

VERIFIED TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2007–08

Melbourne — 11 May 2007

Members

Mr G. Barber	Mr G. Rich-Phillips
Mr R. Dalla-Riva	Mr R. Scott
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Ms J. Munt	Dr W. Sykes
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Witnesses

Mr. R. Smith, President of the Legislative Council;
Ms J. Lindell, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly;
Mr R. Purdey, Clerk of the Parliaments and Clerk of the Legislative Assembly;
Mr W. Tunnecliffe, Clerk of the Legislative Council; and
Dr S. O’Kane, secretary, Department of Parliamentary Services, Parliament of Victoria.

The CHAIR — I declare open the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearings on the 2007–08 budget estimates for the parliamentary departments. On behalf of the committee I welcome the Honourable Bob Smith, President of the Legislative Council; Ms Jenny Lindell, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly; Dr Stephen O’Kane, secretary, Department of Parliamentary Services; Mr Ray Purdey, Clerk of the Parliaments and Clerk of the Legislative Assembly; Mr Wayne Tunnecliffe, Clerk of the Legislative Council; departmental officers; members of the public and the media.

In accordance with the guidelines for public hearings I remind members of the public they cannot participate in the committee’s proceedings. Only officers of the PAEC secretariat are to approach PAEC members. Departmental officers, as requested by the presiding officers, can approach the table during the hearing. Members of the media are also requested to observe the guidelines for filming or recording proceedings in the Legislative Council committee room.

All evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, and it is protected from judicial review. However, any comments made outside the precincts of the hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. There is no need for evidence to be sworn. All evidence given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript which should be verified and returned within two working days of this hearing. In accordance with past practice, the transcripts and PowerPoint presentations will then be placed on the committee’s website. Following a presentation by the presiding officers committee members will ask questions relating to the budget estimates. Generally the procedure followed will be that relating to questions in the Legislative Assembly.

I also note in regard to this that the committee has already heard from the Auditor-General even though, of course, the Auditor-General’s votes are part of the Appropriation (Parliament 2007/2008) Bill. But we are dealing here with the other aspects of that bill in terms of the parliamentary departments. The other parliamentary office, of course, is the Ombudsman, and his votes are included in the Department of Premier and Cabinet. The committee may well seek to establish a more cogent relationship with the Ombudsman in future.

I ask that all mobile telephones be turned off, and I now call on the presiding officers to give a presentation of no more than 10 minutes on the more complex financial and performance information for the parliamentary departments.

Mr SMITH — Thank you, Chair, and good morning to the committee. On behalf of the Speaker and myself, we would like to say how absolutely thrilled we are to be appearing before you on our very first occasion. We will do a joint presentation, where I will lead off the first part basically with an overview of where we are at, and the Speaker will go into more detail and then of course we will end with questions.

Overheads shown.

Mr SMITH — The overview: obviously this is with regards to the Council and the Assembly, the Department of Parliamentary Services and investigatory committees. The annual appropriations for the Parliament — 76.7 million of last year — has been increased, as you can see. Special appropriations remain the same, and the total is a slight increase on the previous year.

The significant challenges that we face include the relocation of the parliamentary committees and parliamentary services to 55 St Andrews Place. We are informed that we are not too far away now from moving into 55. Our inspections — when I say ‘our’, the Speaker and I have inspected the premises on a couple of occasions, and all is going well. It looks to be quite an exciting venue for particularly committees and parliamentary services et cetera, and we are really looking forward to it becoming operational.

The improvement of the business processes, particularly the electronic distribution and questions database with *Hansard* et cetera, we are looking at a continuous improvement model there. Some experiments are taking place with electronic pinks and the like, which are seemingly going well.

The support for the select committees of the Legislative Council is an interesting topic, which is going to require not only some ongoing support but increased Treasurer’s advances et cetera and the like to provide the necessary resources. I am sure that will be a matter of some debate at some stage.

The continuation of the heritage strategy — you can see the works that are currently going on around the Parliament. Again, we are quite happy with the progress that is being made there.

The replacement of the electorates office IT equipment is ongoing. As a matter of fact today we will be ordering the new computers for all the electorate offices. I might make a point, which is worth making on the record, that there are still some laptops to be picked up by individual members. It may be a bit surprising, but it is difficult for some people to find the time to go over there to be properly inducted into the use of. I will follow up on that with those individuals.

The environmental management system is particularly of keen interest to the Speaker, who has got some very innovative ideas as to what we can do and what needs to be done.

The relocation and refurbishing of electorate offices is causing a little bit of — I will not say grief or anxiety, but it is a bit slower than we would have hoped for. There is a great deal of cost involved in relocation or refurbishment, as you can imagine, and people have different views as to what they are entitled to and time frames and the like. That is it from me. I will hand over to the Speaker now, who will go into achievements.

Ms LINDELL — I thought I would run quickly through some of the achievements from the 2006–07 financial year. Obviously a lot of these projects were concluded before the President and I became presiding officers. Some of them are ongoing. If you have particular questions about them, I might use the advice from others to answer some of the minutiae.

The commencement of the 56th Parliament was a logistical wonder in that we had the upper house not declared until several days, I think, not even a week before we actually opened the Parliament, so there was a lot of work to be done in a very short time, with the opening of the Parliament, the induction of new members, the establishment of electorate offices and, of course, the President and me both being new to our positions.

There was a lot audit work around the closure of the 55th Parliament with electorate offices needing to have their final audits done, the handovers from previous members and staff movements. I suppose for us as parliamentarians the closure of an office is probably a very sad day but a very simple day in many ways, but there is a great administrative load that is carried by the Department of Parliamentary Services.

There has been a revision of the joint standing orders. I think we are all familiar with those. We have the new standing orders of the Legislative Council, and, of course, anyone in the Legislative Assembly will have noticed the installation of our new timer. Obviously we have gone through quite a lengthy process with our joint investigatory committee staff around new employment conditions. While the relocation to 55 St Andrews Place is probably nearly delivered, there have been 12 months of very hard work that has gone into getting us to the stage that we are.

The President has already mentioned the continuation of the heritage asset management strategy. We have had a very successful trial of electronic pinks and greens to members, and the replacement of members' notebooks. We have had quite a change to the education office — not so much the office itself but to the product that we deliver for visitors to the Parliament. With the program that is delivered to schoolchildren who come and visit, they go through a play; they all get to dress up as the Speaker and have an imitation mace, and it seems to be very good. The feedback from all the teachers — —

Mr BARBER — Can I come to that?

Ms LINDELL — Yes, you can come and watch. It is fantastic.

Mr BARBER — I want to dress up as the Speaker!

Ms LINDELL — The kids really enjoy it. It shows how much TV they watch because they point and stand and leap across the table at one another, so I think they are all used to watching federal question time.

Dr SYKES — The pinko, commie socialists!

Ms LINDELL — We can sit here and have some light-hearted remarks about it, but it is the product of a lot of work that has been put in by parliamentary officers to deliver what is seen as a very worthwhile visit to the Parliament. The kids get a lot out of it. It fits into the curriculum that they are studying, and I think we should compliment the staff who have been involved in getting the program to where it is.

We had the completion of the 150th anniversary celebrations, the travelling exhibition, the former members' function and the 're-member' database, and we had a very well attended open day for the parliamentary precinct, so they are some of the highlights of the last year.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Speaker and President. We will now move to questions. First of all, we need to bear in mind that in these hearings we are focusing pretty much on the budget, and the forward estimates is really our major concern.

I refer to the Appropriation (Parliament 2007/08) Bill and schedule 1 where it details the estimates for the various departments and particularly the parliamentary investigatory committees. We have got \$5 710 000 and the estimate for the future is \$5 000 803. I also refer you to budget paper 3, page 252, which has a similar table. You will notice there are quite significant differences. While this committee may well be interested in the parliamentary investigatory committees and footnote (d), there are also differences in terms of the appropriation for the Council, the Assembly and parliamentary services. I know it is just the estimates, the summary and there is also information on the other committees in the various other parts of the schedule in the bill, but could one of you try and put the two together and give us a picture of what is the reconciliation between the bill and the 'Output summary' table on page 252?

Mr PURDEY — Chair, I will respond on behalf of the group, if you like. It is obvious in budget paper 3 where it states that the 2007–08 budget for parliamentary committees is 6.2 million, with a footnote indicating that there has been an increase of 8.8 per cent compared with 2006–07, and the direct additional costs being incurred by the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee for increase in research and operational costs; the actual appropriation bill talks about an estimated figure of 5.8 million. Obviously the figures do not agree and what is being provided in the appropriation bill is a figure of 5.8 million. At this stage I am not sure where the difference is. I understand it might be by way of Treasurer's advance but I have yet to check that out — —

The CHAIR — What about the wider question, Speaker? It is \$124.3 million in the budget, and in the bill it is 92.138 million.

Ms LINDELL — That is the special appropriation, surely.

The CHAIR — Would it be possible to give us a table which would reconcile the total picture between the output summary table — I know there are probably assets as well — and what is actually in the estimates in the bill? This will obviously assist, I am sure, debate on the appropriation for Parliament 2007–08 bill, which of course is one of the purposes of this committee — to try actually to help the debate in the house when we come to this matter.

Ms LINDELL — The difference is special appropriations to be made to the Parliament. To my mind there are a couple of separate — the difference for the PAEC funding, I am assured, is that there has actually been an error within the budget management system that has resulted the funding being applied against the wrong output authority. This will be rectified once the parliamentary appropriation bill has passed through the Parliament and the changes can be made within the DTF budget management system.

The CHAIR — What about the Council, which is down to 2.667 million and in the output summary is down at 8.6 million; the Assembly is down at 4 and 17.2. I may not understand that there are special appropriations, and it would be good to have a table for all of us, I think, to reconcile — —

Ms LINDELL — I am sure we can do that.

The CHAIR — It is quite a big difference between 92 million and 124 million as you probably appreciate.

Mr SMITH — I am looking here at page 176, where it outlines that total special appropriations have increased by 19.4 million.

The CHAIR — That certainly goes a long way towards it, doesn't it?

Mr SMITH — Yes.

Ms LINDELL — Certainly we can prepare a table and get it to you.

The CHAIR — That would be terrific.

Mr WELLS — Speaker, I am just interested in the cost of the security of the Parliament House buildings. Is the cost of security for the Parliament House increasing over the forward estimates? With the PSOs that are here, who determines the actual numbers of the PSOs? Is that a police matter, or is it by the Serjeant-at-Arms? Is the cost of the PSOs a cost to the justice budget, or is it a cost to Parliament, and will there be any progression of numbers on PSOs or actual private security over the forward estimates period? Can you just give us an outline of how we are looking for the security?

Mr PAKULA — What happens when members burn their sangers?

Ms LINDELL — My understanding is that it is a joint between the chambers and the department. I will get Ray and Stephen to — —

Mr PURDEY — In relation to security, some time ago there used to be police who provided the security at Parliament House and supplemented by what we called an internal fire watch where staff of the Parliament were paid overtime amounts to look after the building in the evenings in case there were fire or security arrangements.

Some time ago, and it is probably about 12 years or something ago, it was decided to replace that arrangement with the protective security officers. An agreement was reached with the police at that time as to what the numbers were in relation to protective security officers. That agreement was put in place. Those numbers and those arrangements still remain the same today. Part of the parliamentary appropriation was transferred to the police department, I think it was at the time, to cover the cost of that. Those arrangements still remain in place, and the numbers are the same. The costs might go up within the police budget if the salaries of PSOs go up, but it is no additional cost to the Parliament. The only additional costs we have had over and above that is we now pay for the contract security people who man the scanning devices at the front and back entrances of Parliament House, so we actually pay that by a contract amount to an outside security company. That is the only additional cost to the Parliament over recent years.

Mr WELLS — When there are functions on at night, for example, in Queen's Hall, is it the Serjeant-at-Arms who contacts the security company to extend those hours, or how does that work?

Mr PURDEY — Normally if there is a function on at Parliament House people will only be allowed entrance to the building via special invitation, and so we would have attendant staff on with the PSO staff to man the front doors. To my knowledge the guests do not actually go through the security at that time. The Amil security people only work during business hours, so if the Parliament sits back, when the house is sitting they are still there, but they are not brought in for outside functions is my understanding.

Mr WELLS — Do you think that part of it would change over the coming years, that particular process, that if you have a function on that the private security staff may be required to work back to supervise those people coming in?

Dr O'KANE — It would require an extension of contract to do that, and there would be an additional cost associated with that. Also, building on your previous comment, my understanding is that, as Ray said, those numbers are fixed in legislation in terms of the number of PSOs that could be employed in the state, and they have to be shared around by police command to cover areas like the Supreme Court and Parliament and so on. Until that legislation is amended the numbers are fixed.

Ms LINDELL — I suppose while the use of Queen's Hall needs the approval of the President and the Speaker, it is usually only given to organisations of reasonable stature or people or events that are sponsored by members of Parliament. I would not envisage, while those constraints on its use are there, I would not consider that we would need to go to the extent of that security.

Mr SMITH — I would have thought that the current arrangements have sufficed and I would not see any reason at the moment at least to increase what we currently do.

Ms MUNT — The general community is being asked to make savings for water, and the environment is pretty much the topic at the top of their consciousness at the moment. I noticed in your presentation that you talked about development of a Parliament-wide environmental management system. I was wondering if you could tell me

what you are proposing to put in place with this environmental management system, particularly in relation to water savings.

Ms LINDELL — I will take the question. My view is that there has been considerable effort made by the staff at Parliament particularly with regard to water use, but also with regard to energy consumption as well. But we have never actually looked at a holistic approach to best practice to how we actually do go about reducing our environmental impact.

Before we continue on with what I would term ad hoc arrangements around how we do things, I have a view that we need a total system in place. To develop that we will need to document what we do now and actually have a firm view so that going forward we can make strategic decisions about how we move forward, what priority actions we would have, because while we can, I suppose, in an ad hoc way address different functions around the Parliament they might not always, if we view them in a holistic sense, deliver the best outcomes for us in the quickest possible time.

My view is that we develop an environment management system for the Parliament that looks at every facet of how we do business. The sustainability team is made up of senior management as well as staff representatives. They are meeting on a monthly basis and hopefully towards the end of this year we will be in a position to perhaps have a much clearer idea of the process going forward, but I can certainly talk to you about some of the water in particular, some of the water savings that have happened, around the Parliament. Most people would have seen the rainwater tanks out at the annex. We collect about 19 per cent of the water that we need for our garden beds. There are five tanks with a storage capacity of 60 000 litres.

The CHAIR — The plumbers are out there, starting today, to connect the tanks to the toilets in the chookhouse.

Dr SYKES — Does it qualify for the \$1000 rebate?

Ms LINDELL — We do have some things — we cannot harvest the water from the top of the building because of the lead and copper in the roof so we are limited to some extent by what we can do, but certainly there has been drip irrigation systems installed, we have recycled water, we are using recycled water on the gardens. The toilets in this main building have all been converted to dual flush. The showerheads are all low-use water. The kitchen refurbishment meant that all the handbasins on the ground floor and the first floor kitchen now have automatic shutoffs, and obviously the connection of the annex from the rainwater tanks to the toilets is happening today. We are hoping to install additional water tanks to take our total storage capacity to 80 000 litres and intending to complete the drip irrigation system throughout the gardens. There is only 10 per cent of the garden bed not under drip irrigation at the moment, so we are hoping to finish that off in July–August.

Mr SMITH — Clearly more good management than luck has resulted in the current state of the gardens. They are still in very good condition considering the climate we are in, other than the tennis courts and the like, which have not been given the same sort of attention.

Dr SYKES — First of all, I would like to record my appreciation of the staff and how they go about their work, often in what I consider a very antiquated physical environment and at times I would consider, equally antiquated or quaint systems. I particularly appreciate the good nature and open willingness of the staff to help, and that applies across the full spectrum of staff, regardless of the broad range of personalities that compromise our staff collection.

The CHAIR — Comprise, don't you mean; not compromise?

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Are you after something?

Dr SYKES — And here we go, here is the sting!

Mr WELLS — Relate it to the Benalla electorate!

Dr SYKES — In relation to the upgrading or replacement of computers in the electorate offices, the current computers have caused enormous pain. It is pleasing that, I understand, you said you are ordering them today. I will make a beg; if it is necessary for me to beg, I will beg. Please ensure that they are installed ASAP. I will give you documentation of the current problems that have been experienced. Even for me, whose brain ticks

very slowly, I find the system frustratingly slow to deal with, so those with a quicker brain must get absolutely exasperated. I guess my particular question over and above that request is: given my remark about what I consider antiquated systems, what strategies are in place to ensure continued upgrading of the systems so that we remain, or get up to, best practice in terms of service delivery and efficiency in service delivery?

Mr SMITH — I can say that certainly it has been my experience, despite some arguments to the contrary from some members, that the IT department is very conscientious in what it does. They are fully geared up for service delivery, personal service, customer service et cetera. They are particularly well trained and equipped and have some very, what I would argue is, quality leadership. The system itself is different to the hardware. As you can appreciate, you might get new hardware but that may not be any different in fact without changes to the actual software or the programs themselves. There are some difficulties that are being worked on et cetera. Again, all this comes down at the end of the day to the dollar. It is about how much we can spend in certain areas et cetera. It is like a lot of other areas, it could be a bottomless pit if you allowed it. But in short we are aware of some shortfalls in the current system, and they are being worked on.

Dr O’KANE — If I could just add to that, President, in the current budget we have just been given just under \$1 million on an ongoing basis to increase the capacity and speed of the wide area network. We have actually been trying to do that for a number of years with budget submissions. We are now very pleased to be able to tell you that the capacity of the system out to electorate offices will increase from 512K per second to 4 megabytes per second. What that will mean in practice is that members will notice a substantial difference in the performance of their machines. Together with the refresh of the fleet and the new laptops, we think you will get much better performance than you have in the past.

The CHAIR — What is the timing for that?

Dr O’KANE — We are looking at rolling that out after July — July on.

The CHAIR — So it will be in July?

Dr O’KANE — No, from July. It is not flick over instantly.

The CHAIR — The second half of this year?

Dr O’KANE — Yes.

The CHAIR — That will be helpful.

Ms LINDELL — The money has only just been funded for the next budget, so it is not accessible.

Dr O’KANE — That is something that we have been pushing for for a number of years. We have been trying to get the business case up. We have now got that, and you will see a substantial improvement in performance.

The CHAIR — I think all members would welcome that.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Just as an aside, what is happening with the old computers? Are they being donated back?

Dr O’KANE — There is, as you would be aware, legislation which deals with the disposal of electrical equipment. So what we do is we attempt to send it to a third party who goes through that process and does some recycling.

Ms MUNT — But what if, for instance, there were local community groups that would benefit from those old computers?

Dr O’KANE — I would need to give you a more detailed answer on that. The issue for us is, though, that the Parliament cannot be onselling or donating electrical equipment, because it requires certification.

The CHAIR — They have to recheck it all and recertify it, with electrical — —

Ms LINDELL — This issue was raised with the laptops. Really it opens, I think, both the member and the Parliament to some risk. I think the best practice would be to go through a third party. Members can be provided with the details, then they can put their community groups in contact with the third party. It just means that we know that if there is a virus on one of those machines or if there is any sort of a problem, it is not a come back then to the member who has donated it — or to the Parliament which has allowed the donation to occur. So I think just as a matter of risk we would go through the third party. There is legislation that we have to abide by.

Dr SYKES — Can I just clarify, if it goes through the third party, is it possible that we can access those computers? I preface that by saying that in my office I have an arrangement with ADI, and we distribute about 50 computers a year to our community groups, and they really are much appreciated. If we can add our computer to that system, recognising the cleansing and procedures that have to go on, it would be very helpful. So what is the mechanism?

Dr O'KANE — I believe that is possible, to approach that group. We will get back to you with some further information on that.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that.

Mr PAKULA — President, in the presentation you touched on electorate offices. Obviously it is more of an issue in the Council than the Assembly, because I imagine all the new Assembly members have just taken over the offices of the departing members, by and large. I think there are still something like five or six Legislative Council members who do not have offices. I would like confirmation of how many members are still waiting for offices and if you could just elaborate a bit on the reason why it is still ongoing. I do not want you to catalogue the particular obstinacies of individual members, necessarily.

Mr SMITH — You do not want to hear them!

Mr PAKULA — Just a general explanation of why six months on, it is still going and when you expect everyone to have an office.

Mr SMITH — It is a reduced number now; as of yesterday one more was taken. There are multiple problems, in particular finding suitable offices in locations where members feel they want to reside. That has not always been possible. I will use one example: the office in Kilmore was vacated by an upper house member and we automatically put in a new upper house member, who really wanted to be elsewhere, in another country town. But we have an ongoing lease — a two-year lease — which we were not prepared to break and incur the losses. There is a commitment given to these individuals that whenever possible, when that lease runs out or when we are able to, given our budgetary constraints and whatever, relocate, we will. But there is significant cost not only in the relocation but refurbishment and the like.

In some cases where people have just decided, 'I have been here long enough; I want to move somewhere else', it is not always that easy and not possible, particularly if there have been a couple of refurbishments already in that office over a period of years and it is deemed to be of a standard that we accept — we are just not going to do it, because of priorities and other needs of other members. I am aware of, say, four in the upper house now who are either still looking — you may be surprised to know that some of the country location rental costs are in excess of metropolitan — —

Dr SYKES — They have seen you coming.

The CHAIR — Because it is such a great place to live, work and raise a family.

Mr SMITH — I am sorry to interrupt you.

Dr SYKES — Put it down to drought assistance, Mr President.

Mr SMITH — For instance, there is an office that was being looked at in, well reasonably close to the metropolitan area which was \$420 per square metre compared to \$500 in Collins Street. That is just not going to happen: we simply cannot spend that sort of money. Then it becomes a matter of looking for somewhere else. Then you have issues with landlords.

For instance, one in the eastern region, in the country, the landlord is an 86-year-old. With great respect to him, he is not going to incur significant costs in bringing his office up to a standard that we would require. There has been a lot of argy-bargy and debate and whatever, and it is the only one available in the town. We finally got there and as of yesterday it was agreed and certain things are going to happen there and we are happy but it did take quite some time.

We could have moved to another town but the member simply did not want to do that. This was their preference. It was not under a great deal of pressure because of an ability to work out of here — there are, I think, three currently working out of the Parliament who are waiting. Shepparton is proving to be quite difficult; the market is very tight there. My advice to anyone who wants to get into property investment is have a look at regional Victoria because commercial rates are extraordinarily high. But we are getting there.

There is one close in the metropolitan area, again where the member has a strong preference and therefore it is a bit harder to find something suitable. We incur something in the order of about \$100 000-plus for a refurbishment or fit-out. It is an issue that has brought a lot of pressure to bear on the department, on to individuals from members who in some cases are frustrated, others who are a little bit more laid-back. But we are getting there.

When you consider it has been six months, you think that is a long time but even as of yesterday when we signed up for that eastern region office, it will take another minimum of three months for everything to be done in terms of the legals, the fit-out and actually moving in. It is not easy, in particular with the changes to the constitution that resulted in much bigger areas and fewer members. We have juggled it and we are getting there.

Mr BARBER — I suppose my concerns are around the area of disability accessibility, obviously in relation to my own office because I made a commitment during the election that not only would I be disabled-accessible but across many of my portfolios and my two fellow Greens we deal with disability accessibility in every issue in every portfolio.

I had one specific question, that was that I asked to see the audit of compliance information for my own office and was told I could not have that. I do not know if that is correct and that is policy, but that means I cannot really demonstrate what level of accessibility I have achieved, which makes it hard for me to keep my commitment. Yes, I could have my own audit done but then that would create confusion between parliamentary services' view and my view in comparison and so forth. That is one question: is it correct that we cannot make public the results of the audit of compliance of our own offices? Secondly, what is our relationship with equal opportunity? Has there been a past ruling or finding or commitment or whatever that has set the benchmark we are now working to? That will do, those two.

The CHAIR — So you want clarification of the equal opportunity requirements in regard to disabilities?

Ms LINDELL — Mr Barber is quite right. There have been ongoing issues, and I suppose from a policy viewpoint the disability access is treated no differently from other issues around leases and where the Parliament tries to have a bit of distance between the member of Parliament and the landlord, so the lease is actually with the Parliament. The landlord should not go to the member and argue the toss over certain things. We try to actually protect both the Parliament and the member by having a bit of arm's length between the two.

In many instances with various things that come up around the leasing of properties — because, as you understand, the Parliament does not own the electorate offices; they are leased buildings — we do try to keep the distance, because it does make life much easier in the long run for the members and it does provide a level of consistency across all the electorate offices. Many landlords seem to be quite reluctant to undertake structural works around disability access. As far as they are concerned, they have an occupancy certificate that does not require them to carry out the works. Parliament has instituted a system whereby all new leases that are signed off do have disability access to the public areas, and I suppose in many senses it will be a continuum — as offices are refurbished and as new leases are entered into, there will be a requirement for landlords to do the required works.

I might hand over to Stephen to talk about the particular standards, because I understand there are various standards. My advice from the previous Speaker around our relationship with Equal Opportunity Commission Victoria is that it is a very strong one and that we do work quite cooperatively with them. We understand that not all our electorate offices have disabled access, but with advice and liaison — I suppose more with liaison — with the equal opportunity commission we have sort of mapped a way forward to address some of those issues. I will ask Stephen to give you the advice on the particular standards that we are working towards.

Dr O’KANE — I do not have a lot to add to what the Speaker said, except that we do follow all applicable standards and comply with the legislation. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has an educative role, and it provides us with advice as to what the standards are that we should be following. However, there are a number of other complications that relate in particular to electorate offices. I guess you assume as a member that the issue of a building permit from a council which says that it complies with the equal opportunity legislation relating to disability would be sufficient. Often councils issue building permits to properties which in the past have not complied with disability access requirements. There is not a lot that Parliament can do about that except try to rectify the works that have actually happened for a particular location. We have insisted, as the Speaker said, on including disabled access and on making the landlord comply with that in all future leases, so it has already been done.

There are a number of other difficulties that are associated with disabled access, in particular because members seek to have their offices in certain areas. Sometimes the topography of the area and so on actually precludes easy disabled access to an office. In many cases I know members will offer to go and visit constituents or arrange another forum in which they can talk to them and meet their concerns. But wherever possible we insist on complying with all standards that relate to disabled access, and we receive regular advice from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

Mr BARBER — Can I just follow up with one question? My building is pretty good. In fact there is a disabled housing service upstairs in my building, so wheelchair access and toilets and so forth, it is pretty obvious it is all there. I am one of the lucky ones. But then there are a lot of issues around it — a lot of complications. I do not understand the area. I do not really know all the things that pop up — for example, there is a door into my foyer which would probably be hard for some people to open, and there is quite a high counter, which means you would not immediately see a person in a wheelchair come into my office. So that might be a simple thing that we could fix or it could be picked up in a later refurbishment or budget or whatever. I do not have a copy of the properly completed audit that I gather you have done on my office.

Dr O’KANE — We do detailed condition assessments on every office, and we incorporate those sorts of issues in the design of offices. It is not policy to give out that information, but I am very happy to have my electorate properties unit go and sit down with you, if there are particular concerns, and go through those. But we treat all members exactly the same. We do detailed condition assessments on each office, and we comply with all of our legislative requirements.

Mr BARBER — That was my point. I do not know what the remaining issues are, and I would like to be able to see how we could work through those.

Dr O’KANE — Yes. We are happy to enter into some dialogue with you about that.

The CHAIR — That would be great.

Mr SCOTT — I would like to ask a question regarding the upgrade of the wide area network to, I understand, 4 megabits per second. In terms of that upgrade is there any investigatory work that is being done looking at the potential that exists for the Parliament to explore things like voice-over-IP in order to save on communication costs? I know that is a path a number of private sector agencies and other governments around the world are going down, and 4 megabits would certainly provide that sort of pipe.

Dr O’KANE — The answer to your question is yes. We have particularly looked at that issue for 55 St Andrews Place. Yes, we have done the work. It is a matter of actually fitting that in with the funding requirements, obviously, but we intend to progress that further, and as we are funded for it we will progressively seek permission to implement that.

Mr SMITH — Constant improvement.

Ms LINDELL — Within the budget.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — I would like to ask the President about funding for select committees. You touched on it briefly in your presentation. Obviously there is one select committee established, and another is about to be established. Has funding been provided in the budget for select committees. You did mention TAs. Is there any baseline funding in the budget that could be available for select committees.

Mr SMITH — I will defer to the Clerk.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — For some time the Legislative Council's budget has had an amount of \$25 000 for select committees. This has been the case now for probably the last 15 years or so. That is certainly the case in next year's budget. We have also, however, in acknowledgement I guess of the enhanced review capacity of the Legislative Council and acknowledging the fact that the Legislation Committee has now been enshrined in the standing orders, already established a new office in the department, an office of legislation and select committees, which comprises two staff who have already been appointed. They were appointed earlier this year in February and March. Their total salary costs are \$136 000, and at the moment those costs are being absorbed into the Council's budget.

However, looking ahead, we are looking at making application for a Treasurer's advance to cover salary costs and other costs incurred by select committees. This is, I guess, with the expectation that there will probably be at least one or two, possibly more, select committees operating at any one time throughout the remainder of the Parliament. So the Treasurer's advance would look at salary costs and other costs incurred by committees such as printing and advertising, travelling and use of consultants. It would also include additional Hansard resources that would be needed and other information technology and library research functions that might also be needed by committees.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Did the Parliament seek any additional funding in the budget submission that went to Treasury as part of the budget preparation?

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — No. The matter was raised with Treasury and the advice we got from Treasury was that the best way to do it would be by way of Treasurer's advance.

Ms GRALEY — Speaker, Mr Pakula asked a question that was totally answered by the President of the Legislative Council around the transition program for his members. Would you like to comment on the transition program which is mentioned in budget paper 3, page 251, for the lower house members?

Ms LINDELL — Is this the transition to the new Parliament?

Ms GRALEY — Yes, from the 55th to the 56th.

Ms LINDELL — I suppose, in broad terms, parliamentary services has a budget that normally would refurbish a dozen officers in any financial year. A special ERC bid was put in because of the need, particularly for the upper house members, but also obviously some lower house members. We needed some extra resources to do an extra number of offices. There is an agreed list, and I think it was a million?

Dr O'KANE nodded.

Ms LINDELL — Over \$1 million we received so we did not fall into a huge lag of people being able to have their refurbishments done and new leases entered into. There is though, of course, an ongoing amount of money that will continue year on year for the refurbishment of offices. So I would think that at the end of this next financial year we will be in a position where the cycle will go back to the regular maintenance and refurbishment of offices. It is a very complex process, because just when you think that the system is in place and the offices will come up and be refurbished in an orderly sense, there will then be a redistribution and you will have another 40 members who need new offices.

This probably will not happen with the upper house again, but certainly the lower house — it is a very difficult process to get right so that offices are routinely, every eight years, refurbished because of just the changeover. Different members come and decide that no, they do not want to be in that suburb in their electorate; they want to be in a different suburb. It is a very difficult process to get into what I would consider a smooth refurbishment maintenance order. But certainly we should be able to proceed along a fairly smooth track for the moment. As you would be aware, some electorates are very difficult to find office accommodation — suitable office accommodation — for, and there have been a couple of members in the lower house who have struggled for quite a long time to find an office.

It is frustrating for the member; it is frustrating for parliamentary services as well. I suppose it is that constant improvement process that the President has been mentioning. But some members are quite happy in their office, and parliamentary services would not know that there was a problem. A new member comes in, and all of a sudden

there is a whole range of problems that get brought to its attention, and thus the need to move. So it really is, and I have always looked at it as a, 'Why can't this be so?', because I am fortunate that my electorate office has been an electorate office for about 20 years now.

So why can't it be that it is just on a regular refurbishment schedule? But when you compound it with 128 other offices, it just does not happen as smoothly as we would like it to. Increasingly, though, I think we are getting the processes and the system in place to address some of those issues.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — President, Speaker, I turn to BP3, page 256, in particular under 'quality', 'members, staff and officers satisfied or better with the services provided' — —

Mr PAKULA — That was my question.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I have probably taken your question, Mr Pakula. I have probably got a light-hearted approach and a serious side to it, so if you would bear with me in terms of the context. I note that the output involves a range of issues that are outlined at the top. They may cross a great number of the areas that we have already discussed. Like Dr Sykes, I have been pretty lucky in terms of the support that I have had from staff, as many would know, in the previous Parliament and part of this Parliament in terms of the facilities that have been available. So I was quite surprised when I saw that the target and the expected outcome for the current financial year had actually dropped by 10 per cent, and in particular that the target was expected to be even lower than the actual in 2005–06.

On one side I am concerned that there is a dumbing-down of the expectations of the Parliament in terms of members, staff and officers satisfied or better with the services. That is the serious side. On the lighter side I guess in terms of health and fitness for members of Parliament, I am pleased that we have now finally got a gym in operation rather than the old gym that used to be up on the first or second floor — or wherever it was. I can say I am probably one of the very few who actually used it, and I can probably say the same thing about the current gym — I am one of the very few members, although there are parliamentary officers using it.

Dr SYKES — It is not doing a lot of good, mate!

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Yes. We will compare later, Dr Sykes. What I am suggesting is that on the serious side we have this intention of being seen in the community as models of society, as we are expected to be; yet on the other side, people say to me, 'What is it like coming into Parliament?', and I say, 'It reminds me of the police academy', and they say, 'What do you mean' — —

Mr SMITH — 1, 2, 3 or 4?

Ms GRALEY — 1, 2 or 3, yes.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — No. The real police academy — having been there. You could argue, President, that it could be 1, 2, 3 or 4. They say, 'Why is that?', and I say, 'The facilities are old and there is lots of legislation and everything that is served in the dining room has got chips', which reminds me of when I was at the police academy; everything had chips. I guess that is the humorous side in terms of the sense that we seem to have — and I hear it from members — about the quality of the food, and I am not casting aspersions on the people there, because I know they have new facilities and there has been a lot of money spent on that. But it seems to me that we have not progressed from getting new facilities to having a new attitude in terms of the provision of food, which in turn provides better health and fitness to the members who are here, and essentially we are here for long periods of time when Parliament is sitting.

So I was just wondering in terms of the performance audit, is the satisfaction declining because of certain areas, and have you identified those certain areas? And do they relate to particular issues such as the delivery of food? My view is that I think we need to have a review of the food provided, and to provide a better quality type of food. I guess it is a long-winded question but maybe some of you might get a bit of an understanding of where I am coming from, because my view is that with growing obesity in our community and members of Parliament needing to send the right signal when they attend or appear in audiences, that we need to actually start from where we are working from and extend that out into the broader community.

Mr SMITH — I agree with you absolutely, Mr Dalla-Riva.

Ms LINDELL — If I can answer the question seriously, when I look at this and see that, as you said, in 2005–06 the actual satisfaction was 83 per cent, and you would go down and look at 73 per cent, I suppose I looked at the target for 2007–08. The target for the coming year is back to 80, and that gives me some comfort, I suppose — at least we are not going to accept that going from 83 to 73 is actually something that we are just going to live with. So I look at the target of 80 and say, ‘I am glad that we are going to be trying to address it’. Why we got to 73, I have got no background on that. I would have to give that — —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — It would be interesting to get a breakdown of what it was. Was it Hansard? I doubt that would be the case. Was it — —

Ms LINDELL — Stephen O’Kane might be able to help.

Dr O’KANE — I need to give you a detailed response on that, but you need to unpack those numbers because they are an aggregate of a number of services, as you point out.

In the case of the dining room issue, the dining room facility was operating in very modified form whilst the kitchen works were being undertaken, so clearly there was going to be a drop-off in that area. It is now coming back up. We have got some business plans in place and some training for the staff, and we actually are reviewing that whole area at the moment. I think the staff are coping extremely well under really difficult circumstances.

There have been some modifications, with the incoming new group of MPs, to the menus and so on that are being offered, to pick up your point about health benefits. Again, it is a matter of the staff and the catering manager actually understanding the preferences of members in each Parliament, and that takes a little bit of time to do. But we are working on all of those things. But I am very happy to come back to you with a bit more of a detailed breakdown of what those numbers mean.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I think we will just break for tea and unhealthy biscuits, shall we?

Mr SMITH — I just want to supplement that: it has taken us some time to get the House Committee established. The House Committee by and large will deal with, or can deal with, a lot of those particular issues and make recommendations particularly with regards to — that will happen, I think, now quite quickly. But I think your initial comments are quite valid in terms of public perception and, more importantly, healthy living eating style. It is consistent with the government’s policy of promoting ‘Life. Be in it’ and all that sort of stuff.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — It does. There is big policy in that, but it does not seem to reflect in the Parliament, in my view.

Mr SMITH — Could I make a quick comment?

The CHAIR — Certainly, President.

Mr SMITH — It is in response to the question from Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips asking whether an application was made in the budget for the select committees. The reality is we do not know, or did not know, how many committees and the like, so it is impossible — that is why the Treasurer’s advances are important.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — At that stage, when the submission was made, the gaming one had not been established?

Mr SMITH — We established a new select committee last week, and God knows if we do more; we do not know, so it is impossible to put in an application.

The CHAIR — And I am sure it is not a bottomless pit, either.

I asked this before, to try and reconcile a couple of those tables. Just to clarify my request, because I know the President pointed me to the operating statement in budget paper 4, but maybe in responding to my clarification between the various tables in the bill, in budget paper 3, also in your response to our questionnaire on output responsibilities, which is on page 1 of that, and also in table 2.11.1, the operating statement on page 128 of budget paper 4 — and I might add all of those have different figures. There are four different figures. Maybe you could attempt the impossible and try and reconcile them all, bearing in mind, of course, that you are not responsible for the Auditor-General’s figures? I know it is not easy. I do not understand it; I do not think anyone does.

Ms LINDELL — I am sure we can do it.

The CHAIR — Excellent. I would like to table, and have incorporated into the Hansard transcript, a letter I wrote yesterday to the Clerk regarding staffing arrangements for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee secretariat.

See page 23.

The CHAIR — In that letter, on behalf of the committee, I wrote regarding staffing arrangements and noted the additional 360 000, which I think you referred to earlier, Speaker, and knowing that the Premier's view on this, particularly that PAEC has a different role and function to other parliamentary committees, we did note in the letter on behalf of the committee that there were a wide range of roles for the committee and asking for some additional staff and some action immediately as well as the longer term in terms of higher classification staff and additional staff, for which of course funding has been allocated as additional for the budget.

I am not necessarily asking the Speaker or the President for a response to that, but just saying that we are looking forward to a pretty constructive dialogue on this matter as we go forward, particularly since the executive has responded to our request for additional funding. I am just asking for a constructive dialogue on the future staffing arrangements.

Ms LINDELL — Certainly the additional funding of \$359 000 has been received through the budget, and it is obviously there to provide for additional inquiries and for additional staff and operational expenditure. It is being funded on an ongoing basis for the life of the 56th Parliament. I am sure that, as has been discussed before, the business case needs to be put, the inquiry budget needs to be put, and the money is there. I cannot see in the course of events that that will be much of a problem. The real problem, as you know, is the higher classification of the executive officer. That is a decision that is not within the presiding officers; it clearly sits with the Clerk of the Parliaments. As we have pointed out before, it has enormous ramifications for all staff in view of the independent review of the positions that was done in 2005. I will probably just leave it there. It is obviously something that can be discussed ad nauseam for four years if you so wish.

The CHAIR — We would like to continue to progress that, and we are happy to assist in making a case on the basis of the particular role and function, which we agree with the Premier is different to other committees, and that should have an impact in terms of the level and nature of the staff.

Mr SMITH — I think it is probably fair that I also make my views known on the particular matter. I think the Speaker has outlined quite eloquently some of the fears that we would have even though the direct responsibility resides with the relevant clerks in terms of committees, et cetera, but there are a lot of ramifications if there is a new standard set. I do not need to say any more than that, I do not think, or I do not want to at the moment.

The CHAIR — I will comment that I think there is a whole range in terms of HR arrangements within the Victorian public service and there are many different ways of dealing with it. I mean they are quite different from when I joined the Australian public service in 1974 and even when I left the Australian public service less than 10 years ago. I think it is very important that the parliamentary departments are very much in line with modern practice and develop increasing sort of flexibility and best practice and are benchmarked against what is clearly the best available in the public sector.

Ms LINDELL — Absolutely.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — It will eventually happen.

Ms LINDELL — Absolutely. And I would just like to agree with those comments, and that is certainly what the President and I are continually working towards, and a denial of a request does not mean that we do not support those very things.

Mr PURDEY — I would just like to say we agree with those sentiments as well. We have done some benchmarking. We are now the second-lowest paid clerks in all of Australia, and we cannot get our salaries adjusted. My deputy clerk and the deputy clerk of the Legislative Council are EO3, with their responsibilities and what-have-you, and you want to put an executive officer on here at the EO3, it is absolutely ridiculous. I will have

my staff resigning. I just want to make the point quite clear. I think the committee's request in relation to that matter is just over the top. What you need to do is you need to have an evaluation of the position and it goes on work value — not the amount of work but it goes on the level of responsibility. We had those positions evaluated, and they have come out at 6.1. That is where it sits. In my view — —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — And our committee is responsible for overseeing the budget, something in the — —

Mr PURDEY — That is right, but it is not the amount of work; it is the level of responsibility. It is the work value.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I would have argued that we have a responsibility for overseeing a budget in excess of \$35 billion. If you do not see that as important, with the greatest respect — —

Mr PURDEY — I see it as important, but it is the way you evaluate the jobs.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Then that is really not respectful to what the people of Victoria expect out of this committee. The Premier himself made that point in his presentation that he sees PAEC as a crucial committee in terms of overseeing the expenditure of public funds into Victoria. So I understand your concerns and comparatives, but I think to be fair you have got to take on board what the Premier said, and the Premier made that assertion, and I think it is a fair statement. I just find your comments fascinating.

Mr PURDEY — We evaluate the positions in relation to exactly the same process that is done in the public service. Our positions are evaluated in the same way. They have been evaluated, and they have come out at an appropriate level. That is what I am saying, and that is what I have said in a letter back to the committee.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — But you cannot have everything on the same.

Mr PURDEY — I am very surprised that the committee has come back to me again with the letter I got yesterday morning.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Understand, this is a different committee and many of us have been on other committees.

Mr PURDEY — The committee has already written to me, and I have responded. Now I have got a further letter from the committee on the same basis.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — This is the problem: we have the legislation that changed the power for us to appoint — —

Ms LINDELL — No.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I was led to believe we did have that power beforehand and now it has been taken away.

Ms LINDELL — Not to set salaries.

Mr SMITH — I think most people here voted for it.

Ms LINDELL — The committees have never had the power to set their own levels of remuneration.

The CHAIR — In terms of selection, though, there was a certain involvement.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Selection, yes. It is a pity for Victoria, because there is no way of overseeing and having somebody who is going to be — —

Mr SMITH — With respect, that act went through both houses, and there was no opposition to it that I am aware of.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I certainly spoke against it.

The CHAIR — Just to come back to the Clerk's comments, obviously there is disagreement between the Clerk and the committee in regard to the role and function and the work value of at least one of the positions. We would also argue the need for some of the researchers to be at a higher level, possibly 5.2. As I have noted before on behalf of the committee, we are quite happy to engage in a process of making a work value case.

Mr PURDEY — I am happy to look at it.

The CHAIR — The committee certainly agrees with the Premier that the role and function of the committee is somewhat different, and this of course goes to the point that the Clerk has made about the difference. Yes, there was a review — was it 2005, I think, Clerk? Clearly the committee disagrees with that and believes that there is a work value claim which can be made and can be made quite cogently in that regard. I would welcome a constructive exercise and from the point of view of the committee that this be done relatively soon in reviewing the work value case of the executive officer for PAEC and possibly also some senior research officers.

I understand what the Clerk is saying in terms of relativity, and indeed on behalf of the committee my own personal view was an EO3 would be appropriate, but we suggested then a 6.2 with a possible level of gratuity which could be negotiated in terms of the quality of the particular candidate coming forward for the position. We are quite happy to engage in a work value process. I do disagree to some extent with the Clerk that it is actually a volume of activity that it does actually do. It does have some impact. I mean, if you are supervising eight staff rather than two; if you are preparing 10 or 12 substantial reports a year and responsible for that, that is certainly a different order of magnitude than if you were preparing 2 or even 1 a year. Now I understand the work value in terms of a report may be the same, but certainly if you are preparing 10 or 12 of them a year it is actually quite different than just doing 1 or 2, and therefore that has to have some bearing in any sort of work assessment case, but yes also very much the issue is on the work value.

The committee would be happy to engage and I note the Clerk's references saying that a case has to be made. We are happy to work with the Clerk and we would like to do that relatively promptly in terms of looking at the work value case in respect of the executive officer and the possibility of, now that we have additional funding provided by the executive, perhaps one or two senior research officers.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Chair, in respect of the comment that the Clerk made, you said that the structure is now the second-lowest comparative to the rest of Australia.

Mr PURDEY — Correct.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Is there any chance that you can perhaps get that presented to the committee because I think that is important for us to make that assessment?

Dr O'KANE — In fact the whole of the senior staff of the Parliament have concerns about its relativity issues, and we do have concerns about that — the three department heads.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I would like to see that.

Dr O'KANE — Haven't we opened up a can of worms here!

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — It has opened up a can of worms.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Yes, because that probably argues some way to where you were saying before. It is important we understand that.

Mr PURDEY — We have got a ceiling here at the top and nothing more can go up any further because of that ceiling. But by the same token I come back to the point I made: we have had a comparison done — I mean, I am happy to look at a work value thing, but the way the assessments are done in the public service is basically on responsibilities, not on the amount of work people do. And that is the critical thing.

Ms LINDELL — And if we only had to look at the one salary for all members of Parliament, one salary for all ministers, to see that reflected at the top level. If you are a minister of the Crown, regardless of which portfolio you look after, or which portfolios you look after, your remuneration is the same.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — It is how you perform.

The CHAIR — Or not.

Ms LINDELL — Yes, let us leave it there.

The CHAIR — That is not necessarily the direct comparison.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — Chair, could I just make a point before that?

The CHAIR — Certainly.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — This does have very significant ramifications for the structure across the Parliament. It is fair to say that the salaries of staff of the Victorian Parliament now do not stack up very favourably at all compared with our counterparts elsewhere. As Ray Purdey said before, with the exception of the ACT Legislative Assembly, the Clerks are now the lowest-paid clerks in Australia. Two years ago we attempted to rectify the situation when we engaged a consultant — and this was at the invitation of the Acting Premier who had earlier refused to increase the executive salaries but invited us to have a comparative study undertaken. That was done, and the report was submitted, but unfortunately was ignored, so you can see we have this problem at the top.

The CHAIR — No, I understand that although I would judge myself that in respect of the executive officer of PAEC it does not necessarily have — if the work value case is proven — ramifications elsewhere from that particular position.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — I think it does if you have a proper hierarchical system within the organisation. I think it does.

The CHAIR — I think you will find in the modern public service that hierarchies do not actually operate absolutely.

Dr O'KANE — There are a couple of other issues as well in relation to my department, Chair. When you were talking about researchers, and so on, the quality of the research that is undertaken by the parliamentary library is substantial; and whilst you mention this particular committee, it will have relativity issues across the organisation and that needs to be taken into account.

Mr SMITH — I just make a point that Mr Pakula will understand exactly what I am saying when I say it, that comparative wage justice is not a principle that is generally upheld in places like the arbitration commission, for instance, and every union official in this country would be very much aware of that. By that I mean if you want to argue that a steel worker in Victoria gets paid the same as a steel worker in Port Kembla, good luck!

Mr BARBER — I have a couple of quick questions that are probably related, so in the interests of speeding things up, I will ask those two.

The CHAIR — No, we have got some here.

Mr BARBER — No, that would be the end of my questions, that is what I am saying. So I will just flick these two out. The parliamentary press gallery, they tell me, was moved out on the basis of some repairs being done. Whether or not that is true: you cannot believe everything that the press tell you, but my question is:

Mr SMITH — I thought you were their advocate there for a minute.

Mr BARBER — The question is: is there any plan within the estimates period to bring them back into the Parliament, or has some sort of policy decision been made? Second question — kind of related — the broadcast of the audio of Parliament over the internet, streaming through broadband, I would have thought was pretty technically simple to do. I could probably rig something up based on the speaker in my office, but then I would be in breach of parliamentary broadcast guidelines! But I think I could do that in 20 minutes with the help of Tandy Electronics. I know there have been inquiries on opening up the Parliament, and I do not want to set up another one of those; I just wonder why couldn't you guys, almost at the executive level, just decide to stream this thing out on the internet for the benefit of all the public servants who want to follow debate on a particular policy area, who run in and out of these hearings and Parliament and so forth — for their information; members of the public checking up on how we are doing our jobs, either on a specific debate or just generally; and journalists, who do not happen to reside in that building and run back and forth but are in other major media outlets or even out in rural areas?

Ms LINDELL — I will take the media one, I suppose. I am not familiar with the background of why or when or how the media was moved from Parliament, but can I say I would have thought that they can come directly to the President and myself to argue their case, if in fact there is a case to be argued. That is the answer on that one.

The issues around the webcasting are around the quality of the end product and how the Parliament decides to move forward. My understanding is that we have a staged process that will require funding, if and when it becomes available, but also the continual upgrade — but I might get Stephen to answer. I can see Charles nodding in the gallery; not that I would ever acknowledge the gallery! I will hand the ball to Stephen on the technical bits of webcasting.

Dr O'KANE — That is absolutely the case. A lot of parliaments around Australia do broadcast proceedings. There was a SARC study on this topic. The government's response to that topic was that the broadcasting of proceedings is not on the agenda and work would not be funded. The Parliament notes what is happening around other parliaments, but at this stage it is not proposing to do that. We do not have any money for it.

Mr SMITH — Can I just say that, in terms of the media and accessing and whatever, I am not aware that there are any issues relating to either their facilities or access or whatever. If there are, I am more than willing to discuss with them any of those issues. We see them as an integral part of the democratic process.

Mr BARBER — I think they have their own press gallery or club, or whatever you call it. I think that press gallery has a chair as well, so probably that would be the first person to come forward on behalf of all of them.

Ms LINDELL — That is my point.

Mr SMITH — It might be an opportune time for me to also mention too to this committee, which I think is quite relevant, we have already started the process of discussing with the leaders of the parties in the upper house and the PEG group about the issue of refurbishment of the Council, having seen the upgrades in other places et cetera. It is just not able to be argued that it is not due; it is. With regards to those issues of webcasting or whatever, you would see that whilst it may not happen immediately the provision would certainly be made for future technology at the very least. So we are very much aware of where we need to go, but there are a number of issues around it.

Mr PAKULA — I have got a question about the bells. There was an issue, I think, in March where a member of the upper house was in a room where the bells apparently did not ring. I know that in my office the bell buzzes rather than it ringing. You can hear it, but it is pretty faint and dull. So my question there is: how often are the bells in the building checked to ensure that they ring? On a more technical note, if our whips are on the ball we tend to get a page when there is a division coming. I am wonder whether, technology being what it is, there can be an automatic page when the bells are ringing — that that goes direct to the pager? It goes to the issue of mobility. There has been a case of where I have thought, 'I'll nick across the street to get something from the 7-Eleven', but you do not because you do not know if the bells are going to ring.

Mr SMITH — Can I just say that there are some issues around that, and I have been caught myself.

Ms LINDELL — No!

Mr SMITH — I did not think it was that funny, actually — and nor did the leader!

The CHAIR — It would be a matter of timing, I think.

Mr SMITH — The fact is that the minister whose office we were meeting in had turned off the upper house bell, because it was not relevant to him, and we had no knowledge that it was actually going off. With regards to your particular bell being of low tone, or whatever, that is simply a matter of adjustment.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — You can adjust them individually.

Mr PAKULA — Can you?

Mr SMITH — They are checked every morning, too. If it is an issue, then we simply have to talk to maintenance. But it is a valid point you make and there are a number of people who have been caught for a whole host of different reasons, and there are I think a couple of places in the Parliament where there is not a bell. In particular, it is not very helpful when someone turns it off on you.

Mr PAKULA — And this issue in particular of whether or not you can be automatically notified when the bells are ringing?

Ms LINDELL — The paging system is a responsibility of the individual parties — the individual whips. It is not a service that the Parliament offers or delivers and it will not be, so that really is a party communication. The Parliament system is that the bells ring. For bells to be turned down or to be turned off, a request is made of the Presiding Officer and approved by the Presiding Officer. Some people will get caught but they will get caught because they are in a room where someone has actually asked for the bells to be turned off or turned down, or whatever.

Ms MUNT — I would like to have a little bit of a whinge, too.

The CHAIR — We need some bouquets as well.

Ms MUNT — I would like to ask a question about service for members. I understand the difficulties of having a 21st century service in a 150-year-old building. There are challenges all around that, but we are trying to work in a very old building and provide that service in sometimes pretty basic conditions ourselves in our offices. I would just like to point out that when 55 St Andrews opens up and we go and visit, we will be dazzled by all the stuff in there and then walk back to our chookhouse office and think, 'Well, what about us?'. Are there any plans or any thoughts for putting in place some sort of upgrade or services for the actual members of Parliament while we work in here, because sometimes it can be a challenge?

Ms LINDELL — I think you have highlighted that the move to 55 St Andrews Place will allow the opportunity to have a look at what happens within the Parliament. The discussions at this stage are initial, but the President and I are fully committed to having a process whereby facilities, particularly office facilities and furniture and the provision of services to members while they are in the Parliament, are improved. Of course it will always be dictated by budget concerns and the limitations that we have on the budget, but I think we do have now an opportunity to plot a way forward. If we can get buy-in from all concerned, then a fairly smooth process can be embarked upon.

Dr SYKES — Just a further clarification on the pagers, you said it is a party responsibility, management of pagers. But from an in-principle point of view if the parties sought to have the pagers connected to the bells system, are there any issues from the Parliament in allowing that to happen?

Mr PAKULA — And could it be done technically?

The CHAIR — Probably next you will want electronic voting from your office.

Ms LINDELL — The answer is it is technically not possible. They are actually on the emergency services network so it is just not possible.

The CHAIR — Are there any plans to upgrade the whole bells system in the next couple of years? I know I used to be up on the third floor and it was terrible. There are often real problems with volume — it is too loud or too soft.

Dr O'KANE — It has not been raised as a specific issue for capital item. My understanding is that — I was intrigued by the question before — the tone of the bells is exactly the same. I am not sure that you do not, you know — —

The CHAIR — It is not so much the tone of the bells, it is also the way you get the proceedings in your rooms. It is both things. We had a lot of problems on the third floor, for example, the last couple of years.

Dr O'KANE — I am happy to look at the issue. Maybe it is an issue, if it is a concern to members, that could be raised during the House Committee process and we could follow it up.

Ms GRALEY — In light of the environmental challenges that are facing all of us, as a driver of, I think, one of four Priuses in the Parliament I was wondering if there are any plans to extend the fleet or maybe, like some people are doing in our community, joining plans like Greenfleet to offset carbon emissions. Is that something that the Parliament is thinking about or encouraging?

Ms LINDELL — The motor vehicles that are offered on the members of Parliament motor vehicle plan are approved by the minister for finance, so I really cannot comment on that. I would have thought that the Greenfleet issue is something that would fall into the environment management system — another one of those decisions that will need to be made based on an overall strategy of where we get the best outcome overall for the Parliament. But I absolutely agree, I would love to see — —

The CHAIR — So you have got it as part of your environmental management review, have you?

Ms LINDELL — Every aspect of what we do here at the Parliament will be covered by the environment management system. I have also asked for it to have a look at what we can do with electorate offices, although I think that is a challenge that is absolutely enormous so if we can at least look at what we do at Parliament. I would have thought that the idea of offsets for our air travel, offsets for our motor vehicle travel — all of those things have to be considered in the context of the environment management system, absolutely.

The CHAIR — I know we tried a couple of years ago in our electorate offices to move over to green power but, as the President has noted before, they are actually leased and, of course, at that stage the green sort of discounts or whatever — plans — were not available for business premises and we were classified as business premises. I welcome that.

Ms LINDELL — I think with the change in the budget, with the utilities part of the electorate office budget coming back in to be paid by parliamentary services, I would think that is something we can look at again to ensure that we get the best outcome for the environment and for the Parliament.

Mr SMITH — I will just make a quick point in terms of the Prius. I was not aware that it was only four people who have actually taken them up but that is surely voluntary at the moment — anyone can select one if they wish. I am aware that Toyota may actually be developing a Camry hybrid, which I would have thought might be a lot more attractive to an increased number of people, et cetera.

Ms GRALEY — Some of the bigger families.

The CHAIR — You have to wait until the lease runs out.

Mr SMITH — Yes, of course.

Dr O'KANE — The fleet management for this is run by VicFleet and not by Parliament, and I would be very surprised if VicFleet were not looking at that issue.

The CHAIR — It has to, because I think up to 150 as a minimum have to be done now by VicFleet.

Dr O'KANE — That is right. It does the vehicle management for the public sector generally. Parliamentary services is really the conduit between VicFleet and the members.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Just a quick question on committee staffing, looking at the department's submission to this committee. It is a joint question, because it covers both Council committees and Assembly committees. I am just wondering if you can outline the reasons for the decline in senior staff in the committees. Just looking at the table on page 5 of the submission for the year ended June 2006, there were 31 what you could class as senior staff, grades 5 and 6, in the committees and 16.6 junior staff, being grades 2 and 3; but for the financial year ending June 2007 the number of senior staff has declined to 23 and junior staff — again grades 2 and 3 — have increased to 19. I am just wondering what the reason is for that decline in the senior staff.

Mr SMITH — I understand that has been impacted on by the changes to the actual committees, relocation to 55 St Andrews Place and a number of people having their status changed — executive officers, for instance — from a Parliament-by-Parliament contract to a permanent arrangement for employment, which caused some issues that actually ended up in the arbitration commission. There was a requirement to provide some flexibility to the structure on their behalf, and in return they would get permanency. Some decided to take the option of redundancy

and to leave; it suited them, and there was no requirement at all, et cetera. I think that has probably had some impact on those figures. But I just wanted to stress that both the Speaker and myself felt some empathy with the staff of all the committees with regard to their employment status being elected from one Parliament to another, which was inconsistent with our personal views about how people should be employed.

I heard Mr Dalla-Riva earlier in the day refer to his concerns about committees not having the ability to select. Let me tell you I was more unhappy about committees having the ability to fire, particularly on a personality basis — for instance, when people had to have their contracts re-engaged the committee would have them waiting outside to be brought in for an interview, et cetera and told whether they would be working for the next four years or not. We were very concerned about that and unhappy about that. We changed that system, and their employment status now is permanent and, as I said, in exchange for that — or not in exchange but as part of the negotiations — they provided X amount of flexibility. Some raised some concerns about what that meant for them — ‘Oh, would I have to go off and work with another committee?’. The answer was, ‘Well, yes, you would. When this committee has nothing to do and other committees are overburdened with taking two or three inquiries, you may be required in your capacity to work somewhere else’. That was not too arduous, we did not think. But some, as I say, exercised their options and took the redundancy. I think that has had some impact. Stephen may be able to outline any other reasons we have had reduced numbers or a reduction.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — I think the main reason is, if you look at the comparative figures for grade 5, that is where the main difference is — from 17 last year to 11 this year. The grade 5 staff are the committee research staff, and the numbers vary considerably from time to time, depending on the level of activity across the committees. The figure for 30 June 2006 is the actual figure, whereas the figure for 30 June 2007 is an estimated figure. You may well find that by the time we have finished the recruiting process, the figure of 11 may in fact be more. I think that is the way it can be explained.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Though your estimate for 2008 remains at 11.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — I guess it is crystal-ball gazing at the moment. Research staff have traditionally been employed on a short-term basis, say, for 12 months or two years, and some have been engaged on a parliamentary term basis, so it has varied considerably from one year to another.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — The category 6 staff declined from 14 to 12. I assume from the President’s response they are executive officer staff.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — They would be executive officer staff, yes.

Mr SMITH — I think I got it right.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — I think there were two.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — You indicated, if I understood correctly, in some of these staff gaining permanent employment the trade-off was a lowering of their classifications; is that correct?

Mr SMITH — No, not at all. There was no loss at all. It was simply a matter of agreeing to flexibility. In other words, when there was a need in another committee and they had, for want of a better term, no work to do, they could be utilised in their capacity to do the sort of work that they do elsewhere. There was certainly no loss.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — So there was no loss of classification?

Mr SMITH — None at all.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — Classifications have remained the same.

The CHAIR — In regard to that table I notice you have kept the same figures for 2008. Given the extra funding for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee you would be looking to increase the estimated number of staff for 30 June 2008.

Mr SCOTT — Further to the upgrade of the wide area network I just wondered in the light of that if there was any investigation — I know last term there was a bit — but has there been any further investigation of the

possible provision of mobile broadband to the laptops for members of Parliament in terms of members are often working on the road and travelling.

Dr O’KANE — There has been some investigation of that. I will need to come back to you with that.

The CHAIR — I would like to thank you on behalf of Dr Sykes and myself for the action you are taking regard to hearing loops and assistance for those who are hearing impaired. That has proved very valuable for people like us. I understand also that at 55 St Andrews Place in the new committee rooms you will have these facilities, which is very good.

I also commend the presiding officers and their staff for answering question 9 in the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee questionnaire. Yours is the only department that managed to answer that question fully, and I very much appreciate that. We have asked other departments if they could try to answer this fully in their own rights as well.

That concludes the consideration of budget estimates for the parliamentary departments. I thank the presiding officers, the clerks and departmental officers for their attendance today. It has been a very comprehensive session. I am not sure we had any questions on notice — there were one or two right at the beginning. The committee will follow them up with you in writing, and maybe you can look at the Hansard transcript yourselves. We ask that written responses to those matters be provided within 30 days. They will be considered then for a further report from this committee to Parliament. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.