

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 1 – PREMIER AND FINANCE

Monday, 4 September 2017

Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio area

THE LEGISLATURE

CORRECTED PROOF

The Committee met at 12.15 p.m.

MEMBERS

Reverend the Hon. F. Nile (Chair)

The Hon. S. Farlow
The Hon. B. Franklin
The Hon. T. Martin
The Hon. S. Moselmane
The Hon. P. Primrose
Mr D. Shoebridge

PRESENT

The Hon. J. Ajaka, *The President of the Legislative Council*

CORRECTIONS TO TRANSCRIPT OF COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS

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

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

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing of Portfolio Committee No. 1 and its inquiry into the 2017-2018 budget estimates. Before I commence I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people who are the traditional custodians of this land. I would also like to pay respect to the elders past and present of the Eora nation and extend that respect to other Aborigines present. I welcome President Ajaka and accompanying officials to this hearing.

Today the Committee will examine the proposed expenditure for the portfolio of the Legislature. Today's hearing is open to the public and is being broadcast live via the Parliament's website. In accordance with broadcasting guidelines, while members of the media may film or record Committee members and witnesses, people in the public gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photography. I remind media representatives that they must take responsibility for what they publish about the Committee's proceedings. The guidelines for the broadcast of proceedings are available from the secretariat.

There may be some questions that witnesses could only answer if they had more time or with certain documents to hand. In these circumstances witnesses are advised they can take a question on notice and provide an answer within 21 days. Any messages from advisers or member's staff seated in the public gallery should be delivered through the Committee secretariat. Mr President, I remind you and the officers accompanying you that you are free to pass notes and refer directly to your advisers seated at the table behind you. Transcripts of this hearing will be available on the web from tomorrow morning.

I ask everyone to turn their mobile phones to silent for the duration of the hearing. All witnesses from departments, statutory bodies or corporations will be sworn prior to giving evidence. Mr President, I remind you that you do not need to be sworn as you have already sworn an oath to your office as a member of Parliament.

DAVID BLUNT, Clerk of the Parliaments and Clerk of the Legislative Council, sworn and examined

MARK WEBB, Executive Manager, Department of Parliamentary Services, affirmed and examined

JOHN GREGOR, Director, Financial Services, Department of Parliamentary Services, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: I declare the proposed expenditure portfolio of the Legislature open for examination. The questioning of the portfolio of the Legislature will run from 12.15 p.m. to 12.55 p.m. As there is no provision for a Minister to make an opening statement before the Committee commences questioning we will begin with questions from the Opposition.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Mr President, many of us in this building are concerned about whether we are currently regarded as customers or inmates. One of the issues that comes up repeatedly at the moment when I am talking with people is that of our great Hansard service and whether or not a review is currently being undertaken into it. Can you or the officers briefly describe whether there is a review and, if so, what that will entail?

The PRESIDENT: In relation to all aspects, a number of reviews have taken place. In relation to Hansard, I cannot recall seeing any specific information. As you would know, Mr Primrose, I have been President for six months and there has been an overwhelming amount of information. If I was shown something I do not have a recollection of it. I am happy to pass to Mr Mark Webb to see whether he can add anything to that.

Mr WEBB: We in the Department of Parliamentary Services [DPS] always take incredibly seriously the fact that we are spending taxpayers' money, so we are always looking at what is happening, both in this Parliament and in other parliaments, to see whether there is anything we can learn from that. While we have not initiated any kind of formal restructure or review of Hansard, we have asked the Editor of Debates to look at how Hansards are run elsewhere across parliaments from two points of view: to see whether there is anything we can learn to enable Hansard to function more effectively, and from a work health and safety perspective. I am conscious that Hansard officers are dedicated to their work and often have to stay late into the night if Parliament sits late into the night. I have also asked the Editor of Debates to see whether there is anything we can learn to make sure we are doing everything we can from a work health and safety point of view to support those officers.

The PRESIDENT: I will add one thing to that if I may, Mr Primrose. Please be assured that, like you, I am a great advocate for *Hansard* and the Hansard staff. Like all members who mention it consistently, Hansard staff do an extraordinary job and I believe they have the support of all members. Regarding any review and any reports that would be put before me, as far as I am concerned my priority would be the welfare of the Hansard staff and ensuring they can continue to do the job from the best occupational health and safety perspective.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: To ensure that we are not treated as inmates, as someone like you who greatly appreciates the work of Hansard, can you and your officers give an undertaking that before any decisions are made and as part of any review we will not be treated as inmates and we will be consulted about our views?

The PRESIDENT: Absolutely, Mr Primrose. I am a great believer in consultation. I would like to think that in my six months as President I have shown that I am a great supporter of consultation with members. I appreciate enormously the feedback I get from members and I appreciate enormously the feedback I get from former Presidents. I believe that I learn, and will continue to learn, extensively from that. Please be assured that with anything as major as looking at how Hansard can work more effectively I will seek feedback from all members.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Thank you. This former President would like to give that feedback and to have an opportunity to give feedback on many things that happen here, including security barriers and processes. I would like to be consulted before that takes place. Consultation is more than simply being advised when decisions are taken. I will leave it at that.

The PRESIDENT: I do not want to take too much of your time but can I say that since becoming President I have become well aware of issues relating to consultation. I have had a number of discussions with members, including the Opposition Whip in relation to consultation. I believe that consultation must occur at the beginning. In other words, even when there is just a thought bubble, consultation should occur. Under my watch I intend to ensure that that happens.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I am heartened by that, Mr President. Thank you for that assurance. I have been advised that on at least two occasions this year the audio equipment in this room has failed. I know that you and your officers are aware of that, Mr President. On one occasion during the Portfolio Committee No. 5 inquiry into water augmentation, a section of the transcript was unavailable as Hansard could not obtain the audio and stenographers were not being used as a backup. Can you tell us about any proposed upgrades that will prevent that from occurring in the future?

The PRESIDENT: Yes. A number of upgrades have occurred. There have already been three major capital works projects completed: disability access to toilets, upgrades to security and upgrades to public spaces. To answer your question, three new projects will begin this year—education, further security and core components of the broadcasting system. These matters are being looked at. We are continually ensuring that upgrades take place. I assure you, Mr Primrose, that I have also asked Mr Mark Webb to look at this over the next 10 years to ensure we have sufficient funds and, if necessary, to go to Treasury. I indicate that the core components of the broadcasting system will be replaced in the near future to ensure consistent reliability and quality. The Department of Parliamentary Services has reviewed its protocols and, as a result, there will be routine checks of the system. We do not want to know about it when we are sitting in committee or in Parliament; we want a routine check. Just as they check the alarms and bells routinely, we want the same checks with this system. Mr Webb?

Mr WEBB: I can give some more details. As the President has outlined, we have a project that primarily concerns the stabilisation of the system, but obviously that will take some time. In the meantime we have put in place some additional measures to try to make sure that these issues do not impact on the operation of committees. There are a couple of things that we have put in place. My Facilities Branch now thoroughly tests the broadcasting system before each hearing. We have also been assisting with some testing for unusual events, for instance, when a Skype component to the hearing might be included. If issues arise on the day we have clarified the escalation protocols to make sure we can react more quickly to those issues. You might have noticed that the Hansard team has deployed the away kits—the portable recording devices—in hearings to make sure that, if we have a repeat of the kind of incident that you outlined where we get a small break—I think it was 12 minutes lost audio in the hearing you are referring to—we have the away kits deployed as a backup to make sure we do not lose audio.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Fantastic to have that backup from Hansard.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Thank you Mr President and officers for being here this afternoon. I thank my colleague for putting the issue of consultation in perspective. I understand that the President will not treat us like inmates. Members should be offered better consultation. I know the President has already indicated that he will improve the consultation process. I want to ask about the security barriers, in particular, on level 7. What measures have you put in place if and when the barriers malfunction, in particular, when division bells ring?

The PRESIDENT: As you will appreciate, the decision for the security barriers and the ordering of the barriers occurred well before my time as President. When I became aware, as President, that the barriers were to be fitted I was immediately concerned, first and foremost, about the bells ringing for a division. I had a meeting with Mr Mark Webb and others to ensure that every protocol is observed. For that reason you will note that the barriers have not yet been implemented.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Leave them open, we say.

The PRESIDENT: During a division they will be left open. They will be immediately opened the minute that the bells ring. I have insisted on that and I have been assured that that will occur. Other protocols include the security guards manually opening the barriers, if necessary. If they do not open immediately at the touch of a button there are other ways to open them. If you are facing the barriers and looking at the elevators you will note on the far left a door there—a panel can be opened with a key and can be left open. We have already started to test the security barriers and they will be continually tested. I need to be 100 per cent sure that there will be no slip-up with these barriers.

I also indicate, Mr Moselmane, that these security measures were being looked at in 2006 after the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation recommendation; again in 2010 after the Deloitte recommendation; in 2014 after the police recommendation; and finally in 2015 Treasury supplied funding to enable these barriers to be built. These security measures are not something that occurred overnight; they have been taking place for almost 11 years now. I believe there has not been sufficient consultation in relation to these barriers. I have accepted that and the department has accepted that. This is one of those perfect examples where, after a thought bubble, if I can use that expression, consultation commenced immediately and we are

seeking feedback. We still want members' feedback. As these barriers commence to operate it is vital that we receive members' feedback.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Leave them open; that is my feedback. Do not turn them on.

The PRESIDENT: I will take that as feedback. That is the reason they will be left open during divisions. The initial plan was that members would still need to swipe their security passes, but that will not be occurring.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: My main concern is that any malfunction will not cause members to miss a division. I take it from what you have said you will guarantee that will not happen.

The PRESIDENT: I am sure that will not happen. As I indicated earlier, on the far left-hand side there is a door that can be opened using a key. That door will be open. I cannot see how somebody could now miss a division. You will not be required to jump over the barriers.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: We hope so.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: He has been in the gym. He is training.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Member for Gosford Liesl Tesch has written to the Presiding Officers with regard to accessibility issues in the Chamber and in the precinct, particularly regarding exiting onto Macquarie Street. As former Minister for Disability Services and now as President responsible for the Parliament building, what steps have you taken to address her valid concerns?

The PRESIDENT: I was pleased to receive her letter. This is probably the best example of consultation with members. She is our first member in a wheelchair and is able to tell us what does and does not work. We have already undertaken a number of upgrades to ensure that we comply with disability legislation, and in particular the Disability Inclusion Action Plan. I am proud to have introduced that plan as Minister for Disability Services. The issues that the member for Gosford raised are excellent from a consultation perspective, from somebody who is living it each and every day. To be honest, we would never have thought of or considered some of those issues because we have not experienced them. Even issues such as accessing the Chamber, the table in the Chamber and her office desk while using a wheelchair are being examined.

She has requested that we review and update our procedures to allow wheelchair users to exit through the security gatehouse. The manhole in the Speaker's square—the Chamber entry—has been re-edged to address a trip hazard. The ramp between the Wentworth Room and the Chamber has been addressed, but more long-term work must be done after further consultation. Other minor works programs are to be completed by the end of this year, including removing a metal protective edge on the timber under the table in the Chamber. We would never have thought of that had the member not brought it to our attention. The member has brought a number of other issues to our attention that will require more planning, and we will need to approach Treasury for funding to address them. External access to Hospital Road is important and we must work on it. The member has brought to our attention the accessible shower and toilet in the pool and gym, the stairlift into the pool and gym, and the automatic doors between the Wentworth Room and the Macquarie Room.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: When you say you will work on access to level 6 and Hospital Road, what is the plan? Do you have a plan?

The PRESIDENT: Planning and budgetary work have already been undertaken. We will need to approach Treasury for funding and I will argue that it should be provided.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: At the moment the exit to Macquarie Street has a turnstile. Anybody carrying anything, let alone someone in a wheelchair, will not be able to go through. What measures have you taken to ensure that this issue is addressed immediately to avoid having the member humiliated by waiting for somebody to open the door?

The PRESIDENT: Mark Webb and I have been discussing that issue. Again, the planning is underway. I can either ask Mr Webb to respond to that question or I can take it on notice if you have more questions.

The CHAIR: It would be good for him to provide that information for us.

Mr WEBB: We are looking at a couple of things. I think your question is more to do with what we are doing immediately to deal with this issue.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Yes.

Mr WEBB: The first solution, which you have already pointed out, is that the gate next to the turnstile can be opened by the special constables. We have consulted with the constables to make sure that they are aware of how to do that and how to do it quickly.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: We would like members to be able to swipe themselves out.

Mr WEBB: Installing that facility is one of our longer-term plans. In the short term, while we do the necessary planning, we have instituted a new protocol which allows people using wheelchairs to exit through the gatehouse. Rather than going out through the turnstile, they can go through the gatehouse. Again, the special constables have all been briefed and trained. They understand that somebody in a wheelchair can exit through the gatehouse to prevent the kind of delay that you are talking about.

The PRESIDENT: One of the positive aspects of these suggestions from the member for Gosford is that all of the work being undertaken to assist her has a positive flow-on effect for members of the public, including parliamentary staff, who use wheelchairs and who want easier and better access.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I refer to another member's issue, one that I have raised with you previously. The member for The Entrance David Mehan has an electorate office that is riddled with asbestos. The Government knew of the asbestos and it was on the asbestos register. An incident occurred in May 2016, after which the office was deemed unsafe to enter and was subsequently closed for one week. Two of the staff were required to register on the National Asbestos Exposure Register due to possible exposure. A company was subsequently contracted to connect the National Broadband Network [NBN] in May 2017 and was not informed of the presence of asbestos.

In a letter to Clerk of Legislative Assembly Helen Minnican, David Mehan goes to great lengths to explain the situation. A follow-up report dated June 2017 produced by SLR Consulting identified the presence of unsealed asbestos within the ceiling space. The recommendation was to restrict access and to remove the asbestos. At no point since the report was provided has any action been taken by the New South Wales Parliament to have this recommendation implemented. This is clearly gross negligence on the part of Parliament in protecting the member, his staff, constituents and tradespeople accessing that office. What is your answer to that?

The PRESIDENT: Clearly, I am not in a position to comment on your assertion of gross negligence. However, I understand the question, the passion with which it has been asked, the reasons for asking it, and its importance. The management of electorate offices is a matter for the Legislative Assembly; it is a matter for the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly and Madam Speaker. I have made inquiries to ensure that the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly is actively managing the issue of asbestos in electorate offices on behalf of Madam Speaker. I am sure that Madam Speaker is prepared to receive any member of the Legislative Assembly in her office to address any concerns or questions.

Given the longstanding convention that operated in relation to the budget estimates hearings for the Legislature and the principles of the Committee, I am not in a position to comment further on a matter that affects the Legislative Assembly. The executive manager can provide details on the management of asbestos at Parliament House if required. However, I think the best thing I can do is to forward the question to Madam Speaker and provide her response to the Committee. It will not be a response from me.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: What is the total cost of installing those new security barriers?

The PRESIDENT: I do not have that exact figure with me. Mr Webb may have the information with him, but if he does not I will take the question on notice.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I am happy for you to do that. I am not asking for the details of the security assessment.

The PRESIDENT: I understand that, and I would not be able to provide that detail anyway.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Nor would I seek it on a public transcript. When was the security assessment done suggesting that this additional form of security should be installed?

The PRESIDENT: In 2006 the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation recommended improvements to internal access. In 2010 Deloitte recommended improvements to internal access control with access barriers to the level 7 lifts and lobby. I took 2010 as the real commencement in relation to the barriers we are speaking of. In 2014 the NSW Police Force advised improvements to internal access control with the lifts on 24/7 security pass access. In 2014, the Parliament submitted the funding request to Treasury and obtained

approximately \$2 million. In 2015, Treasury approved the funding allocation in the 2015-16 budget and that is when the work commenced.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Mr President, was there any assessment done that compared the competing priorities of having members of Parliament and a Parliament House that is accessible to citizens and the public and the security threats of, heaven forbid, allowing members of the public to engage with members of Parliament?

The PRESIDENT: It is a bit difficult to answer the question with the longstanding protocol. As you indicated, it is not for me to go into detail.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: It is the general principle of having an open Parliament House where MPs engage with members of the public. That is an extremely worthy goal. It distinguishes the New South Wales Parliament from the bubble we see in Canberra. We seem to be getting closer and closer to that bubble where MPs are excluded from the public.

The PRESIDENT: I understand that. From my perspective, I have a duty to protect members of Parliament even if they say they do not need to be protected and are fine. I have a duty to protect their employees, I have a duty to protect parliamentary staff, I have a duty to protect the public who attend the Parliament's precinct and I have a duty to protect the schoolchildren who frequent the Parliament. I personally weigh those duties and obligations against the fundamental principle of access by the public to Parliament. I accept that, Mr Shoebridge. I am not trying to restrict the Parliament to the public. There are security measures and barriers, but any member of the public can gain access to the Parliament after following the protocols. If a member wants access to another member the protocols are there to allow that to happen. The protocols allow access to schoolchildren and members of the public wanting to see the President. I do believe the security measures are there for the security of everyone and at the same time the protocols allow the public to have access to the Parliament.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Will you take on notice whether those considerations were part of the planning and in what way those considerations were part of the planning before we got the third layer of security? There are fences, external security, roving security and now this third layer.

The PRESIDENT: I understand that. I assure you that those matters are taken into account. They were taken into account by my predecessor and by former presidents. There are other issues in relation to security. There is the issue of schoolchildren lining up on Macquarie Street with no protection whatsoever.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Better to get them in.

The PRESIDENT: We are now taking action to prevent that by having the schoolchildren come around the library and possibly having Hospital Road as the entrance for schoolchildren. I have to weigh accessibility against security.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Why can we not have a policy of automatically allowing school kids access? Why does a class of eight-year-old school kids have to go through the rigmarole of lining up and passing through metal detectors and security? Why do we not let the eight-year-olds in as a job lot?

The PRESIDENT: I cannot go into all of the reasoning behind security. We are taking every possible measure to ensure not only the safety of the schoolchildren but the safety of everybody.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Have you got a figure?

The PRESIDENT: It is sad that we live in an environment where we have to do this.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I am not scared of letting the eight-year-old kids in school uniform in with their classes. Anyone with a rational view of the world would say if you have the fourth class from Carlingford primary school just let them in. That would be the sensible solution, would it not?

The PRESIDENT: I am trying to ensure that all security protocols are there at the same time as not restricting access. We live in this environment, whether it is the airport, courts or Parliament.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: For the record, I am not afraid of primary school kids. Do you have the figure on the cost of the barriers?

The PRESIDENT: For the record, I love primary school kids, I meet with them all the time and I enjoy their company enormously.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Then let us stop x-raying their school bags and putting them through security: just bring them in to Parliament.

Mr WEBB: The security barriers are part of a prior security project and that was a little under \$1.9 million, but I will have to take the breakdown of the specific component for the security barriers on notice.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: What is the update on disability access to the Legislative Council public gallery? In the interim can we have a policy in place that allows people in wheelchairs to get priority access to the President's Gallery if they cannot get access to the public gallery?

The PRESIDENT: In my short time as President I have on two occasions given immediate approval for people in wheelchairs to be within the President's Gallery.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Yes, I know. One of those was a request from me and I am grateful. Can we have a standard protocol so the staff and MPs are aware that can be the default position?

The PRESIDENT: If they cannot contact me, I am happy to look at that and that is a very good suggestion.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I have had ongoing concern about the lack of employment security for the cleaners at this Parliament. They do a professional job, they are dedicated and there is an enormous benefit in giving them secure, permanent employment. Is there a policy in place to ensure that our cleaning staff have secure permanent employment?

The PRESIDENT: I am 100 per cent in agreement with you, I believe our cleaning staff do a fabulous job and I consider many of them as friends and they consider me as a friend. I like the fact that when I go around the Parliament—

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Friendship is great but security of employment is better.

The PRESIDENT: I will indicate some figures. It is sometimes misrepresented. In 2003 there were 19 part-time cleaners. In 2014, there were 17 part-time cleaners. In 2016, there were 17 part-time cleaners. And in 2017, there are 17 part-time cleaners.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: How about full-time?

The PRESIDENT: Building assistants, which are the full-time positions: In 2013, there were eight; in 2014, there were eight; in 2016, there were eight; and it is now seven. There has been a reduction of one.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Why are we not getting that transfer and giving increased full-time employment? You have cited four years of figures and we have a ratio of twice as many part-time as full-time. Why do we not employ full-time cleaners so they have security and a living wage?

The PRESIDENT: The cleaners are there and have been there for a period of time. They do have security.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: There are more than twice as many who do not.

The PRESIDENT: Mr Shoebridge, we have gone from eight to seven and from 19 to 17 over a number of years. It is not a situation where we have had a huge reduction. That is not the case. We have an obligation to ensure that the best outcomes occur for the cleaners with the best use of taxpayer funded money. The situation is that with the current cleaners we have and the use of contract part-time cleaners it is providing the best outcome for all. I can assure you that the cleaners that are there have secure jobs.

The CHAIR: With all the renovations and the special security facilities on level seven, what is the future of the Queen's portrait? At the moment it is not on display.

The PRESIDENT: Which one are we talking about?

The CHAIR: The large one.

The PRESIDENT: My understanding is that they are finalising the maintenance of the portrait and it should be returned within two or three weeks.

The CHAIR: Why not install it in the original setting that was approved by the painter, in the public area? It is now in a place where the public cannot see the portrait; it is inside the security barriers.

The PRESIDENT: I will take that on notice. That is a good question. I am happy to have a discussion to understand exactly where it is going. I had focused earlier in relation to strangers. They have been returned in a much better condition than previously. The crest will be returned in the next couple of weeks as well. I will take your question on notice.

The CHAIR: There was a suggestion that the sunlight might damage the portrait, but I checked with the painter and that is not a problem.

The PRESIDENT: I know I was initially told there were concerns about damage. I took it to mean damage by the public, but I did not take it to mean damage by sunlight, if I can be allowed to simply have that discussion with management to ascertain that.

The CHAIR: You were involved in yesterday's reception for the visit of His Holiness Pope Tawadros II from the Coptic Church.

The PRESIDENT: I think it was Friday.

The CHAIR: He came to our Parliament from Egypt and there was not embarrassment, but there were some problems as to whether his entourage could enter through the gates of Parliament. Is that a situation we could review as to whether, in certain situations with presidents of countries or heads of churches, the gates can be opened?

The PRESIDENT: The visit was actually planned by the Department of Premier and Cabinet. It did not go through the President's office, so I did not really have any control over that. I will investigate why. I take it you mean the gate the vehicle could have driven into?

The CHAIR: Yes.

The PRESIDENT: I will examine why the gates were not open. But I can assure you all work was undertaken to ensure that when His Holiness came through the gatehouse he was not required to go through security. There was no impediment. He was appropriately escorted. The Usher of the Black Rod was present to assist at all times.

The CHAIR: I notice too that with the renovations a number of paintings have been removed from the ground floor—our level 7. We just have hooks and things on the walls, which was quite unpleasant for visitors such as we had on Friday. What is the timetable for the restoration of those paintings to restore level 7 to its normal glory?

The PRESIDENT: Literally everything will be back in the next couple of weeks.

The CHAIR: That is a promise, is it—two weeks?

The PRESIDENT: "A couple" will be two or three weeks. I cannot give you an exact date, but we will definitely be on top of it.

The CHAIR: I am adding my own inquiry to this issue, and I have asked other members. There is an element of unhappiness among members over the current regime of charges for the parliamentary facilities.

The PRESIDENT: I take it you mean catering.

The CHAIR: There seems to be a dramatic increase. Two weeks ago I had a guest in the Stranger's Dining Room. The charges are so exorbitant that members are not using the facilities in the way they used to. I went to the Stranger's Dining Room with guests and found that we were the only guests in the whole of the Stranger's Dining Room for that day. I have never seen that before. Obviously there is less custom. The increased prices may be to increase revenue, but if there is less use the net result is less income. If you check your budget, you may not be getting the revenue you need.

The PRESIDENT: When I became President, it was one of the first questions I raised. As a person who ran a business for 30 years, I truly understand the aspect of finding the right balance. I have to find the right balance between what is really a service to members and to the public—affordability, if I can use that term—and, at the same, the taxpayers' money going towards paying for these services for members. I am well aware that past Presidents have had the same dilemma that I am having. In 2011-12 the loss to catering was approximately \$1.22 million. That was the actual loss. Last year, the loss was \$558,000. We are trying to work to a loss of \$396,000 for next year. That means that one of two things needs to occur: Either prices go up or certain services where there are some substantial loss-making aspects need to cease. I am trying to find the right balance. It is something that I am monitoring very carefully.

We have taken other action to help increase funding in a positive way. Opening high tea to the public is one example. Opening the venues to the public to bring in additional income has had a very positive impact. It has been one of the reasons we have been able to reduce the losses. But we do need to do more. I know that Mark Webb and his entire team are looking at it. We will have a new catering executive manager commencing in approximately five to six weeks and that will be one of the first tasks given. We will also have a new head

chef coming in in approximately four to six weeks who will look at those aspects. I would love nothing better than to wave a magic wand and say all costs are going to be enormously reduced, but if that will end up resulting in more services having to cease, that is not a good outcome. I have to find the right balance, and that is what we are trying to do.

The CHAIR: But there is a problem if, as it was that day when I was in the Stranger's Dining Room, all the staff are standing around and there are no patrons. You are in trouble. That is cost you are probably not assessing.

The PRESIDENT: One of the ways we have been able to reduce some of the costs is that a number of the staff are casual, part-time staff. We are able to monitor and make some adjustments with, of course, our permanent staff being there. We have the same issue in the Members' Dining Room. I am a frequent visitor of Members' Dining and I have been there on a number of occasions when I was the only person who was there. We need to look and monitor. It would always help enormously if more members would use the facilities, but at the same time I understand that if prices become unaffordable then the opposite will occur.

Mr WEBB: One of the initiatives that Mr President referenced was opening the restaurant to the public one week a month in a non-sitting week. We also open for five weeks over both the summer and the winter recesses. I am very pleased to say that with our opening of the restaurant to the public over the most recent recess we had pretty much full capacity every day. The restaurant was filled, except for a couple of tables we would hold back in case a member wanted to dine at the last minute. We were at pretty much 100 per cent occupancy the whole time. They are the kinds of initiatives that we are trying to do to make sure we do not have, as you say, staff who are not being fully utilised.

With the starting of the new head of catering and the new executive chef, one of the things we will be looking at very closely is the options for members dining. We have heard the feedback around members dining. You can expect that once those two positions have got their feet under the table we will be coming out with a more specific consultation with members to try to improve the service that we offer there and maybe change the mix. I have very much heard the feedback from many members of both this House and the other that simpler fare at a different price point would be very much welcomed. That is something that we are looking at. In the short term, I would direct you towards the members' specials, which we will beefing up over the next little while, and which try to meet that gap as well.

The CHAIR: I am not suggesting that we reduce staff.

The PRESIDENT: No. We are trying to increase patronage.

Mr WEBB: Yes, that is very much the case.

The CHAIR: Yes, that is the whole point. You need to have a bit of salesmanship to get the customers coming through the doors. Thank you very much, Mr President and your staff, for being with us today for the estimates hearing. We appreciate it.

The PRESIDENT: Thank you, Chair. I thank all the members.

(The witnesses withdrew)

The Committee proceeded to deliberate.