

Standing Committee on Public Administration — Ninth Report — “Annual Report 2008”

Tabled on 10 March.

Motion

Hon BARRY HOUSE: I move —

That the report be noted.

The annual report of the Standing Committee on Public Administration details a summary of the committee’s major activities during the year for the house. We also tabled a couple of separate reports on specific topics during the year. This may be the last report from the public administration committee that we consider during the life of this Parliament before we move to the next Legislative Council membership. I take this opportunity as chairman of that committee to thank members for their contributions over the past four years. The membership has been fairly steady with Hon Ed Dermer and Hon Matt Benson-Lidholm being regular members throughout that period. Initially, Hon Helen Morton was a member; now Hon Nigel Hallett and, more recently, Hon Ljiljana Ravlich have been added to the committee. The committee has been a very harmonious, constructive group of people. We have been very well supported by our staff, in particular, Jan Paniperis, who has recently been promoted into a slightly different position in the Legislative Council committee office, and Suzanne Veletta, our advisory officer. Hon Vince Catania was a member for most of the four-year period. Vince resigned from this chamber to successfully contest a seat in the other chamber. We wish him well in that capacity.

The annual report contains a snapshot of our activities in certain areas. I will mention some of those inquiries briefly. The first was the “Inquiry into the Management of Asbestos-containing Materials in Western Australian State Schools”. We tabled a separate report on this but we also included in our annual report an explanation of what the committee had been doing. We included it because as a result of our work in this area over four years, even though it was non-spectacular work, we achieved a very good outcome. We highlighted the need for regular inspections in Western Australian state public schools. I think we had a very positive impact on the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Housing and Works in getting their processes together in an organised fashion to provide continuous scrutiny and action on these issues when they are required. As a result, our previous recommendation was that biannual reports on the Department of Education and Training’s inspection regime and activity report be provided to this Parliament. The first report was provided last year. That is a very positive development. It will give the community at large some assurance that this very serious issue of asbestos in state public schools is being addressed. Of course, asbestos is contained in a lot of other buildings in Western Australia but state public schools was our brief. It is not harmful—we do not want to be alarmist—unless it is disturbed, either by some natural phenomenon or some activity that creates fibres in the air. That is where the major problems can arise. We were satisfied that the Department of Education and Training, together with the Department of Housing and Works, has put in place a process that includes continual inspections and surveillance so that situations can be, should be and, in most cases, are brought to the attention of the relevant authorities in a timely manner. The end result of that work was constructive.

The second inquiry, which is listed in paragraph 11 on the contents page, was the “Inquiry into Statutory Office Holders’ Grievance Procedures”. This is an indication of what the committee is doing. The house may recall that Hon Helen Morton, through a motion that was supported by the house, was successful in referring the case of Christopher Read to the committee. That was referred specifically as a case study. The committee’s broader role is to look at systemic issues and generic issues in the public sector. Those are the terms of reference that we have adopted using the Christopher Read case, which goes back many years, as a case study. We are well into that inquiry and are desperately determined to have the report finished before 21 May so that it will provide a timely conclusion to the committee’s involvement in that affair.

The third inquiry, which is listed at paragraph 12 on the contents page, was the “Inquiry into the Governance of Western Australia’s Water Resources”. Members may recall that this committee has had a specific role in considering some legislation. Specifically, we took on the role of assessing the Water Resources Management (Administration) Bill 2003 several years ago, and we have had a continuing role in a watching brief for other water legislation. That has led to the only recommendation in our report, which is a recommendation that this committee has brought to the house previously. It is recommendation 1, which reads —

The Committee recommends that the proposed Water Services Bill, Water Corporation Act Amendment Bill and Water Resources Management Bill (or any renamed bill dealing with the same or similar matters) be referred to the Standing Committee on Public Administration, or its successor, immediately following the second reading speech of the Minister or parliamentary secretary with carriage of the legislation and the Committee be empowered to consider the policy of the legislation.

Given the body of knowledge, experience and research that resides within the Standing Committee on Public Administration, we believe that it is a well equipped body to conduct consultation and analyses of these bills when they are drafted and come before the Parliament. In that sense I am sure that this committee can do a very constructive job in getting input and views on various matters from the community and can iron out many of the really contentious issues and problem areas of the legislation, as no doubt there are bound to be differences of opinion on various aspects of the legislation.

The next inquiry, which is found at paragraph 13 of the contents page, was “Scrutiny of Statutory Office Holder Reports and Consultations with Statutory Office Holders”. This has been an ongoing process whereby we provide at least a preliminary look at the reports of statutory office holders that are tabled in this Parliament—we know there are many of them—and in some cases we pursue elements of those reports by contacting the minister and the agencies involved. That has provided a valuable role for this committee in its continuous scrutiny of the public sector. That applies, of course, to the Auditor General, the Office of the Public Sector Standards Commissioner, the Ombudsman, the Inspector of Custodial Services and various others.

Therefore, Mr Chairman, that is all in the annual report for all members to read and I think it provides a comprehensive summary of our activities throughout the year.

Hon ED DERMER: Having listened to the very thorough description of the contents of the report by the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Public Administration, there remains very little for me to say. I certainly concur with the comments of the chairman and I say to him, on behalf of all his fellow members of the committee, that we appreciate his kind comments and extend the same to him. That spirit reflects the very sensible and constructive approach that the committee takes to its work. The regular consultations we have with statutory office holders assists us in our work and we occasionally get comments from those office holders to suggest that using us as a sounding board in a way contributes to their work. Our regular systematic review process for the reports of statutory office holders gives us an opportunity to specifically ask ministers about their response to matters that are raised in those reports and I hope that that further reminder to ministers assists them in their work. Certainly the responses that we receive indicate that in most instances they are addressing the matters raised by those statutory office holders.

Question put and passed.

Progress reported, pursuant to standing orders.