

## PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES

Committees are part of the Parliament and are established by the House of Representatives and the Senate to scrutinise bills or investigate issues in greater detail. Often, there is not enough time during debates in the chamber for the members and senators to investigate detailed and complex issues. So they vote to send an issue to one of their committees, which has weeks or even months to make a closer study. Senators often spend more time working in committees than they do debating in the Senate chamber. Each committee has a secretariat to assist with the running of hearings and writing reports.

Parliamentary committees usually have six to ten members and/or senators from both government and opposition parties as well as minor parties in the Senate. One senator or member becomes the chairperson who runs the proceedings.

When Parliament establishes an inquiry it decides the terms of reference or the specific purpose of the inquiry. The committee advertises in newspapers and invites written submissions from the public and experts on the subject.

The committee members read all the submissions and may invite selected people or groups to appear before the committee. Usually some people are invited to appear before the committee in Parliament House. Sometimes the committee travels to different places in Australia so that the members and senators can meet a wide variety of concerned people.

Committee hearings are formal public meetings of the Parliament. Hansard records everything that is said. The media often attend. Submissions and all the hearings are published in Hansard on the Parliament House website. After the public hearings are finished, the committee writes a report which the chairperson formally presents to the Parliament (with the assistance of the secretariat). Members and senators often use evidence from a report to propose amendments to a bill.

There are several types of committees. Most committees consist of senators only or members only, while others are joint committees and include both members and senators. Standing committees are continuous during the life of a parliament and concentrate on examining bills and issues relating to particular subjects. For example, the Senate Rural Affairs and Transport Committee examines bills and issues about rural affairs.

Select committees are set up by the Parliament to examine a specific issue. When the report is presented, the committee disbands. Often, a minister establishes a committee to investigate a policy issue. In August 2002 for example, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, asked the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade to inquire into Australia's relationship with Indonesia.

Estimates committees meet twice a year to scrutinise how the government has spent the budget funds. The only witnesses who appear before an estimates committee are ministers and senior public servants in government departments.

In recent years, committees have become more and more important in the work of the Parliament, especially since legislation is increasingly more complex and technical such as copyright, digital broadcasting and free trade agreements.