Parliamentary committees are an important part of the work of the Parliament. They investigate issues and bills (proposed laws) in detail, so that the Parliament can be well-informed before making decisions of national significance.

One of the roles of the Parliament is to make laws for the nation. However, there is often limited time to debate complex issues in detail in the parliamentary chambers. Members of parliament can vote to appoint a committee to take on this role. A committee may have weeks or even months to make a closer study of an issue.

Membership

Most members of parliament, except ministers, serve on parliamentary committees. These committees are usually made up of six to ten government and non-government members of parliament.

Committees may consist of senators or members of the House of Representatives, or may be established as joint committees which include members of both houses of Parliament. One committee member is voted to be the chairperson who runs the committee proceedings.

Each committee has a secretariat — a group of parliamentary employees who assist with running the hearings and writing a report to present to the Parliament.

Procedure

When Parliament establishes a committee of inquiry, it decides on the terms of reference — that is, the specific purpose of the inquiry. The committee advertises in newspapers and invites written submissions from the community, experts and interest groups regarding the issue.

Committee members read the submissions and may invite selected people or groups to appear before the committee to provide further evidence or answer questions from committee members.

Committees take place at Parliament House, but also travel all over Australia to discuss issues with many different people.

Committee hearings are usually formal public meetings of the Parliament. Hansard reporters record everything that is said. Submissions and hearings are published in Hansard and are available on the Parliament House website. The media often attend and report on proceedings. After the public hearings are finished, the committee writes a report which is formally presented to the Parliament. Members of parliament often use evidence from a committee report to propose bills or amendments to existing laws.

Types of committees

There are several types of committees:

- Standing committees operate continuously and concentrate on examining bills and issues relating to particular subjects. For example, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment examines bills and issues relating to these two areas.
- Select committees are set up by the Parliament to examine specific issues. A minister may establish a select committee to investigate a policy issue. After a report is presented to Parliament, the committee disbands. For example, in 2009 the Senate Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries inquired into the impact of bushfires in Australia.
- Estimates committees usually meet three times a year to scrutinise how the government has spent Budget funds. The only witnesses who appear before an estimates committee are ministers and senior public servants in government departments (see Senate Estimates).

In recent years, committees have become more important in the work of the Parliament, especially since law-making is increasingly more complex. Committees are also a powerful way to bring Parliament to the people and allow a greater variety of opinions to be heard.

LINKS

**APH website**
Parliament House virtual tour
virtualtour.aph.gov.au
Committees
www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees
House of Representatives Infosheet: Committees
www.tinyurl.com/Infosheet4
Senate Brief: Senate Committees
www.aph.gov.au/Senate/briefs/brief04

A parliamentary committee in action

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