

THE PARLIAMENT OF BIRDS

Ian HARRIS (Australia)

Mr Ian HARRIS (Australia) *spoke as follows:*

I have previously delivered a communication, which evolved into a report, on attempts in Australia to improve the public perception of the Parliament. On this occasion, I would like to outline some of the steps being taken by the Australian national parliament to educate its citizens (including its young citizens) on Australia's parliamentary processes.

University visits

One partnership the Australian House of Representatives has been developing over the past three years is with tertiary institutions. It is important for the parliament to connect more effectively with the up and coming talent of our nation and with those who are educating them.

To this end we have established a university lecture program whereby members of the House and senior parliamentary officials visit universities free of charge to provide lectures on the realities of working in today's House of Representatives. The program was trialled with a few universities and proved such a success that it has now been extended to tertiary institutions throughout Australia. Usually the Speaker and the Clerk of the House deliver the talks. A small and manageable number of universities is visited annually.

Internships

The House also participates in an intern scheme, sponsored by the Australian National University. Interns are attached for a short time to the staff of Members and Senators, and are required to produce a research paper during their internship. On occasion, an intern has been attached to the office of the Clerk of the House. We have also commenced a system of employing a small group of university students on a part time basis to do messenger duties in the Chamber and elsewhere. Our system is based on the very successful Canadian system. So far, one intern has joined the staff of the House, but this is not our principal aim. We draw from a variety of disciplines: science, the arts, forestry etc. Our hope is that Australia's leaders of tomorrow have some understanding of the operation of Australia's parliamentary system.

New technologies

We have made use of new technologies, such as the Internet and digital television, which present even further opportunities to engage with different sections of the community. The Australian Parliament has a comprehensive web-site providing access to most recent parliamentary material. On this site, 'House News' provides information on new developments in the House to back up the information provided to the media. In addition, recent experience in producing a documentary and CD-ROM on the first 100 years of the House, and the large number of orders received for the two products, show that the Parliament presented in interesting ways can capture the public imagination. Production of the documentary and CD-ROM involved collaboration with broadcasting colleagues in the Department of the Parliamentary Reporting Staff; contractual 'partnerships' with the private sector (multi-media company, design company; marketing and distribution companies); and commissioning of original music and actors.²

Parliamentary education

The principal means by which we attempt to reach the young people of Australia is by means of the Parliamentary Education Office (PEO). The PEO is located within the Department of the Senate. The House of Representatives provides financial support for the PEO's operations, and the staff of the House have input to quality control, content of programs etc.

Those elected to the Parliament have an input by means of a Presiding Officers Advisory Group, whose membership is made up of Senators and Members, and whose principal function is to advise the President and the Speaker on the operations of the PEO.

The PEO aims to provide a comprehensive service in parliamentary and citizenship education to schools and to assist senators and members to inform constituents about the parliamentary process. It can be seen as working in partnership with teachers to assist students (and teachers) to:

- understand the significance of the Australian Parliament;
- understand how the Australian Parliament works; and
- take an active role as citizens in our democracy.

The PEO carries out its national role by:

- conducting active learning programs for student visitors to Parliament House. These one hour programs take place in a dedicated venue—the Education Centre—and engage students in role-plays about parliamentary processes and concepts;
- conducting outreach programs for students and teachers in their own classrooms in schools throughout Australia. These programs show how teachers can use the parliamentary process of decision making as a teaching/ learning strategy in the classroom;
- producing and publishing state curriculum based parliamentary education resources for teachers. Many of the resources are published on the PEO website (<http://www.peo.gov.au/index.html>);

² Details of the CD-ROM and documentary are available from: <http://www.houseforthenation.gov.au>

- delivering professional development programs for school teachers, trainee teachers and tertiary and community educators in schools, technical and further education institutions and universities;
- providing fellowships that give opportunities for young professionals including Aboriginal and other community leaders, teachers and journalists to further their knowledge of parliamentary processes;
- conducting a range of special activities and events, including symposiums and Conferences, an annual forum on the subject of the Budget, sessions of the National Youth Science Forum, an Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio program for rural youth), the Rotary Adventure in Citizenship, and Talk-back classroom (a program where senior secondary school students interview senior politicians and other community leaders for broadcast on the national ABC youth radio network). Further details are available from the PEO website; and
- maintaining a very useful website.

As would be apparent from this range of activities, the PEO works closely and pro-actively with schools systems, universities and teacher organisations on a number of levels. It seeks to work collaboratively with the relevant professional education networks. The scale of the work is significant and the quality high, and to illustrate this I will refer to three areas:

- services for school groups within parliament;
- a new education resource for primary school students, Cockatoo Island; and
- the PEO's new web site.

Services for school groups within parliament

In recent years, more than 100 000 students have visited our national Parliament House in Canberra each year as part of an organised school group. Based on recent survey data, this represents more than 80% of inter-state student visitors to the national capital.³ A comprehensive Visitors' Services Section in Parliament House conducts tours, explains and interprets the Parliament and provides written materials.

The PEO provides Education Centre services for almost 80 000 of the visiting students. Included amongst them are about 16 000 students (from 550 schools) who live a long way from the national capital and whose travel to parliament is partly subsidised under a program called the Citizenship Visits Program. The program is run by the Australian Parliament, and total expenditure last financial year was \$1.02 million.

PEO Education Centre services began with the occupancy of the present Parliament House building in 1988. They have evolved over time, and the current programs now include:

- debating a bill role-play (with a choice of five bills for primary, and eight bills for secondary, although others can be used);

³ Discover what it means to be Australian in your National Capital: Size and effects of school excursions to the National Capital, 2002, Centre for Tourism Research, University of Canberra, 2003.

- committee of inquiry role-play (with one topic available for primary, and eight bills for secondary, although others can be used); and
- Question Time role-plays.

Importantly, professional educators are involved in delivering the programs. For most visiting student groups, from all states and territories in Australia, the parliamentary education program is linked directly to primary and secondary social science curricula.

External and internal evaluations of the Education Centre program over the period have demonstrated that the program is achieving its aims of encouraging students to become active and informed citizens. Last year, an external evaluation, indicated a 97 per cent level of satisfaction by school groups participating in PEO programs.⁴

Visiting school groups have the opportunity to meet with their elected representatives during their visits to Parliament House. An automated booking system advises members and senators about bookings for schools visiting from their electorates or States/ Territories, and a refinement to the program will allow for an electronic reminder close to the visit. This enables members and senators, if they wish, to make arrangements to meet with the students.

I should also say that all members of parliament in Australia consider visits to schools as among their most important duties. To assist members and senators in this regard, the PEO has produced facsimiles of the Despatch Boxes in the House of Representatives' Chamber, for use as an education resource. The facsimile boxes include a range of parliamentary information, props, photos and other materials for use during visits to schools and other community venues. The boxes are produced in response to orders for purchase from individual members and senators and are sold on a cost recovery basis.

Cockatoo Island

Last year, our Presiding Officers launched Cockatoo Island, an exciting new resource for young school children produced by the PEO.

Cockatoo Island is an imaginary island run by a parliament of Australian birds. Three colourful 'Big Books' introduce students to a diverse and democratic society. Illustrated by central Australian artist Kaye Kessing, they tell the story of how the birds organise life on the island to be fair and tolerant with opportunities for all and the right to be heard. Birds Australia has enthusiastically supported the project, and provided advice which has ensured that the ornithological details in the teaching notes are accurate.

Teachers' 'In-Flight Guides' are provided with background notes about parliament (and the birds), curriculum outcomes, portfolio pages and role-cards. The stories and the activities that go with them have been trialled in schools over the last three years with great success. PEO staff members are now visiting different regions to introduce the resource to classroom teachers.

The Cockatoo Island package is now being sold throughout the country through the publishing firm Thomson Learning. Under the contract, the project has been undertaken at minimal cost to the Australian Parliament. In the five months since publication some four hundred schools have purchased the resource, involving an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 students throughout Australia (and royalty return to the Australian Parliament). Its potential for education programs in other parliamentary democracies is already being tested, successfully, in South Africa, using South

African birds. Details about how to order the product are available from the PEO website. Information about intellectual property and any adaptation of the concept are available from the author, PEO staffer, Ali Garnett.

Studies of citizenship education have concluded that it is not what we teach in schools but how we run them that determines whether students will emerge as active, participating citizens.⁵ The Cockatoo Island resource is a significant addition to the resources available to teachers to encourage their students to develop concepts of democracy. It complements a major curriculum initiative in the late 1990s by the Australian Government entitled 'Discovering Democracy'. The Cockatoo Island project demonstrates that innovative programs are the key to engaging young people's interest in the parliament.

Parliamentary Education Office Website

The PEO website has recently been redeveloped. The site continues to provide comprehensive, accurate and useful information on PEO programs, activities and events and a range of resources for teachers, primary and secondary students and internet resources. (For example, it includes photographs and other materials that students can download for their school projects). The site is logically structured, visually appealing, easy to navigate and easy to use.

As a new development, the site also now includes an interactive sub-site for upper primary students, called Kidsview, which includes a number of features designed to interest children.

Content is arranged across five main themes: Representation, Law-making, Democracy, Parliament House and Parliamentary Artefacts. Kidsview includes complementary teaching material for teachers and parents. It links directly with State and Territory social science curricula, assisting teachers, parents and students in achieving curriculum outcomes.

Comment

Australia's experience with the PEO demonstrates that a relatively small group of professional staff dedicated to the task of parliamentary and citizenship education for schools, can make a significant contribution. We consider the investment to be both important and necessary to contribute to the task of sustaining our system of parliamentary government.

I would be interested to learn of the experience of other legislatures in introducing young people to the operation of their parliaments.

Mr Anders FORSBERG, Vice-President *thanked Mr Ian HARRIS for his contribution and invited members to put questions to him.*

Ms Heather LANK (Canada) thought that the Parliament of Birds was a fantastic tool. The view in Canada was that it was important to get to people before they had learnt to be cynical about Parliament. She asked what age group was best to focus on.

⁵ Senator the Hon. Margaret Reid Taking Parliament to the People and Bring People to the Parliament. Paper presented to 30th Conference of Presiding Officers and Clerks, Fiji, 16-24 July 1999, p 11.

Mrs Helen DINGANI (Zimbabwe) said that the presentation tied in with the earlier debate on Parliament and the public. Many southern African countries would use animals other than birds, but nonetheless she had had talks with the Ministry of Education about similar projects. They were thinking mainly about aiming at secondary schools. She noted that internships for university students were well-established, but they tended to be less successful.

Mr George CUBIE (United Kingdom) thanked the President and congratulated the Australian Parliament on this initiative. The House of Commons and the House of Lords were doing similar work, but they had nothing so dramatic as the Australian initiative. He had been talking to a Member of Parliament who had commented to him that it was very effective when talking to schools in her constituency when she spoke about her work in post-conflict areas. He noted that the facilities of the Education Unit were vastly oversubscribed. One of the constraints on doing more was that there was no dedicated space for lectures and teaching. He would like to know how much resources the Australian Parliament had given to this. A web site had been established to help virtual visitors to Parliament. There was acute consciousness in the UK Parliament that the level of public awareness of the work of Parliament was a very low. Given that in the United Kingdom there was a tight educational formula it was not easy to find space in the curriculum for Citizenship Studies. He asked what staff resources had been devoted to the Australian project. He also wondered if it was possible to know more about the interface with universities.

Mr Carlos HOFFMAN CONTRERAS (Chile) congratulated Mr HARRIS on his presentation. The Chilean Parliament was just starting up a programme to improve the relations between the Senate and civil society. It was very tempting to borrow the method which he had just demonstrated. He asked what the intellectual property rights were in this concept.

Mr Petr TKACHENKO (Russia) thanked the President for his presentation. He asked how long the programme had existed. If it had existed from long time, how had the destiny of the children who had been through the programme been monitored? He wanted to know whether they tended to become officials or politicians. He also asked how the mass media involved themselves in such initiatives.

Mrs I Gusti Ayu DARSINI (Indonesia) said that there was a system in Indonesia for giving some education to visitors to Parliament. She asked what topics were chosen for lectures to students about Parliament. She asked how students' activities were paid for.

Mme Hélène PONCEAU (France) congratulated Mr HARRIS on his presentation. In both the National Assembly and the Senate in France there were special departments for education. They produced more austere documents than the one that had been demonstrated. They did not try to amuse as well as to educate. Nonetheless, there were some cartoon documents produced which were quite popular. There were some plans to introduce games and role-play. In addition, in France a Parliament was held for children. Despite the best intentions, all these instruments probably did not reach young people as much as they should. The difficulty in France was producing material in a light-hearted way was the risk that parliamentarians might think that they were being held up to ridicule.

Mr Pitoon PUMHIRAN (Thailand) said that cartoon material was produced in Thailand about the role of parliamentarians. In addition, seminars were held for secondary school children.

Mrs Lulu MATYOLO (South Africa) said that in South Africa the Public Education Office educated the public about their rights under the Constitution. It focused on rural women and on children. It produced reading material. It also produced educational material for use in schools.

In addition, an interschool competition was sponsored with the winners arriving to debate in Parliament itself. Recently, some schools had established shadow Parliaments. One school even had an annual appropriation debate. For financial reasons, there had been some limits set to this competition. Further, a system had been introduced whereby some schoolchildren shadowed particular ministers. The three universities around Cape Town sent students to Parliament on attachment.

Dr Yogendra NARAIN (India) thanked the President for his contribution. He had heard the presentation in Canada at the Speaker's conference. There had been widespread interest in the initiative described. He noted that in India Youth Parliaments were held. This initiative was being extended throughout states and provinces. In order to celebrate the 200th session of the Upper House a special seminar had been held on the role and relevance of the Upper House. This had been very useful and a lot of Members and former Members had attended. A web site had been established, which was a useful tool for interacting with the public. He would have thought that secondary school and university students were a better level for a target audience.

Mr Brissi Lucas GUEHI (Cote d'Ivoire) thanked the President for his presentation. He was very impressed. In Cote d'Ivoire there were also mock Parliaments. He had organised a mock Parliament for secondary school and university students. However, resources were limited. He would like to have someone deal with mock Parliaments on a permanent basis. These activities could create a sense of patriotism, which was very useful at the present time of crisis in Cote d'Ivoire. He asked whether the material shown could be used in Cote d'Ivoire.

Mr Hans-Peter GERSCHWILER (Switzerland) said that he was very favourably impressed by the Australian experience. He said that in Switzerland about 10 years previously all secondary schools had had material sent to them. Teachers had been invited to Parliament and had held a mock Parliament. The squeeze on resources had meant that there had been a change of approach towards interactive aids on the Internet. A web site had been set up. It was now possible to help teachers more systematically.

Mr Seppo TIITINEN (Finland) said that the most innovative point had been the enlargement of the target group to include very young children. He said this raised one question: what educational research had been carried out before the system had been set up and what the results were of that research.

Mrs Marie-Francoise PUCETTI (Gabon) congratulated Mr HARRIS on his presentation. She said that she also had organised mock Parliaments, which followed the session of the real Parliament. There was also an organised programme to host children visiting Parliament.

Mr Hans BAKKER (Netherlands) said that the Dutch Parliament had been looking for a good educational concept for children in the 12 to 16 age range. Each year in the Netherlands a mock Parliament was held which involved about 200 children, who were invited to debate in Parliament. The real Speaker chaired the mock Parliament and ministers attended. He noted that in Denmark and Norway excellent mock Parliaments were held, but that this was very expensive. He asked about the cost of the Australian initiative and whether it would be possible to copy that concept.

Mr Vergara BENJAMIN (Mexico) congratulated Mr HARRIS on his contribution. In Mexico a mock Parliament had been held involving boys and girls. Presentations and Communications had been made and there had been debates. About 300 children had taken part. Brochures and books were given out to children who participated. In 2003 a parallel election had been held by children.

Mr Anders FORSBERG (Sweden) said that in Sweden the Youth Parliament had been held. This had discussed drug trafficking in advance of the real debate in Parliament. The results of the children's debate informed the debate in Parliament. The regional press gave good coverage to the children's Parliament.

Mr Mohamed Salifou TOURÉ (Guinea) thanked Mr HARRIS for his presentation. He said that he was a teacher by training and hoped that the document would be translated into French and published more widely.

Mr Ian HARRIS, President thanked his colleagues for their kind attention. He noted that his contribution might well have formed part of the Tuesday's debate. Mrs Lank had talked about getting to children before cynicism set in. Like Mr TOURÉ, originally he had been teacher and this initiative had been aimed at children who were at a vital age. The concept tried to create an understanding of the principles of parliamentary democracy which would last throughout the children's lives.

As far as staff resources were concerned, not a great deal was needed. The initiative was run by the Education Office, which had a staff of six people. The biggest resource was involved in training the teachers who are acting as guides for the children.

There was also a programme of interfacing with universities. The students who were visited were very lucky. The Speaker of the House of Representatives and he went under the Chatham House rule, i.e. , nothing that was said in the room was repeated anywhere else. He had been struck by the conservatism of university students. Out of 2000 students who had taken part in this exercise there had only been one rebel, and he had been dealt with within the group of students.

The cost of this exercise was not great. It was absorbed within the budget of the Senate and the House of Representatives. Much of the expenditure had been recouped from royalties received. He hoped that it would work elsewhere. The main aim was not to raise money! He had not selected the animals illustrated, but it had been thought that birds were less fearsome! He hoped to share this programme as much as possible

Mock Parliaments were a very good idea. But very often mock Parliaments emphasised conflict between political groups. He thought that the type of training represented by the Parliament of Birds went against the TV short slot approach, which only showed the conflict at Parliamentary Question Time.

He emphasised that the initiative had only been going for one year. He still had to evaluate its impact. He noted the contribution of Mme PONCEAU and affirmed that it was necessary to make sure that Members of Parliament were happy with the way in which Parliament was presented. He said that Members of Parliament in Australia were happy with the association of the Member for rainforests etc.

Mr PUMHIRAN had noted the Thai experience, and it was clear that the Thai sense of fun informed their approach. He was happy to share the concept with South Africa. It was important to remember that children no longer used books exclusively , but also relied on videos for education. This needed to be remembered when building such programmes. The research on which the programme had been based was centred on the wildlife which was featured in the video and had been carried out by senior Parliamentary staff. Feedback was being received from teachers about what part of the programme worked. It was interesting to hear that children paralleled the real debate in Parliament in Sweden, as well as having committees chaired by real members.

Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments

Aims

The Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments, constituted as a consultative body of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, seeks to facilitate personal contacts between holders of the office of Secretary General in any Parliamentary Assembly, whether such Assembly is a Member of the Union or not.

It is the task of the Association to study the law, procedure, practice and working methods of different Parliaments and to propose measures for improving those methods and for securing cooperation between the services of different Parliaments.

The Association also assists the Inter-Parliamentary Union, when asked to do so, on subject within the scope of the Association.

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