

Estimates Committee A

Report No. 1, 8 July 1997

Legislative Assembly

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ESTIMATES COMMITTEE A

REPORT TO THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF QUEENSLAND

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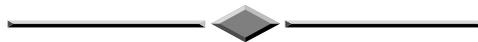
ESTIMATES COMMITTEE A

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Report to the Legislative Assembly

Estimates Committee A presents this report to the Legislative Assembly in relation to the estimates of expenditure for the Legislative Assembly of Queensland.

1.2 Sessional Orders dated 4 June 1997

The Legislative Assembly, pursuant to Sessional Orders adopted on 4 June 1997, appointed seven estimates committees to inquire into the estimates of expenditure contained in the Appropriation (Parliament) Bill 1997 and the Appropriation Bill 1997.

This committee, being Estimates Committee A, had the following organisational units allocated to it:

- Office of the Governor
- Legislative Assembly
- Queensland Audit Office
- Parliamentary Commissioner for Administrative Investigations
- Department of the Premier and Cabinet
- Department of Economic Development and Trade
- Treasury Department
- Any other organisational units within the portfolios of the Premier and the Treasurer.

Sessional Order 30(2) requires that Estimates Committee A presents two reports; one for the Legislative Assembly and another for the other organisational units allocated to it. The committee has reported separately in relation to the other organisational units allocated to it.

The committee has now considered the estimates referred to it in relation to the Legislative Assembly and has met in public session to receive evidence from the Honourable, Mr Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. The committee will be tabling separately in the Legislative Assembly, additional information which has been received as a result of questions on notice prior to the hearing and the minutes of the committee's meetings.

1.3 Overview

The Legislative Assembly of Queensland consists of 89 Members who discharge a range of important legislative and constituency responsibilities.

The mission of the Parliamentary Service, established under *the Parliamentary Service Act 1988* (Qld), is to pursue excellence in providing services to the Queensland Parliament and its Members.

The total budget estimate for the Legislative Assembly in 1997-98 is \$42.31m, which is an increase of approximately 8.2 per cent over the previous year's budget. Some of the areas to which this additional funding will be directed are elaborated upon in this report.

2. MAJOR NEW INITIATIVES FOR 1997- 98

2.1 Improvements to constituency support

The committee notes that additional funding of \$0.75m (or \$10 500 per Member) has been allocated to Members, other than Ministers, to be used for employing part-time staff in their electorate offices. This additional funding is in accordance with a previous recommendation of the Parliamentary Committee for Electoral and Administrative Review and should alleviate the considerable workload of Members, some of whom have had difficulties supporting constituents with current staffing resources. This allocation should become effective from 1 July this year and Members will have the discretion as to what type and level of staff they employ using that allocation.

2.2 Refurbishment of the Parliamentary Annexe building

The 1997-98 budget provides for many initiatives contained in the *Parliamentary Service Physical Asset Strategic Plan*. At the hearing Mr Speaker advised the committee that he was conscious of the need to preserve the historical and cultural significance of the parliamentary precinct and to provide a safe, functional and comfortable workplace environment for Members and staff, as well as a premium facility for all Queenslanders.

These initiatives include a three-year \$8m program for the refurbishment of the interior of the Parliamentary Annexe building, of which \$2m is provided in the current budget in order to commence that process. At the hearing, Mr Speaker elaborated on how that refurbishment would be undertaken. The committee was also informed that:

- as part of the refurbishment a fibre-optic backbone will be installed throughout the building which will handle computing and audiovisual facilities;
- there is no proposal to downgrade media facilities; and
- at present no budget allocation has been made to replace the lifts due to the tremendous cost.

At the hearing Mr Speaker also advised that an allocation in excess of \$900 000 is to be spent on cleaning and repairing the exterior of the Annexe. The committee is aware of the need for this work particularly given that recently pieces of concrete have been falling from the exterior of the Annexe.

The preservation of the old Parliament House will also continue through the Stonework Restoration Program, stage 4 of which will be completed in 1997-98. Mr Speaker further advised that the Department of Public Works and Housing will be providing \$500 000 towards this program in 1997-98 which is in addition to the Legislative Assembly's budget allocation of \$173 000.

2.3 A Better Parliamentary Service

Mr Speaker advised the committee that during 1996-97 he has, in consultation with management, instituted several new planning processes with a view to improving communication within the Parliamentary Service and improving communication between the Parliamentary Service and Members. These processes include the recently developed Parliamentary Service Management Plan.

In an answer to a question on notice, Mr Speaker also updated the committee as to the status of the review of the *Members' Salaries, Allowances and Services Handbook*. In summary, submissions made by all Members (and the submission made by The Clerk of the Parliament) have been considered by the Speaker and are currently being considered by the Premier.

Mr Speaker advised that when he and the Premier have agreed upon the content of a new draft handbook, he will forward a copy of that draft document to the leaders of the parliamentary political parties, the Auditor-General and the Taxation and Operation Section of the Treasury Department for comment. Following consideration by the Premier and himself, necessary amendments will be effected and the new handbook will be put to the Executive Council for approval. The committee notes that Mr Speaker hopes to have the new handbook finalised by early July this year.

3. PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES PROGRAM

3.1 The Committee Office

At the hearing, the committee was advised that there had been staff level increases in 1996-97 in the Members' Ethics and Parliamentary Privileges Committee and the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee, and that the AO4 position in the Parliamentary Criminal Justice Committee had been upgraded to an AO5.

There has also been an increase in the budget for the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee for the use of external consultants as and when the need arises.

3.2 Parliamentary Library

The committee was most interested to hear of the plan for the Library to convert deteriorating historic records including videotapes to compact disk (CD). Mr Speaker advised the committee that this conversion is a labour intensive process and requires an operator with specific skills. Therefore, \$25 000 has been set aside in 1997-98 to permit a full-time temporary employee to work on the videotape conversion. Another \$5 000 has also been allocated to complete the costly work on restoring the 1876 Stanford Map of Australasia and to commence restoration on the remaining maps.

3.3 Table Office

The committee notes the various benefits and cost savings which are evident from the completion of the successful trial of the Bill to Act process between the Parliament, Office of Queensland Parliamentary Counsel (OPC) and Goprint.

This process has resulted in:

- greater integrity of text by OPC having sole responsibility for producing and amending electronic text, and providing Goprint with electronic amended text of Bills instead of hard copy amendments for insertion by them;
- reduced turnaround time for the production of the various stages of bills; and
- electronic availability of Acts within hours of receiving assent.

3.4 Hansard

The committee is most impressed with the improved Hansard accessibility which means that people can now access Hansard via the Internet within two hours of the adjournment of the House. This is compared to the situation only three months ago where subscribers used to have to wait about a week after parliamentary sittings before they received the Weekly Hansard.

As to the availability of legislation through the Internet, the committee was advised at the hearing that whilst this is a matter for the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel, users with access to the Parliamentary Library's "Concord" databases are able to browse the full text of consolidated legislation.

3.5 Education and Protocol Office

The Education and Protocol Office has informed the committee of the success of the Parliamentary Internship Program which completed its pilot phase in 1996-97. The program aims to give university students first hand appreciation of the relationship between political practice and theory, an in-depth understanding of the political processes and the role of Parliament, and the opportunity to obtain relevant research experience in a new environment.

Given this success the committee appreciates the plans to extend the program by also inviting the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba to join the scheme. This expansion is part of the office's Parliamentary Outreach Program which aims to expand parliamentary education programs into regional and rural Queensland.

3.6 Attendants

The committee notes that there are at present twelve full-time attendants and eight to nine casual staff employed in and out of session. The committee was advised at the hearing that on-the-job training of attendants and rotation of staff were believed to be the best ways to improve performance.

4. CORPORATE SERVICES AND MEMBERS' SUPPORT PROGRAM

4.1 Human Resource Management

The committee questioned Mr Speaker with respect to the 7.3 per cent increase in "salaries, wages and related payments" at the hearing. In response, the committee was informed that the increase was due to a number of factors including funding for the electorate offices, an increase in Members' salaries of about \$115 000 and the creation and re-classification of some positions. Enterprise bargaining was also stated to account for approximately \$250 000 of the increase.

With respect to the current Enterprise Bargaining Agreement, Mr Speaker advised the committee as to some of the key productivity improvements achieved under it including reductions in water consumption and energy costs, discretionary fringe benefits tax, and workers' compensation claims and absenteeism. The committee understands that the current agreement is due to expire on 31 October 1997 and that a new agreement will be discussed and negotiated in greater detail over the next few months.

4.2 Information Technology Services

At the hearing, the committee sought information on electorate office access to the Internet and e-mail facilities. In response, the committee was advised that Information Technology Services (ITS) is looking at a new Internet strategy but it has not yet been determined whether Internet access can be provided through the parliamentary network or whether it would be more economical to connect Members with a local service provider.

The committee was also given some background as to the technical difficulties that ITS has encountered in relation to e-mail facilities for electorate offices. As a result of these difficulties ITS has recommended that each electorate office install a separate data line.

4.3 Property Services

The committee sought further information on the approximate cost of implementing the comprehensive energy management strategy which is designed to conserve energy and

reduce expenditure upon utilities. In this regard, Mr Speaker advised that the Clerk of the Parliament has entered into a contract with Honeywell Limited to introduce the Honeywell Comprehensive Technical Services program within the parliamentary precinct. The cost of implementation is expected to be \$1.5m.

However, Mr Speaker also advised that the contract was awarded in conjunction with the Department of Public Works and Housing which will monitor and evaluate the program as a pilot project and that funding for the project will be provided by the Department of Public Works and Housing.

4.4 Catering Division

At the hearing, Mr Speaker expressed his belief that, to maintain its independence, the Parliament should not privatise the services provided by the Parliamentary Catering Division and that he was not satisfied that there would be a tremendous saving by privatisation. Mr Speaker also reported that he had held discussions with Members from other Parliaments who had stated that Queensland had one of the better parliamentary catering services.

Mr Speaker also outlined for the committee plans to ensure that the principal sourcing of foods and wines served in the Parliament is Queensland.

4.5 Security

New security measures to be implemented within the parliamentary precinct in 1997-98 include a card access system to control access without restricting the movement of Members and staff. The committee was advised that the cost of this new system will be in the region of \$47 000.

Mr Speaker also stressed that he is not in favour of privatisation of the Parliament's security services.

4.6 Administrative Services

In its questions on notice, the committee sought additional information from Mr Speaker as to the arrangements with Treasury for the part-funding of electorate office photocopiers. In this regard, Mr Speaker advised that initially an allocation of \$300 000 was included in the 1996-97 budget estimates to cover the cost of leasing 84 new electorate office photocopiers as at the time leasing was considered the best option.

However, Mr Speaker further explained that prior to the photocopiers being leased, changes occurred in the leasing rates and in the type of copiers available. As a result, the Clerk of the Parliament conducted an audit which revealed that it would be more cost effective to purchase the photocopiers. Given that the full purchase price was \$769 000, the Clerk approached Treasury with a view to obtain recoverable funding in 1996-97 for the balance of \$469 000. Pursuant to the resulting arrangement, Treasury agreed to

provide additional funds in 1996-97 which the Parliament would repay in 1997-98 and 1998-99.

The Clerk of the Parliament subsequently found savings elsewhere in the budget which were applied to meet the cost of the photocopiers, thereby reducing the amount of the recoverable funding advance to \$250 000. The committee notes that the repayments (together with interest amounts as advised by Treasury) are reflected in the program outlays. For 1996-97, the repayment due is \$61 000 principal (plus \$4000 interest) and for 1997-98 the principal repayment is \$189 000 (plus \$6000 in interest).

5. CONCLUSION

The committee acknowledges the importance of the appropriation for the Parliament being contained in a separate bill, thus ensuring the separation and independence of the Parliament from the Executive. In this regard the committee believes that Parliament's independent administration of its own affairs should be maintained.

The committee appreciates the co-operation afforded to it by Mr Speaker and officers of the Parliamentary Service during the estimates process. The committee also thanks Mr Speaker, the Clerk of the Parliament and their officers on their preparation and the provision of full and frank answers to questions on notice and questions at the hearing.

The committee's general comments as to the estimates process are contained in its Report No.2.

The committee has agreed to the proposed expenditure referred to it, without amendment.

6. RECOMMENDATION

The committee recommends that the proposed expenditure be agreed to.

Luke Woolmer MLA
Chairman

[For comments made by non-Government Members as to the proposed expenditure for the Legislative Assembly, reference should be made to the Statement of Reservations attached to the committee's Report No. 2.]