

Budget Estimates

May 2014

Senate Estimates are legislative inquiries into government appropriations bills. Through the process, government expenditure estimates are referred to Senate Committees as part of the annual budget cycle for examination, who then question ministers, decision-makers and government officials on government policy. This opportunity to examine the operations of government plays a key role in the parliamentary scrutiny of the executive.

This Occasional Paper outlines the process for Senate Estimates, the membership and portfolio allocations of the various Senate Estimates Committees for the 44th Parliament and the dates and times for 2014-15 Budget Estimates.

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Senate Estimates

Senate Estimates provide individual Senators, in particular non-government Senators, with an opportunity to gather information on the operations of government. Although Senators can seek information from the government during question time in the Senate chamber, their questions can only be directed to the Minister concerned and they are unable to question the relevant officials directly and extensively as they can at an Estimates Committee hearing.

Estimates also serve an important accountability function, enabling the Parliamentary scrutiny of the executive. Although there are many methods by which facts, figures and general information from the Government can be obtained, Senate Estimates provide an opportunity for *explanation* from relevant officials for the reasons for government administration and action. Indeed, Senator the Hon. John Faulkner has described Senate Estimates as the ‘best accountability mechanism of any Australian parliament.’

The process

After the Budget is tabled, Senate Estimates Committees scrutinise the Appropriation Bills and other budget documents, usually in the final week of May and the first week in June. The basic function of the Committees is to require the presence of, and seek explanations from, the ministers who formulate policy and from the various departmental and agency officers who implement government policy. The Senate Estimates Committee process is generally finished in time for Parliament to pass the Appropriation Bills by the end of June.

Senate Estimates Committees also conduct additional hearings around November and the following February. These hearings allow Senators to further examine government spending and the actions of government ministers, departments, agencies and authorities.

The Committees are portfolio-based (for the list of portfolios and Committees, see page 3) and review all agencies falling within the respective portfolios so that all spending and revenue measures may be scrutinised.

The hearings

During the hearings, ministers, assisted by senior public servants, answer questions put to them by any Senator that relate to the operations and expenditure of departments, agencies and statutory authorities that receive federal government funding. The majority of questions from Committee members are answered by officers of the department or agency proposing the items of expenditure under consideration. However, ministers often answer questions about policy matters, which public servants are not required to comment upon.

The Estimates Committees examine Portfolio Budget Statements, annual reports and other documents, such as reports of the Auditor-General, and the corporate plans and annual reports of the departments and statutory authorities under consideration. As the majority of the annual reports are presented to parliament by 31 October, they are generally considered when Committees examine the Additional/Supplementary Estimates.

The annual reports of departments agencies and statutory authorities now contain information on how these agencies have performed against planned outcomes using the performance measures set out in the Portfolio Budget Statements. Additional hearings in November therefore provide Estimates Committees with the opportunity to better compare and evaluate government department and agency reports with their performance in the preceding year.

Senate Estimates hearings are public and Estimates Committees are not empowered to receive confidential material in the absence of a specific Senate resolution to that effect. Under detailed questioning from non-Government Senators, ministers and department officials may reveal details about Government practice were not previously public. This process may prompt improvements to the operation of government departments, and further emphasises the accountability of the executive to the Parliament.

Reporting and further information

After the Committees have completed initial hearings, they present their reports to the Senate highlighting any items of particular concern. Members may also attach to the report a minority or dissenting report with separate conclusions and recommendations. Written answers to questions taken ‘on notice’ are also collated and tabled in separate volumes and are published online.

All material received by an Estimates Committee is automatically published. Reports, hearing transcripts and answers to questions on notice (including previous hearings) are available online [here](#).

Allocation of Portfolios to Committees in the 44th Parliament

Portfolio	Committee
Agriculture	Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
Attorney-General	Legal and Constitutional Affairs
Communications	Environment and Communications
Defence (including Veterans' Affairs)	Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Education	Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
Employment	Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
Environment	Environment and Communications
Finance	Finance and Public Administration
Foreign Affairs and Trade	Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Health	Community Affairs
Immigration and Border Protection	Legal and Constitutional Affairs
Industry	Economics
Infrastructure and Regional Development	Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
Parliament	Finance and Public Administration
Prime Minister and Cabinet (including Indigenous Affairs)	Finance and Public Administration
Social Services (including Human Services)	Community Affairs
Treasury	Economics

Membership of Senate Estimates Committees in the 44th Parliament

Estimates Committees are automatically established at the beginning of each Parliament and remain in existence for its duration. They consist of six members: three Government members, two Opposition members, and one member from the minor parties and independent Senators.

A quorum may be constituted by a majority of members (four) or by two members if one is a member of the Government and the other a member of the Opposition. Where the vote on a question before a Committee is equally divided, the chair has a casting vote.

Unless otherwise agreed to by the Senate, not more than four Committees may hear evidence on Estimates at any one time and they may sit only when the Senate has been adjourned or suspended.

The membership of Committees in the 44th Parliament is listed on the following page. The Hawker Britton Update on Parliamentary Sitings for 2014 is available [here](#).

Group A		
Group A	Members	Portfolios
Environment and Communications	Senator Williams (Chair) – Nationals Senator Urquhart (Deputy Chair) – ALP Senator Fawcett – Liberal Senator Pratt – ALP Senator Ruston – Liberal Senator Waters – Greens	Communications Environment
Finance and Public Administration	Senator Bernardi (Chair) – Liberal Senator Lundy (Deputy Chair) – ALP Senator McKenzie – Nationals Senator Rhiannon – Greens Senator Smith – Liberal Senator Tillem – ALP	Finance Parliament Prime Minister and Cabinet
Legal and Constitutional Affairs	Senator Macdonald (Chair) – Liberal Senator Marshall (Deputy Chair) – ALP Senator Boyce – Liberal Senator Seselja – Liberal Senator Singh – ALP Senator Wright – Greens	Attorney-General's Immigration and Border Protection
Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport	Senator Heffernan (Chair) – Liberal Senator Sterle (Deputy Chair) – ALP Senator Boswell – Nationals Senator Edwards – Liberal Senator Lines – ALP Senator Siewert – Greens	Agriculture Infrastructure and Regional Development
Group B		
Group B	Members	Portfolios
Community Affairs	Senator Boyce (Chair) – Liberal Senator Siewert (Deputy Chair) – Greens Senator Brown – ALP Senator Peris – ALP Senator Seselja – Liberal Senator Smith – Liberal	Health Social Services (including Human Services)
Economics	Senator Bushby (Chair) – Liberal Senator Marshall (Deputy Chair) – ALP Senator Eggleston – Liberal Senator Pratt – ALP Senator Williams – Nationals Senator Xenophon – Independent	Industry Treasury
Education and Employment	Senator McKenzie (Chair) – Nationals Senator Lines (Deputy Chair) – ALP Senator Back – Liberal Senator Rhiannon – Greens Senator Smith – Liberal Senator Tillem – ALP	Education Employment
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade	Senator Eggleston (Chair) – Liberal Senator Stephens (Deputy Chair) – ALP Senator Edwards – Liberal Senator Faulkner – ALP Senator Fawcett – Liberal Senator Wish-Wilson – Greens	Defence (including Veterans' Affairs) Foreign Affairs and Trade

2014-15 Budget Estimates

The schedule for the 2014-15 Budget Estimates is listed below.

The list of times and room allocations for Estimates hearings as at 14 May is available [here](#).

Proceedings can be viewed at www.aph.gov.au/live and www.parlview.aph.gov.au.

Group A

Monday 26 May to Friday 30 May 2014

	Environment and Communications	Finance and Public Administration	Legal and Constitutional Affairs	Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
Monday 26 May	Environment	Parliament Prime Minister & Cabinet	Attorney-General (AFP and ACC only) Immigration and Border Protection	Infrastructure and Regional Development
Tuesday 27 May	Environment	Prime Minister & Cabinet	Immigration and Border Protection	Infrastructure and Regional Development
Wednesday 28 May	Communications	Finance	Attorney-General	Agriculture
Thursday 29 May	Communications	Finance	Attorney-General	Agriculture
Friday 30 May		Cross-portfolio Indigenous matters		

Group B

Monday 2 June to Thursday 5 June and, if required, Friday 6 June.

	Community Affairs	Economics	Education and Employment	Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Monday 2 June	Social Services	Industry	Employment	Defence
Tuesday 3 June	Social Services Human Services	Industry Treasury	Employment	Defence Veterans' Affairs
Wednesday 4 June	Health	Treasury	Education	Foreign Affairs
Thursday 5 June	Health	Treasury	Education	Foreign Affairs Trade
Friday 6 June				