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Chair
Independent Review into the Australian Public Service

JOINT SUBMISSION FROM THE HEADS OF THE PARLIAMENTARY DEPARTMENTS TO THE INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE (APS)

The heads of the parliamentary departments (the Department of the House of Representatives, the Department of the Senate, the Department of Parliamentary Services and the Parliamentary Budget Office) make the following brief submission to the independent review of the APS (the review).

Importance of maintaining a separate parliamentary service

The parliamentary service is a separate service from the APS reflecting its role supporting the Parliament rather than the Executive and, at a more fundamental level, reflecting the principle of separation of powers. We consider it fundamental that the parliamentary departments retain their autonomous position to support the Parliament as a separate institution from the executive government.

While the scope of the review specifically excludes the parliamentary departments, we note that the *Parliamentary Service Act 1999* closely mirrors the *Public Service Act 1999* and we consider that it is important for this to continue. As a result, changes proposed to the APS in the review that require legislative changes to the Public Service Act, may also have implications for the Parliamentary Service Act. We would therefore wish to be consulted about any proposed legislative changes at an early stage.

Understanding the role of the Parliament

An effective government requires an effective and well-functioning Parliament. Moreover, to be an effective public servant, it is important to understand the relationship between the executive and legislative arms of government, the distinct roles that each plays and the circumstances in which close engagement between the two arms improves their effectiveness.

It is therefore important for public servants to receive training on the fundamental principles of Australian governance. In our experience, APS officers' understanding of the role of Parliament, the separation of powers and the accountability of ministers and the APS to the Parliament remains uneven even amongst senior officers. The House departments offer seminar programs to assist in developing this understanding. Nevertheless, there is considerable scope to improve officers' understanding of these principles.

Accountability to the Parliament

The APS fulfils an important part of the framework of accountability of executive government to the Parliament. This manifests itself in many ways. Perhaps the most important is in the relationship to parliamentary committees, whether the committees are undertaking general inquiries, considering legislation proposed by the executive or examining the estimates of agencies. The review should keep in mind the centrality of this relationship in consideration of the future of the APS; in other words, it is important that the APS remains responsive to the requirements of the Parliament to support accountability.

Mobility and opportunities for collaboration

There are good existing examples of collaboration between the APS and the parliamentary service. For example the Parliamentary Budget Office works closely with many agencies on model and data issues; and there are circumstances where the APS engages cooperatively with committees including by seconding experts to committee secretariats for particular inquiries. However, we consider there may be opportunities for broader collaboration between the services and, in particular, greater support for mobility between the services.

We consider that mechanisms to support mobility between APS and the parliamentary service have important benefits for both services. For parliamentary officers, a more nuanced understanding of the operations of the Executive allows them to provide more effective support to parliamentarians. Similarly, APS officers who have a deeper understanding of the legislative processes and accountability functions of the Parliament are likely to be significantly more effective.

For these reasons the secondment programs between the APS and the parliamentary service, including the graduate program, are important for capability building, along with the formal training programs that each service offers. In addition, joint participation in APSC training programs is valuable for building informal networks and an understanding of each other's roles.

Specific mechanisms to build on these existing initiatives could include:

- more flexibility for departments and agencies to release officers on leave without pay to take up non-ongoing opportunities in the parliamentary service;
- opportunities for parliamentary service officers to take up secondments in the APS during non-peak periods (for the chamber departments this would generally mean election periods); and
- waiving of probation and health clearance requirements for officers transferring permanently from one service to the other.

We would be happy to provide any further information which may assist the review.

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