

VERIFIED VERSION

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Budget Estimates 2016–17

Melbourne — 6 May 2016

Members

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Mr David Morris — Deputy Chair

Ms Harriet Shing

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Witnesses

Mr Telmo Languiller, Speaker,

Mr Bruce Atkinson, President,

Mr Ray Purdey, Clerk of the Legislative Assembly,

Mr Andrew Young, Clerk of the Legislative Council, and

Mr Peter Lochert, Secretary of the Department of Parliamentary Services.

The CHAIR — I declare open the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee inquiry into the 2016–17 budget estimates. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to welcome the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, the Honourable Telmo Languiller, MP; the President of the Legislative Council, the Honourable Bruce Atkinson, MLC; Andrew Young, Clerk of the Legislative Council; Ray Purdey, Clerk of the Legislative Assembly; and Peter Lochert, Secretary of the Department of Parliamentary Services. I would also like to welcome additional witnesses sitting in the gallery. Any witness who is called from the gallery during this hearing must clearly state their name, position and relevant department for the record.

All evidence is taken by this committee under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Comments made outside the hearing, including on social media, are not afforded such privilege. Witnesses will not be sworn but are requested to answer all questions succinctly, accurately and truthfully. Witnesses found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and subject to penalty.

Questions from the committee will be asked on a group basis, meaning that specific time has been allocated to members of the government, opposition and crossbench to ask a series of questions in a set amount of time before moving onto the next group. I will advise witnesses who will be asking questions at each segment.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and you will be provided with proof versions of the transcript for verification as soon as available. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

All written communication to witnesses can only be provided via officers of the PAEC secretariat. Members of the public gallery cannot participate in the committee's proceedings in any way. Members of the media must remain focused only on the person speaking. Any filming and recording must cease immediately at the completion of the hearing.

I invite the witnesses to make a very brief opening statement of no more than 5 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

Mr ATKINSON — Good afternoon, Mr Chairman and members of the committee. It is a pleasure to come back to the chopping block. The Speaker and I bring with us the heads of three of our key departments, three of our key arms, and indeed there are other members of the administration who are with us today, so if there are some issues that we are unable to satisfy, perhaps we might be able to do that today with the help of the officers, or indeed, as you have extended courtesies to us in the past, we would be delighted to provide written responses to you in follow-up.

Visual presentation.

Mr ATKINSON — Can I say at the outset that the Parliament is actually grateful to the government for its support this year of a number of initiatives, and they are significant, very significant. In the first instance, the excusing of the general efficiency dividend for Parliament sits very well with us. We are concerned about having to battle on it every year, because we do not believe that it should be applied to Parliament and it has some significant ramifications for us if it is applied. But certainly the Treasurer was prepared to waive it this year, as it has been in recent years, indeed since the 2013–14 year.

There was clearly an allocation for the building out the back, the new office accommodation for members, and that is an amount of \$45 million. It actually draws down funds that have existed for quite some years, accumulated for quite some years, in respect of our unspent funds at the end of each year, but to have access to that to undertake this very important project — important in terms of OHS, important in terms of the efficiency of members operations and also important in terms of security — we certainly appreciate the government's support in that regard. We also appreciate decisions that were made in terms of the topping-up of electorate office budgets to recognise changes in voter population and indeed, quite importantly for us from a security point of view, the recognition of the government of the importance of extending the replacement hours that are available for electorate office staff who are ill or away on holidays.

All of those initiatives are actually very significant. The only one that we missed out on, in terms of the process of submissions to the Department of Treasury and Finance, and obviously the Treasurer and the finance minister, was in respect of some additional funding for the Legislative Council committees. That is an ongoing concern for that department, but certainly the other matters were terrific.

Rather than go straight to the presentation, which you already have, I thought I might just cover a couple of other quick things so that you have a bit of an understanding of what we do as presiding officers, because we do not act as a tag-team pair in our own right by ourselves; we actually draw on a lot of advice in the work that we do on behalf of the Parliament and indeed on behalf of our members of Parliament. A couple of the key organisations that we have, or key areas that we have within our parliamentary structure, are an audit committee, an audit advisory committee, which draws on some external participants, very experienced gentlemen in Frank King and Bill Russell — unfortunately who have both indicated that they wish to retire, and we are in the process of replacing them with other external candidates to ensure that we have an external perspective to the work that we do in managing our business. Also represented on that committee is PwC, which is our appointed auditor, and the Auditor-General staff actually come and present reports to us as well. Of course we engage the Auditor-General to undertake audits by invitation and receive reports there.

We have also got a security board, which was established about 15 or 18 months ago obviously in response to the heightened concern about some of the security matters, and we have drawn considerable advice from that board. That board consists of VicPol as well as Wilson Security and from time to time brings in other experts as well as our own staff who are responsible for security.

We also have a presiding officers and senior executives meeting on frequent occasions where we run through particular initiatives, and indeed the building works out the back, the security works and many of the issues related to the operation of the Parliament are canvassed by that committee. The Speaker and I are subject to advice in that forum, which is obviously invaluable in discharging our duties as presiding officers.

As part of the project out the back we have established a panel of experts who will assist in managing that project and ensuring that it comes in on budget and on time, the time being December 2017 — I would perhaps allow up to the January, February period of 2018, but certainly very early in 2018, if not completed by 2017. The members of that committee include obviously key staff that are here — Peter Lochert and Hilton Barr — but also the architect, who actually is a heritage architect, Peter Elliott.

I am conscious of time too, Chair, so I will wind up. Also the state government architect; a representative of the Department of Treasury and Finance; a quality surveyor; Parliament of Victoria's auditor, PwC; Parliament of Victoria's legal representatives; and indeed the manager of building and grounds services. One of the things we are conscious of with building this building is that the grounds are also important in a heritage sense, so we are very much focused on ensuring the integrity of the grounds as well as the building — important going forward.

Just very quickly, we do have cost pressures. The budget has been increased, and we are grateful for that. Some of the increase in budget, though, is for new initiatives, particularly the budget office that will assess policies, which is a new initiative of government. We have a \$4 million allocation in our budget to facilitate that office. Generally though, we have a 2.5 per cent increase, which is similar to all of the other departments. That is fine except that areas like our rents, our utilities, our information and technology costs, including licences, our security costs and a pending EBA all are in excess of the 2.5 per cent. So we have consistently had to manage our resources and cut our cloth to ensure that we are able to meet our responsibilities to our members and our staff.

In that sense — and I do conclude on this, Chair, and thank you for your tolerance — the GED, were it applied, would be an extra \$3.1 million. That would be a very significant impost on the Council — on the whole Parliament, I should say — and it would represent a significant impact on the MPs that we serve. There is already an impact in terms of our cost pressures in that we did, in 2013–14, have to cut members' budgets to meet the original \$4 million cut that we had at that time — the GED.

Whilst we were able to restore part of that last year, we have certainly not got back to restoring all of the money that was previously available to members. And it shows up in little areas like office relocations and upgrades, because we are increasingly finding that when we have to relocate an office, it is to a less exposed position, which is not what a member of Parliament wants, but indeed again it is a matter of actually being able to afford it in a fairly competitive marketplace. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR — Thank you, President.

Ms WARD — Thank you, everyone, for attending today. My question is to anyone who wishes to answer it. In the presentation today, the building out the back has been referred to. I have got two questions regarding this. In deciding the number of toilets, has there been consideration to the increasing amount of female MPs that are coming into the Parliament; and will these toilets and existing toilets be provided with tampon and pad dispensing machines, rather than just the bottom drawer in the gift shop, which is the current arrangement?

Mr ATKINSON — The answer to both questions is yes.

Ms WARD — Thank you.

Mr ATKINSON — I might add that members might also have noticed that we have actually been rejuvenating our existing facilities throughout the building. There are currently works on the second floor, which serves K Room — or Federation Room, as it is now — and some of the party rooms and dining rooms. So we are actually very focused on making sure that those facilities are up to scratch.

Ms WARD — But in those new toilets there are not any pad or tampon dispensing machines.

Mr ATKINSON — Well, there should be, in the new toilets.

Ms WARD — There is? I have not seen them.

Mr LOCHERT — In the new ones, yes.

Ms WARD — Are there?

Mr LOCHERT — In the new ones there should be, yes.

Ms WARD — Which new ones?

Mr ATKINSON — There are some on the lower ground floor at the back entrance.

Ms WARD — Okay. I have not noticed. I do not know that there is.

Mr LOCHERT — I have not personally checked them.

Ms WARD — I know, but I do not know that there is. I will double-check that for you.

Mr ATKINSON — But we are progressively upgrading those washrooms, and certainly that is something that we are mindful of.

Ms WARD — Great. Thank you very much.

Mr LANGUILLER — Similarly, if I may add, provisions have been made for people with different types of abilities. Whether it is toilets or whether it is tours or whether it is prams, all of those provisions have been made, so I think you will find that on issues of gender, disability and so on all the good boxes have been ticked.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Can I go, President, to what you said earlier — and obviously it applies to the Speaker as well — in relation to the allocation of 1.7 million this financial year and in the forward estimates for additional staff — that matters to all of us. I know why I think it is important, but could you explain a bit more about what drove that outcome, because to be honest I do not think there was much made of it even amongst members and I really just saw it in the budget papers, and what it actually means — from 10 days to whatever?

Mr ATKINSON — It is 10 days to 40 per office. We were concerned about a number of things. In one instance we were concerned about a number of employees who were not taking enough leave, and we felt that one of the reasons why some were not taking leave was because they felt pressure to stay at the job because their employer — their member of Parliament — would not be able to adequately have the office serviced if they were away. So that was one of the pressure points. But more significantly we are mindful of the need, as much as possible, to have two people in electorate offices from a security point of view. There is also the issue of staff who may leave the employ of the Parliament and take with them the corporate knowledge. So it is a

question of also having more people understand the way a member works and what their systems are and processes are and their being sufficiently up-to-date on those so that if there is a change of staffing, the member is not disadvantaged in that sense as well.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Thank you, President. Just for the public record — because I only really, to be honest, became aware of this fairly recently — those two FTE are entitled to effectively 40 days of leave between them?

Mr ATKINSON — Correct.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — We only got replacement for 10 days of leave — —

Mr ATKINSON — Previously — —

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Previously. So as of 1 July?

Mr ATKINSON — Previously it was 10 days between them; it is now 40 days between them.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — As of 1 July? Is that right?

Mr ATKINSON — Yes. One of the things that we do try to encourage is for members to request their staff to take some leave time over the Christmas period, when there is very little that happens except return Christmas cards. I might add that if there is long-term illness or some other trauma for an electorate officer, then we do have an opportunity as Presiding Officers to consider those circumstances and perhaps provide further support to a member.

Ms SHING — Thank you, gentlemen, for the information you provided in the presentation, and to you, President, for your opening remarks. I would like to ask about the work which is undertaken by Parliament's staff in relation to keeping the building operating when we have late sittings, particularly in the Council, given changes to the standing orders and the way in which we are often here very, very late and the impact that that has in relation to the budget allocation and the way in which staff resources are provided, as well as the way in which the committee structure for upper house committees is operating and the extent to which you feel that that is able to be acquitted through current resourcing.

Mr ATKINSON — Certainly when the houses sit later there is a significant increase in costs and the costs range across the Parliament. It is not just in terms of the actual house that sits, because the dining-room needs to be open, the library needs to be open, Hansard is obviously on rotation — indeed Hansard has quite a number of people because of the rotation process — security needs to be maintained at a particular level and we have engineers on site and so forth in case the microphones go dead. So there are a significant number of employees that are required to stay on site when Parliament is sitting late. I do not have the figures for this year. We did have them for the last Parliament and it was a significant amount of money. Mind you, at the last Parliament the hours tended to be longer than we have experienced here, but they are becoming a feature of Thursday nights.

Ms SHING — Thank you, President. By way of follow-up, if I could ask that this perhaps be taken on notice and provided to the committee. If there is any modelling that has been done in relation to the way in which costs might be minimised and/or resources might be better allocated where a sitting on a Friday were to occur with the Legislative Council, I would be grateful if that could be provided to the committee or otherwise by way of comment in the remaining 29 seconds.

Mr ATKINSON — There would still be further costs obviously associated with Friday sittings, but they would not relate to overtime and so forth in the same way. Obviously when staff are here for extended periods we need to send them home in cabs for safety and so forth, so there are other costs that perhaps are not immediately recognisable. Yes, it would be cheaper to have sittings resume on the Friday rather than to go into the late hours of a Thursday.

In respect of the resourcing for Council committees, our staff have done an extraordinary job in our committees right across all of the committees — obviously the joint committees as well. The staff do a tremendous job. But certainly the Council ones have been under real pressure. Indeed those committees have really been supported to a large extent by chamber clerks and so forth and people from the papers office, because we have not had sufficient funds to actually cover the number of committees and the extent of the inquiries — not just the

number of inquiries but the extent. We have had over 3958 submissions to the four committees — the three established committees plus the select one into the port facilities. It is nearly 4000 submissions and, as members would appreciate, the actual processing of submissions is one of the most onerous aspects of the committee procedures because you need to make sure that they are right, you need to know whether or not they should be published — there are quite a range of things there. I am just —

The CHAIR — Order! I might just pass to the Deputy Chair.

Mr MORRIS — Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome. I just want to start with a question that emanates from the second-reading speech for the appropriation of Parliament bill. I was just trying to find it in *Hansard*, and for some reason it is not coming up. It was only a half-page speech but essentially the speech indicates that the bill was in accord with the Presiding Officers' wishes. I made the point when I opened the debate for the opposition that it was not clear whether the appropriations proposed were in accordance with the Presiding Officers' wishes or whether the allocation of the resources that have been provided was in accordance with the Presiding Officers' wishes. I am wondering if you could expand on that for me.

Mr ATKINSON — I think there is still an issue as to whether or not we have the best process in terms of Parliament's funding in discussions of appropriation bills. It would be true to say that that statement is correct to the extent that, as I said, the government has made a number of provisions in this budget which recognise the submissions that we put, particularly the additional staffing for electorate offices, the increased funds on voter population for electorate office budgets, clearly the building out the back and we have also had accommodation on some security funding over a period as well. To that extent, yes the government has met all but one of the requests that we put. The one that was missing was additional funding for the upper house committees.

To the extent that statement is true. But there is an issue that ministers are able to go to the government and argue their position and argue about their appropriation. We tend to get told by Treasury and Finance that this is your allocation, plus the 2.5 per cent increment, and of course on this occasion a couple of new initiatives were funded, particularly the budget office. But essentially we do not have that opportunity to actually make representations to government to say, 'Look, this is an area where we are falling behind. We really need some additional resourcing'. It may well be that going forward we do need to look at the resourcing of the two houses — the Legislative Council to the Assembly.

Whilst the Assembly has more members, in the Legislative Council the nature of the work is quite different, which is really a factor in the longer hours. It is a factor in those committees that are now meeting and doing very extensive inquiries. I mean, there was one into dying with dignity and another one on coal seam gas. These were major inquiries. Out of eight reports that have been tabled and all of the work that was done with those submissions and that, it has been less than \$1 million, most of which has been subsidised out of Legislative Council's funds, indeed leading us to a likely deficit position this year of probably around 400 000. Indeed it would be worse were it not for the fact that we were able, with the Treasurer's acquiescence, to transfer, under the finance act, \$500 000 from joint committees across to the Legislative Council to again augment our position.

Mr MORRIS — Just on that, President, we obviously have the opportunity as an outcome of this inquiry to make recommendations on the appropriation process. It would be helpful if the Parliament had a view on how the process might be improved if it were to be transmitted to this committee so that we could consider it and perhaps make recommendations along those lines and at least in that way get the process in front of the government in a formal sense.

Mr ATKINSON — Yes. Can I answer that first of all by saying that with the Department of Treasury and Finance we have had a remarkably constructive relationship over the last couple of years. The people that we have dealt with have come to understand a little bit more about how Parliament works; they have come to understand the separation of powers a lot better than I think was the case corporately previously. So we have actually done quite well in terms of prosecuting our case with the department officers. But that still relies on personalities. It is not necessarily a sound position going forward.

We might like to discuss this further and provide you with some written notes in respect of our view on this — a collective view, rather than just mine — but on this occasion what I would say is that formal meetings with the Treasurer to explain our position would be helpful. Can I say the Treasurer has also been helpful. He has met with us on a number of occasions; he has been quite open to discussions on some of our needs and, indeed, has responded to them. Again that is relying on personality. We would like to perhaps have it on a firmer footing.

Mr MORRIS — Thanks. Chair, I might yield to my colleague.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — I have a question to whoever — probably Mr Lochert. You were talking about security upgrades in the presentation. The rear entrance security upgrade and changes to the fencing, the new building et cetera there — was that delivered on time and on budget, or were there any cost overruns with it?

Mr LOCHERT — No, it was. It was done in two stages. I do not have the breakdown here for the previous financial year, but the first stage was done to meet the requirement of the opening of Parliament. If you recall, we had a pretty intensive sort of work program there. We funded that very much out of unspent depreciation funds that the Parliament had not spent in the previous year, so it did not require any new funding. And from then, after the opening of Parliament, we set up a project that step by step improved, for example, the fencing, the car park, the guard house. Each one of those was separated out as a separate project. Each one of those had a time line. Each one of those had a budget. They all were delivered on time.

There were some additional works that were done, and they were principally related not to security but to the car park, in particular because, as we started putting in some of the services — for example, the electronics, the data, the power and so on — we found what has become common when doing work in the Parliament area. It is a bit like an archaeological dig.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — No reflection on the inhabitants, I am sure.

Mr LOCHERT — Well, no, I am referring to the building only.

Mr ATKINSON — We have found three former members.

Mr LOCHERT — We have, indeed! There are a lot of utilities, and there is a lot of infrastructure; there is cabling; there is piping. There are a whole lot of things like that that are not documented, and as we dig we find them, and they need to be remediated. One of the major problems that we had is that we found some serious contamination that required digging out a much larger area of the car park and resurfacing the car park completely. We would have done that in the course of the parliamentary precincts program in any event, but we would not have done touched that for another two or perhaps two and a half years — we just had to move it forward.

Mr ATKINSON — In terms of precinct, we have another significant project to go which we are working on and, again, taking advice on. We are trying to make sure that it is aesthetically a good solution as much as practically, and it relates to the front steps and the approach to the building. The advice that we get and the models that we have taken for fencing, including the stone work in front of the back door, have all been designed to stop a vehicle that is running at a speed that is capable of ramming the facility. There is an opportunity, I understand, for somebody to climb up the steps in a suitable vehicle at a reasonable pace, and we are looking at how that vulnerability might be addressed as well as the two wings on the front. But we are looking for an aesthetic solution because we clearly do not want to barricade the front.

Mr LANGUILLER — Can I, if I may, just bring in the secretary again to actually show, for the benefit of the committee, some of the good work that has been done, particularly in terms of the security upgrade at the back and just to give you an example of what happens in this place on a daily basis or weekly basis. Just very quickly the secretary — —

The CHAIR — We might just pause that for a moment while we throw to Ms Pennicuik for her question. We will come back to that.

Ms PENNICUIK — Thank you, Chair. Thank you, President, Speaker, clerks, Peter and all the staff. I just wanted to say — before I say what my comments are — that my question was going to be about security, so maybe you can hold that thought, Mr Lochert, and you can continue with what the Speaker was going to ask you to do. Basically I was going to ask about any more thoughts on security, because I am very interested in that issue and the balance between access to Parliament and security, which I have studied through my trip for the CPA, and that is the focus of lots of the commonwealth parliaments — how to balance access and security.

But I just wanted to thank you for your presentation and just make the comment that it really shows how much work is done behind the scenes by staff in electorate offices, staff in the Parliament and all different types and levels of staff in St Andrews Place — the security staff, everybody. That is very well outlined there, and the

pressures on everybody to assist us in our work are great. For anybody who is listening, have a look at this presentation. It really does outline the type of work that is done really on behalf of the citizens of Victoria and particularly with the committees and their inquiries.

Can we continue, as you were, to tell us more about security, because that is really what I was going to ask about.

Mr ATKINSON — I will throw, as the Speaker has invited, to Mr Lochert to address a little bit of what goes on, but can I just make one point in regard to a media story that appeared this week that suggested that the PSOs, particularly the women PSOs, were dealing with inadequate facilities in their work here. Can I indicate that the media outlet, for whatever reason, got that story wrong in the sense that the facilities that were of concern to PSOs were at government house, not here.

We have actually invested quite a lot of money in terms of ensuring that they have a sealed area that enables them to do the video monitoring that is so crucial to the security of this place, and it is part of the seamless security. In other words, it is not in people's faces, but it is ensuring that a safe environment is maintained.

Other parts of that article were of interest, I think, in respect of the level of service from the PSOs, and there have been some ongoing discussions about the balance between the PSOs and private security at Parliament. We are in the process of continuing those discussions and working towards a renewed memorandum of understanding with the police in terms of our expectations of them and their accessibility to the Parliament and so forth in the course of their work. We do have an existing memorandum of understanding, which has been in place for quite some years, but we are in the process of refreshing that with new police command and new government to make sure that everybody understands their obligations and we are able to work together.

Mr LOCHERT — Thank you, President. Thank you for your question, Ms Pennicuik. The whole question of security is a really sensitive one, obviously. One of the things that we value about Parliament House and the parliamentary precinct in particular has been that we have always referred to it as the house of the people. It has always been an open building, and any of us who have come from overseas particularly value that characteristic.

We live, however, in different times. We live under different circumstances, and sad as it may be, we really have to manage it differently. What we do try to do all the way along is to manage it as sensitively — and in a balanced way — as we can, commensurate with the risk that we face. In that, we work very closely with Victoria Police, with the federal police and with other security agencies. We receive advice on that, and much of the physical work that you have seen around the precinct has been motivated by that and driven by that. We still have a fair way to go, but we are getting there.

Probably more important is a lot of the work that we do in the background, which is not seen and hopefully is not any more intrusive than it needs to be for members, for staff and particularly for visitors who come to the building.

Just to give you an idea, some basic statistics over the last nine months — this current financial year: we have had about 244 security incidents that we would classify as reasonably serious. We are looking at about 86 000 visitors to the precinct, and the security — the searches at the various entrances — have collected so far 4748 items. I have just circulated for your information photos of the sorts of things that we are collecting — —

Mr ATKINSON — The cutlery.

Mr LOCHERT — The cutlery, indeed. It is only, I guess, a selection, and obviously it shows what are the prohibited items that we are collecting. The sad thing about it is that when you go through and you look at what has been collected and the types of people who have actually presented to a search with those kinds of — particularly knives — items, there is a great deal of worry and risk to people in the precinct.

Mr ATKINSON — The Speaker might just very quickly mention another threat that you might not think of as a security threat, but indeed for us in the management of the Parliament it is, and that is with the IT system.

Mr LANGUILLER — Thank you. If you refer to page 17 of our presentation, I think I want to address this in the context of recognising the very good work that our IT department does, and with respect, if I may submit, to all members, so we can all understand the work that they do, it is not just responding to our messages and

trying to unlock our systems when people like me lock themselves out time and again, weekly. But I will just refer, by way of prevention and proactively, to there being 1 100 000 deleted spams that are stopped before they actually come into our system. That requires a significant amount of work that protects all of us. Further, if you go to the red part of that, that relates to 685 000 incoming emails, and then of course the last colour, the blue one, relates to outgoing.

That puts into context the enormous amount of work that gets done, and I cannot emphasise that enough about this department, and the others, and you have seen, by way of showing some of the items that security and staff collect, there is an enormous amount of work being done — good work being done — by all departments to protect the wellbeing and the security and, to take your point, if I may, to try to strike a balance of remaining the very open Parliament that it should be, but at the same time delivering on the safety and security of members and staff and indeed visitors, the thousands that come into this place.

Ms WARD — I just wanted to go back to my earlier question regarding the provision of tampons and pads within the female toilets. The female toilet up on this floor that has been refurbished does not have these machines, so if you could get back to me and follow that up, that would be great.

Mr LOCHERT — We will follow it up. We will certainly follow it up.

Ms WARD — Thank you very much.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — So this has a relevance for security, but I do not want to talk about security — I mean, I think it is vital and I think it should be continually enhanced. But nonetheless, in terms of the public access to this building, I think it is fantastic. It is a working building, but I see a lot of people coming from the public, and I think it is great. It opens up the Parliament, it demystifies what we do and all that kind of stuff. I see attendants do great jobs with tours and look scornfully at me about my little tours, because I know about one-tenth what they do. I never get to book it in time, so I have to do it myself. But I just want to get a sense: do we monitor those trends? Is it increasing, the public interest, whether it be school groups, whether it be other groups, because I think it is really important in terms of democracy and Parliament?

Mr ATKINSON — One of the crucial things that we have addressed in these past 12 months has actually been community engagement. We were fortunate in recruiting an expert in this field who had worked in the federal Parliament in a community engagement and indeed an international relations role in Andres Lomp. Under his work, or management if you like, we have developed a very significant community engagement program.

The trends, as you rightly highlight, are for increased numbers of people coming through, despite the fact that we have those accessibility issues. Indeed we probably, because of Parliament sitting times, have some less functions during the sitting weeks than we used to have. But certainly general community engagement is significant. Parliament House open day is one of the things. We expect that to increase, particularly now because our website — the Victorian Parliament's website — is now the most viewed of the websites around Australia in terms of parliaments.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Wow. Mr President, I have noticed that you have got a Facebook page now and Parliament television and interesting facts come up on my Facebook page.

Mr LOCHERT — And a YouTube channel.

Mr ATKINSON — Exactly. Yes. So we are really exploring all of those areas. And of course those are the sorts of areas that also drive visitation, so we do expect that there will be increased visits to Parliament by members of the public.

Mr LANGUILLER — If I may submit: open day, 4000 visitors; school conventions in September and October, with more than 200 students, just to give you some examples; the news alert service, 1600 subscribers; and of course we do youth workshops in April and May, amongst some other activities that the Parliament undertakes.

Ms SHING — I might ask, if I may, how it is that we propose to reflect the role of Indigenous communities in the Parliament. I note that we have introduced various changes in a procedure sense in the way that the house conducts its affairs, but with these opportunities around new facilities being built and external facilities as well

in the context of the heritage component of the grounds, I would like to get your comment on how it is that that might incorporate Indigenous communities and their role.

Mr ATKINSON — We would be very keen to do that, but it would be rather arrogant of me to suggest that we have got the answers on that one. I think that we have already had some discussions with representatives of the Indigenous communities. I say ‘communities’ because sometimes people think that they are this one group of people and they all have the same view, and they do not, so we do need to consult on what might be the most appropriate ways to reflect that.

It has certainly occurred to me and in some of our discussions, when we do have these new facilities in the Parliament, that one of the welcoming rooms — perhaps a room that we welcome particularly our international guests in — might well be given an Indigenous name. I know ‘wominjeka’ is one of the words that is used fairly extensively — and that means ‘welcome’ — but whether or not that is the most appropriate word, we need to consult on that and indeed on other areas in which we can reflect. The flag flown over Parliament is a wonderful thing; it is probably 160 years too late, but fortunately it is there now.

Ms SHING — But the work continues then, just to pick up the flavour of what I think your response was there, President. Speaker, did you have anything else to add in relation to how that might be reflected across the organisation?

Mr LANGUILLER — I think the acknowledgements, if I may, have been welcomed by Indigenous communities, and both houses do the acknowledgements. To be perfectly honest, we are learning every day. The other day the Assembly had a delegation of various groups of brothers and sisters of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander communities. I was to welcome them in my office, and it was suggested to me, ‘Do you have the Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander flags in your office?’. The answer was no. I thought it was a great idea. I had not myself registered that, so it is not an initiative that I had undertaken, but actually it was suggested to me. I think it is a good thing, and we did it. We do it in good faith, and we do it because we want to continue to work together and to learn with them and try and continue to go through this journey in close consultation. I think it is fair to say that the President and I and the staff are as cognisant as we can be, but we always welcome to learn a lesson or two.

Ms SHING — Including through employment opportunities?

Mr LANGUILLER — Of Indigenous? Yes.

Ms SHING — Thank you.

Mr ATKINSON — In terms of employment, we actually do strive to be an exemplar as an employer. We have actually just embarked on a new White Ribbon endorsement program that will ensure that we are working to get the messages across and make sure that behaviours are changed where necessary so that people do understand and respect each other much better. So there are a range of areas that we do work in in that respect. Certainly with the employment of people, yes, you are right; we try to be as diverse as possible.

Ms SHING — Fantastic. Thank you, President.

Mr MORRIS — I might begrudge Ms Shing my 41 seconds

Ms SHING — I am sorry, Mr Morris.

Mr MORRIS — If I could come back to security, but the front of the building rather than the back, the improvements, particularly around the vestibule area and the glass screens and so on, are clearly an improvement, but on both those doors we still have simply security firm staff. On the exit door quite frequently it is an older person. It was pointed out to me today, and I concur, as I have been to many parliamentary buildings around the world — I have had that privilege — that this is the only one that does not have someone with a firearm reasonably close to an entry point. The suggestion is that we are sort of winding things back rather than amping them up. Are we likely to persist in that situation?

Mr ATKINSON — The PSOs are armed, and the PSOs — —

Mr MORRIS — With respect, President, they are, and they are sometimes up at the top of the steps and quite frequently they are down the steps or a long way away.

Mr ATKINSON — We do have a managed timetable, and it is based on risk analysis. Again this is a matter of striking a balance between perhaps having an Arnold Schwarzenegger standing at the door and a Marilyn Monroe.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — Is that an option?

Mr ATKINSON — Indeed, might I say that sometimes the Marilyn Monroe might well be far more effective than the Arnold Schwarzenegger, because very often it is not the actual bulk of the person, it is their ability to defuse the situation. In many cases some of the women that are employed by Wilson Security and engaged by us are actually trained so that the defusing of an incident is the first option. I guess that comes about particularly when we confront these guys coming in with knives and so forth — it is sometimes a lot easier for the women to ask them to hand them over than for a guy. With this whole program we work on the advice and the expertise and the experience of those people we engage. I am not sure that it is true that all other parliaments have armed support at their entrances. I am not sure that is right, but — —

Mr MORRIS — I was saying all the ones that I have had the privilege of visiting; I certainly do not pretend to have been to every one.

Mr ATKINSON — I do not contradict you, because that might well be the case; it is just that I am not aware of that. But certainly, as I said, we do take advice. We are liaising, again, through that security board that I mentioned at the outset. We are taking advice from VicPol and indeed there is a feed into that from the federal police as well. We are looking at those matters. There is a concern sometimes with armed response. Indeed one of the nastier incidents that we did have in the Parliament was where one of the PSOs actually had a firearm and he was overwhelmed and his firearm was stolen. The perpetrator actually ended up shooting himself down by the Yarra. That was one of those situations that police are very mindful of — the concern about being too overt with firearms as well.

Mr MORRIS — I will just be very quick because I know Mr Smith has an issue he wishes to raise. The orange bollards down at the bottom of the steps there have been around, I think, for about eight years now. Is there any plan to replace them with something that will simply drop into the ground and be far more attractive? It is not a good look for the front of the building.

Mr LOCHERT — The high-security plastic chains.

Mr ATKINSON — Yes, they are very confronting for everybody who might want to do evil.

Mr MORRIS — Exactly.

Ms SHING — The Marilyn Monroe of bollards perhaps!

Mr ATKINSON — Indeed. That is something that I referred to earlier, and you are absolutely right. We do need to have a better solution at the front, which is about, as I said, not just vehicles coming up the steps but also protecting those wing areas. We have looked at bollards that drop. We have looked at chains that drop as well and that members can activate so they can enter and use those parking bays, but other vehicles are prevented from coming onto site. There are a number of options that we are looking at. They are under active consideration at the moment. You are right; the current position is just not effective.

Mr T. SMITH — I do not know who I should address this question to, so to the panel: I am just intrigued as to what the Parliament will be doing to recognise the 90th birthday of the Sovereign.

Mr ATKINSON — There are no plans. We actually have, I think, mentioned it, certainly in the Legislative Council — I do not know if it has been in the Assembly — but we have certainly acknowledged the record of her reign. There is no plan specifically to recognise the birthday.

Mr T. SMITH — Nothing?

Mr ATKINSON — Sorry?

Mr T. SMITH — Nothing by the Parliament at all?

Mr ATKINSON — No, and my understanding is that neither are any of the other Australian parliaments.

Mr T. SMITH — Okay. Interesting. The federal Parliament has, but anyway.

Mr ATKINSON — The federal Parliament?

Mr T. SMITH — I believe the federal Parliament has, but anyway.

Mr ATKINSON — Maybe.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — You talked about office relocations due to redistributions et cetera last time. Can I just ask what the rules are surrounding office allocation, particularly when new members come in, given that in the Eastern Victoria Region there was an office, for example, that went begging? I know when I came in it was, 'This is your office. You don't get a choice'. What are the rules around that?

Mr ATKINSON — Essentially with our offices we are in a contract situation with landlords. We have leases and we have options on those leases. In part those options are designed to try to protect our financial position going forward. So we are keen to try to make maximum use of the contract that we have with the landlord, but we recognise that particularly after redistributions there are a number of members who are left outside their electorate, and clearly that is unsatisfactory in terms of their ability to represent those electorates and for their constituents to access their services. So from our point of view we do have included in most leases now an ability for the Parliament after an election to actually quit some of those sites.

The problem that we have, though, as well is that, for instance, at the moment we have 44 members all looking for relocations or major upgrades of their offices, and we frankly do not have the funds available to do all of that in one hit, so we do have to ration that. And again, when we look at things like the general efficiency dividend, \$4 million hit some four years ago, and that clearly impinged on our ability to do some of this sort of work.

Inevitably the rents increase quite markedly when we look at our electorate offices. In fact, our rents are running I think at about 6.4 per cent — —

Mr LOCHERT — Over 12 years.

Mr ATKINSON — Over 12 years. We are having difficulty when we come to relocate members to find facilities that are compliant in terms of disability access, in terms of security, making sure that they have got car parks, making sure that they are as close to public transport and so forth as possible. There are quite some criteria that we use.

In terms of priorities, yes, the first priority is usually to get members into their electorate offices. The second priority is to look at those offices that are not particularly disability compliant or that have major maintenance issues. Quite a few of our offices tend to have water features after major rainfall events and we do look at those sorts of things as well. There is quite a process involved in that. Clearly we would like to support all members and give them the offices they want in the locations they want, but it is fairly difficult from a financial point of view.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — I guess in the case of Eastern Victoria — this is not a dig at you I hasten to add, Ms Shing — there was a perfectly good office in Sale that apparently no-one wanted to move into and it had to be abandoned, basically, and I think new accommodation found. Is that the choice of the MP or is it up to the Parliament?

Mr ATKINSON — In that case it was the choice of the MP who actually lived a very long way from Sale. Essentially he lived in the metropolitan area —

Mr D. O'BRIEN — He was out of the electorate.

Mr ATKINSON — and could not commute to that office on a regular basis, and the staff he was employing were also not located in the Sale region, so there was a real issue there. In most cases we were able to reallocate offices and come to an agreement with various members who had come in, where an office — —

The CHAIR — Dr Carling-Jenkins.

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — Thank you very much for coming in on a Friday afternoon. I certainly have a renewed appreciation of the breadth of the work that you all do and oversee. This is not a question, I just want to note and commend in the key activities in the presentation the capacity building activities undertaken in Fiji and Nauru through the Pacific Partnership Program. I just think that is an excellent program. I commend you for keeping that going and contributing in that way.

I have a couple of very quick questions around the budget items in budget paper 3, on page 111. The first one is around Legislative Council committees. I appreciate, President, that you have been doing a lot of advocacy in this area for the Council and I note there is an increased funding allocation of around 400 000, I think it is, a year. I just want to clarify: is this simply preventing the Council from having to reallocate funds, that you referred to earlier, or is this really new funding?

Mr ATKINSON — That is new funding. It is a continuation of some funding that we were able to get last year. The problem with us transferring from joint committees is that firstly the joint committees may well not have funds available for transfer —

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — Sure.

Mr ATKINSON — and secondly we can only do it on an annual basis because we can only do it within a particular budget period. One of the things about the joint committees this year is that they have had a fairly tight year financially after we transferred that \$500 000, and there has been very little committee travel. So if more of those committees had aspired to travel this year in the course of their inquiries, then we would have been under much greater pressure. We obviously absorbed through this committee the cost of the Auditor-General's investigations and so forth as well so there were significant constraints on our budget in that sense.

Our ability to run the legislative committees, notwithstanding that \$400 000 allocation, is probably inadequate in a chamber that a government does not control.

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — Sure.

Mr ATKINSON — If a government controls it, as in the last Parliament, the government can actually define which inquiries are going to get up and which ones are not, but in this Parliament obviously there is a range of members who all have different views and the government only has 14 out of 40 members so it is not able to prevent those inquiries. On a number of occasions, as the members of the Legislative Council would know, I have actually referred to the difficulties in funding and also the workloads for both members and staff where there are new references. Notwithstanding those warnings one of our committees the other day, and I cannot do anything about it, self-referenced a new reference on bushfire preparedness.

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — Wow. Yes.

Mr ATKINSON — And again that could be quite a significant inquiry that could well generate a lot of submissions at this point.

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — Absolutely, and I note that the select committee on the port of Melbourne, for example, cost almost 150 000. It was quite a short committee and a very effective committee, but that has to be absorbed somehow in the budget.

Mr ATKINSON — That was really just the cost of the consultants, because indeed everybody else was essentially already there and it was supported by existing staff. For the extent of that inquiry and some of the work that was done that was probably Parliament — and in fact a number of these inquiries and our joint committees as well: I think back to the children one that the Family and Community Development Committee did in the last Parliament — at its very best. It is the real showcase of what we can do well. That port of Melbourne inquiry was a very complex one. It had commercial issues, it had political overtones, it had environmental issues. It was very complex and that was probably the bargain of the century.

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — Very interesting. I have 30 seconds, so I am just going to ask a very quick question that perhaps could go on notice, and that is around the establishment of a parliamentary budget office. I

am just wondering if the committee could have a little bit more detail on timing, staffing and location of that office?

Mr ATKINSON — We would take the opportunity to actually provide that answer in writing because that is a bit of a work in progress for us as well.

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — Sure.

Mr ATKINSON — We are in discussions with the government as to how we will facilitate it. We have obviously scoped out some of the things that we can do to support it, and there is a budget allocation, but it is a work in progress so we will take that opportunity to provide a written response on that, thank you.

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — Thank you very much.

The CHAIR — Thank you. I am conscious of time. I would like to thank the witnesses for their attendance — the President of the Legislative Council, the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, Andrew Young, Ray Purdey and Peter Lochert. The committee will follow up with any questions taken on notice in writing, and a written response will be provided within 14 calendar days of that request. I would like to express my regret that we did not acknowledge the 100th anniversary of the Easter uprising in Dublin to acknowledge the great role played by Irish nationalists.

Committee adjourned.