



Challenge finding takers for top job

SENATE PROBE

By Peter Jean

Senate President John Hogg was puzzled about why there might be a shortage of qualified people interested in heading up the Department of Parliamentary Services.

But it turned out there were plenty of reasons for people to think twice about applying for the job; reasons involving billiards tables, a \$3.1 million website, surveillance cameras, internet filters, protesters lighting fires in the Parliament House forecourt and budget cuts.

Current Department of Parliamentary Services Secretary Alan Thompson is on leave before retiring later this year.

Senator Hogg told a Senate committee estimates hearing that a search was under way for a successor to Mr Thompson but on the two previous occasions when the job had become vacant it had been difficult to attract a strong

field of candidates.

As the estimates hearing progressed, details of the types of challenges to be faced by the new secretary emerged. Challenges like cleaning up after the bungled disposal of two billiards tables that were auctioned for a combined \$4900 after an undated, handwritten "heritage assessment" said they were of no heritage value.

Acting secretary David Kenny said sanctions had been approved against a DPS officer over the affair but the officer was retiring this week. The cost of investigations into the affair was \$97,183, but this had been partially offset by the money made from the sale of the billiards tables.

The \$92,000 investigation cost came on top of a \$600,000 blowout in the budget for the long-overdue new Parliament House website which will be launched this week.

The new website will have cost taxpayers \$6.1 million by the time it gets switched on one year behind schedule.

Labor Senator John Faulkner turned his attention to security cameras, and demanded to know

if they had been used to check for suspected whistleblowers entering or leaving his office. Of course not (to our knowledge), insisted DPS officials. And if they had attempted to spy on Senator Faulkner's office it might not have worked because the officials admitted – under questioning from Liberal Michael Ronaldson – that the cameras were just a server failure away from shutting down.

The Greens were interested in a different type of security, complaining that all ".info" websites were off-limits to senators because of security concerns

Liberal Scott Ryan had security concerns of his own and demanded to know how indigenous protesters got away with taking a fire on to the Parliamentary forecourt which was used to set an Australian flag alight.

The Department of Parliamentary Services clearly has its challenges – and thanks to the efficiency dividend – the new secretary will have \$2.6 million less than his predecessor in operating funds for 2012-13.