAIR: Order! Could you confine yourself to questions to the Minister, not comments, observations, et cetera, as they are not appropriate to questioning of estimates matters.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Well, I am just questioning the Minister in relation to her role as Minister for Consumer Affairs on behalf of consumers and their lack of insurance coverage when they are building a home and I just thought the Minister may--

CHAIR: I think the Minister has answered that question.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: With the Home Building Advisory Council, what is its relationship with the Home Building Service?

Ms MEAGHER: I would ask the Commissioner for Fair Trading to respond to that.

Mr O'CONNOR: May I have the question again?

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What is the relationship between the Home Building Advisory Council and the Home Building Service?

Mr O'CONNOR: The Home Building Advisory Council is an advisory council appointed by the Minister to provide direct advice to her on home building matters. The ex officio member of the Home Building Advisory Council is myself and I can provide that information to the Minister in response to matters raised, but they report directly to the Minister and the general manager of the Home Building Service attends all meetings to provide advice or other information required by that advisory council.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What is the composition of the council, if you could provide me with details about individual people on that council, their annual remuneration and other allowances and entitlements, including cars, mobile phones, for 2002-03 and 2003-04?

Ms MEAGHER: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What initial budget was allocated in 2002-03 to the Home Building Advisory Council?

Ms MEAGHER: The Commissioner for Fair Trading will respond.

Mr O'CONNOR: There is no particular budget for the Home Building Advisory Council. Members are paid a fee as they attend. Any money or research that they require for travel, information research, professional service, is provided from within the Office of Fair Trading. There is no separate budget.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: On how many occasions during 2002-03 did the Home Building Advisory Council provide unsolicited advice to the Minister and what was the subject matter of this advice?

Ms MEAGHER: I would have to take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Could you take on notice, for the previous financial year, that same question? What is the composition of members of the Retirement Villages Advisory Council?

Ms MEAGHER: Well, it crosses industry and, of course, consumer groups and stakeholders, but again I do not have that information here, I would have to take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: For the individual members?

Ms MEAGHER: Yes.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Could you also provide details on notice of their annual remuneration and other allowances and entitlements for this financial year and the 2002-03 financial year?

Ms MEAGHER: Yes, I will take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What was the initial budget allocated in 2002-03 for the Property Services Advisory Council?

Ms MEAGHER: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Was this budget revised or exceeded and, if so, by how much? You can take that on notice as well.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: They should know the budgets.

Ms MEAGHER: I am sorry, I did not hear that, Mr Gallacher.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Surely you can tell us if the budget was revised. This is budget estimates. Surely you do not take that on notice. The whole idea is to discuss the budget.

Ms MEAGHER: The status of the advisory councils is similar. The Commissioner for Fair Trading has answered that in the first instance. You are going now through the list of ministerial advisory councils. Their situation is similar. I will take it on notice.

CHAIR: It would be helpful if we only had one question at a time, thank you.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: She asked me a question, Madam Chair, you might recall, she said, "What was that, please, Mr Gallacher", and I was only assisting the Minister.

CHAIR: Thank you for being so helpful.

Ms MEAGHER: I needed him to repeat it because he is right up the back.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What are the allocations for the Retirement Villages Advisory Council for 2003-2004?

Ms MEAGHER: I have responded to that.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: That was actually the composition of the council.

Ms MEAGHER: Well, as I pointed out to you, it is the same as the Property Services Advisory Council. All of the advisory councils operate under the same auspices. I will take it on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: On how many occasions during 2002-03 did the Retirement Villages Advisory Council provide unsolicited advice to you or the other minister and what was the subject matter of this advice?

Ms MEAGHER: I will take it on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: On how many occasions during 2002-03 did the Minister seek advice from the Retirement Villages Advisory Council and what was the subject matter of this advice?

Ms MEAGHER: Well, I cannot answer for the previous minister. I have sought advice from the council on one occasion.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Minister, I will talk up and that way you can hear me. What initial budget was allocated in 2002-03 for the Consumer, Trader and Tenancy Tribunal?

Ms MEAGHER: I would ask Michael Silk to respond to that.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Thank you.

Mr SILK: The operating budget for the CTTT for 2002-03 was \$22 million approximately.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Can you hear me fairly clearly, Mr Silk, so I do not have to shout?

Mr SILK: Yes.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Mr Silk, was this budget revised or exceeded and, if so, by how much?

Mr SILK: In the year 2002-03 the tribunal exceeded its budget allocation by approximately \$0.8 million.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Mr Silk, could you give us an indication, please, if at all possible, of how many matters the CTTT has heard since its formation on 25 February 2002?

Mr SILK: I will refer that question to the Minister.

Ms MEAGHER: One of the objects of the Consumer, Trader and Tenancy Tribunal Act 2001 is to ensure that tribunal proceedings are determined in an expeditious manner. The CTTT commenced operations on 25 February 2002 and is meeting its legislative obligations to be inexpensive, accessible and expeditious in delivering its services to the people of New South Wales. The tribunal provides traders and consumers with a cost effective forum for settling disputes and helps foster a better, fairer marketplace. The tribunal has proved to be an effective low cost forum for the settlement of a wide range of consumer problems. The majority of applications lodged at the tribunal cost \$28. Pensioners and students pay only \$5 each. The tribunal--

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Minister, we are on a fairly limited timeframe and I would hate to cut into one of our Independent's time. Could you please simply tell me how many matters it has heard since its formation on 25 February 2002?

Ms MEAGHER: Mr Gallacher, I am trying to answer that question.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Yes, I am sure it is there, Minister, but it would make it a lot easier for the other members.

Ms MEAGHER: Thank you, Mr Gallacher.

CHAIR: Well, I appreciate your concern, Mr Gallacher. We only have one Independent member here this evening, Mr Breen is not with us.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: I would hate to cut into your questions too, the Government's questions.

CHAIR: The Minister is entitled to answer the questions in the way she sees fit, so the Minister may proceed.

Ms MEAGHER: The tribunal receives more than 5,000 applications per month and in the year 2002-03 the tribunal received 62,000 applications. In 80 percent of the tribunal applications a final determination is made at or prior to the first hearing date and the majority of matters are concluded within 35 days of lodgment. Of all the matters heard by the tribunal, only .8 percent are approved for rehearing, indicating a satisfactory standard of decision making. Appeals against tribunal decisions, which go to the Supreme Court, are relatively low and in the past year only 81 such appeals have been identified. The tribunal has implemented case management strategies to deal with the complex jurisdictional issues throughout its divisions and I am glad that, as part of the Carr Government's e-commerce movement, I will soon be launching the CTTT's on-line application service which will enable applicants to lodge their applications through the internet.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Thank you, Minister. Part of the ongoing responsibilities of CTTT is to ensure the confidence of the community, I think you would agree with me. Could you indicate to the Committee what formal qualifications or experience did the chair of the CTTT have, Ms K Ransom, before she took over the position?

Ms MEAGHER: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Was it you that actually appointed Ms Ransom?

Ms MEAGHER: No.

CHAIR: The Honourable Michael Gallacher, you have one more question in this bracket of 20 minutes for questions of the Opposition.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Minister, in terms of Ms Ransom's nomination, can you tell me how many other candidates were part of the selection procedure?

Ms MEAGHER: I was not the Minister at the time.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Can you take it on notice?

Ms MEAGHER: I will take it on notice.

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: Minister, perhaps I am taking a slightly different line. Can I refer you to Budget Paper No. 3, Volume 3, page 88? This is the page on which, of course, the operating statements are provided. At the bottom of page 88 under operating statement expenses there is an item, and let me say that the figures for 2002-03 and 2003-04 show very little variation over the whole spectrum, they are fairly stable, but one figure I would be interested in having explained to me is the figure marked as "Subsidies to organisations, public financial enterprises". What sort of subsidies are paid to what sort of organisations?

Ms MEAGHER: I am going to have to just try and find the line item that you are referring to.

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: All I am wondering is what sort of subsidies Fair Trading would be making and to whom? The reason I am asking the question is that that is one of the items which has shown a reasonably large variation in the downward direction. What I suppose I am about to ask is what is the reason for what seems to be about a 12.5 percent reduction in that payment figure in the 2003-04 budget?

Ms MEAGHER: This item relates to a pro rata share of a number of consumer related grants in 2003-04. Last year's budget included an amount of \$1.7 million to the Travel Compensation Fund in relation to the collapse of Ansett with the New South Wales Government contribution of \$1.7 million.

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: So that will not be there this year, obviously?

Ms MEAGHER: That is right, yes.

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: In general though, what sort of bodies get those sorts of subsidies?

Ms MEAGHER: Tenants, advice advocacy services, financial counselling service grants.

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: That is fine. That is all I need. Then may I ask you, in the eyes of the general public, when you talk about Fair Trading and the old Consumer Affairs Department, and you hear about it in the news, I suppose the thing that most people associate with that department is dealing with what you might call the shonky traders, the people who do not bear up their warranties, who disappear overnight. What sort of progress are you making, what sort of progress do you hope to make in the coming year and how effective has the department been at cracking down on those people?

Ms MEAGHER: One of the two objectives of the Carr Government is to promote honest and ethical fair trading in the market place. The Government has a wide range of remedies available to ensure compliance with fair trading legislation and promote consumer protection. These include formal cautions, warnings, penalty notices, some of which may be issued on the spot, prosecutions, Supreme Court injunctions, disciplinary proceedings against licensees, public naming of unfair traders, accepting court enforceable undertakings from traders to make good the effects of misconduct and secure their future compliance.

Priority areas of compliance actions include major fair trading issues, such as the home building industry, the real estate industry, product and electrical safety, scams targetting vulnerable consumers and unlicensed trading generally. The Office of Fair Trading does not hesitate to take major court action where this is appropriate and to enforce orders granted by the Supreme Court. During the year ended 30 June 2003, the office successfully prosecuted 116 defendants for more than 570 breaches of legislation administered by the office. Total penalties of over \$700,000 were imposed. The following prosecution results highlight the seriousness with which the court regards conduct which contravenes fair trading laws. The results should deter not only the persons convicted of unlawful conduct but also others who contravene fair trading laws.

One such case was a Adrema Pty Limited, trading as National Sports Marketing and Sports Stars Tours, specialising in arranging travel to international sporting events advertised extensively on the internet. It sold airline tickets, hotel accommodation, car hire and tours. Adrema collapsed in June 2001, stranding more than 120 fans who had paid for tours to major overseas sporting events. The company was not a licensed travel agent and consumers lost more than \$600,000. One of the key figures in both businesses was Ken Elphick. In view of the seriousness of the conduct, Fair Trading launched a prosecution in the Supreme Court, also seeking ancillary money orders. In September 2002 the Supreme Court fined Elphick \$22,000. The other director, Stuart Bradley Cann was fined \$3,000. Both were ordered to pay compensation totalling more than \$140,000 plus costs. These cases also send out a powerful deterrent factor that if you breach the laws the consequences can be severe, not just monetary but, more important, to reputation which, as everyone knows, is crucial to a travel agent.

Two more recent cases highlight the department's work. At the end of August National Van was successfully prosecuted after falsely claiming to hold a licence to undertake electrical work. Also at the end of August, the Office of Fair Trading successfully prosecuted a director of a former Thirroul bank building related business for taking excessive deposits under the Home Building Act. The prosecution followed complaints from consumers who entered into contracts for the installation of shade sails that in one case were defective. Investigators quickly discovered that the company was not licensed to undertake the work and that the company demanded 40 percent deposit on the jobs, where the law states deposits of either 5 or 10 percent can be expected. These cases highlight Fair Trading's efforts to protect consumers and act where necessary to prosecute traders who flout the law.

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: Minister, I think you said there were 116 prosecutions in 12 months. The figure itself is not particularly relevant. Are there any instances where prosecutions are unsuccessful, and, if so, what proportion do they make of all the prosecutions you undertake? What I am searching for is a level of success, the ratio of success.

Ms MEAGHER: I can tell you certainly a list of our potential successes, three or four amendments to the Fair Trading Act, and one of the most important factors I think is now there are potential gaol terms for habitual rogue traders. In the past someone could liquidate their business and start trading again the next day. Now they potentially could face gaol terms of up to three years if the Office of

Fair Trading brings action successfully in the Supreme Court. I am also advised that on prosecutions the office has a success rate of 86 percent.

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: Would you say that is a good rate? It is obvious, isn't it. Minister, thank you for that. One other question I would like to ask you is something that came up during this year which impinges on upon the activities of the Office of Fair Trading I think, and that is something that was referred to in Parliament by myself, and that is the report that we may be seeing being imported into Australia various items of clothing which are made from the fur of domestic animals such as cats and dogs. It is a particularly iniquitous trade, apparently not only coming from China but from Belgium. Has your office received any complaints or reports of goods of this type being sold or attempting to be sold in New South Wales? If so, what remedies do you have to stop this from happening, because I presume it would be illegal?

Ms MEAGHER: Yes. Your concerns that you raised in the Legislative Council were passed on to me and I too saw that *7.30 Report* and was quite horrified with the images that I saw. It is an offence under the Fair Trading Act of 1987 to falsely represent that goods are of a particular composition or have a particular history. Any supply or retail, to sell or advertise such a product in New South Wales would need to comply with the Act. Any complaints reported to the Office of Fair Trading are investigated. The penalties for these offences, for falsely representing a product, a maximum of \$22,000 an individual and \$110,000 a corporation.

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: Do you have to depend on complaints or do you have any system of, I suppose, sniffing out this sort of thing, because obviously it is a growing trade and it is one which has been greeted with repulsion and revulsion in many parts of the world? Do you have to wait until somebody complains or is there a detection system, say at the point of entry, which could pick these things up?

Ms MEAGHER: Detection at the point of entry would involve customs and we are not in a position to add to that, otherwise it would be a complaint driven process.

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: Thank you, Minister. No more questions, Madam Chair.

CHAIR: I will go to the Government members if they have any questions.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Thank you, Madam Chair. I am interested to know the legal implications and the process for the delivery of equal opportunity obligations to both staff and public by the Department of Fair Trading?

Ms MEAGHER: The Office of Fair Trading abides by the principles of equal opportunities in both its staffing and delivery of service. I would like to briefly outline some of the key points in this area.

The Office of Fair Trading supports people with disabilities. We have a telephone typewriter service for people who are deaf or who have speech or hearing impairments in five areas: general fair trading inquiries, renting services, property, real estate and business licensing, the register of encumbered vehicles and the Consumer, Trader and Tenancy Tribunal (CTTT). Disability issues are included in the access and equity component of the customer services division induction program. Information includes practical resources for staff, such as sign language interpreters, TTY phones and TTY relay service.

From the equal employment opportunity survey, as at 30 June 2003, 10 percent of staff identified that they had a disability. The CTTT currently employs a number of staff with disabilities. Adjustments have been made to the physical environment and in two cases duties have been altered to accommodate needs.

For people from non-English speaking backgrounds the Office of Fair Trading provides a raft of services. Language assistance is provided via free telephone or in-person interpreter services. There are translated publications on the web site and selected items in hard copy in a range of languages, including Chinese, Arabic, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean and Spanish.

In May, I visited the adult migrant education service in Burwood to bring the consumer protection message to people from non-English speaking backgrounds. It was pleasing to see the Office of Fair Trading make a presentation and have an information stand. People from non-English speaking

backgrounds can often be a target for marketplace scams and shonks and often come from countries where there is a distrust of Government. That is why we are particularly keen to provide as much information on consumer protections so their rights are guarded. In fact, this Sunday the Office of Fair Trading has an information stand at the annual Moon Festival in Cabramatta, which attracts in excess of 40,000 people, mostly of Chinese and Vietnamese origin.

The Think Smart on Consumer Rights education strategy for ethnic communities will continue to guide the development of ethnic communication strategies. It includes a dedicated budget and a full-time senior multicultural liaison officer; training for ethnic community workers at migrant resource centres and ethno specific organisations as part of Think Smart; expansion of the ethnic community and media partnership program; and an ethnic web site which provides key consumer information in seven languages. The information is accessible from every page on the Fair Trading web site. It will be expanded to cater for other languages and topics.

24 percent of staff at the Office of Fair Trading are people whose language first spoken as a child was not English. This exceeds the Government target of 20 percent. We have four six month placements to monitor career development programs for people from non-English speaking backgrounds who had overseas skills or experience that had not been recognised.

In 2003 we identified two positions for advertising to be filled by job seekers or public sector staff who wished to gain experience in the area in which they have overseas skills. These were assistant customer service officer positions in Sydney and Newcastle.

In regard to women, the Office of Fair Trading representation of women, 61 percent, exceeds the Government target of 50 percent. To increase the representation of women at higher levels, OFT has implemented a range of strategies. One example was the piloting of the Reskilling for Women in Information Technology project. Two positions in IT were targeted for six months for two women from OFT business units to increase their IT skills and increase the representation of women in IT.

Finally, the Office of Fair Trading has been active in producing a range of consumer educational material for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities focussing on a wide range of issues. The office has developed culturally appropriate material, which includes an indigenous youth package, a series of fact sheets, flyers and posters on issues such as tenancy, register of encumbered vehicles, toy safety and credit, all of which are major issues identified from research and consultation with Aboriginal communities.

The development of culturally appropriate promotional material has provided support for major Aboriginal events, including Survival Day, NAIDOC Week and New South Wales Aboriginal football knockout carnival. The regional efforts of the office's Aboriginal customer service officers are being recognised through regular articles being distributed to various Aboriginal community organisations throughout New South Wales.

Research clearly indicates that Aboriginal communities prefer face to face contact for getting information or assistance. To improve access for Aboriginal people, the Office of Fair Trading has employed 12 Aboriginal customer service officers in 11 Fair Trading centres specialising in Aboriginal tenancy issues. A program of customer service initiatives has also been developed by the office to ensure that Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders living in rural and remote areas are equally empowered as consumers. Aboriginal customer service officers conduct regular outreach visits to local land councils, Aboriginal support centres, Aboriginal housing providers and many other organisations accessed by Aboriginal people who need information or assistance.

CHAIR: Do we have any further Government questions at this time?

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Not at this time, thank you.

CHAIR: In that case we will start again on Opposition questioning, but I will advise that at 6.30 we will have a five minute break, so you can have 15 minutes of questioning and then five minutes after the break and we will just keep going around in circles.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Minister, in your opening address you made comment about Reame I think in terms of media monitoring, the spending there, and you said "as reported". Are you talking about comments that you made in an earlier committee hearing or somewhere else?

Ms MEAGHER: In another committee hearing, I think it was General Purpose Standing Committee No. 1.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Can you indicate to us, please, why the Honourable John Della Bosca - I assume that is who you were talking about - would have come up with a figure of \$126,074 on the issue of media monitoring? Why such a specific figure, considering it was wrong.

Ms MEAGHER: The Honourable John Della Bosca, I understand, wrote a letter of clarification to the chair of General Purpose Standing Committee No. 1, the Honourable Reverend Fred Nile. I might read that letter for your clarification.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: You do not need to, it has been tabled, so that is fine.

Ms MEAGHER: Well, I think it is best that I do.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Point of order. The matter has been tabled. We are not going to see a blatant use of time, which is clearly an unfair attempt by the Minister, knowing that we are on very strict times.

CHAIR: I actually think it would have been quicker for the Minister to have read it.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: No, it would not have, as she reads incredibly slowly. I would prefer to continue on with the questioning. We do not have time for silly games.

CHAIR: Well, I would suggest that you stop indulging in them.

Ms MEAGHER: I am actually a little concerned. If the letter has already been tabled, why did you ask me the question?

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Because I asked you to clarify your position, not John Della Bosca's. Turn it upside down and give me your answer. That is John Della Bosca's.

Ms MEAGHER: Well--

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Please, Minister, give me your interpretation, not John Della Bosca's.

Ms MEAGHER: It was John Della Bosca's answer that seems to have confused you, Mr Gallacher, so I think to read his clarification would assist you.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: We do not need his clarification, Minister. If you cannot do it without looking at John Della Bosca's note, which has been tabled, we will proceed to further questioning. Minister, I note in the Government Gazette dated 15 August that you in fact appointed five people to be part-time or full-time members of the CTTT effective from 6 August 2003. What sort of qualities do you look for in these people? Do you interview them personally?

Ms MEAGHER: The department goes through a process of advertising for applications. Those applications are then sorted and assessed by the department. The department then makes recommendations.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Do you interview them at all?

Ms MEAGHER: I do not interview the applicants personally.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Do you know any of the applicants who were appointed to the board?

Ms MEAGHER: I would have to look at the list again, Mr Gallacher.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Well, Minister, perhaps I can help you. Does the name Cameron Lionel Murphy ring a bell?

Ms MEAGHER: Yes, Mr Gallacher, it does.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Can you tell me what qualifications Mr Cameron Lionel Murphy has in his position on the board?

Ms MEAGHER: Mr Murphy has a law degree and has been very active on the Council of Civil Liberties. He was deemed to be well qualified by the department to take up--

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: And do you know him, Minister?

Ms MEAGHER: I may have met him.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: You may have met him? Did you give him any sort of reference or anything for the position?

Ms MEAGHER: Certainly not, Mr Gallacher.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Advice?

Ms MEAGHER: Certainly not.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Would he happen to be a member of the ALP?

Ms MEAGHER: I am not aware of his status in that regard.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: You would not know if he has formerly been a member of the ALP?

Ms MEAGHER: I am not aware of Mr Murphy's--

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: So ALP members cannot be on boards?

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: It is purely for the public interest, honourable member. Do you know Mr Kerry John Williams? Do you know Mr Williams?

Ms MEAGHER: No.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: You do not know of Mr Williams at all?

Ms MEAGHER: No.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: You seem a bit reluctant, Minister.

Ms MEAGHER: I am just concerned, Mr Gallacher. As I said to you, there were recommendations made to me by the Office of Fair Trading based on the skill level of the applicants that had applied. Based on that information and advice, I have appointed those people to act in those capacities.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Georgia Adleigh - does that name ring a bell?

Ms MEAGHER: Mr Gallacher, I do not have the list of appointments.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: No, I have the list of appointments here, I am just trying to assist you. Does that name ring a bell?

Ms MEAGHER: I have not met him.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Him or her?

Ms MEAGHER: I am sorry, what was the name again, Mr Gallacher?

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Georgia Adleigh?

Ms MEAGHER: No, I have not met her.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: I did not ask if you had met her; do you know her? There is a difference.

Ms MEAGHER: Do you mean that in the biblical sense, Mr Gallacher?

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Do you know of her?

Ms MEAGHER: Her application would have been--

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Do you know of her?

Ms MEAGHER: --assessed by the department and recommendations were made to me and I made those appointments.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Did you know of her prior to her putting her application in?

Ms MEAGHER: Based on the information provided to me, those appointments were made.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Minister, did you know of her before she put the application in?

Ms MEAGHER: I have answered that question, Mr Gallacher.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: No, you have not.

Ms MEAGHER: I have said to you I do not know her.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Do you know of her? There is a difference.

CHAIR: Would you like to clarify what that difference is, Mr Gallacher?

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Well, to give you an idea, before Amanda Fazio arrived in Parliament, I did not know her, but I read *Abuse of Power* and I did know of her. I am asking you do you know of Georgia Adleigh?

Ms MEAGHER: What was *Abuse of Power* about, Mr Gallacher?

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: You should read it; you have a starring role in it. Georgia Adleigh - does that name ring a bell?

Ms MEAGHER: No, Mr Gallacher. Before I saw these recommendations from the department, these people were not known to me.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Will you give an undertaking to the Committee to provide - and it is for the public, of course, so that they have confidence in the CTTT - the formal qualifications and experience of those five nominees that you nominated on 15 August?

Ms MEAGHER: I would have to take that on notice, Mr Gallacher, because I am not quite sure how this stands in relation to privacy issues, whether people who are applying for jobs want their personal details released.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: They are not in the public purse?

Ms MEAGHER: I would have to take that on notice, Mr Gallacher.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: So who pays for these people on CTTT?

Ms MEAGHER: I have told you, Mr Gallacher, I will take it on notice.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: So you do not even know who pays for these part-time members?

Ms MEAGHER: I have told you, I will take it on notice.

CHAIR: The Minister has advised that she will take the question on notice.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Which question are you taking on notice?

Ms MEAGHER: All of the above, Mr Gallacher.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: All of them? Okay. As their names are in the Government Gazette, they are therefore not worried about the fact that they are made public. What I think the public would be very interested in is the qualifications of these people that are actually being appointed to boards, so it is not a question of their identities, it is a question of their qualifications and experience to sit on that board. You do understand the distinction, Minister?

CHAIR: Order! The Minister has already indicated that she will take that issue on notice bearing in mind the privacy considerations of the individuals concerned. Would you like to move on to another area of questioning?

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: If you are able to table that information to us, could you also seek information on whether they held any other advisory positions or were appointed to any other New South Wales Government position, and if they had ever been employed by the New South Wales Government as a consultant?

Ms MEAGHER: Yes, I will take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: How many other candidates were part of the selection process? Could you just give us an idea of the number of applicants for the CTTT?

Ms MEAGHER: I have been advised by the Commissioner for Fair Trading that there were 28 applicants.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What initial budget was allocated in 2002-03 for the Financial Counselling Trust Fund?

Ms MEAGHER: I am sorry, what was the financial year?

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Last financial year, 2002-03.

Ms MEAGHER: Michael, could you please answer that?

Mr SILK: In relation to the Financial Counselling Trust Fund, the financial statements or the unaudited accounts for the Financial Counselling Trust Fund for the year 2002-03 indicate that their total operating budget was in the order of \$477,000.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Was this budget revised or exceeded and, if so, by how much?

Mr SILK: I do not have that information.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Take it on notice?

Mr SILK: Yes.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: And the allocations for the Financial Counselling Trust Fund for this financial year, 2003-04?

Mr SILK: I do not have that information.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Could you provide that to us on notice?

Mr SILK: Yes.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What is the composition of the trust fund and the people that make up the trust fund? Could you include individual details, annual remuneration, allowances and other entitlements?

Ms MEAGHER: I will ask Brian Given to answer that question.

Mr GIVEN: I do not have the details of the membership, but Chris Connolly is the chair of the Financial Counselling Trust Fund.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Who is Connolly? David Connolly?

Mr GIVEN: Chris Connolly. There is Carol Alcock, Hilary Cleland and Susan Dixon.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What specific action have you implemented to address the criticism of the Financial Counselling Trust Fund by the Auditor General in his report to Parliament 2002, Volume 6, page 251, where he said the fund's current investment strategy is considered to be too conservative?

Mr GIVEN: The criticism was that the investment strategy of the trustees was somewhat conservative and it was suggested that that ought to be reviewed. It was in fact reviewed by the trustees and they followed the recommendations that were put to them by officers of TCorp and the investment strategy that is now adopted is hopefully going to produce higher returns.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Going back to the retirement villages area, what is the process of the review of the Retirement Villages Act and regulations and how will the department of fair trading consult with the retirement village industry to ensure that the consultation process is effective and includes fair representation from those providing the service?

Ms MEAGHER: Mr Stowe will answer that question.

Mr STOWE: The next review of the retirement village legislation is as part of the statutory review requirements of the Act, which is after five years of operation. That will mean that the review will be completed in 2005. Like all reviews that the office conducts, it will ensure that there is consultation with all participants and stakeholders in the industry and the Retirement Villages Advisory Council for the Minister.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: How many tribunal hearings have been conducted into issues relating to the Retirement Villages Act and what were the outcomes of these hearings?

Mr STOWE: Tribunal hearings?

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Yes.

Mr STOWE: I cannot give you that, I will have to take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Do you agree that the tribunal hearings have increased dramatically due to the current legislation referring all matters of concern to the tribunal when many of these could be resolved through mediation, saving both time and cost?

Mr STOWE: Could I have the question again, please?

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Being the head of that area, are you seeing more tribunal hearings in number, dramatically increasing, because the current legislation refers all sorts of concerns to the tribunal rather than them being able to be resolved through mediation which could be both time and cost-saving to the department?

Mr STOWE: I am not aware of any increase in tribunal applications in respect of retirement village matters, but certainly in any review that would be considered and its effectiveness assessed.

[Short adjournment]

CHAIR: We will proceed with six minutes of Opposition questioning, go to Mr Tingle, go to the Government, come back to the Opposition and keep going in circles going until our time has expired.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What is the composition of the Motor Vehicle Repair Industry Council?

Ms MEAGHER: I will ask Brian Given to take that.

CHAIR: Maybe we will take it on notice, so we can get through some more of these questions.

Ms MEAGHER: He is ready to go.

Mr GIVEN: The Motor Vehicle Repair Industry Authority Council is constituted by a chair and members appointed by the Minister. There are representatives of industry and consumers, and also the police have a representative on the council.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Can you provide the Committee with the names and remuneration allowances of those people on the council in the years 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 on notice?

Mr GIVEN: Yes, we will have to take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What are the allocations for the Motor Vehicle Repair Industry Council for 2003-2004?

Ms MEAGHER: We will take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What specific action have you taken to address criticism of the Motor Vehicle Repair Industry Council by the Auditor General in his report to Parliament in 2000, Volume 6 page 253, for not complying with the requirements of the State Records Act 1998?

Ms MEAGHER: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: How many formal papers or publications did the Motor Vehicle Repair Industry Council provide to the Minister for Fair Trading in relation to the repair industry 2002-2003?

Ms MEAGHER: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: And can you also provide the subject matter and material?

Ms MEAGHER: I can.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Minister, could you tell the Committee how many media or public relations advisers are employed in your Ministerial office?

Ms MEAGHER: Yes, Mr Gallacher. I hope you are not disappointed with the answer. It is one.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: One to do PR and media or one to just do the media, or what is the situation?

Ms MEAGHER: I have one media adviser.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: And what is the total number of your staff?

Ms MEAGHER: I have seven full-time staff and one part-time.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: And the total budget for salaries for your Ministerial office?

Ms MEAGHER: I will have to take the question as to salaries on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: And budget?

Ms MEAGHER: The allocation for my Ministerial office is \$1,238,255.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: And for each of your portfolio agencies, how many media or public relations advisers are employed there?

Ms MEAGHER: The Office of Fair Trading has one media adviser.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What about public relations staff?

Ms MEAGHER: There is no public relations section in the Office of Fair Trading.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: So just one media person?

Ms MEAGHER: One media adviser.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Does that person deal with advertising budgets and other things for \$63,000 a year?

Ms MEAGHER: It is an administrative task done through the management area.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: So the media person doesn't do that. What does the media person do?

Ms MEAGHER: I will get the Commissioner to answer that.

Mr O'CONNOR: The effective task of the media liaison officer is, as the name mentions, to liaise between the agency and the Minister. The function of that person is to take calls from the media that come to the department. All calls are centralised in that spot. Hopefully, that person will be able to answer in general terms the request of the media, if not they are referred to the Minister's office, if they are simply beyond editorial comment, because that is all the department is allowed to put out. If it is anything other than editorial comment, it is a policy requirement to go to the Minister's office to answer, and that person may also prepare draft press releases for the Minister and the Commissioner.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Minister, of the \$1.2 million for your office budget, does that include rent?

Ms MEAGHER: Yes.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: And what was the rent?

Ms MEAGHER: I will have to take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: For the Department of Fair Trading how much money was spent on advertising in 2002-2003 and could you please provide campaign costs and which firms were involved?

Ms MEAGHER: I will ask the Commissioner of Fair Trading to answer that question.

Mr O'CONNOR: The Fair Trading expenditure for advertising is in a number of areas. There is recruitment advertising, which was \$119,693, and there is also advertising for legislative reviews, issues papers that are issued by the department, and also in particular we have an outreach to advertising in the various sections of the media as well. So the total budget for advertising for the last financial year was \$264,376.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Thank you.

CHAIR: Time for Opposition questions has expired. Mr Tingle, do you have any questions?

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: Thank you, Madam Chair. Minister, I would like to take you back, if I may, to the questions Mr Gallacher was asking about the selection process for people on various boards and bodies under your control. I feel that there was an inference in those questions of some form of political nepotism. That being the case, I wondered if you would like to explain to us what the process is for somebody to become a Ministerial nominee on one of those boards or bodies? Do you pick them out of a hat or does somebody advise you who should be the Minister's nominee? How is that status arrived at?

Ms MEAGHER: I will ask the Commissioner for Fair Trading to answer that question.

Mr O'CONNOR: Thank you, Minister, Chair. When vacancies occur on any position, whether it is a Government position in the department, whether it is a member of the tribunal or whether it is a member of an advisory council, we do two things: We place advertisements in newspapers, both in Sydney and the country if we are looking for country people, and also we write to relevant industry associations and consumer groups seeking their nominees for these various groups.

When we receive the applications, particularly from advisory councils, the Office of Fair Trading makes a recommendation to the Minister based on a number of criteria, if it is geographic, industry representatives, consumer representatives or other types of representatives, so we have a balance. We are also required to look at gender balance to the extent we can, so we take all of these into consideration and then provide a list to the Minister of the people who we think most suitable, and then the final decision is that of the Minister according to the legislation.

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: What I am specifically asking is how does somebody become a Ministerial nominee? Is that what you are saying?

Mr O'CONNOR: Exactly, by the same token.

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: I suppose it might sound a silly question, but why are there Ministerial nominees to those sorts of boards?

Mr O'CONNOR: Because the legislation calls for them, Mr Tingle.

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: That is a good answer, thank you. I think you have probably answered the question, but just to clarify this and to deal with this question of nepotism, if on the recommendation of one of your officers, such as Mr O'Connor, you nominate somebody as a Ministerial nominee to a board, and if you did know that person or have some connection with them, personal or political, would you be required to disclose that fact? Is there any requirement in any of the Acts that says, "I am the Minister. I nominate that person. By the way, I do know them. I had a cup of tea with her last week" or something?

Ms MEAGHER: Nothing is required under the legislation.

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: Would you, as a Minister, feel that, just to clear the air for later, that you should say, "Well, I do know this person"? Would that be a good thing to do?

Ms MEAGHER: Well, we follow the legislation with appointments and there is no formal procedure as such outlining that, for example, in the Government Gazette.

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: Would you feel it would be a wise thing to do?

Ms MEAGHER: Those appointments are basically signed off on in the Gazette, so there is no public statement by me in relation to those appointments or mentions of them in the department.

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: What I am trying to get at is, even though they might be shown as a Ministerial nominee, they are in fact people who have been recommended to you for that position by one of your officers, so really you yourself are not picking that person out and making the Ministerial nominee?

Ms MEAGHER: Could you just repeat that again?

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: What I am saying is when a person becomes a Ministerial nominee, it is because one of your officers has recommended to you that that person should be so nominated?

Ms MEAGHER: I think it is important to clarify the language. They are not political nominees. The department makes a recommendation. The Office of Fair Trading obviously refers candidates based on their assessment criteria and I decide upon that.

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: That is what I was trying to clarify obviously. Thank you, Minister.

CHAIR: Have Government members any questions?

The Hon. IAN WEST: Minister, I can imagine that within the department customer service would be a major issue when you are dealing with obviously people who come to the department and have all sorts of difficulties, who have possibly got regional and isolation problems, ESB issues, etc. Could you give us some indication as to what the Government is doing to technically improve customer service delivery?

Ms MEAGHER: Fair Trading has considerable contact with the public of New South Wales. In fact, customer service, as you are aware, is our core business. Figures for 2002-2003 show that Fair Trading provided 5.5 million direct services to customers. This means that the Office of Fair Trading is providing a direct service to a significant proportion of the State's estimated population of 6.7 million people each year.

Administering more than 40 different pieces of legislation means its services span a very broad range of issues, from credit and home building issues to tenancy and everyday consumer advice. This includes over 1.5 million phone and counter inquiries through its network of 23 Fair Trading centres throughout New South Wales. These call centres are in a registry of co-operatives in association with Bathurst.

There are over 800,000 peer group sessions on the web site. The interesting point is that this is new demand. It is supplementing rather than replacing traditional service methods. There were over 1.2 million checks in the register of encumbered vehicles, allowing people to purchase vehicles privately with more confidence. There were 571,000 rental bond transactions. These involved \$295,000 being lodged for safekeeping with Fair Trading, whilst \$276,000 was refunded to people who had completed their transfers.

Over 26,000 Fair Trading complaints were received, including over 6,000 received through e-complaints, an Office of Fair Trading web site facility that allows customers to lodge complaints about Fair Trading issues electronically. Each of these complaints involves negotiations between the parties involved. Around a quarter of all customer consumer complaints received by Fair Trading Centres are now lodged electronically, which is a 12 percent increase compared to the previous financial year.

In providing this high level of contact, the Office of Fair Trading takes careful account of customer response in order to ensure the provision of services is of the highest possible standard and consistent with clients' needs. It does this each year through an objective outsourced customer satisfaction survey that tests the response of recent customers across the range of its service. The results you will see once again show that the high level of contact is matched with equally high customer satisfaction levels.

For issues such as overall quality of service, subject knowledge, politeness and helpfulness of staff, satisfaction levels are all in the 90 percentile range. These excellent results reflect Fair Trading's management, training and business recruitment processes. When combined with the great number of customer contacts, it is clear the people of New South Wales are receiving good value for their money.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Minister, can you tell me what is the Government doing in country New South Wales to assist and protect consumers?

Ms MEAGHER: Thank you. The Government is committed to ensuring services provided by the Office of Fair Trading meet the diverse needs of the community, embracing both metropolitan and regional populations, as well as disadvantaged groups such as Aboriginal people. As a result of the Government's commitment, people in country areas now have increased access to services provided by Fair Trading.

In May this year I had the pleasure of opening the new Port Macquarie Fair Trading centre. The centre had been operating for 10 years at Port Macquarie and was in desperate need of more modern facilities. The centre catered for more than 107,000 people on the mid-north coast and dealt with over 22,000 inquiries last year. In July I had the pleasure of officially opening the full-time office at Bathurst. Fair Trading centres also conduct a range of outreach and partnership programs. These programs often involve seminars for consumers and traders on a variety of subjects, such as consumer credit, residential tenancies and owner-builder responsibilities.

In addition, the regional access program sees departmental officers visiting regional and remote communities that are not directly serviced by a Fair Trading centre. A range of fair trading services is also available through all government access centres throughout regional New South Wales. Electronic service delivery initiatives are improving access to services for residents of regional areas. The Office of Fair Trading's comprehensive web site means fair trading information can be accessed 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Inquiries and complaints can also be lodged with the office via the web site.

The Office of Fair Trading funds 24 financial counselling services for people outside Sydney. The Office of Fair Trading funds 10 tenancy advice and advocacy services in regional locations of which three are run by Aboriginal organisations targeting the Aboriginal community.

The weighbridge testing service conducted by Fair Trading throughout rural New South Wales ensures the accuracy of hundreds of public and private weighbridges. These include those used intensively for the harvest of wheat and other grains as well as cattle weighing scales in sale yards.

The location of the Registry of Cooperatives and Associations and the opening of the Bathurst Fair Trading Centre are other examples of the Government's commitment to locate services close to the communities that need them.

Previous research and consultation with Aboriginal communities has identified tenancy issues, complex contracts and discrimination as the most important consumer issues. Since launching the Aboriginal Action Plan in 1998, Fair Trading has created 12 designated customer service officer positions throughout the State specialising in Aboriginal tenancy issues. The good work of the New South Wales Office of Fair Trading in reaching Aboriginal communities has been acknowledged by other consumer protection agencies.

CHAIR: We now have another 20 minutes of Opposition questions.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Minister, I wanted to ask you about legal fees, but before I do I am interested to hear your comments about country New South Wales, because it is 1,443 days to the day since Minister Watkins, as Minister for Fair Trading, promised to bring down petrol prices

in country New South Wales. I just wondered if you could tell us what your plan is to bring down petrol prices in country New South Wales?

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: John Watkins was going to do it, and he is a man of his word.

Ms MEAGHER: I thank the honourable member for his question, and I would remind him that petrol prices are the responsibility of Federal Government.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Surely when you visit your electorate from time to time they do raise with you petrol prices in Sydney and John Watkins was very clear about bringing prices down. I am just wondering what you are doing as Minister to ensure that we are going to get cheaper petrol prices in New South Wales?

Ms MEAGHER: Well, Mr Gallacher, it is very difficult to do things that are beyond your control and beyond your jurisdiction. Petrol prices are the responsibility of the Federal Government.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Is that a recent change?

Ms MEAGHER: I suggest you refer your questions to the Prime Minister.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: I am just concerned that Mr Watkins may have misled the Committee in the past, that is all.

Ms MEAGHER: I suggest you ask Mr Howard what he is going to do about petrol prices.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: All right, I will raise that with Mr Watkins. He might get some good legal advice.

Ms MEAGHER: Take it to the man who can do something about it and refer it to the Prime Minister, Mr Gallacher.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Minister, in each of your portfolio agencies in 2002-03, how much was spent on legal expenses?

Ms MEAGHER: Mr Gallacher, it would be difficult to provide an exact figure as it is part of the general operating expenditure of the Office of Fair Trading.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Can you give us a rough figure?

Ms MEAGHER: I would have to take it on notice.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: A ballpark figure, perhaps?

Ms MEAGHER: I have answered that, Mr Gallacher.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What was the initial budget allocation for the New South Wales Product Safety Committee for 2002-03?

Ms MEAGHER: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Can you also advise whether the budget was revised or exceeded and, if so, by how much and what was the allocation for the New South Wales Product Safety Committee for 2003-04, and if you could detail the specific referrals made to the committee by the Minister. Have you made any referrals to the New South Wales Product Safety Committee?

Ms MEAGHER: Yes, I have. There was a yo-yo ball that was threatening to kill children around New South Wales and that was referred to the Product Safety Committee for its attention. Also a baby bathing cradle.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Any killer kettles?

Ms MEAGHER: I am sorry?

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Killer kettles.

Ms MEAGHER: Killer kettles?

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Exploding kettles and things like that?

Ms MEAGHER: Mr Gallacher, you might find these matters light-hearted--

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: No, I am serious.

Ms MEAGHER: --but when people are seriously injured it is very, very sad and disturbing.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: We see these every year, but unfortunately, Minister, quite often--

Ms MEAGHER: It is very disturbing.

CHAIR: Order! Would you allow the Minister to finish her answer?

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: --you have to be pushed to do something about them.

Ms MEAGHER: Well, that is very untrue, Mr Gallacher. I am very prompt to make a reference to the Product Safety Committee because I take these issues seriously.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Well, we will watch you with great interest in the future.

Ms MEAGHER: I have no doubt you will.

CHAIR: Do you have any further questions?

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Yes.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Were there any other referrals to the New South Wales Product Safety Committee by you as Minister, was the question, apart from the yo-yo ball?

Ms MEAGHER: Yes, recent referrals to the Product Safety Committee have included the baby bathing frames and cradles relating to the coroner's investigation after a six week old child died after being left unattended in a bathing frame. The yo-yo balls we have discussed. As a result of an inquiry into portable soccer goals the Office of Fair Trading drafted and Standards Australia published a guide on the design, storage and maintenance of soccer goal posts. The inquiry was held following the death of a child being struck on the head from an unstable goal post.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Minister, is it usually a referral after an incident that the Product Safety Committee investigates or does the Product Safety Committee actually go through businesses where there is a flood of products that come in from China, for example, where things are made very cheaply, and I see with my own eyes some very dangerous toys that I would not like to have my four year old or one year old play with, so the question is: Does the department actively seek out dangerous toys or do you wait for a referral?

Ms MEAGHER: I will ask Brian Given to answer that.

Mr GIVEN: The Product Safety Committee action is taken on the basis of referrals from the Minister, but of course there is a whole range of work that officers in the Office of Fair Trading do in relation to product safety issues and we do have people in the field monitoring the marketplace. Most people would be well aware of the survey work that is done around Easter and prior to Christmas, and the showbags that are monitored around the Easter Show and that kind of thing. We also have matters referred

to us from other jurisdictions where problems come up and, through the network of the ministerial council and the Standing Committee of Consumer Affairs officials, there is an exchange of information right around the country, and indeed internationally, when issues come up that there is some intelligence that there could be a product that appears to be unsafe or has caused a problem in some part of the world that we think may be a problem here. Those matters are investigated.

Where appropriate, there are recommendations made to the Minister for banning orders and the Minister has the option in relation to that sort of circumstance of referring matters to the Product Safety Committee to get further investigation and consideration of a particular product. There are many examples where that happens. The Minister can also ask the office to develop particular standards if the product is not necessarily unsafe but there are design issues that need to be taken into account so that the product's safety is improved, and the Office of Fair Trading does a lot of work with the various committees under Standards Australia that look at developing standards for bicycles and crash helmets and things of that sort, so there is quite a strong effort and commitment and I think that, without boasting, in New South Wales we have shown, over a long period of time and certainly currently, that the commitment of the Office of Product Safety and the Minister is a leadership for Australia. We are generally recognised as the leading authority in terms of product safety issues within Australia.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Minister, could you give us a little bit of a run-down on the Cooperatives Council and what it does?

Mr GIVEN: Because I am the convenor of the Cooperatives Council, it is probably easier for me to answer the question. The Cooperatives Council is established pursuant to the legislation, the Cooperatives Act. It is referred to in the legislation. Its members are appointed by the Minister and a proportion of those members have to be people nominated from cooperatives, and recently that process has been put in place because the current term of the members of the Cooperatives Council is due to expire so--

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Could I just ask, as an example of some of the cooperatives across the State, because they have quite a significant impact on economies in rural New South Wales, what sort of groups are represented at the Cooperatives Council?

Mr GIVEN: Well, the membership currently comprises some people who are members or directors of cooperatives, both large and small, and other people who have an interest in cooperatives. All of the current members have had long involvement in the cooperative sector.

You referred to the importance of cooperatives in terms of rural and regional economies and that is certainly an issue that the Cooperatives Council has focused on over the last few years in particular. Currently the Cooperatives Council is overseeing a strategy that was developed by the Registry of Cooperatives and Associations which is looking particularly at regional development issues and how cooperatives can assist in regional development issues. That strategy involves officers of the registry not only contacting cooperatives and people in regional communities but also looking at how we can tap into other government programs which have that regional development focus and, as I said, the Cooperatives Council is playing its part to ensure that this strategy is implemented and developed.

Ms MEAGHER: I would like to add to Brian's answer: I issued a press release on 2 September. There is actually a position vacant on the Cooperatives Council and I have asked people to nominate, because the Cooperative Council provides me with independent and expert advice on matters that relate to the development and operation of the cooperatives. The council makes appointments for up to five years and helps promote the strategies and policies relating to cooperatives. Whether they are involved in commercial or social activities, they can be an ideal vehicle to harness community resources, to assist individuals, families and groups of persons to cope more effectively with the economic and social challenges confronting them. The Properties Council of up to nine members is appointed for up to five years.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Minister, could you give us an indication, as Minister responsible for Fair Trading, of your approach to fuel co-operatives please?

Ms MEAGHER: There is no doubt this is a priority between metropolitan and regional areas when it comes to fuel prices and the Federal Government, quite frankly, does little in this regard. On the issue of fuel co-ops, the proposed community co-operative, which is remunerated out of the registry cars

project in conjunction with the Barwon Darling alliance, is looking at the re-activation of the town's petrol outlet which has been closed for a number of years.

The Office of Fair Trading has developed a co-operative formation kit dealing specifically with petrol co-operatives to assist interested parties. Both the kit and the reports are available free of charge.

The registry also provides a number of other services to help interested parties examine the potential of petrol co-operatives. These include information on the Fair Trading web site, as well as financial assistance through the Co-operatives Development Grants Program to assist new venture proposals.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: That is very refreshing, Minister, if you are across it. As you know, a number of other States have successfully implemented fuel co-operatives. I am just wondering now that we are catching up to the other States, which of the States are you looking towards as the model to emulate?

Ms MEAGHER: We will take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: On how many occasions during the last financial year did the co-operatives council provide recommendations to the Minister to promote the activities and improve the operation of co-operatives and what was the subject of matter of this advice?

Ms MEAGHER: Sorry, what year was that?

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Last financial year.

Ms MEAGHER: I am not aware of any of that. I will have to take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Home warranty insurance. You have been Minister now for six or seven months -

Ms MEAGHER: Five actually.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: It feels like it. The Home Building Service, have you not received any briefing or information from that service in respect to home warranty insurance?

Ms MEAGHER: I think it was made clear in the terms of reference of this Committee that home warranty insurance is a matter for the Minister for Commerce, John Della Bosca. I can only add to that that there is a great awareness throughout Government, as I am sure you would be aware, in either the lower house or the upper house, of the concern for the home warranty insurance situation.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: So the Home Building Service has not provided you with any information on its position on home warranty insurance?

CHAIR: I indicated at the commencement of this sitting that questions on home warranty insurance should be directed to the Minister for Commerce.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: I just feel and believe that with 140 or so staff in the Home Building Service that it has an obligation to the consumers of New South Wales to at least be providing some advice or information to the Minister about home warranty insurance.

Ms MEAGHER: Why would the Home Building Service pre-empt the Grellman inquiry? Anybody in New South Wales is able to make a submission to the Grellman inquiry if they feel strongly about the development policy, and that would be the most appropriate area.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Will the Home Building Service be providing a submission to the Grellman inquiry?

Ms MEAGHER: Not officially, no.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Not officially. Unofficially?

Ms MEAGHER: What individuals do in their own time certainly is up to them. I would not prevent anyone from having a say on such an important area like that.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: I would have thought it would be important for the Home Building Service, which has an important stake in home building in New South Wales, to actually provide an official submission or thoughts to the Grellman inquiry.

Ms MEAGHER: Well, it would not be an appropriate use of those officers' time to sit around and second guess an inquiry which is reporting on 30 September.

CHAIR: You have three minutes left for questioning.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: I will talk fast, Madam Chair. Minister, the New South Wales Product Safety Committee, the Government Gazette 124, dated 8 August, I notice you did some nominations there too in regards to appointments. Could you give us an indication what the formal qualifications and experience is or was of Ms Candice Douglas?

Ms MEAGHER: I will have to take that on notice.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Again - I asked before - do you know or know of Ms Candice Douglas?

Ms MEAGHER: Mr Gallacher, I have to take it on notice.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: So you don't know, all right. What about John Furbank, do you know Mr Furbank? There seems to be some information there, but perhaps that lady can answer the question.

Ms MEAGHER: Yes, I have met Mr Furbank on one occasion.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: How do you know Mr Furbank? What sort of qualities does he bring to this position that make him such an attractive option?

Ms MEAGHER: Well, he struck me as a bit of an expert in his field. I met him in relation to a discussion on the yo-yo ball when he was providing me with advice of the dangers that that toy posed when I was signing the ban.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: When you say an expert in his field, since you have made that observation, can you tell us what field that is?

Ms MEAGHER: I will ask Mr Given to answer that.

Mr GIVEN: He is the manager of the product safety branch and informs the executive manager on unsafe products.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Do you know Mr Bonacruse at all?

Ms MEAGHER: No, Mr Gallacher.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: You might give us further information on his qualifications and experience. Are you happy to take a number of these notice, to be able to come back and keep that level of probity and transparency in Government appointments?

Ms MEAGHER: I certainly am.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Thank you, that is very refreshing.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: You said you have seven full-time staff and one part-time staffer on your personal staff, Minister. Does that include your driver for your Ministerial vehicle?

Ms MEAGHER: No.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: So it is eight full-time staff and one part-time?

Ms MEAGHER: I do not employ a driver.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Can you find out for me how much is spent on the driver of vehicles for your use per annum?

Ms MEAGHER: I will take it on notice.

CHAIR: Mr Tingle, do you have any other questions?

The Hon. JOHN TINGLE: No, Madam Chair.

CHAIR: Government members, do you have any more questions?

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: No, thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIR: We will need about two minutes to finish off the meeting.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Point of order, Madam Chair.

CHAIR: Yes, the Hon. Michael Gallacher?

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: I thought the Committee was sitting until 7.30. There were fairly clear instructions in regard to it, and I understood, therefore, that if the Government and the Crossbench have run out of questions, that the Opposition is well and truly placed to take up the remaining six minutes, Madam Chair.

CHAIR: I just indicated, Mr Gallacher, we will need about two minutes to finish the formal proceedings, which means we have now got three and a half minutes.

Ms MEAGHER: Madam Chair, before these proceedings conclude, I would also like the opportunity to request leave to table the letter that was signed by John Della Bosca to the Reverend Fred Nile notifying the position of the media monitoring costs for the Office of Fair Trading. I seek leave to table that now.

Leave granted.

CHAIR: You may proceed with a question.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Minister, have you made any Ministerial overseas trips or have you any plans to?

Ms MEAGHER: No.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Which one? There are two questions there. Have you been on any trips?

Ms MEAGHER: I have answered the two questions. The answer is no to both of them.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Thank you.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What contractors or consultants were engaged by the Minister's office in the last financial year and to date to undertake work or advice on behalf of the Minister and/or the Minister's office?

Ms MEAGHER: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What were the names of the contractors or consultants, security engagements, services engagement and remuneration paid?

Ms MEAGHER: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: For each of your portfolio areas, how much was spent on consultants last financial year?

Ms MEAGHER: The Office of Fair Trading has in place a policy on the use of consultants which specifies that consultants are to be used where it is not cost-effective for a service to be provided within the office, if necessary, or at times of urgent workload, expertise is not available within the office and independent specialist activities are required.

In 2002-2003, the Office of Fair Trading spent \$1,022,894 on consultancies, primarily due to work on its on-line customer services. This included the on-line customer assistance system, voice recognition technology for the register of encumbered vehicles, as well as other electronic service delivery initiatives. Direct contact with consumers in 2002-2003 included a million checks on the register of encumbered vehicles and 750,000 visits to the web site. These consultancies were engaged to help provide efficient services to the community.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: On the issue of the Rental Bond Board, what is the composition of the board? Before we start on composition, how many members do we have on the board?

Ms MEAGHER: I will ask the Commissioner for Fair Trading to respond to that.

Mr O'CONNOR: I am in fact the chairman of the Rental Bond Board. There are two representatives of the Government, one representing the Minister for Housing and Planning, one representing the Treasurer and there are two independents appointed to the Rental Bond Board, and it has been the practice now for many many years for those representatives to represent the consumer in form of the Tenants Union and real estate agencies in the form of the Real Estate Institute of New South Wales. There are two members representing real estate and one representing the consumer and tenancy.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: And, Commissioner O'Connor, could you tell the Committee the names of those members?

Mr O'CONNOR: Mr Waddington is the representative for the Treasury and Ms Tamsett is the representative from the real estate, and I cannot think of the others. The one from housing is a relatively new one.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Minister, before we finish off on the last question, do you have all your press releases on the internet? As part of your ongoing communication with the community, do have all of your press releases available to the public to look at?

Ms MEAGHER: I understand the web site undergoes regular updates and changes. One of those changes was to create a new update for people to access the latest press releases.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: So all of your press releases are therefore on that web page? I am not talking about Fair Trading; I am talking yours as Minister. Your press releases are all on that web page?

Ms MEAGHER: The new ones go up and the older ones go off, I understand, so it is a cycle.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Pardon my ignorance. Am I therefore right in assuming that all your press releases, as Minister, all go on the web site?

Ms MEAGHER: No, they are not all up there at once. As the new ones go on, the old ones come off.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Going back to Mr O'Connor, I just need to clarify this - What initial budget is allocated 2002-2003 for the Rental Bond Board?

Mr SILK: The Rental Bond Board's budget for 2002-2003 was \$27 million approximately.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: Was this budget revised or exceeded in any way?

Mr SILK: The final expenditure for the Rental Bond Board 2002-2003 was \$29 million. That difference was due to one-off capital expenditure incurred by the board.

The Hon. MICHAEL GALLACHER: And what is the proposed budget expenditure for 2003-2004 for the Rental Bond Board?

Mr SILK: 2003-2004 the proposed budget is \$31 million.

CHAIR: Time for questions has expired. If you are not familiar with the procedures for lodging questions, you can check with the Committee clerk. I would like to thank the Minister and your staff for attending tonight. I declare the meeting closed.

The Committee proceeded to deliberate.