

VERIFIED TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2008–09

Melbourne — 15 May 2008

Members

Mr G. Barber	Mr G. Rich-Phillips
Mr R. Dalla-Riva	Mr R. Scott
Ms J. Munt	Mr B. Stensholt
Mr W. Noonan	Dr W. Sykes
Mr M. Pakula	Mr K. Wells

Chair: Mr B. Stensholt
Deputy Chair: Mr K. Wells

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms V. Cheong

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 hearing on the 2008–09 budget estimates for the portfolio of parliamentary departments. On behalf of the committee I welcome the Honourable Robert Smith, President, Legislative Council; the Honourable Jennifer Lindell, Speaker, Legislative Assembly; Ray Purdey, Clerk, Legislative Assembly; Wayne Tunnecliffe, Clerk, Legislative Council; and Stephen O’Kane, Secretary, Department of Parliamentary Services. Departmental officers and members of the public and the media are also welcome. I should note that the bill deals also with the Auditor-General, but maybe that is something we can take up in another year.

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 this room. All evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act and is protected from judicial review. There is no need for evidence to be sworn; however, any comments made outside the precincts of the hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript, and the committee requests that verifications be forwarded to the committee within three working days of receiving the proof version. In accordance with past practice, the transcripts and PowerPoint presentations — if you have one — 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 — my apologies to the President. In other words, we try not to have supplementaries and try to keep the responses to around 4 or 5 minutes. I ask that all mobile telephones be turned off, and I invite the presiding officers to give a brief presentation of no more than 10 minutes on the more complex financial and performance information related to the budget estimates for the portfolio of parliamentary departments.

Overheads shown.

Mr SMITH — Thank you, Chair. On behalf of both the Speaker and myself the following is our report in response to the invitation from PAEC. The departments that come under our appropriation group are the departments of the Legislative Council, the Legislative Assembly and the Parliamentary Services and the parliamentary investigatory committees.

The annual appropriations estimated for 07–08 are 75.1 million. The special appropriations are 19.5 and the total appropriations are 94.6. For 08–09 we are suggesting 83.8 for annual appropriations, special appropriations being 20.3 million, with the total being 103.6 million.

There are some significant challenges confronting us for 08–09. They include the development of the infrastructure to deliver audio webcasting of parliamentary sessions in the Legislative Council and the Legislative Assembly, including the provision of video streaming at a later stage of the project; improvement of our business processes, including LAPRAC publishing, questions on notice database and electronic distribution; support for the committees of the Legislative Council; rectification of the Council chamber, as opposed to renovation; continuing the Parliament heritage asset management strategy; in October 2008 the houses will undertake regional sittings in the Gippsland townships of Churchill and Lakes Entrance, with the Assembly going to Churchill and the Council going to Lakes Entrance; development of a parliament-wide environmental management system; and the renegotiation of the electorate officers and parliamentary officers EBA.

Under parliamentary achievements for 07-08 there have been the establishment of select and standing committees in the Legislative Council. We have facilitated the inaugural conference of the Australian members of Parliament. We have introduced a regional parliamentary information talks program, and transition of new members following by-elections, which, believe it or not, was quite an exercise for Parliamentary Services and, in our opinion, done very well.

There has been the continuation of works under the Parliament heritage asset management strategy; the rollout of new computers and network-related infrastructure to electorate offices, including upgrading the wide area network to 4 megabytes; the creation of a series of educational DVDs and resources for use in primary and secondary curriculum; the practical completion of the chamber sound system upgrade; and the commenced development of an environmental management system in conjunction with Sustainability Victoria. We have completed renegotiation

of the parliamentary officers EBA, and completed in excess of 25 relocations or refurbishments of electorate offices. We are reporting that we had a very well-attended open day for the parliamentary precinct — I think in excess of 5000 on the Sunday — which was highly successful.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. My question may be for Stephen O’Kane insofar as we have got the appropriation bill, which comes to 93 million, but the actual money available to Parliament is 131 million, or something. Can you tell us how these figures work? The Auditor-General is also included there, I know, but even subtracting his out it is 12 million.

Dr O’KANE — Chair, we had this issue last year, I remember, with the way that the budget papers were represented. What I have done this year is I have got a complete reconciliation prepared in advance and which I have provided to the members and secretariat of the PAEC.

The CHAIR — You are brilliant.

Dr O’KANE — I am happy to table that if you are wanting to look at that.

The CHAIR — That would be terrific. I am sure it will help, and I am sure it will give members of the committee, when they speak on the appropriation bill for the Parliament, lots of things to talk about.

Dr O’KANE — If I can incorporate that.

The CHAIR — I noticed in your response to the questionnaire that you said you had no subsidies or concessions or anything; is that right? I thought the parliamentary dining at some stage in past years had provided some sorts of concessions in terms of cost.

Dr O’KANE — Essentially the question asks about whether we are a revenue-raising entity, and in fact we are not. But the dining room operation is essentially run as a separate business unit. I am happy to take that one on notice and give you a detailed response.

The CHAIR — That would be great. Across the board we are trying to get an idea on what subsidies are there in terms of various departments and what concessions.

Dr O’KANE — Yes. I understand it is a bit of a theme for Parliament.

The CHAIR — It is not just the fact of revenue-raising money, but are there any implicit subsidies or whatever.

Dr O’KANE — Sure.

The CHAIR — I know it is a question of definition and it may not be always an easy thing to do, but we are asking right the board. We even asked about people getting into national parks this morning. Of course there are some subsidies for members of Parliament in terms of accessing the railway network and things like that.

Dr O’KANE — I am very happy to respond to that in detail if I get a question from the committee.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — In respect of the Parliament achievements for 2007-08, the establishment of the select and standing committees in the Legislative Council is mentioned as an achievement. I am trying to find where the additional funding provisions are in the forward estimates, into 2008-09, for these select and standing committees, given that they are a new phenomenon in the now-reformed upper house. Given that there are now these new committees being established, what form of funding is there provided? Should there be a separate line item for those committees, and who would you suggest should have establishment and control of those funds if they were to be established.

Mr SMITH — I have some notes here on the funding of the Council committees which are reasonably extensive. What I would like to do, Chair, is to ask the Clerk to explain, given that he is much more au fait about this than myself.

The CHAIR — Okay; no problem.

Mr SMITH — But also to provide this for the committee.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — The position with the committees is that, as you are aware, in the current Parliament two select committees have been appointed pursuant to standing orders, and the new Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration has been appointed pursuant to sessional orders. If the Council moves to establish a committee, we have an obligation to service it. To attempt to establish a Council committees office we made application for a Treasurer's advance of 380 000 for 2007-08, and a similar increase in ongoing funding for the remainder of the Parliament. That amount comprised 320 000 in staff salaries, for four positions, and 60 000 for ongoing expenses, such as postage, printing, report costs and travel. Because the committees had already been appointed, we did move as a matter of urgency to appoint two staff — a secretary to the Council committees office and a research assistant — both of whom have been servicing the two select committees that have been operating to date, and we have met their salaries out of the Council's existing budget.

The request for the Treasurer's advance was not approved by the Treasurer, and in his letter he said the reason for that was due to limited Treasurer's advance capacity for 2007–08 and given that it may be possible to absorb those costs from our existing appropriation. After we received the Treasurer's letter we did review our budgetary position, and we now believe that we can continue to absorb the two additional staff salary costs on an ongoing basis, but to do anything further presents some difficulties. It presents difficulties simply because we have got a number of ongoing priorities within the Council's output funding. A good example of that in the next financial year is the Lakes Entrance regional sitting, which will probably cost us about \$100 000, for which specific funds have not been provided.

At this stage we are left with looking at our capacity to absorb all of the standing committee costs from within our existing budget. One other thing we did do in our submission to the Treasurer is we proposed that a dedicated amount for Council committees be allocated in the Parliament's appropriation bill. This was the case up until 1997, when a specific amount for the operation of select committees was included in each bill, and it followed a recommendation from the Joint Select Committee on the Parliament Of Victoria which was tabled in Parliament in 1991. That was the report that led to the creation of a separate appropriation bill for the Parliament. In that report the committee noted that the Parliament must have the financial capacity to adequately source a committee of inquiry if it sees fit to appoint one, without the necessity to seek funds from the executive. In its report the committee went on to say that this would be particularly critical in the case of an upper house without a government majority which may seek to establish a committee against the government's will and then find it has to curtail its activities due to a lack of funding.

What I am saying at the moment is that we have already appointed two staff, and we can continue to fund their positions. Our ability to adequately service the committee's ongoing expenses or even appoint any additional staff is arguable. You have got to appreciate that the Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration has precisely the same terms of reference as this committee, so it is pretty wide. It also has the ability to operate as subcommittees, so conceivably it could have more than one inquiry going concurrently. It has already received a reference into the economic assessments of the dredging of Port Phillip Bay. It has the capacity under the sessional orders to appoint consultants. So all I am saying at this stage is our ability to service the committee to the extent that we believe it needs is a little bit limited.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — In terms of the President's speech on the establishment of select and standing committees, have you done an analysis as to how many could be in operation before you hit the ceiling; in other words, three committees and then no more? And what is the process once that occurs?

Mr SMITH — One, I would like to say that initially being asked by Treasury to look to thyself — physician heal thyself, if you like — in terms of funding, we have been able to successfully cater for the needs of the committees to date within the current budget constraints. How long is a piece of string in terms of your question? It can be at the whim of the house; it can establish a committee at any time on any matter it chooses. Therefore it is almost impossible for us to actually budget to cope with the costs that will be incurred. We have, I think, a degree of confidence that we can, up to date, comply with the requirements of those committees. If, for instance, we were confronting another three or four committees, then obviously we would have to look elsewhere. There are some funds that we have internally that are available by agreement between the Treasurer and the presiding officers, but that is for the whole Parliament, not simply for the upper house. But it will come down to, at the end of the day, in my personal view, that committees will hit a financial wall at some stage, and that is a matter to be addressed, I think, either politically or for the house itself.

The CHAIR — I note that the average cost per member of the Legislative Council according to the appropriation bill is \$66 000 and for the Assembly it is 46 000. I know it is not a simple arithmetic — —

Mr SMITH — What costs are talking about?

The CHAIR — In the appropriation bill there is 2 637 000 applied for the Council, which is the equivalent of 65 925 per member, and for the Assembly there is 4 076 000, which is equivalent to 46 318 per member.

Mr PAKULA — It is probably because there are only half as many of us, but we take up the same amount of room.

The CHAIR — Yes, but is there any scope there? I know it is smaller, and there are certain overheads et cetera — —

Mr BARBER — You have already reduced the size of the house. I do not know what else you can do.

Mr SMITH — I am listening to the answers. I am quite interested.

The CHAIR — I have just stirred them up, but that is okay. It is a difficult situation you are in, obviously.

Mr SMITH — Yes, and we are coping, I think, reasonably well. We are not curtailed, I do not think, in terms of our responsibilities, and that is the best benchmark, or the only one that really matters. At the end of the day, the way the house is actually functioning at the moment, it will get to that point where we have run out of money and we would have to source it from somewhere. I am confident that, at the end of the day, that will happen.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — Mr Chair, can I make one final point in relation to the funding issue?

The CHAIR — Sure, yes.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — There is one alternative source for funding, I think principally the standing committee, and that is that in the Parliament's appropriation bill one of the output groups is the parliamentary investigatory committees, which of course provides funds for the 12 committees, including this one. Given that the standing committee is of an ongoing nature and its terms of reference and methods of operation will not be dissimilar to this committee, I do not see any reason why it could not have access to some of those funds. Of course I appreciate that that is subject to the approval of both the President and the Speaker. I do not believe that is the ideal situation, because obviously it then becomes a matter for joint responsibility of the presiding officers. I think the most appropriate situation would be for the Council to have some dedicated funds, which are subject to the President's approval.

Mr SMITH — I think it is also worth flagging that it is my personal opinion that at some time in the future it will not be inconceivable to have presiding officers from opposing parties. I think that will pose a great difficulty.

The CHAIR — It has happened before.

Mr SMITH — Yes, but in these circumstances, where the majority is in opposition to the government and the Presiding Officer, I just think it is a situation that puts the presiding officers in a very difficult situation; compromised almost.

The CHAIR — Okay, fair enough. Just for the record, as chair of the committee and probably speaking for the committee, I just would not agree with what the Clerk of the Council is suggesting.

Mr BARBER — Can I just clarify though, there is nothing in the appropriation that stops that money being pulled over — the structure of all that?

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — The committee output group — no, I do not believe there is. It would be a matter for determination by the President and the Speaker.

Ms MUNT — I noticed in your presentation that mention was made of the development of an environment management system in conjunction with Sustainability Victoria. That is under the achievements of 2007–08. I was wondering if the Speaker could update us on where that has progressed to.

Ms LINDELL — Thank you for the question. The Parliament has had the assistance of Sustainability Victoria in a pilot program to put together our environment management system. We are now in the position that we can actually measure all our electricity use and keep records of our electricity use both at Parliament and in the electorate offices. That has been a huge resource issue, because the Parliament has always paid bills but never recorded how much electricity we have used, so it has been a manual process to go back to get the benchmark two-year figures, which is what is suggested before you move forward with the environment management system itself. We need to be able to measure what we have been doing in the past so that we can actually learn to manage that properly. So we now have very accurate readings of our past energy use, our past water use, and we continue to work with Sustainability Victoria on moving forward with our actual documentation. To now the only resources that have been used have been staff resources, but we will be moving more into addressing capital shortfalls going forward, but that is still some time in the future.

Mr WELLS — Speaker, I refer to the report that PAEC did in regards to strengthening government and parliamentary accountability in Victoria. I am just wondering whether any costings have been done by parliamentary officers about the impact of some of the recommendations made in this report where Parliamentary Services will be responsible over the forward coming estimates, or is it a matter of how the government responds and then find out what happens after that?

Ms LINDELL — A little bit of a mixed answer to that, Mr Wells, in that some of the recommendations — if I can come to a couple — recommendation 15, for example, that funding should be provided for the video webcasting, that has actually now been received. So audio is scheduled for our first sitting week in August and then the video webcasting will be probably 18 months to two years away. We still have an enormous amount of work to do on the tender to purchase the cameras, the criteria on which they are used, the guidelines et cetera.

Recommendations 26 and 27 really need to go the Standing Orders Committee to be progressed. They both will need some further investigation and discussion and obviously standing orders. On recommendation 17 — that consideration be given to the appropriate resourcing of other parties or formal briefings — the Parliament supports other parties at the moment with the paying of the rent for the opposition rooms at 157 Spring Street, and obviously the IT infrastructure is also provided to the opposition rooms. To my mind this is not really a recommendation for Parliament; it would need resourcing, and unless we were resourced, we could not on our own volition comply with recommendation 17.

On recommendation 13, we would probably need to seek some input from the House Committee. This is about amending the policy relating to overseas travel by members. The presiding officers and I think the House Committee would need to progress that change; not that is a large change. We would not do that on our own. We would have some further discussions of that. I am not sure of other recommendations that you might have had in mind.

Mr WELLS — No, that is fine. I just needed to sort those things out.

Mr PAKULA — I refer to your presentation. You talk about one of the significant challenges for 2008–09 being the renegotiation of the electorate officers EBA. I want to ask you a couple of questions about that. Firstly, who is principally responsible for the negotiation from the parliamentary departments' side? Have they commenced? Will there be any opportunity for members to express a view to the Parliament about the outcome? Speaking for myself, I have recently lost one of my staff and found it very difficult to replace that person with an appropriate person, given the pay scales and particularly given the challenges that confront electorate offices these days both with the technical aspects of their job and also some of the constituent-related issues. I suppose the question is: have the negotiations begun? Who is primarily responsible from the parliamentary departments' standpoint. What, if any, opportunities exist for members to express a view about some of the elements of the agreement? I am particularly interested in the pay levels and, as I understand it, the inability of anybody to come in at greater than level 3. I do not mind who answers that.

Mr SMITH — I will start and there will be others who can supplement it. Ultimately it is the responsibility of both the presiding officers. However, these negotiations are being conducted. Once they start formally between our departmental head in human resources, Bronwen Edwards, and we get regular updates as to where it is at, we, collectively as presiding officers and departmental heads, discuss the sorts of things we want to see in the outcomes of the EBA and of course discuss all the relevant claims that are put before us. The issue of whether or not electorate officers should have or could have a direct say is a matter between them and their union, I would suggest. But if you are actually suggesting that they could have access to the presiding officers, I would say no.

Mr PAKULA — No, President, my question was whether members of Parliament have an ability to express a view to Bronwen Edwards, for instance.

Mr SMITH — They are not the employer, so I do not believe they have a formal role in this process. Maybe some gratuitous advice would be that they should keep out of it because it can only complicate matters.

Ms LINDELL — The President, the secretary of the CPSU and I have signed a memorandum of understanding or guidelines around the negotiations going forward. We have identified our director of organisational development and finance and two other people to lead the negotiations on behalf of the Parliament. Members of Parliament have ready access to the presiding officers. That would be the appropriate input. Certainly the President and I would welcome all views. You should, however, understand that the entry scale for state electorate officers is actually higher than the entry scale for federal electorate officers. The limitation on electorate officers starting in level 3 and no higher than that was actually inserted at the request of the union in the last EBA. As I say, the President and I would be more than happy to speak to any members as to which way they would like to move forward on this.

Mr BARBER — I just have one question about disability accessibility standards for electorate office buildings. What are the standards that are in place? When were they created and when have they been updated? I think the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission is now recommending compliance with the enhanced standard, which is AS 1428.2. Is that advice that we are taking on board, and how many of our offices currently comply with that standard?

Ms LINDELL — I will get Stephen O’Kane to answer the technical sides of the question. Can I perhaps premise Stephen’s remarks, though, by saying that the Parliament leases all electorate offices. One of our greatest challenges is to find offices with disabled access. Even in the offices that we currently lease and then are looking to re-lease, to go back to the landlord and ask for disability access works to be done, even when the landlord agrees to do that there is some resistance from members to have that inconvenience, change of work practice, change of layout of office actually completed. While I understand the importance and indeed the great desirability, and Parliament actually wanting all of our electorate officers to be fully disabled compliant, it is not always within the hands of the Parliament. Stephen can answer the technical details.

Dr O’KANE — I would support the Speaker’s view in the way that she has described that situation, Mr Barber. Disabled access has always been a very difficult issue for the Parliament to deal with. We have a very strong association with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. We regularly talk to their officers about what the best practice standards are and so on. In terms of the legal position, standards formally are not binding in law; however, we seek to follow the standards that you described.

The other issues that we are faced with, particularly with electorate offices, are things like the desirability of agencies to actually comply with those activities. I will give you an example of that. When we search, as part of our electorate office searching criteria, we look at things like the topography of the area, the availability of supply and so on. After we do our comprehensive analysis of an electorate office, one of the key components of that is an architectural assessment, which looks specifically at how the electorate office is configured or might be configured; also, where necessary, we get a disabled access consultant in to have a look at the particular property. We do have practical difficulties, though, with, for example, councils issuing certificates of occupancy. When an occupancy certificate is issued, the assumption is that it complies with all legal requirements, including disabled access. Often you will have situations where one part of the council — often the community services area — will be an advocate for disabled access but its own building department within the council does not necessarily look at disabled access issues. The Parliament is entitled to assume that the councils have done their job, but over and above that, we do our own assessment of offices and seek to comply with the standard. I guess the short answer is that the best way of

dealing with that is to put in as good a process as possible, and we try and do that, but we have constant dialogue with human rights and equal opportunity officers, and they update us on those changes as they occur.

Mr NOONAN — My question goes to something that came through on the estimates questionnaire on asset funding and specifically the 08–09 period in terms of the Parliament House heritage asset management strategy. Perhaps for the committee’s benefit can we get an update on how that is progressing?

Dr O’KANE — I am happy to take that one. The heritage asset management strategy is a very important part of what the Parliament does. We have got a building and its surrounds which are listed on the Victorian Heritage Register, and that of course is in relation to items of outstanding significance and special character. There are various modifications that have happened to Parliament House in its 150-year history, and we are now starting to see the effects of weather, pollution and age that have taken their toll on the actual fabric of the building. From the 05–06 budget the Parliament applied for \$9 million over three years to deal with heritage asset management, and we identified a number of priorities in relation to that. One was the restoration of the external stone facade of the building, and members would have noticed around on the southern side of the building near the Council the work that has been done there, which I think is of particularly good quality. Other priorities include the restoration of external stone balusters and balustrades on the building; waterproofing works over the library dome; window refurbishment and replacement, which is an ongoing activity around the Parliament; a floor and tile audit; and then restoration of the plaster finishes.

We have done a lot of work in that area, and we are at the stage where we have completed stage 1 of the external stonework, which is the area over here that I have mentioned. Stage 2 of the works is the area at the rear of the building behind where the library is, and that is due to commence at the end of this month. We have got a project schedule to complete that in about 300 days, and that will cover quite large stone pieces of the building. Some of those blocks are actually 6 tonnes in weight, but it is an area of significance to the building. If you look very carefully when you stand on the lawn at the back of the building you will notice that various attempts at patching it in the past have not actually worked; the stain discolouration is actually quite a difficult problem. We have had to source the stone, and also we have had to work out the logistics, and all of this is done in the context of the Parliament with its ongoing sitting patterns and members accessing the precinct, so it has actually not been an easy thing to do.

As part of that second stage, which we are commencing at the end of the month, that will also look at those external balustrades and balusters. If you actually have a look at the back of the building, you will see bits chipping off here and there. The waterproofing over the library dome will also take place after the completion of that stage 2 work, so that is of lesser priority. In terms of the window refurbishment and replacement, we are progressively doing that, and that is an ongoing project. At the moment we have done quite a detailed tile and floor audit of the building, and we are now looking at ways in which we might replace some of the intricate tile work that is actually in the building. It is an extremely complex project and we are using a heritage architect to help us with that. But it is on schedule, and we are continuing. It is an ongoing thing, but our priority is definitely to fix the areas where there is the highest risk and then work progressively through that.

Mr WELLS — It is the only thing in Victoria that is on schedule!

Mr SMITH — It is the place to be. I just want to also say that the cost involved in this is quite significant, and one of the principal reasons for that is that in decades gone by it is unquestionable that piecemeal jobs have been done — short term, on the cheap et cetera. We have taken the view that we should take the long-term view. Whilst the cost is greater, it will last decades and subsequently be cheaper for the Parliament. Those 6-tonne blocks, for instance, we thought we could source easily, but it has proven to be quite difficult. I think that is one of the examples of the complications or difficulties we have in doing it properly. When you look at the safety aspect, we talk about timing and why it is difficult to do these things during the course of the normal year when Parliament is sitting. I think Stephen suggested that parts of the balustrades or whatever had chipped away; I think some of them are the size of a house brick, and if they dropped down on someone I have got no question they would do enormous damage to an individual, a car or whatever. So it is quite important that we do it properly, and I am confident that the way we are going about it is absolutely correct.

Dr SYKES — My question relates to getting an update on the rollout of the wireless broadband for laptop access out there in rural and regional Victoria and I guess elsewhere, because I recall earlier in the piece having problems with wireless access even within the dungeons of the Parliament here.

Dr O’KANE — If I could respond to that, Chair: we have had quite a successful year in IT in terms of rolling out projects with the wide area network upgrade to 4 megabytes — and members would have noticed an increase in bandwidth performance — and now non-metropolitan electorate offices receive the same level of service delivery as metropolitan electorate offices. We have looked at uninterrupted power supply being installed in every electorate office. We have looked at smaller footprint desktop PCs. The pending deployment of wireless broadband is an important issue as part of that program, and that is really to overcome the slow dial speeds and the high expense associated with non-metropolitan usage. What will be happening is that my department will be deploying the latest and fastest 3G wireless network broadband service to all members. The service will be available in mid-June to early July this year. The service has been tested already by a number of non-metropolitan members who found it of particular benefit to them. I might say to members present that we would actually have already had this out had Telstra not had some issues with its software. The parliamentary IT group did this presentation some time ago to the House Committee and they were quite satisfied with it. I think members will notice a significant difference when the wireless broadband is deployed. We have also done a number of other activities to do with data storage and backup, so we have actually had quite a busy year in IT.

Ms LINDELL — I will just add to that: members notebooks are scheduled to be replaced in early 2009, and towards the end of this year we will be upgrading to version 8 of Lotus Notes, so there is still some continual improvement of the system.

The CHAIR — That will be good. There seem to be some problem with Lotus Notes, and trying to open and save documents from it.

Dr O’KANE — Actually that is an issue, Chair. One of the reasons for that is the size of the mailboxes. We are actually attempting to put some automated archiving software in place to combat that problem, and we hope to do that by the middle of the year because we have had that feedback from other members as well.

Mr SCOTT — Just before I ask my question, I would like some clarification about the previous question. What sort of download speeds are we expecting from the wireless broadband?

Dr O’KANE — I would need to take some further advice on that, but I am happy to respond to that.

Mr SCOTT — In terms of the planned upgrade of security infrastructure in the Parliament precinct, I would like to know what the time frame for that planning is, and also I suppose by way of gratuitous comment, if the Chair will indulge me, I have a plea that we keep the fairly open feel that Parliament has with whatever security we have. Security is a difficult balancing act. I think at the moment the Parliament does it quite well. We are reasonably open to the public, but there is a level of security that protects members’ interests. If you could give me some information on the sort of time frame for that rollout?

Mr SMITH — We have a committee to oversee and review our current safety standards, security standards et cetera. I have to say I am not convinced that the current standards are as good as you might think. I think there is a huge question mark on the security of the Parliament as such. You are right to point out that it is a balancing act which we need to get right to service everyone. There has to be public access and the like. It is an area where we are seeking expert advice to do the best possible job we can for everyone. We are not too far away from that meeting, are we?

Ms LINDELL — No.

Dr O’KANE — Just to take up your point, we absolutely agree. With all these matters of security it is a bit of a continuum. At one end you have laissez faire and at the other end you have Fortress Parliament, and I do not think anyone wants to go there. It is about working out where you are on that and trying to retain the flavour of having an operational and functional building but at the same time, perhaps limiting the public and private spaces, for example, and just getting it to work in together. I think every public authority has the same sort of dilemma. I know local councils have it as do other government departments. It is about retaining the look and feel, but also maintaining a greater security presence. Members still need to meet constituents at Parliament House.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I will just follow on from that substantive issue. I think it was during the last sitting week — on the Friday — one of our members observed a break-in on a staff member’s vehicle in broad daylight, and I was quite astounded about that. We have enough on our plate without also having to watch our cars.

Mr SMITH — It is a valid point, and it deserves a response. It is a matter that will be discussed at our review in that particular committee. Clearly there are some shortcomings in the system there. For example, the current cameras do not actually rotate, so there is no ongoing surveillance behind the building without a foot patrol. And while a foot patrol takes place, it cannot, as you know, be everywhere at all times. That is the bad side. The good side is the perpetrator was apprehended very quickly.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I digress, but it is interesting. I pursued it with security — not the PSOs — and sort of said, ‘What has happened since that person was arrested?’. They had no idea that there was an arrest, which I would have thought would have been part of a debrief. We do have an increase in people wandering through, so I was quite surprised. I know it is not relevant to the forward estimates but it is an interesting point. You would have thought there would be an internal process for advising, or at for least advising members, that there is a risk of their motor vehicles being broken into in broad daylight.

Ms LINDELL — Can I say that there is fairly general information though. Members are warned that it is foolhardy to leave laptop computers on the back seats; they should be locked in the boot if they are going to leave them in the cars. I think members are reminded regularly of all of that. I have to say that to leave a GPS system just sitting in the car is foolhardy, wherever it is parked. While yes, we have foot patrols, they cannot be everywhere in an area like this at the one time. I think the security is a challenge for the Parliament, because we do have a lot of people coming and going, which is a terrific thing, but there does need to be a lot of resourcing with a lot of, I would have thought, clever things happening as well — cameras that swing, various technology solutions, not just personnel solutions and behaviour change for members but some fairly smart technological applications that can help us as well. Anyone who has been here for any length of time will know that the security we have now is a vast improvement on the security that we had 20 years ago when you just walked in the door. I think it is just one of those continuums.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I just want to take you back to my initial discussion. The report on strengthening government and parliamentary accountability included consideration as part of the investigation by the government-dominated committee. On page 19 in relation to the Legislation Committee, which I spoke about earlier, it states:

While it is too early to determine the value of the Legislation Committee, the committee is of the opinion that the Legislation Committee’s role to consider legislation enhances the Council’s traditional role as a house of review and strengthens the accountability function of the parliamentary committee system.

I just note that the Chair made a comment on the way through in finalising it, saying that he did not support it. In fact, recommendation 1 from this committee was that:

Adequate funds be provided to the parliamentary joint investigatory committees via the annual appropriation (Parliament) act.

Given that PAEC has actually recommended that there be adequate funding, and we made that recommendation as recommendation 1, do you still think there ought to be adequate funds provided for the Legislation Committee?

Mr SMITH — Of course. To perform its role — the chamber, that is — it has to have the necessary resources. As I said earlier, I am not yet of the view that it cannot. The question is when it might not be able to — then what happens? I cannot give you a definitive answer to that, it is not within the scope of certainly me to determine what funds would be available when extra funds were needed. But in terms of whether they should be able to do the job, I think it is an obvious yes.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — Can I add something to that?

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Yes.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — The Legislation Committee has now been in operation for about 18 months and there have been four bills referred to it. I thought we had a really good example of its value earlier this year when we had an impasse in committee of the whole in relation to some amendments that were being proposed to a bill. It really was very unclear what the impact of those amendments would be, on both sides of the house. They were opposition amendments. In fact, I think, Mr Dalla-Riva, they may even have been yours.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I totally deny that, but they may have been.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — The point I am making is that there was agreement reached to refer, at very short notice, the bill to the Legislation Committee. It was called together, met and reported back within, I think, the space of about 24 hours. Some amendments were made and the bill proceeded. I thought that was a really good example of its value.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Given that we have identified the importance of the house of review, I think it is important to note that there needs to be some adequate funding. That is my strong view; the Chair may have a different view.

Mr PAKULA — Can I just say, Chair, I am just hoping Mr Dalla-Riva is not misunderstanding the recommendation, which refers to joint investigatory committees rather than — —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I read it out.

Mr PAKULA — That is good. I just want to make sure we are on the same page, that's all.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — I think the principle applies to the Council investigatory committees as well.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — It is the principle; that is what I was about to say.

The CHAIR — Speaker and President, in your response to the questionnaire you talked about the development of a parliamentary precinct master plan. Can you tell us what the intention is there, what you are proposing and how you are proposing to go about it? We are going to do the dome, are we?

Mr SMITH — No.

Ms LINDELL — No, that would not be my intention.

Mr SMITH — No lions.

The CHAIR — I was not sure if it was going to be the tunnel or the dome.

Ms LINDELL — Most members would be aware that significant space has been freed up by the move of Parliamentary Services to 55 St Andrews Place. Rather than make hasty decisions about what to do with the space that has been freed up, the view of the President and me was that an overarching, long-term view of the best utilisation of office space would be in the interests of all members.

I think we all know we have members on the third floor; I think Mr Scott is one of those members who shares with two other members on the third floor. We have people out in the temporary accommodation, running up and down those steps in the dark, in the rain in coming across to the house. I think it is fairly widely acknowledged that we do not have professional office space accommodation in Parliament House; or many of us do not — some of us are lucky enough to have it. The ministerial corridors really do not equip ministers to have an adviser with them, working. The view is that if we take some time and consider the whole of the space that is available, we can in fact do a much better job than making some ad hoc decisions about putting 'members A and B over there' and 'members C and D in another corner'. Let us look at the whole and see if we cannot actually have areas where they may be predominantly opposition members or predominantly government members with joint workspaces, with photocopiers or printers or coffee and tea-making facilities — just modern, efficient, professional workspaces. But this is a plan that will not take resources for a long time, because it really is in its embryonic stage. But by no means are we talking about the completion. There is no mention of the dome. It is a long-term look at how we actually make the building that we have sustainable for use of the Parliament for another 50 years.

The CHAIR — I am sure the committee will give you great support in that, Speaker, and may be you might even change the chookhouse or something! I would not necessarily be too modest in your ambitions, but of course you do have to take some notice.

Mr BARBER — I could cope with sharing if we could get some decent committee funding.

The CHAIR — We also need some decent accommodation. You will find the Assembly offices are not as well catered for.

Ms LINDELL — Yes, I should make that point: the offices available to Council members are much grander than those available to the Assembly members.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that, Speaker. I notice there is different membership on this committee and I am sure there are various views.

Dr SYKES — I am just looking for a clarification in relation to the conduct of parliamentary inquiries, particularly the one that was put up by Peter Hall in the upper house in relation to meeting Melbourne's water supply requirements. Where is that at, and is funding an issue in relation to that one?

Mr SMITH — That was the one that was unconstitutional.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — No, that was the one that was referred to Environment and Natural Resources. Is that the one you are talking about?

Dr SYKES — Yes.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — Yes, it has gone to that committee. I could not tell you offhand where it is at with the committee, except to say that under the Parliamentary Committees Act a joint investigatory committee has to give priority to a reference received from either of the houses. But I could find out from that committee and report back.

Dr SYKES — I would be interested, because at some stage along the way I thought lack of money was a constraint on that inquiry being undertaken.

Mr SMITH — It is about priorities.

Dr SYKES — It is a pretty important priority to some of us north of the Divide.

Mr TUNNECLIFFE — It is with the Environment and Natural Resources Committee.

Mr SMITH — As the Clerk said, it is a matter for them to determine where it fits in their order, given that it has come from Mr Hall, and not one of the houses.

Dr SYKES — But it was endorsed by your house.

Mr NOONAN — It would be remiss of me at my first opportunity not to compliment you on the assistance to transitioning members following last year's by-elections. I certainly appreciated the support through a pretty hectic time, so I thank you and your staff for that. There is a dot point in the challenges for 08–09 just in terms of improvement of business processes. It might just be useful to get a fuller description of what in particular those three bullet points might ultimately mean.

Dr O'KANE — Sure, I will take that one. There is an ongoing process of reviewing a number of areas in our finance arrangements, our human resources systems, how we actually report and so on, which we commenced a number of years ago, and we are continuing that cycle. A lot of that relates to the administrative processes. In terms of the parliamentary executive group, we have actually taken a fairly joint approach to business planning for the Parliament as a whole, and we have actually been cascading that down, in terms of what we need to do in terms of excellence in customer service delivery and how that might play out in the Council, the Assembly and Parliamentary Services. Then we have broken that down within each of our areas to look at particular systems. That is an ongoing process and it just depends on the particular area as to what that process is.

Ms LINDELL — I might get Mr Purdey to talk about the LAPRAC publishing and the questions on notice database because they particularly relate to the house. With regard to the electronic distribution of proofs — this is pinks and greens — instead of coming in paper form, members can elect to have them go onto their email systems straight off. It is a simple way of helping members with their jobs, but of course the background and the work from Hansard and IT to get that system to where it is now is quite significant. But Ray will talk about the LAPRAC and the questions on notice database.

Ms MUNT — It is a great system too. I was in the initial rollout, and it is very helpful.

Mr PURDEY — LAPRAC stands for the Legislative Assembly practice manual. Over the last 12 years staff have been documenting our own procedures, so it is in some form writing our own version of *May* in a lot of ways. It has basically been written to assist staff in procedural research and things like that. What we are attempting to do is find some sort of software to enable us to take the written word version and put it into a format that is searchable and more readily usable for staff to be able to find things easily when information is required.

The questions on notice database is a database that is being developed for both the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council to allow questions on notice to be put into a database, and out of that database to produce our question papers. That would allow management of the questions on notice to be done much more efficiently. We would be able to search information, provide statistics to members and various things like that. That database is well on the way to being developed, and we hope to have that completed before the end of the calendar year.

Ms LINDELL — Can I just add, there is one thing that is not there, and that is the e-petitions that have been worked up, and I think that was a recommendation from your report also. The Assembly Standing Orders Committee has done significant work on the e-petitions and it is now in the hands of the IT and Assembly staff to try to deliver a program for us.

Mr SMITH — Just as late as last week the Council members were reminded of their capacity to opt out of receiving the hard copy of *Hansard*. Some people had expressed a view that maybe they ought not to be getting the hard copy any more. There were difficulties associated with removing it entirely, but I certainly reminded them that they did not have to get one, that they could actually opt out; and I think one or two may have done that.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Just a last question, without fear of being sliced up literally.

The CHAIR — You are not going to raise the chips issue again, are you?

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I may raise the issue of chips.

The CHAIR — Mr Rich-Phillips is not here today.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Because the absence of the chips has been noticeable ever since I raised the matter.

Ms MUNT — It has taken 12 months to get them back on the menu.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Correspondingly the reduction in his waistline as a result. The redevelopment of the kitchen was completed over the last 12 months, I think; is that right?

Mr SMITH — I think it might have been longer.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Yes, about that. I am just trying to work out: how has that has improved the efficiencies in terms of the kitchen and has it made the kitchen a commercial kitchen as such? If it is now such that it could be considered to be a proper commercial kitchen in the real sense, is it able to be used for outsourcing by other organisations?

Mr SMITH — In terms of the redesign, it has certainly improved the efficiency and, I would argue, productivity but more importantly the safety of people working in there. It was quite frankly diabolical — the previous model — and I think we all know it cost a fair bit of money but it is completed now. I do not think that it is arguable that it could not cope with what you are suggesting. There is no intent from the Parliament or certainly the Presiding Officers in this case to commercialise it or have it outsourced, which I suppose is what you are asking or suggesting. None. But in terms of: if that did happen, could it cope? I think unquestionably. The kitchen is well fitted out on a significant scale.

Dr O'KANE — I think that also the catering team has actually undertaken a number of commercial events which were quite significant in the last year as a result of having those works done: for example, there was the inaugural conference of the Australian members of Parliament where there were 80 members of Parliament from around Australia for an all-day event; the Victorian Employers Chamber of Commerce and Industry had the Victoria Summit where there were 170 political and business leaders looking at sustainability; Australian Unity has the Australia Day breakfast that has been run on 13 or 14 occasions; the Premier's Climate Change Summit where there were 140 political and business leaders. We have done a lot of large-scale functions utilising a number of areas and our catering group has run all of those and done them very successfully.

Ms LINDELL — If I can just add, I think one of the limiting factors for the ultimate or full utilisation of the kitchen as far as functions that happen in the Parliament are concerned, is that we must remember our core business is Parliament and committees. We do have clashes where we have a function booked and then a committee hearing, and obviously the function has to be cancelled. You lose not only that business but the ongoing business. It is a very delicate balance. We try to service as much outside work as we possibly can, but we always do have to face the limitation that we have to service Parliament first.

The CHAIR — I have found the afternoon tea for two vouchers is very popular with my preschool visitors.

Ms LINDELL — Yes, the afternoon teas are indeed very popular.

Mr SMITH — They are very successful, I can tell you. I have on numerous occasions — —

Ms LINDELL — Can we put in a plug that there is now an afternoon tea and tour that is available? You can do both for the price just of the afternoon tea.

Mr SMITH — As I was saying, I have had discussions on numerous occasions with visitors to the Parliament who have come only for the afternoon tea; the feedback I have had from numerous people there has been very positive.

The CHAIR — Is it better than the Windsor?

Ms LINDELL — Yes.

Mr PAKULA — Speaker, you mentioned earlier that MPs' laptops were going to be upgraded — —

Ms LINDELL — In 2009.

Dr O'KANE — Maybe earlier.

Mr PAKULA — What happens to the old ones? Do they get reconditioned and reused or sent to a computer graveyard? What happens to them?

Ms LINDELL — First they are cleaned of all information on them to defence standard security, and then I believe they are recycled.

Dr O'KANE — Yes, they are. The issue with the Parliament disposing of them — I think we canvassed this in the hearings last year — is that the Parliament cannot itself recycle, those because new equipment under legislation needs tagging and testing. The Parliament is not in a position to do that and does not want the residual liability for that, so that is passed to a third party to do.

Mr PAKULA — Passed to a third party?

Dr O'KANE — Yes.

The CHAIR — Although there was an arrangement with regard to the fax machines at one stage. Any more questions? I thank the efforts of particularly the Clerk and others to get additional staffing for our committee over the last few months so I am sure we will be able to continue our efforts in that regard. It is a busy committee and we appreciate the work being done. I thank the Speaker, the President, the clerks and Dr O'Kane for their presence here today. There will be transcripts obviously and you will be able to look at them and return them within three days. We would appreciate responses on any follow-up questions we put on notice within 30 days. Thank you very much for your attendance today.

Witnesses withdrew.