

ESTIMATES

Estimates are also known as the Estimates Committees or Senate Estimates, in which senators examine or scrutinise how the government is spending Commonwealth funds. The senators focus on how government funds have been spent recently and on government spending plans for the future. The committees are called 'estimates' because they examine what the government estimates it will collect and spend in the current financial year.

Estimates hearings are held twice a year, usually soon after the government presents its annual budget to the Parliament in May, and then half way through the financial year, in about December. Senate Estimates hearings last for two weeks on both occasions. All hearings are open to the media and the public, and are televised live. There are separate sessions or hearings for each government department and often last several days. Hearings begin at 9 am and continue until 11 pm each day with four committees running simultaneously. Since Estimates are a formal meeting of the Parliament, Hansard records and publishes all statements and debates in the hearings for public information and scrutiny.

Before the public meeting of an Estimates Committee, the panel of senators from all parties scrutinise the budget statements. These are documents that have been presented by the Treasurer to the Parliament in May and contain very detailed lists of all the main items of income and expenditure for the financial year which, in Australia, runs from July to June.

After the senators have studied the Budget documents, there is a formal meeting or hearing of the committee with the minister whose departmental Budget they are scrutinising. The minister is assisted by senior officials from the department. The Senate panel sit along the side of one table, while the minister, flanked by department officials, sits facing the panel at another table.

Senators ask the minister and officials about specific items of income and expenditure, how the programs are being administered, as well as government policy. Only ministers who are senators are required to attend and answer for the government. Senate ministers therefore have to represent ministers who sit in the House of Representatives. In these cases, the Senate minister may not know a great deal about a specific department or portfolio and may rely upon the departmental officials to know all the details of the department's budget.

Estimates proceedings attract great public attention because there are often discussions and disagreements between the Opposition senators on the panel and the minister representing the executive government. Opposition and minor party senators use Estimates to find out more about what they think the government is trying to conceal. Under detailed questioning from non government senators, the government and its department officials often reveal details about government actions that have previously not been made public.

Estimates hearings are a major activity of the Parliament, whose task is to scrutinise and review the work of executive government. Since the government cannot legally spend money without the approval of the Parliament, the Parliament insists that it knows, in detail, about how funds are collected and spent.