

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No. 1

Monday 28 August 2006

Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio area

THE LEGISLATURE

The Committee met at 10.30 a.m.

MEMBERS

Reverend the Hon. F. J. Nile (Chair)

The Hon. D. Harwin
The Hon. P. T. Primrose
Ms L. Rhiannon

The Hon. J. Ryan
The Hon. H. Tsang
The Hon. I. W. West

PRESENT

The Hon. Dr Meredith Burgmann, *President of the Legislative Council of New South Wales*
Mr J. Evans, *Clerk of the Parliaments*
Mr G. McGill, *Financial Controller*
Mr R. Stefanic, *Director, Corporate Support*
Mr A. Shariat, *Manager, Parliamentary Information Technology Services*

CHAIR: I declare the hearing of Budget Estimates 2006-07 open to the public. I welcome the President of the Legislative Council, the Hon. Dr Meredith Burgmann, MLC, and accompanying officials to this hearing. At this hearing the Committee will examine the proposed expenditure for the portfolio of The Legislature. Before we commence I wish to make a number of comments about procedural matters. In accordance with Legislative Council guidelines for the broadcast of proceedings, only Committee members and witnesses may be filmed or recorded. People in the public gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photographs.

Those who report the proceedings of this Committee must take responsibility for what they publish or what interpretation they place on anything that is said before the Committee. The guidelines for the broadcasting of proceedings are available on the table by the door. Any messages from attendees in the public gallery should be delivered through the attendants and support staff or Committee clerks.

Madam President, you and the officers accompanying you are reminded that you are free to pass notes and refer directly to your advisers while at the table. I remind everyone to please turn off their mobile phone. Madam President, I advise you that the Committee has resolved to request that answers to questions on notice be provided within 21 calendar days of the date on which they are sent to your office. Do you anticipate this will pose any difficulties?

The PRESIDENT: No.

CHAIR: All witnesses from departments, statutory bodies or corporations will be sworn prior to giving evidence. Madam President, obviously you do not need to be sworn as you have already sworn on oath as a member of Parliament.

ALI SHARIAT, Manager, Parliamentary Information Technology Services, affirmed and examined:

GREGORY JOHN McGILL, Financial Controller, Parliament of New South Wales, sworn and examined:

JOHN EVANS, Clerk of the Parliaments, sworn and examined:

ROBERT STEFANIC, Director, Corporate Support, Legislative Council, sworn and examined:

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

The PRESIDENT: No.

CHAIR: The Committee proposes that as Chairman I should commence the hearing with some questions and then we will move to the Opposition and then government members. In view of the concern about the announced cuts to the budget of the Parliament, so that Committee members know the exact situation could you, or members of your staff, outline what the cuts are in regard to joint services to the Legislative Assembly and to the Legislative Council so that those facts are on record?

The PRESIDENT: As always, Mr Greg McGill is here voluntarily. He cannot be questioned about anything to do with the finances of the Legislative Assembly.

CHAIR: I appreciate that but is it possible to have the full picture in relation to joint services because it affects members of both Houses? Can the Committee be advised about the amount of the reduction? Mr McGill can indicate if he does not wish to advise the Committee.

The PRESIDENT: Are you asking what the cuts are and how they are to be divided?

CHAIR: The first question is: What is the amount? Some media reports have said it is \$3 million and others suggest it is \$1.6 million. The Committee would like the full facts before it.

The PRESIDENT: I think I need to start with an overall picture. The parliamentary budget is about \$110 million of which about \$75 million is totally mandated in that it consists of the salaries and entitlements of members of Parliament and the salaries of their staff. All of that is mandated by the Parliamentary Remuneration Tribunal, over which we have no real control. So the area over which we have some discretion is about \$30 million, in relation to which we are having to make savings of \$1.4 million this year.

CHAIR: Does that amount of \$1.3 million relate to the Legislative Council only?

The PRESIDENT: No, the whole Parliament. The actual amount is \$1.44 million, and that is represented by global savings of \$572,000, a shortfall in funding from 2005-06 of \$496,000 and a reduction in expenditure required to remain within budget based on 2005-06 expenditure of \$372,000. That is what it is made up of. The ways in which we are approaching how to bring about those cuts are long and varied.

CHAIR: That is my next question: How are you responding to those cuts in the administration?

The PRESIDENT: To achieve this target, significant reductions must be made in both staffing levels and services. Expressions of interest for voluntary redundancy were sought from all staff in July, and 55 expressions of interest were received. Management have identified 20 positions for deletion, and consultation has already commenced with the unions on the work performed by these positions and the impact on remaining staff.

The areas where positions have been identified for deletion: Legislative Council, 3 positions; Legislative Assembly, 3 positions; Library, 2 positions; security, 1 position; Building Services, 4 positions—making a total of 13 positions.

Further reductions can be made in Building Services depending on the degree to which planning services can be reduced, and also in Hansard depending on the nature of changes in the production of *Hansard* with a more verbatim transcript of proceedings.

The savings to be achieved through the restructuring of staff are estimated to be \$900,000 in a full year. The balance of savings of \$500,000 will be achieved in other operating expenses, and these will be achieved through various means, such as:

- freeze on the filling of positions externally
- reduction in the use of contract staff
- reduction in overtime by 10 per cent
- reduction in overseas committee travel, with committees being restricted to one overseas visit in each four-year parliamentary term. This will have the greatest impact on Assembly committees as Council committees have not made an overseas study tour in recent years
- reduction in committee advertising costs
- reduction in printing costs of official publications by making greater use of electronic distribution, for example, use of CDs and DVDs for distribution of *Hansard*
- reduction in use of contractors and consultants by 10 per cent

The savings measures will include a reduction in recruitment costs; stationery; taxi fares, with staff sharing taxis to nearby destinations; newspapers; laundry and dry cleaning; and reduction in external storage costs by converting parking spaces to a storage area.

Finally, a review will also be undertaken of user charges to increase revenue. These measures will include post office rental, mobile telephone tower rental, and charging the parliamentary press gallery for rental of office accommodation. This latter measure could generate rental income of \$120,000 per annum.

Also, for those members who have read the newspapers—although that would not help terribly much—we are obviously talking with the Government and Opposition about sitting hours. We estimated sometime ago that not sitting past 5.30 on the two sitting nights that we sit would actually save \$500,000 a year. It is not being suggested that we cut out both nights, but certainly if we reduced it to one sitting night a week the reduction in overtime, electricity costs, security costs, taxi fares home and all those things is huge. So that would also reduce costs. We figure that if we sat only one night we could save \$100,000 straight off.

CHAIR: What effect, if any, will this have on the efficiency of the Legislative Council? Perhaps the Clerk could indicate.

The PRESIDENT: I will answer. Efficiencies of the Legislative Council?

CHAIR: Yes—how it functions, and its efficiency with these cuts.

The PRESIDENT: Already, as you know, the Legislative Council has been forced to do much more committee work with pretty much the same staff. The number of committees that have occurred in the Legislative Council over the last five years is just a bit out of control. I think the major problem will be that the very high level of service that the committee staff have been able to deliver to the committees will still be a higher-level of service but it will be slower; committees will just have to take longer to be able to produce their final reports. I think there will be an effect on services from the Library, there will be less parking spaces. There will definitely be effects. Are you asking about sitting nights or are you asking about the overall effect?

CHAIR: The overall effect on the efficiency of the Legislative Council in carrying out its responsibility to the people of this State.

The PRESIDENT: It will be mainly seen in the effects on the committees. As to the sitting at night, we are not saying that there would be less sitting hours. There would certainly be the same number of sitting hours. They just would not sit past 5 o'clock, which is what incurs the overtime penalty.

CHAIR: But sitting hours literally are usually decided by the House.

The PRESIDENT: Yes. But we are not suggesting that there be less sitting hours, which was one of the suggestions in the media. We are saying that if you do not sit for the extra 3½ hours of a sitting night, you can sit an extra week.

CHAIR: Could you explain what negotiations took place regarding these cuts, or were they unilaterally announced? Was there any discussion with you or your staff prior to the announcement?

The PRESIDENT: There have been endless discussions with the workplace group of the Parliament and with the PSA and with the—

CHAIR: No, I meant with the Treasurer, with the Government.

The PRESIDENT: Yes, there have been endless discussions with the Treasurer too.

CHAIR: I assume you objected to the cuts.

The PRESIDENT: We have managed to ameliorate the cuts to some degree. They are not as severe as they would otherwise have been. What the Treasurer has agreed to do is something that we have been arguing for a very long time—in future, starting from this budget year, the global saving which is being forced on all government agencies will only affect the amount over which we have discretion, that is, the non-mandated section of the budget. So the \$70 million or so that is mandated by the Parliamentary Remuneration Tribunal will not be taken into account when he is talking about global savings, and that will make a huge difference. It is now possible.

CHAIR: There have been some media reports that stated that the Treasurer initially had asked for a 1 per cent cut and that the Parliament did not agree to that. Is that factual?

The PRESIDENT: Most of what is in the media is not factual. You know that.

CHAIR: But, that is, negotiations.

The PRESIDENT: Negotiations have been going on. We have appeared before the Expenditure Review Committee of Cabinet. We are still not happy with the savings that we are required to make, but it is less than it was originally.

There is also the reduction to the catering budget, which is in addition to what I have just been talking about, and that is an ideological position put forward by the Premier in April, when he said that there would be no longer a subsidy of the operating costs, that is, the staff wages. The food in the catering service has always been cost neutral, but there has been a subsidy of staff wages, and that has been removed, and this of course has caused voluntary redundancy and a lot less casual labour in the dining area.

There has also been the closing of the Members Dining Room, the members' bar, the staff dining room—although staff, of course, are now welcome in the Strangers Dining Room—the bottle shop and room service, and we have not been able to reinstate any of it, particularly room service, which is actually the most subsidised of all our services. Our core services continue. I believe that some of those things that have been closed down were not core services. I did not think the bottle shop was a core service, the members' bar was hardly ever used, and the members' dining room was really only used on sitting days. It is a pity that we cannot continue room service because it is certainly very

hard to get food here, particularly when you cannot leave the building. The canteen will be open until the rising of the latest House and the Strangers will operate as usual, but they will be the only food outlets.

CHAIR: So the reference you made to the Premier adopting a policy of user pays, basically?

The PRESIDENT: Yes.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: You might recall that a while ago I wrote to you about my concerns about some provision of disability services for people who access the Parliament, in particular the toilets that are, in my view, embarrassingly inadequate for people with disabilities. The only available disabled or accessible toilet that I know of is in the main foyer of the building. Given that it is located near the coffee shop, it is hardly discreet. The doors on it are self-closing, which means that you virtually have to escort a person with a disability almost up to the pan in order for the person to use it, which these days is not considered an adequate disability standard. Is there any proposal to improve the provision of disability accessible toilets within the Parliament? I believe that the Minister for Disability Services is not able to meet people in wheelchairs in his office, and I certainly find it very difficult in mine. Whilst I would not expect all offices to be necessarily immediately made wheelchair accessible, it seems reasonable to me that at some time within the period of time a couple of offices be made fully wheelchair accessible at least to allow the Minister and the shadow Minister for Disability Services to be able to see constituents in wheelchairs.

The PRESIDENT: I totally agree with you, and I know that you have been in contact with me about other disability issues such as the provision of hearing loops, and I was very pleased to be able to tell you that we have gone a long way with that. One of the problems we have, of course, is safety issues in the major part of a very old building. It took me two years to get wheelchair access to the Legislative Council, and when we eventually got the ramp built in order to comply with the Occupational Health and Safety Act both the major newspapers headlined that ramp as providing more perks for politicians. The problem is that disability issues are going to be quite expensive in an old building.

It is a bit of an outrage that in 1979, when the new building was built, wheelchair services were not incorporated into it, but it is a fact that they were not. We are left with that now. Because of safety issues it is probably always going to be the fact that the disability access toilet will be in the public area of the building. Because that sort of building change is always going to be expensive, I cannot see it happening soon. There is also a disabled toilet on the north end of level 8, but, once again, you have to go through the security system to get there. So, yes, you are right, at the moment it is in a very public area and not very good. It is something that I will put on the top of my priorities.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: I suspect it will require some sort of negotiation with the Government specifically for a supplementation of the budget to meet it. Whilst I accept that there seems to be an issue about having disability accessible toilets in public areas, that means that if someone with a disability is visiting a member, the press gallery or any other place like that they inevitably have to arrive at level 7 and, as I said, use what are, whilst they are labelled accessible toilets, in simple truth not independently accessible by people with disabilities. You would need a carer to get you in and out of them, which is not the standard that exists in places like shopping centres, service stations and so on.

The PRESIDENT: As I say, it is certainly one of my priorities.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: If the Parliament sits fewer nights, I take it that means there would be more sitting days in some fashion or other?

The PRESIDENT: I might say that was our suggestion that we have put to the Leaders of the Houses. We have no say, as you know. The Legislature has no say over sitting hours. We are simply putting that as a suggestion, but a decision will have to be made in consultation with the Opposition and crossbenchers. They might not agree to it. But we certainly can save \$100,000 if we sit only one night.

CHAIR: We could start earlier. That is another option.

The PRESIDENT: I have been arguing for 15½ years that we should make laws nine to five, but I have not actually got anywhere. It has been a fairly fruitless campaign.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: I think we actually do make laws from nine to five, but the Parliament may not sit nine to five. But I can promise you that the other time from nine to 11 is very busy.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: In one of your answers you spoke about user charges and you talked about the post office and the press gallery. You mentioned a figure, I think it was about \$100,000—please correct me if I am misquoting you. Is that right?

The PRESIDENT: No. The only figure in that area was the rental for the press gallery, which we believe could generate about \$120,000 a year. It already happens, I understand, at the Federal level where they charge for the press gallery.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: I want to explore the user charges issue a bit further. I refer you to the document that was issued by the Clerks to all parliamentary staff dated 23 August in relation to the savings plan, and I note that you encapsulated most of what was in the attachment in one of your earlier answers. Item number 12 was "review user charges for meeting rooms, post office and other services provided to external organisations". Obviously, there have been some developments since then because the press gallery was not specifically included at that time. You are looking at estimated savings of \$20,000 in this financial year and \$25,000 in subsequent years. In particular I want to know the process you went through to determine that figure in terms of reviewing current users and how the Parliament came up with a figure of \$20,000 to \$25,000 a year.

The PRESIDENT: As you know, many, many community groups use our rooms, and if they are sponsored by a member of Parliament, those rooms are free as long as they are in the core hours where you do not have to put on extra security or extra electricity. I do not intend that to change. I think that is a very valuable service that we, as members of Parliament, can give to our community groups. However, a number of government organisations also use those rooms. There is a bit of an argument about whether we should continue, as the Parliament, as The Legislature, to offer those rooms free to government bodies, and that maybe we could charge the Government. I assume that is where that amount of money comes from.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: That is what I am exploring. I just wanted to know upon what basis we came up with the figure of \$20,000 to \$25,000. Obviously I totally agree with you on the issue of community groups. My concern was government departments, bearing in mind that plenty of government agencies have user charges for their facilities.

The PRESIDENT: That is exactly why we are wanting to, yes.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: I am wanting to know what we have done to look at our facilities and to benchmark them against other similar facilities that are available in the CBD or elsewhere, and whether \$20,000 to \$25,000 is, in fact, a low figure.

The PRESIDENT: It might, in fact, be a high figure because what we have to look at, if we start charging, is will they, therefore, not use the rooms? That is always the issue. You cannot just assume they will continue to use the rooms if they are being charged. I suspect it might be a high figure. They may simply use their boardrooms that are not quite as large.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Thank you. That is your suspicion, but I am just wondering what work has been done. Is the \$20,000 to \$25,000 figure a guess, or is there something backing it up? If there is something backing it up, I wonder if you would be able to tell the Committee what that is.

The PRESIDENT: Mr McGill will give you a more detailed response.

Mr McGILL: We have a database of all room bookings, and there was an additional analysis made of those bookings to see which ones were independent of members of Parliament. We are also anticipating, on some previous valuations received, obtaining rental of something in the vicinity of

\$5,000 from the post office, which is incorporated into those figures. But there is obviously a lot more work to be done in contacting these organisations and we obviously have to be competitive with the competition outside in the use of room hires. I know, for example, the State Library next door rents out quite a few rooms as well to outside organisations.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: I am still not getting any sense of how. Effectively, it is just an estimate?

The PRESIDENT: Yes. How else could you do it?

The Hon. DON HARWIN: What I am suggesting is: Have we, for example, estimated what comparable user charges are for the facilities? I mean, what is the basis for saying it is just \$20,000? Is that working on, for example, losing 10 per cent, 40 per cent, or 80 per cent if we put in user charges? I am just wondering where the figures come from. Some members have approached me, having read this document, and felt that it was a low estimate. I am giving you the opportunity to respond to that.

The PRESIDENT: Another reason why I do not think it is a low estimate is that I would be very opposed to using our meeting rooms as a revenue raiser because every time someone is in there using them, it means we cannot use them for our community groups. The major use of these rooms should be for members to have community organisations in here. We are not a hotel, we are not a convention centre, we are a Parliament, and I get quite angry about the way in which we are having to move towards being a more commercial operation, but we are having to. I would not be happy about rooms being rented out to commercial operations at a commercial rate if it meant that you could not have the local Lions Club in.

Another thing is that once people pay for a room, they start demanding things. We are a working Parliament, and if you have got people demanding things because they have paid for it, over and above the services that they would normally get, it just becomes very difficult for this to continue to be a working building. So I am not in favour of it going above that amount.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: That is fair enough, if that is your policy view.

The PRESIDENT: Yes.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: The issue of the security passes to lobbyists and to departmental staff, in the light of the savings that have been required, has there been any review of the user charges?

The PRESIDENT: For lobbyists?

The Hon. DON HARWIN: For lobbyists, and I suppose that part two of the question is in terms of departmental staff, where I do not believe there is a charge at the moment. Has there been any consideration given to introducing a charge for the provision of that pass?

The PRESIDENT: There is already a charge for lobbyists. We can certainly look at raising that. In fact, I would be totally in favour of raising it. I think it is about \$150 now, which is not a great amount of money. It is now \$220 or \$110 for half year.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: Do they get a badge for that, do they?

The PRESIDENT: Yes. I would be totally in favour of raising that. As for departmental staff, I am not sure it would be appropriate to charge departmental staff.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: It would be fun to charge Treasury.

CHAIR: We also have a number of Federal Government activities in the Parliament at which Federal hearings are held. Are they reimbursed, or is there some contra system?

The PRESIDENT: If it is a parliamentary committee, my view has been that that is something that we do as a fellow Parliament, or a sister Parliament. But if it is a government activity, I

am happy to charge them. I think as Legislatures, we should co-operate with each other. Do not forget that we can use their buildings if our committees are meeting in other States.

CHAIR: That is why I used the term contra arrangement.

The PRESIDENT: Yes.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: What sort of Government activities happen in the Parliament other than the use of the theatre for briefings and things? What other Government organisations actually use the Parliament for things that are not parliamentary?

The PRESIDENT: Government Ministers are always holding launches of what I consider to be Government activity.

CHAIR: In the Jubilee Room.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: Right, I see.

The PRESIDENT: A lot of those would continue because, obviously, the Minister likes to have it happening here, but they are Executive Government activities, and not parliamentary activities.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: I will give Ms Lee Rhiannon or Government members the chance to ask some questions for a while. I will ask a few more later.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: Madam President, I would like to ask you about some issues to do with information technology [IT]. I noticed in the *Australian Financial Review* last Tuesday a report that the New South Wales Government has a contract with Microsoft that expires in 2008. As that is quite soon, I was interested to know what your plans are. Are your plans to review the contract with Microsoft, or are you planning to move over to free alternatives?

Mr SHARIAT: Not all Government organisations have signed the contract with Microsoft, and the Parliament is one of them. We have never gone under the renewal of a yearly contract with Microsoft.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: So we do not have a contract with Microsoft?

Mr SHARIAT: No, we do not.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: The other matter I was interested in, while I stay with IT just for a moment, is if we have no contract with Microsoft, who do we have a contract with, or do we just have a range of ones with different software organisations?

Mr SHARIAT: We purchase licenses and those licenses are valid until we upgrade. The contract that Microsoft provides is that you pay a yearly licence fee and that entitles you to upgrade as the upgrades become available, and you pay a fee if you want to get out of it.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: That is what we do not have.

Mr SHARIAT: We have done calculations. Given that all our services and programs are not under Microsoft, we will not be better off to go under that contract. For example, our network operating system is with Novell and our database is with Oracle. Unless you have a form where your email systems, network operating systems and database systems are under Microsoft, it is not beneficial. Particularly again, I think we have been very lucky, given that Microsoft has not released a new operating system for over three years now. We would have been paying a licence for over three years without getting any benefit out of it.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: As has been touched on in past estimates sessions, I recently noted about open source that some European and United States of America governments have moved over to Linux and Open Office as their standard desktop environment. Considering there are big savings, enormous savings, in that area has that been considered?

Mr SHARIAT: We have certainly looked at the open source as an alternative. I am still not convinced that there will be a saving. There are two parts to this; whether you take the open source from the background services, such as network operating system, or the desktop services. I certainly do not believe that desktop services are there yet, because there would be a conflict in terms of the type of documents that are exchanged with people. Certainly there could be savings from the network operating system, which is totally hidden from the normal user.

We have actually started this year transferring the library server to an open source server. The current licence with Novell allows us to use their Linux SUSE and we actually are in the course of transferring the library service to open source and to SUSE, and we are reassessing to see what sort of work is required. If that is the case, all our prime licence with Novell enables us to transfer the existing services into open services environment.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: You would have a wider application beyond the library?

Mr SHARIAT: Yes, it would be a test case for us. Then we can easily transfer that, but then we have to have a part of training the staff, making sure that that transition is smooth and we do not have any problem with that.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: Madam President, with the savings that you are looking to make in Parliament, has consideration been given to the information technology [IT] area, considering the possibilities with open software? Could there be a saving by bringing more of those on line?

The PRESIDENT: No, there have been two areas where we really have not looked at savings. They are IT and security.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: Earlier I mentioned that more governments are moving to open source, which would suggest that some of the European and United States of America governments feel secure in moving to that system. Would you consider savings in that area? Or have you just ruled them out?

Mr SHARIAT: I am part of the government open source group and meet regularly with them. A test case is that I am still not convinced that the open source is the cheaper source. Where I see the saving for us is to go towards one type of environment across the Parliament and because we use both Microsoft and Novell we are using two operating systems. Going to open source could be an opportunity to use one operating system across the applications. Because applications such as Oracle, SAP and Lotus Notes that are currently used under the Microsoft licence can be transferred, if there is an equivalent open source version. That means that with all the service, if it is using one operating system, the set-up is consistent.

Certainly when you go to the open source, while it is always free to get the open source it is not free on support. The cost of the support is always the same. For example, Novell would provide us with the same price for our open source operating system to the existing operating system. The same with Linux and other works. These days you are frequently upgrading your operating system with security patches and so on. Those security patches have to be tested by those organisations before it is released. That is what they charge you for. That cost is not cheaper at this point, it is higher because there are fewer people in the market who are familiar with open source and they are demanding bigger salaries.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: Madam President, I am aware that over the years you have tried to bring child care facilities into Parliament, facilities to be available for people who work here. Would you give an upgrade in light of the cutbacks that have to occur. Where does that stand?

The PRESIDENT: I have been involved in trying to get child care facilities into Parliament since I arrived here in 1991. In 1993, I think, when Wendy Machin and I, as a sort of child care task force of Parliament, looked at every conceivable place. We even checked out the roof garden. There was no place which fulfilled the very strict guidelines as to what areas can be used for child care. We even checked out the Chief Secretary's Building, we checked out the little cottage in the Domain

which is part of the botanic gardens. We checked everywhere, even the Nightingale Wing of Sydney Hospital. Nowhere could really be made into a child care centre.

Parliament has entered into an arrangement with a child care centre in Bridge Street, a couple of hundred yards away. Staff and some members of Parliament had their children in that centre. It is not optimal, because it is a couple of hundred yards away, but it is available. You will be pleased to know that we are looking at whether it is appropriate to change the members' bar into a crèche. We think that would be totally appropriate and we are looking at that. However, I am not terribly hopeful.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: It is so sunny!

The PRESIDENT: The guidelines for what can be used as a childcare area are very stringent.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: In the 2005 estimates you spoke about occupational health and safety issues, and specifically mentioned occupational health and safety issues in the press gallery. Can you outline those safety issues that you were referring to and how the problems can be rectified?

The PRESIDENT: It is mainly to do with overcrowding in some areas. I am told that some members of the media have quite large working spaces and others have very small spaces. Also, there are issues with electric power points and things like that. However, if we are going to move to charging the gallery, that would have to be seriously looked at because you cannot really charge people for substandard areas. That is one of the things that might work against charging the press gallery for rental space, because you have to do a fair amount of upgrading before you can do that.

The Hon. HENRY TSANG: I would like to congratulate you on your idea about sitting days and more friendly hours. That is a really good thing. I refer to the coffee shop in the foyer. It is untidy. Is the coffee and cake subsidised? If so, now that the staff dining room is not being used can it be leased out commercially so that everyone pays the commercially related cost of coffee and cakes—and thus keep the foyer tidy?

The PRESIDENT: I agree with the honourable member; the Fountain Court should not be a place in which we serve coffee. It is a beautiful and elegant area and it should be seen as such. The advantage of having coffee there is that visitors to the building can also buy their coffee. Once we go into the staff area it is not a public area of the building. There would need to be quite major changes to infrastructure before it could be made a public area. However, that might well be what we end up doing.

We asked for \$150,000 to make a coffee shop entrance into the staff dining room and to turn that into a coffee shop. As I said, it was costed at \$150,000. That coffee shop would also have provided fresh salads, sandwiches and light meals. We did not get that funding so the coffee trolley remains. As you can see, it is a second-best solution. We will certainly be looking at moving it into what was the staff dining room but there are problems with that.

CHAIR: With no room service you are virtually cutting off all sources.

The PRESIDENT: The coffee shop will remain.

CHAIR: The Hon. Henry Tsang suggested it should be commercially viable.

The PRESIDENT: The coffee trolley will remain in some form, whether it is in the staff dining room or in the foyer.

The Hon. HENRY TSANG: If it were to be tendered for publicly, a commercial operator would charge more money and members would then have to pay for it if they wanted room service. If they wanted coffee and sandwiches delivered when they had visitors they might have to pay an additional 20¢. So it might be worthwhile to tender publicly and thus make it a commercially viable operation.

The PRESIDENT: The whole problem with catering in Parliament is that for 50 days a year the place is buzzing and a huge number of people all want coffee and sandwiches. However, for many months of the year you could fire a shot in the Fountain Court and you would not hit a soul. What commercial operation would take on board a commercial function where 10 coffees are served on some days and 200 coffees are served on other days? It is not commercially viable. However, we will continue to look at all sorts of options. I assure members that I see the provision of good coffee as a core function.

Reasonable coffee will remain. It was through me fighting for it that we eventually got the coffee trolley. I see it as really important for the people who work in the building. But for many months of the year there are not enough people in the building to keep it going. In addition, the price is very sensitive. If you put up the price by only 20¢ people would walk outside the building and buy it at the Rose Cafe or at the Hole in the Wall. Coffee is very price sensitive.

The Hon. IAN WEST: It is also very quality sensitive.

The PRESIDENT: Yes, that is exactly right. If the quality goes down people do not buy it.

The Hon. IAN WEST: What has been the Parliament's contribution to peace and good governance in the Solomon Islands?

The PRESIDENT: I am terribly pleased that you asked that question.

The Hon. IAN WEST: I thought you might be.

The PRESIDENT: Our beloved former Usher of the Black Rod, now Clerk-Assistant, Committees, Warren Cahill, has been on attachment to the Solomon Islands Parliament as part of a jointly funded UNDP-AusAID parliamentary strengthening project. He was originally engaged for a period of three months but that period was subsequently extended to six months and then to 12 months. Although the current contract expires on 10 September, I have received a request for the attachment to be extended until the end of this year.

The project is designed to address weaknesses that have been observed in the functioning of the Parliament of the Solomon Islands, mainly through activities and outputs which will lead to more effective parliamentary services and administration. Warren was locked down in the parliamentary library during the riot and he rang us and gave us an ongoing commentary while it was all going on. His car was also firebombed. As the project manager Mr Cahill has provided professional and technical expertise in a number of areas, including revision of the standing orders, redesigning and rebuilding of the library, establishment of a web site for the library, redesigning and replacement of *Hansard* equipment and chamber microphones, computer training for members of Parliament, and a conduct of a parliamentary orientation workshop for members of Parliament and public servants, which was held in July 2006 after the general election, a little later than it was meant to be held.

It is anticipated that the project will support the Solomon Islands Parliament in fulfilling its constitutional roles, lead to a better understanding by the public of the role of the Parliament, and lead to a better representation by parliamentarians of their constituencies. It is also expected to facilitate improvements in the representation of women and their interests. There is another part to the program. Warren set up a graduate internship whereby very good graduates from the University of South Pacific are taken on board and are basically taught how to be the clerks of the future. They are a bright and enthusiastic bunch.

A woman who is interested in being in the parliamentary library has already been in our Parliament for a two-week internship. Given the problems with our finances, this is not happening as quickly as I would like it, but we are hopeful that the internship program continues and that we in New South Wales are able to teach or help to train parliamentary staff. It is crucial that whatever happens with the comings and goings of members of Parliament in the Solomon Islands, the Parliament is honest, hard-working and leads in the area of integrity.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Is it cost-effective and does it have a coffee shop?

The PRESIDENT: It has outsourced. A little lady comes in and, for the equivalent of 50¢ a day, provides a meal for parliamentarians. Parliamentarians in the Solomon Islands have no facilities at all. The area where they used to be able to sit down is now a bomb site. There is no area within the Parliament where they can work. The United Nations Development Program should be looking at providing such facilities for parliamentarians. There is a beautiful building in the Solomon Islands, but it is really only the Parliament. There is a library and some offices for parliamentary secretariat but there are no areas for members of Parliament.

The Hon. HENRY TSANG: I understand you provide a very good education program for school students and community groups. Are tourist groups and others charged when visiting Parliament House? I notice that students from a number of universities are coming to Australia as tourist groups. Are they charged if they come into Parliament House?

The PRESIDENT: I am pleased to say that we do not charge tourists for having a look at Parliament House. That is an awful thought. I find it a bit offensive that Parliament now has to charge for a number of services for which it has not charged in the past. I do not think that is very dignified. Charging tourists as they come in is not something that I have thought about. I will say a little about our tiny education department, which comprises three people. I think Graham Spindler, Daniela Giorgi and Kathy Slade do a fantastic job.

The Hon. IAN WEST: They do a great job.

The PRESIDENT: The section operates four broad programs: community programs, student programs, professional development programs, and publications and information programs. In 2005 the section increased its community programs with the conduct of seven "A Little Night Sittings", which had 300 participants. The education section ran one six-week Workers Educational Association program entitled "Corridors of Power", which attracted 20 participants. It also continued monthly lunchtime tours, which averaged 35 to 40 members of the public on each occasion.

I spoke to a couple of those groups and they were really interested. It has co-ordinated parliamentary openings for Australia Day, with 3,000 visitors, and played a significant part in developing resources and conducting the Parliament's sesquicentenary program. It has conducted two State Government familiarisation seminars. They are user pays and, in fact, we make money out of those government familiarisation seminars. That money goes towards subsidising the other activities of the education department. Overall, the section conducted 30 public program activities, with upwards of 5,000 participants. The section also conducted 85 special tours additional to the main tours program. They are the main activities of the education group, which continues to go from strength to strength.

CHAIR: Turning to some general matters, obviously we have all seen some of the announcements by the PSA about their reaction to these staff cuts and the proposed industrial action that I understand is to occur tomorrow. What impact will that have on the Parliament and its operations and what measures are you taking to deal with it?

The PRESIDENT: Can I say from the start that I think the PSA has adopted a very responsible role but has been strongly advocating the rights of its members in this workplace. It is mainly concerned that the voluntary redundancies do not affect the work of those workers remaining. That, of course, is a core union position: it is not a genuine redundancy if other workers have to step in and fill the role of the worker who has taken the voluntary redundancy. So we have been very careful. All voluntary redundancies will be worked through very carefully with the workplace group and the PSA and the MEAA, and continual consultation will occur. As to what effect it will have on the Parliament, members will have to collect their own mail. Members will not get newspapers. There are a number of things that will happen arising out of the bans.

But, as to the overtime ban on Tuesday, my understanding is that our Chamber will stop at 4 o'clock because the bans cut in at 5 o'clock, which means that we will then be out of the Chamber by the time the bans cut in. This is what happened some years ago. When a similar ban happened we pulled the pin at 5 o'clock, so to speak. So it will be very similar to what happened, I think, seven years ago.

CHAIR: There is some suggestion that it will have an effect on security and that security may not function. Is that a matter of concern?

The PRESIDENT: No. If Parliament stops sitting—I am assuming that the Legislative Assembly is doing the same as the Legislative Council—there will be no effect on security. The union is being very responsible about the issue of security. No-one takes security lightly in this building.

CHAIR: Turning to another general question relating to the cuts in the budget, I had the opportunity to meet with the Commonwealth Secretariat in London a couple of weeks ago. It raised the issue of the ability of Parliament to have some control over its own parliamentary budget as distinct from the Executive having total control. I know it is a grey area. You could argue that Parliament still has control because we pass the appropriation bills. Has any thought been given to whether we could investigate strengthening the autonomy of Parliament over its own budget as opposed to the Executive Government making a decision, as happens now, when it is raising billions of dollars for expenditure and other areas of State government responsibility?

The PRESIDENT: I think you will find that parliaments all around the world have this ongoing battle with Executive Government because it is always going to be Executive Government that decides the budget. That is the role of Executive Government. My understanding is that other Presiding Officers have been in exactly the same position of having an ongoing fight with the Treasurer of the day about their budgets. We are in the same position as the Department of Agriculture or whatever: they are cutting our budget and we are objecting to it. But we are the people making the decisions about where the budget cuts happen. That is our role.

CHAIR: But that is the whole point of my question: Should the Parliament be in the same position as a government department? I understand that there have been some moves in parliaments in other countries that operate on a similar basis to ours to get a better system than we have.

The PRESIDENT: To have The Legislature not included in the budget and then have a separate—

CHAIR: Yes.

The PRESIDENT: That would be excellent. You organise it.

CHAIR: I am looking into it.

The PRESIDENT: We have a reasonably strong Executive Government in New South Wales. I believe it dates back to the fact that we began as a giant government department in 1788 and we have been a giant government department ever since.

CHAIR: Would you be prepared, as President, to initiate some investigation of that matter or do you feel that it is beyond your powers?

The PRESIDENT: I do not undertake fruitless enterprises, Fred.

The Hon. HENRY TSANG: Maybe the crossbenchers could set up a special committee.

The PRESIDENT: That is right. Maybe Ms Lee Rhiannon could start a special committee.

CHAIR: We will set up a no-cost committee. The other question relates to some of the household operations of the Parliament. Many complaints have been made to me about the removal from the Strangers Dining Room of the two historic photographs of Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh, which were presented personally to the Parliament and which have for many years been in a prominent place near the podium in the dining room. They were removed and are now located behind a pillar in the Parkes Room. Many people—whether they are monarchists or republicans—have been critical of that decision. What was the basis for that occurring?

The PRESIDENT: Ever since I have been in Parliament the situation has been that when community groups use the dining room for dinners and lunches they have the option of having the

photograph of the Queen up or down. A lot of groups of course choose not to have the photographs of the Queen and the Duke there. We got complaints from catering staff that the continual removal and putting up of the photographs was an occupational health and safety issue. So they then set up a sort of trolley system—I do not know whether you ever saw it but it was unbelievably ugly—that meant that when the pictures were not there two bits of wood on rope hung there and it looked really bad.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: What is there now does not look that great. There are two huge sunspots where the pictures were.

The PRESIDENT: That comes to the issue about the dining room, which badly needs refurbishing. It has not had a major refurbishment in 30 years and it looks very tacky. So we decided to put the photographs in the Parkes Room, which is I think the most beautiful area of the Parliament. It is certainly the most historic area, given that parts of those rooms were Dr Redfern's surgery in the original Rum Hospital. So the photographs are now in the Parkes Room. I think Catering still says that if you want a photograph of the Queen in the dining room there is an easel that you can use to put a picture of the Queen on.

CHAIR: Catering will provide that?

The PRESIDENT: Yes, I think so. I think that is what the arrangement is.

CHAIR: I understand that some have asked for that but they got no co-operation. Maybe that is a new provision. I made reference to the two portraits being behind the pillar in the Parkes Room, and quite often a white board is placed in front of the two paintings. An observer might regard that as an indication of disrespect to the Queen of Australia.

The PRESIDENT: I am horrified at the thought there might be a white board in the Parkes Room. As I say, it is the most beautiful and historic part of our Parliament and white boards are horrible things. I have not been in to visit them in their new home.

CHAIR: The whole point is that no-one can see the portraits as they are behind the pillar facing the street. Not only have the paintings been removed; they are almost invisible in the Parkes Room, and that adds salt to the wound.

The PRESIDENT: We might look at where else they could be kept in the Parkes Room. There might be a more appropriate position.

CHAIR: A more prominent position.

The PRESIDENT: A more prominent position. We can certainly look at that.

CHAIR: When such changes are under consideration is there any consultation on the principle of democracy with members of the upper House? They are housekeeping matters that affect the functioning of the upper House.

The PRESIDENT: That decision had nothing specifically to do with the upper House. Certainly the way in which the Parliament is decorated is the role of the Presiding Officers, and it is not something on which we would specifically take advice.

CHAIR: I meant consulting the Legislative Assembly.

The PRESIDENT: No, I think we have seen it as the role of the Presiding Officers and I am sure the previous Presiding Officers saw that as their role too. They decided to put up that huge portrait of the Queen—rather a bad portrait of the Queen, I might say, with a shocking frame—in the Fountain Court. That decision was made unilaterally, so the fact that the Speaker and I made a decision about the photographs is in keeping with decisions of previous Presiding Officers. I might also say it was a decision of previous Presiding Officers that the photographs were put in the dining room in the first place.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: Are you referring to the aesthetic quality of the frame?

The PRESIDENT: The picture is pretty bad. I remember showing it to Princess Anne on one occasion when I had to hold her up for a few minutes to stop her going into the Strangers Dining Room. It was a very funny occasion because Warren came rushing out and said "You've got to hold up Princess Anne for five minutes." A reception was being held for the British Olympic team and there were so many huge Olympians present. They could not actually make a passageway through these huge blokes to allow for Princess Anne to get in so I had to hold her up for five minutes while these huge guys were pushed aside. I said to Princess Anne, "A picture of the Queen." She just looked at it and said "That's awful." I must admit I agree with her. It is not a good portrait.

CHAIR: That particular portrait was removed from the forecourt and placed near the lift area, which is not a public area, and the public can no longer see it unless they are visiting a member of Parliament.

The PRESIDENT: All the permanent pictures in the Fountain Court have been moved. You might have noticed all the Max Dupains and the beautiful textile collage of the Parliament have gone so that the whole of the Fountain Court now is a exhibition area.

The Hon. HENRY TSANG: A good idea.

The PRESIDENT: People have just been thrilled with the exhibitions that have been in that area in the past year or so and the way in which they have been curated, mainly by my chief of staff, Yvette Andrews, who is a frustrated curator. It is certainly a different proposition to what it was when it displayed a whole lot of permanent pictures and photographs. When community groups wanted to put on an exhibition like the Stroke Survivors exhibition or the Reconciliation with Schools exhibition their exhibits had to be put on those horrible partitions. It always looked like a school fete. I ask you to think back a couple of years, when you had to fight your way past all those horrible partitions before you could get into the Chamber.

We have now done away with them. We now say that nothing can be exhibited unless it is able to go on the walls. That has meant that you can actually see the lovely marble of the Fountain Court. It is a much more spacious area and any art displayed is hung the walls. I think that is one of the great changes we have made to the public face of the building. I make no apologies for taking down the picture of the Queen as part of those changes. Count yourself lucky that is where it is Fred; it might be moved further on if you are not careful.

CHAIR: I am keeping a very close eye on it.

The PRESIDENT: We want to put the beautiful Brett Whitely picture of Patrick White opposite her so that we can have the two old Queens facing each other. That Brett Whitely painting is one of the most beautiful pieces of art in Australia yet it is up on the eight floor, where no-one ever sees it. We have got problems with its security and safety because it is worth about \$2 million, but we do want to bring it downstairs so that when the public enter the building they can see this real showpiece with the Queen on one side and Patrick White on the other.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: I have noticed some additional security infrastructure of sliding doors being constructed around the building. When they come into operation what will happen? Will members have to carry around cards to make them operate?

The PRESIDENT: I do not want to go into details about how security operates. I will talk about money and security but I am not going to talk about security in a public forum. You are very welcome to come and see me and I will take you through the whole business.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: They are built. When will they be turned on?

The PRESIDENT: They are coming into service on 9 September.

CHAIR: Instructions will be issued to all members prior to that?

The PRESIDENT: Yes, but I do want members to be fairly discreet about the way in which it all works.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: As they are the interface between the public and private areas it would hardly be discreet. At the moment when documents are tabled before the Parliament, particularly ones that are privileged, the way members read them is to sit at a coffee table in the office of Mr Evans. Frankly, I have never thought that to be a particularly satisfactory situation.

The PRESIDENT: Neither does the Clerk.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: And I am sure the Clerk finds it incredibly irritating. In fact, I admit there have been occasions when I have thought twice about coming down to read documents at times because simply I do not regard it as appropriate to charge into his office at times which might necessarily be convenient for me. Is there any way in which we can work towards getting some sort of decent reading room for those things? Standing Order 52 is now a regular habit of the Parliament and will not go away.

The PRESIDENT: You are absolutely right. It is awful for the Clerks to deal with it. As you say it is happening over and over again. Another one of our expenses, might I say, are the legal expenses because we have to keep on hiring an arbitrator to decide what documents are privileged. We would need to organise supplementation to our budget. You would need a change to the infrastructure, unless that is what you do in the members bar. You could have a reading room.

CHAIR: I think they are meant to be in the possession of the Clerk.

The PRESIDENT: The standing order says in the custody of the Clerk. We have got to change the standing orders or the way in which the Clerk's office works.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: I am sure that other Parliaments have a standing order that is a bit similar, and I am sure they are not sitting on the Clerk's sofa, reading them on the Clerk's coffee table in other Parliaments—or I would be surprised if they are. Does the Parliament still have scheduled maintenance whereby things such as carpets, doors and all those sorts of things are replaced on a regular basis? In the time that I have been here the place seems to be becoming significantly rundown. When I was a new member the place seemed to have a regular schedule of maintenance and always looked pretty new. There is no way of saving that money over time. Ultimately, someone will have to fix the place up if we do not fix it up progressively. Has there been some cut to that that sort of regular maintenance over time, or is that maintenance still going on and I am just getting older and the place looks daggy?

The PRESIDENT: Yes, I agree with you: one of the reasons is that, yes, you are getting older, and that when you arrived here the Parliament was not that old a building, and now it is quite an old building. It is now 25 or 26 years old. I keep arguing that it is time for a major refit. There are very few 20-year-old office buildings in Sydney that have not had a major refurbishment. It is certainly time for it—especially the dining room, where there are patches in the carpet. It is badly in need of work.

Maintenance has been subject to the same global budget savings as the rest of the Parliament. So, yes, there has been less maintenance than normal. We have now got a total asset management plan and we have also been successful in getting \$250,000, which will start being used on our annual maintenance of the building. But I agree with you: there is a certain tawdriness. Have any of the officers still got the brown raffia wallpaper or is that all gone? There you are: that is an achievement if none of them have brown raffia now. That was the 1970s contribution to the Parliament.

CHAIR: We all got new chairs at one stage. Suddenly, something happens.

The PRESIDENT: That is an occupational health and safety matter. Hopefully, you will start seeing an improvement.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Madam President, there was discussion earlier of user charges for the press gallery. I am hoping to explore that a bit further. I note that was not in the proposed

saving plan for the Parliament that was issued to the staff on 23 August. Is there any reason why that was not in that first draft?

The PRESIDENT: There are a couple of things that were not in that savings plan. The other one was sitting only one night. The reason for that is that we still had not had the consultations necessary for that to be a public document. We still have not had discussions with the press gallery about it, so it is still very much a proposal, and it might not happen. That also is cost sensitive. When Canberra charged, media entities tended to close down their Canberra office and run their entire Canberra operation out of Federal Parliament.

But, in Sydney, that is not going to be an option. So, if we start charging the press gallery, they may well decide to pick up sticks and run their operation out of Channel 10 in Martin Place or from Murdoch. It would be quite conceivable that they might get so offended about being charged that they leave. I see the press gallery as an integral part of the Parliament and an important part of what the Parliament is about, and I would be very saddened to see the press gallery leave. So we have got to find out from them what sort of charges would mean that they would get up and leave, because we certainly do not want that happening.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: I agree with you, Madam President. Therefore, I am wondering where the \$120,000 figure came from that was quoted in terms of possible rental.

The PRESIDENT: That is the commercial rate for the amount of floor space that the press gallery takes up.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: You also mentioned, in response to a question from Ms Lee Rhiannon, that that was possibly an unrealistic figure because of occupational health and safety issues.

The PRESIDENT: It is not an unrealistic figure for annual income. We might have to have an upfront capital expenditure.

The Hon. JOHN RYAN: Which would not be much of a saving, would it?

The PRESIDENT: Over time it would be a saving. The other point is that we could charge the media organisations for the capital expenditure.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: So there has been no discussion with any of the affected users?

The PRESIDENT: No, which is why it was not in that. It is still just a proposal. Also, they know that it has been a continual proposal for some time. The issue of whether or not to charge the press gallery has always been in the air, because we charge Ministers. We are moving towards charging government bodies.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Could you outline for the Committee what charges you place on Ministers at the moment?

The PRESIDENT: Ministers pay for their offices in Parliament.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Could you outline what the rent is for each ministerial office?

The PRESIDENT: yes.

CHAIR: Would you like to take that on notice?

The PRESIDENT: We will take that on notice. We will let you know the exact figures that we charge each Minister. But I am told they are roughly commercial rates. I am also told there are two different rates—one for the Domain side and one for the rooftop garden. But that would be commercially based.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Given that we charge rents for offices, I was wondering why there was, I think, a degree of reluctance in your earlier answer about departmental staff passes. If we

are charging Ministers rent for their offices, and we are incurring fees for the processing of security passes, why would we not do that for departmental passes as well?

The PRESIDENT: Because I think it would end up being a bit tit for tat, and it would mean that we would be charged for passes when we went down to GMT.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Thank you.

CHAIR: Madam President, you mentioned occupational health and safety concerns with the press gallery rooms and that they may not now be suitable for the number of people working in them. I know it is difficult and expensive to rearrange the rooms. Do you have any plans to determine which media outlets have more staff than others so that they could rearrange the allocation of the rooms?

The PRESIDENT: Basically, we have left the press gallery up to the press gallery, and any discussions we have will be with the president of the gallery, Alex Mitchell. I would not be making any decisions about the area inside the press gallery. I think that would be very much up to the press gallery.

CHAIR: So the ABC and AAP could decide among themselves to move to another area? Those rooms are not designated permanently to those organisations?

The PRESIDENT: We try not to be prescriptive about how the gallery is used.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Has a payment of rent by the press gallery been something that has been canvassed between you and the Treasurer in any of your meetings?

The PRESIDENT: Yes, we have been quite candid with the Treasurer.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Did the Treasurer initiate it or did you?

The PRESIDENT: I think that it was part of our savings plan.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: The Parliament suggested it as a possible response?

The PRESIDENT: It has always been on the deck ever since I have been President. When I first became President that was when we started charging the Ministers. That was a decision of John Murray and me. It has been on the table, charging the press gallery, ever since. It has come up continually in savings plans.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Did the Treasurer indicate that he was happy for you to proceed in that direction or was he opposed to it?

The PRESIDENT: The Treasurer has never been involved in any of our internal decisions, except for the one about catering and that was because the Premier had made an announcement that there would be no subsidy of catering, but in reality that came down to the subsidy on the operating costs. That has been the only issue on which there has been a discussion with the Treasurer. The Treasurer acknowledges that cuts are made to the Legislature by the two Presiding Officers. He acknowledges that, and he really has not sought to intervene in any way in which cuts are made and which cuts are not. Our arguments with the Treasurer have been over the quantum.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: What is the timetable that you are looking at in terms of the changes that you will need to make to the beverage and catering services to reflect the fact that the operating subsidy is being removed?

The PRESIDENT: We are looking at voluntary redundancies being in place before the end of September, and the closure of the five outlets that I have talked about has already happened.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Yes, but short of complete closure of beverage and catering obviously there will be further changes because we now have no money for staff. Are you suggesting

that the only changes that are going to be made are those funds, and that they will be enough to ensure that from the result in turnover all staff costs are met, or will there be other changes?

The PRESIDENT: Part of our catering strategy is also to maximise the commercial use of the catering services so that we aggressively go out and market the dining room for use when Parliament is not sitting. As you know, we have already done that. But we have a consultant's report that says that more could be gained. Rob Stefanic went down to Melbourne to talk to the Victorian Parliament, which makes quite a lot of money on high teas, weddings and birthday parties. It is very much in commercial competition with the hotels around. However, the Victorian Parliament is a wonderful 1850s building built at the height of the gold boom and it is magnificent. We really are limited in that the Strangers is a fading dining room and at night, when you cannot see the Domain, it really has nothing much to recommend it. We have the Jubilee Room, which is lovely, but it does not take that many people. We have not quite got the drawcards that the Victorian Parliament has, but our consultant says that we can earn some money to offset the drag on finances from the provision of core services to the Parliament.

CHAIR: Just following up on voluntary redundancies, some of the staff here, without being a deputation to me, just in conversation I have asked them how they feel about these things happening and I was concerned there was an impression with some of the staff who have worked here for many, many years—10, 15 or 20 years—that you would ensure that they were given priority in continued employment and not have pressure on them to accept a voluntary redundancy. In other words, loyalty to the Parliament should be recognised in any reduction of staff.

The PRESIDENT: Voluntary redundancies are exactly that, they are voluntary, and there is no pressure. The union would be on to us like a tonne of bricks if there were any pressure on any member of staff to leave. It is a voluntary redundancy and it is being organised with the union and with enormous consultation with the staff. My understanding is that those who are taking a voluntary redundancy are very happy.

CHAIR: Some of the staff I have spoken to, some of the long service members, felt that they were under pressure. Whether or not they were imagining it, that is what they felt.

The PRESIDENT: They need to talk to their union because the union knows what is going on and there is certainly no pressure on anyone to leave. In fact, it is financially in some of their interests to leave, and they know that.

CHAIR: But it should not be left to the union to protect those positions. I believe that you have a role to make sure that there is fairness.

The PRESIDENT: A voluntary redundancy is exactly that, it is voluntary. Members of staff have to approach us with an expression of interest saying they want to be part of the voluntary redundancy program. How can that be pressure if they have to come to us with an expression of interest?

CHAIR: There must be discussions within the organisers or those in charge in promoting these redundancies to the individuals. They are not waiting for them to apply.

The PRESIDENT: There is not.

CHAIR: Some have complained to me, so I am happy to follow that up. There are ways and means of getting a voluntary redundancy. It happens in the commercial world so I would not be surprised if it happened here.

The PRESIDENT: Whenever there is a change in people's workplaces there is always anxiety and worry, and rumours fly. It is really up to the members of Parliament not to feed into those rumours. I know of instances of members of Parliament telling members of staff absolute porkies in order to make the members of staff worried. My response is, as it always is, that members of staff have their union to protect them and their union is doing a very good job at that. For members of Parliament to try to take on the role of the union is just inappropriate. Do not forget, you are a boss and so is every other member of Parliament. They are bosses in this context.

CHAIR: As you made the point about porkies, I certainly have not made any suggestions to staff at all.

The PRESIDENT: I am not suggesting that it is you.

CHAIR: But I did say, "Are you happy?" or "Are there any problems?" and I have had some feedback where some members indicated it to me.

The PRESIDENT: I am not saying it is you, but some members have taken delight in steering unrest and unease amongst the staff.

CHAIR: I certainly oppose that.

(The witnesses withdrew)

The Committee proceeded to deliberate.
