Dear Committee

Review of the Parliamentary Entitlements Framework

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) is an active and progressive union committed to the promotion of a modern efficient and responsive public sector that delivers quality services and quality jobs. We represent around 60,000 members in the Australian Public Service (APS), ACT Public Service, NT Public Service, ABC and the CSIRO. We also have members in Telstra, commercial television and the telecommunications industry.

The CPSU welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Review of the Parliamentary Entitlements Framework. The CPSU is the major union representing employees engaged under the Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984 [MOPS Act] and has a long history of representing MOPS staff with sensitivity and confidentiality. This submission has been prepared in consultation with these members.

Classifications of Electorate Office staff

Over the last 25 years there have been very minimal increases in staffing levels for the Electorate Offices of Senators and Members of Parliament. In 1984 the staffing allocation increased from two to three and in 2007 from three to four. Over the same period of time, however, the range and complexity of tasks and the workload in Electorate Offices have increased significantly.

It is necessary that amendments to staffing allocation and classifications are made to ensure that the classifications at which employees are engaged adequately reflect the actual work they are doing.
Under the current arrangements, electorate officers are classified as Electorate Officer Level A, Electorate Officer Level B or Electorate Officer Level C. Level A is the lowest classification and Level C is the highest classification. Each Electorate Office is entitled to a maximum of four electorate officers and only one Level C position. Furthermore, in order for an office to have one Level C position, two of the remaining three positions must be filled by Electorate Officers at Level A. This restriction on the combination of staff permitted in an electorate office is inadequate and does not allow offices to attract and retain suitably qualified and experienced staff.

The skills required of all permanent Electorate Officers are now beyond that of the Electorate Officer A classification. Staff need to be recognised for the contribution they make and the complexity of tasks that they perform. These tasks include:

- responding to demands for information and assistance on a very wide range of matters from individual constituents, many of whom exhibit high levels of anger and/or distress (advances in electronic communication have increased the volume of such traffic significantly, while the massive expansion in Government programs since 1984 has greatly increased the range of matters that constituents bring to Electorate Offices);
- responding to the general demand for information about the activities and views of the Member/Senator from their constituency as a whole, which now includes making such information available electronically, through websites, e-newsletters and Web 2.0 tools, as well as through local media and mass produced print media, such as newsletters;
- managing an increasingly complex system of entitlements for both the Member/Senator and their staff, and the increasingly hectic diary and travel arrangements of the Member/Senator;
- researching and writing speeches on a very wide range of matters for the Member/Senator, both for parliamentary purposes and for community and other functions;
- attending, arranging and publicising community events and meetings with constituents with or on behalf of the Member/Senator (including events/meetings at Parliament House and in the Electorate); and
- preparing papers, background briefing notes and providing advice for the Member/Senator on a wide range of policy issues, particularly in relation to the parliamentary committee work of the Member/Senator.

The workload of Electorate Office staff has also increased with the recent cuts to staffing levels of Minister’s and Shadow Minister’s offices. Electorate Office staff now receive less support from Minister/Shadow Minister’s offices when they are performing key tasks.

The diversity and complexity of the tasks being undertaken by Electorate Office staff, as well as the sheer number of tasks that Electorate Office staff are being asked to complete, mean that the Level A classification is no longer appropriate to cover the work of ongoing Electorate Office staff.

The classification is outdated and reflects days long gone when some Electorate Office staff were engaged in purely administrative tasks, such as reception, word processing and filing. Quite simply, the Level A classification does not reflect the realities of working in an Electorate Office. It is therefore no longer appropriate that it be used for ongoing Electorate Office staff.
The classification may have some relevance in the case of relief staff; for example where casual staff are engaged in the Electorate Office to undertake only basic administrative tasks.

**Recommendations:**

**Electorate Office Level A not to be used for ongoing Electorate Office staff.**

In addition to reconsidering the utility of the Level A classification, it is important that the Review consider the classification of staff assigned to Electorate Offices in an overall sense. The current arrangement whereby most offices have only one Level C classification employee, one Level B classification employee and two Level A classification employees is inadequate.

Ideally, Electorate Offices should be structured as:

- two Electorate Office Level B staff; and
- two Electorate Office Level C staff.

If this is unachievable, at the very least offices should be allocated three Level B staff and one Level C.

The increase in Level B and Level C staffing levels is appropriate due to the following factors:

1. For reasons outlined above, the skills required of all Electorate Officers are beyond that of the Electorate Office Level A classification and the contributions of Electorate Office employees should be adequately recognised and valued.
2. All offices should have someone in addition to the Member or Senator in an office management/staff supervision/entitlement administration role. Such a role is most appropriately filled by an Electorate Office Level C, because Members and Senators are often not available and/or do not have the time to fulfil these roles.
3. Changes in constituent expectations and advances in technology mean that Electorate Offices require a specialist in media/communications to undertake certain tasks, such as design and maintenance of bulk email systems, website/blog content and maintenance, drafting of media releases and media liaison and the design and production of print materials. Given the skills and knowledge involved in this work, this role should be filled by an employee at the Level C classification.

**Recommendations:**

**The quota of Electorate Office Level B and Electorate Office Level C be increased.**

**Mobile Phones**

Electorate staff routinely perform duties outside of ordinary office hours. They are required to travel extensively throughout the electorate, attending community functions and meeting with constituents. This means that there are many times where electorate staff are outside of the office but required to be contactable, not
only for their employing Member or Senator but also to keep in contact with colleagues. There is an expectation, therefore, that Electorate Office staff will carry a mobile phone.

Currently, a Member or Senator is entitled to two mobile phones, one is for their own use and the second mobile phone is for staff. Sharing one mobile phone between four full-time staff is not practical. Generally the phone is allocated to a single staff member and other staff are forced to use their personal phones for work purposes. There is, however, no provision under the MOPS collective agreement for staff to be reimbursed for work calls made from personal mobiles.

While the CPSU is not advocating the use of technology to extend the working hours of Electorate Officers, all Electorate staff should be issued with a blackberry or similar PDA device to enable them to perform work related tasks while they are not in the office during work time. Email is increasingly the communications technology of choice and there is a growing expectation that emails will receive prompt attention and response. For this reason, the provision of a blackberry or similar device is now common practice, especially for staff that travel as part of their work.

The provision of blackberry or PDA device would not only relieve employees of their current burden of personally paying for work calls, but it would also improve their ability to respond to and deal with work when they are out of the office. Furthermore, it may also create some flexibility for staff to improve their work/life balance as they would be able to access emails whilst out of the office. This is of particular importance for Electorate staff who are commonly called upon to work long and unusual hours.

**Recommendations:**

All Electorate Office staff to be provided with a blackberry or similar device.

Should you require any further information about the issues raised in this submission, please contact Kim Travers on (03) 8620 6336.

Yours sincerely,

Nadine Flood

Deputy Secretary