

Top Issues Bulletin – shaping the battle rhythm of the day

Defence is inundated with issues on a daily basis – knowing how to deal with them effectively and ensure a coordinated approach across the Groups and Services is the key to ensuring a positive outcome.

No stranger to this is Assistant Secretary Ministerial and Executive Support Branch, Tony Corcoran, who says the best way to manage responses to the abundance of media, ministerial and operational issues is to start the day with a report called the 'Top Issues Bulletin'.

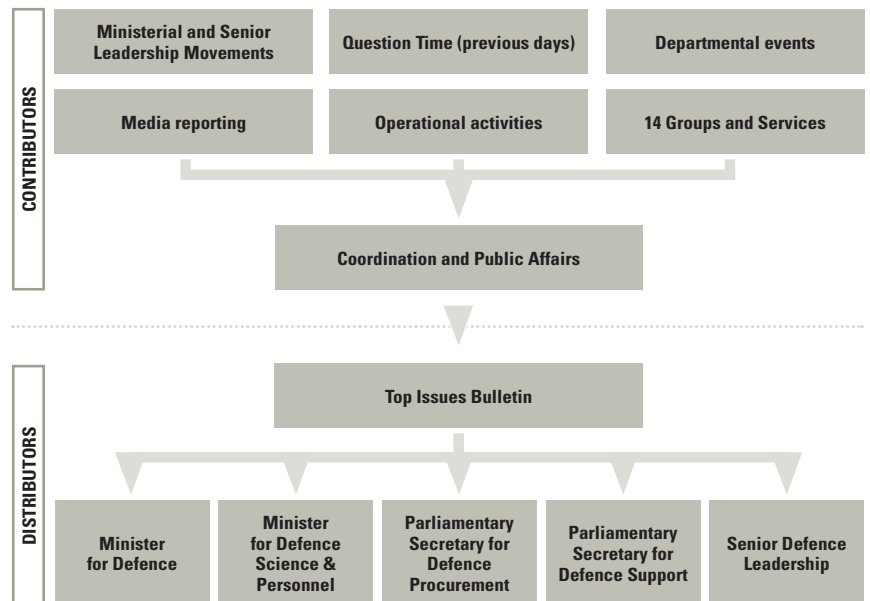
"The Top Issues Bulletin informs the Secretary, Chief of the Defence Force (CDF) and Senior Leadership of significant issues and events reported in the media that may have direct ramifications for Defence," he says.

"The Bulletin lists each identified issue, nominates a lead Group or Service and shows what action is to be taken. For example, do we need to develop talking points, a media release or should we send advice to the Minister?"

Also listing the Ministers' movements, significant events within Defence (including key visitors to Defence), speeches and forthcoming events, the central driver behind the preparation of the Bulletin is Question Time on Parliamentary sitting days.

"Defence has a responsibility to ensure that our Ministers are fully briefed on all current issues before they walk into Question Time at 2pm each day," Mr Corcoran says. "All this takes time to ensure that the right input is provided from the appropriate subject matter experts."

Each morning representatives from Ministerial Support and Public Affairs, Military Strategic Commitments and the Defence Coordination Network meet to be briefed on the issues of the day. During this meeting, appropriate responses for each issue are agreed upon, along with lead areas for responses. According to Mr Corcoran,



this is where the "plan of action for topical issues management begins."

The Bulletin, which has received very positive feedback from the Senior Leadership since its inception, is produced daily by the Directorate of Coordination and delivered to the Ministers' offices and senior Defence staff by no later than 8.30am. Coordination and Public Affairs staff prepare for the daily examination of issues by accessing databases and liaising with key areas in Defence to provide summaries of key issues for the morning meeting. Issues are identified from a wide range of sources, both internal and external, and most of the topics included in the Bulletin are those raised in media reports and judged to need a specific Defence response.

Inputs into the Top Issues Bulletin include the Ministers' and Parliamentary Secretaries' activities for that day, key events occurring within or impacting upon Defence, recent operational issues, media coverage and other activities

(including speeches, launches or events) happening throughout Defence. The range of responses includes developing Question Time Briefs, Talking Points, Ministerial Submissions or, when relevant, Senate Estimates Briefs.

While the issues most pertinent to Defence are raised in this daily forum, there are many other important issues that are not mentioned in the Top Issues Bulletin and still require the Groups and Services to consult with Public Affairs and the Directorate of Ministerial and Parliamentary Liaison Services to develop Talking Points and Question Time Briefs.

This process and its outcome are just extensions of daily meetings that happen all over Defence. However, with 14 Groups and Services to keep informed and responsive to tight timelines, some formality and cooperation along the way ensures that those who need to know are kept fully informed, no matter where they are in the world, in an assured and reliable manner.

Are there any Questions? Question Time in Parliament

It is 2pm and Parliament is sitting. The Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate ask 'Are there any questions?' Parliament might be associated with lengthy speeches by our elected Members or Senators, but this is definitely not the case during Question Time! Question Time often involves drama and vigorous debate in both Houses of Parliament – the Senate and the House of Representatives – as the Government and the Opposition seek to pursue their objectives and make their points known to Parliament and the Australian people.

In addition to questions without notice from the Opposition or other parties, prearranged questions are prepared by Ministers (or their staff). These questions are called 'Dixers', a term that originates from a 19th century advice columnist in the US, Dorothy Dix, who was widely suspected of drafting the questions as well as her responses. Curiously, Australia seems to be the only country that uses this slang term. Frequent use of 'Dixers' may be seen as an undesirable aspect of the parliamentary process, but such questions do comply with the Standing Orders of Parliament. They allow the Government to outline its policy achievements or to criticise the Opposition's stance on an issue.

Question Time is an element of government Australia has taken from the United Kingdom's Westminster System. This system of government is used in many Commonwealth nations including Canada, Singapore, Ireland, New Zealand and India.

When Question Time commences, it is normal practice for the first question to be asked by an Opposition Member or Senator. Members and Senators stand in their places to ask questions; Ministers reply from the House of Representatives despatch box or their place in the Senate. Question time runs for 70-90 minutes, concluding when the Prime Minister or another Minister asks that further questions be placed on the notice paper.

In the Senate, time limits apply to questions and answers. Questions should not exceed one minute and answers should not exceed four minutes. No such time limits apply in the House of Representatives, but the Speaker of the House manages the debate.

The Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate are the two most important roles in running Parliamentary business. Both the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate ensure that debates run smoothly in accord with the Standing Orders of Parliament (the rules of play). When Members or Senators become unruly during debates, the Speaker or the President has the power to deal with any breaches of order in the most appropriate manner, which may include ejecting Members or Senators from the Chamber.

Ministers are not given prior notice of questions to be asked by non-Government Members or Senators, so they must be prepared to respond on any of their portfolio issues. To ensure our Minister and his representative in the Senate are prepared for Question Time, Defence prepares Question Time Briefs (QTBs) in the lead up to and during parliamentary sitting periods. The Directorate of Ministerial and Parliamentary Liaison Services works closely with staff in the Ministers' offices and the Defence Executive to determine briefing requirements. For each Parliamentary sitting period, Defence drafts around 100 QTBs.

The Ministerial Awareness and Training (MAT) Section conducts a 'Defence Government Awareness' course for those interested in learning more about how Defence supports the Government and Parliamentary processes. Contact the MAT section on (02) 6265 6314 or visit their website at <http://internet.defence.gov.au/oscdfweb/sites/mat>

The despatch boxes, located in the centre of the House of Representatives, were gifts from King George V to mark the opening of Old Parliament House in 1927. Their original purpose was for parliamentarians to carry their documents to the Chamber. Members of Parliament now use them to rest their speeches and documents on when they address the House of Representatives. Hence, they are said to be speaking 'from the despatch box.'

Who spoke these memorable one-liners during Question Time?

"Mr Speaker, can I have some protection from the clowns on the front bench?"

"You were heard in silence, so some of you scumbags on the front bench should wait a minute until you hear the responses from me."

"The Opposition crowd could not raffle a chook in a pub."

Answer: the Hon Paul Keating, former Prime Minister of Australia, 20 December 1991 to 11 March 1996.

Light in dark corners: the role of Senate Committees

What do operations in the mountains of Afghanistan and the cost of catering for high level Defence Committees have in common? They, and issues like them, can all be the focus of Senate Committees. While the notion of appearing before a Senate Committee or preparing briefing papers for those who must attend may not be everyone's idea of a great day at work, these committees are an essential part of Australia's democratic political process, ensuring the Government remains open and accountable to the Australian people. Amanda Dickerson explains.

So what is a Senate Committee and why is one formed? Some tasks are more easily undertaken by a small group than the full Senate, so a committee is appointed to examine a matter. A comprehensive system of legislative and general purpose standing committees was introduced in 1970. The eight committees established under this look at policy and administrative issues across the full scope of Government activity. 'Estimates' committees examine the particulars of proposed Government expenditure.

Public hearings are held at which the relevant Senate ministers, together with senior officials from the organisations whose estimates are being examined, appear before the committees to explain expenditure proposals and to answer questions concerning the effectiveness and efficiency of

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various programs. In the case of Defence, this means the Special Minister of State, Senator the Hon John Faulkner, the Secretary, Chief of the Defence Force and other senior Defence officers (both military and civilian) are required to attend.

The Senate's committee system assists the Senate in performing its law-making and inquiry role more effectively and in keeping the Government accountable for its actions. Committees also provide a formal channel of communication between Parliament and the public, which encourages greater community participation in the Parliamentary process.

The running of committees is mandated under Senate Standing Orders. Legislative and general purpose standing committees consist of eight Senators – four Government members, three Opposition members and one from other parties and Independents. Additionally, Senators who are not members may be appointed as participating members, giving them all the rights of membership, except the right to vote. A Senator who wishes to resign from a committee must seek the formal permission of the Senate to do so.

Committees do not have powers of their own: they possess only the authority delegated to them by the Senate itself. The Senate has the power to take evidence under oath, to require that people attend, and that documents be produced. These powers support one of the Senate's major functions: to inquire into any matters of

concern as a necessary preliminary to debating and legislating about those matters. As a result of the delegation of power, committees have extensive powers. Committees may 'send for persons and documents', which means that they may summon witnesses and require them to produce documents. However, these powers of compulsion are rarely used. Committees usually invite witnesses to make oral and written submissions and to provide documents.

Public servants appearing as witnesses before committees have the same rights and responsibilities as other witnesses. Government guidelines for public servants appearing as witnesses before committees state that public servants are required to fulfil their accountability obligations by providing full and accurate information to the Parliament (and its committees) about the factual and technical background to policies and their administration.

In essence, Senate committees work to ensure the accountability of the Government of the day. They throw light in dark corners – investigating and drawing attention to what they find.

More information on Senate committees can be found at www.aph.gov.au/Senate/pubs/briefs