



Parliament Fact Sheet



No. [3]

SELECT COMMITTEES

The National Parliament of Solomon Islands has a committee system that enables Members of Parliament to examine issues in more detail than is possible in the House. It also enables the public to have direct input into parliamentary processes.



The front entrance of the Parliament House at Vavaya Ridge.

APPOINTMENT OF COMMITTEES

Select Committees are appointed from among the members of the House at the start of each Parliament (after a general election). The Speaker decides on the size of every Select Committee and also nominates the Chairman and the members of each. Membership currently ranges from five to seven per committee. Within Parliament, there are two main types of select committees. They are:

- Standing Select Committees
- Special Select Committees

Standing Select Committees

Standing Select Committees are appointed under the Standing Orders. From time to time, a Standing Select Committee reports to

Parliament on the issues and matters that it was assigned. Standing Select Committees are relatively permanent and they dissolve only on the occasion when Parliament has dissolved. There are five Standing Select Committees in the National Parliament of Solomon Islands, which have different areas of responsibilities. These five are:

- Public Accounts Committee
- Parliamentary House Committee
- Bills and Legislation Committee
- Constitution Review Committee
- Foreign Relations Committee

Special Select Committees

Special Select Committees are appointed under an Order specially made. Such a committee dissolves as soon as it has completed considering and reporting to Parliament the issue or bill referred to it. There are various examples of Special Select Committees in the past, who have investigated and reported on the following issues:

- Inquiry on the ten Kwaio men sent to the Weather coast in June 2002
- The petition relating to the Sale of the National Art Gallery and former Sate House property
- Review of the Retirement Schemes and condition of service for certain constitutional offices

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Committee work includes examining bills (proposed laws) and several ways of holding the Government accountable to the House. The

responsibilities of the five standing committees are outlined below.

Public Accounts Committee

One of the key responsibilities of the Public Accounts Committee is to examine the public accounts prescribed by Section 33 of the Finance and Audit Act 1978, together with the report of the Auditor General. The PAC can also summon any public officer to give information on any explanation or to produce any records or documents which the committee requests.

Another main area of responsibility of the PAC is to consider the Draft Estimates prepared by the Government in support of the Annual Appropriation Bill. Again the committee can summon the Accounting Officers and technical staff of Ministries and Departments to produce background information and explanation in relation to Draft Estimates.

Parliamentary House Committee

This is the committee that looks after the general welfare of both the Members of Parliament and the staff. It deals with issues such as the terms and conditions of service for members, management and administration of facilities and properties of Parliament, and all other matters connected with parliamentary business for its meetings and sittings.

Bills and Legislation Committee

The Parliament refers most bills (proposed law) to the Bills and Legislation Committee. This committee is responsible for reviewing all the draft legislation before they are introduced into Parliament. It also examines subsidiary legislation to ensure that it is compliant with the Act under which it is made.

After a bill has been referred to it by Parliament, this committee then calls for public submissions mainly through newspaper advertisements and by contacting organizations and individuals with a known interest in the legislation. People can be asked to give an oral presentation to the committee, in addition to providing written submissions. This makes the legislative process very accessible and can result in significant changes.



The main conference room used for Committee Meetings in Parliament House.

Constitution Review Committee

This committee is basically responsible for reviewing the Constitution regularly. Once they have done their review, they usually advise the government on the changes that they see as necessary. They also request written submissions from members of the public, whether it be individuals or groups that have an interest in the proposed changes.

This committee not only reviews the Constitution, but they also deal with the issues arising from the use, abuse or misuse of constitutional powers, rights and responsibilities.

Foreign Relations Committee

The Foreign Relations Committee handles matters that are to do with the foreign relations of Solomon Islands. Its primary purpose is to make observations and recommendations to Parliament and to the relevant government department(s). First of all, this committee is responsible for recommending the establishment of new diplomatic and consular relations. It also nominates persons to be appointed as Ambassadors and High Commissioners to represent Solomon Islands in any other country or international organization.

Another key area of responsibility of the Foreign Relations Committee is to make recommendation to the government concerning the accession to, signing and ratification of international treaties and conventions. This committee also looks into the receiving of foreign assistance and how it is administered. An example in the Solomon Islands would be

RAMSI. Overall, this committee acts as a watchdog on how the government conducts its foreign policy.

PUBLIC ACCESS TO COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS

When a committee hears evidence (for example, submissions) the meetings are usually open to the public, including the news media. The only exceptions are if a committee decides to hear evidence in private or secret. Secret evidence remains secret after the committee presents its report. Private evidence remains confidential until the committee reports. It is then publicly available, along with all the other committee proceedings.

When the committees are not hearing evidence, proceedings are not open to the public. This enables Members to discuss issues freely while they decide what to report to the House. It would be much harder to have free and frank discussions if they were open to the public and media observation.

After a committee reports to the House, papers related to the committee meetings are placed in the Parliamentary Library.

PARLIAMENTARY POWERS AND WITNESSES RIGHTS

Most evidence supplied to a committee is given willingly because people wish to assist committees in reaching an outcome that takes into account their concerns. However, committees sometimes need information that is not so willingly provided particularly when they are, for instance, holding an inquiry. Therefore, Parliament has the power to require:

- witnesses to appear before a committee
- production of documents to a committee
- answers to relevant committee questions

The powers derive from the privilege to send for persons, papers, and records. They are somewhat coercive in nature and procedures have been developed to ensure due deliberation is built into the exercise of these powers, which are very rarely used in any case. Knowledge of their existence tends to ensure a reasonable level of co-operation.

Evidence given to committees is covered by the absolute freedom of speech that applies to all parliamentary proceedings. The House has therefore built into its standing orders (procedural rules) some natural justice procedures giving right of reply. This ensures a fair process is followed if serious allegations are made about a person during committee proceedings. It is necessary because parliamentary privilege prevents the person from taking legal action for defamation.

Acknowledgement

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