Submission to the

Senate Finance & Public Administration Committees

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On behalf of Multiple Sclerosis Australia (MSA)

to

The Performance of the Department of Parliamentary Services

This brief submission addresses the term of reference (a)

(a) matters raised at the Budget estimates hearing of the committee on 23 May 2011 and in answers to questions taken on notice; and specifically addresses the questions about disability access within Parliament House.

MS Australia representatives regularly visit the House, and we have encountered a number of access barriers that we believe need to be addressed to ensure that Parliament House is a model of accessibility for the country.

We were pleased to see these issues and the progress of responding to the CRS access report brought up at the 23 May Senate Estimates hearing. There are more access issues than we mention here, but these are ones that we have experienced through our work in and around Parliament House.

Now that Australia has signed the United Nations convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities and COAG has endorsed the National Disability Strategy we believe it is important both practically and symbolically to implement the recommendations of the CRS access review, and look at how access can be a significant factor in future use & planning for the building.

A workable decision making process needs to be adopted that can manage the dilemmas created by the competing demands around the building, namely security, design integrity, occupational health and safety, disability access requirements and visitor amenity.

We are aware that some positive changes have been made to improve access in recent times (such as the automatic doors at some security checkpoints, but there are some key unresolved problems that need rapid attention. These are detailed below.

Main entrance taxi pick-up and drop off zone

The recent installation of concrete security barriers in the underground car park at the main entrance has compromised access for people with mobility issues getting from their taxi to the lift entrance and also getting a taxi on exit.

We wrote to the Speaker in 2010 when these were first installed and some corrective action was taken, however for people using wheelchairs the access around the concrete barriers is difficult still. The other issue with the taxi rank being set back down the car park is that the slope of the road is relatively steep and it makes it very difficult to manoeuvre in a wheelchair.

Additionally, there is no pram crossing at the taxi pick up spot so a person in a chair or other mobility aid can get off the road way. While we acknowledge that there is an indented spot where a person with a mobility aid can get back from the roadway, this is not at the front of the area where taxis stop. This means that others can 'jump the queue' and, with the limited supply of taxis at Parliament House, this can make it extremely hard for a disabled person to catch a cab successfully. The result has been that, in a large number of cases we are aware of, the people with disability not from Canberra have missed their plane home.

The relocation of the taxi zone is needed and we would recommend consultation with users of wheelchairs as well as access consultants to look at the best location for this important zone and also address the security concerns that have made the use of concrete barriers important in the first place.

Availability of scooters for visitors

MS Australia has hosted a number of events in parliament house where people have needed scooters to cover the large distances within the building. Some of these people may not need them regularly at home but do when travelling to manage fatigue and/or pain issues.

We note that this mobility assistance is also required for the same reason by a range of people with disabilities who regularly visit parliament house for work.

During our National MS Advocates Conferences held at Parliament House in 2008 and 2009 we hired 6 scooters from an outside supplier at our own cost to accommodate our advocates who have mobility problems. Getting them into the building through security was an alarmingly laborious process that added to the cost. On both occasions the supplier made comment that although he was making money from supplying hire scooters to Parliament House, he'd rather see them with a fleet of their own.

We are aware that a small number of mobility scooters are in existence for the use of visitors to the House who have mobility difficulties, however they are rarely available. We have been told by the security staff that there is a curious hierarchy system to determine priority of access (first use of the scooters from our understanding go to members even if they do not have a permanent disability, then their staff, pass holders then finally the public). This has resulted in a scooter never being available when we have requested one.

Members of Parliament (and other staff) who regularly need scooters/powered wheelchairs to undertake their duties should be eligible for equipment under the (renamed) Employment Assistance Fund (or their health fund, self-hire or purchase in the case of temporary impairment) and should utilise these sources rather than relying on a scarce resource that needs to be available exclusively to visitors.

There are manual wheelchairs at the information counter but they are the old style hospital models which are too heavy to self propel for any distance. For some people the use of these wheelchairs would require a carer/assistant, particularly when negotiating the carpeted areas of the building.

Large shopping centres around Australia make scooters available at no cost to their customers who have mobility problems, and have done so for many years, so there are models for the DPS to examine for making a fleet of scooters available within Parliament House.

Carpeting

The carpet throughout the building is always maintained at in good order with the result that the carpet pile is always high. Pushing a manual wheelchair through the carpeted areas is difficult, and has the effect of increasing fatigue levels as well as simply creating a barrier to good access. The height of the pile varies depending on what part of the building you are in.

It is well known that the carpet pile in the Ministerial area is thicker than the rest of the building. One wheelchair user working in Parliament House once described pushing through the Ministerial Wing as similar to 'pushing through Velcro.' This problem is one of the easy ones to remedy.

At a meeting approximately two years ago with the Deputy Secretary of the Department of Parliamentary Services, we were told that the underlay of the carpets would be replaced (which we understood was recommended in the CRS review). This would certainly make it easier for people using wheelchairs as well as those using walkers, or canes. To our knowledge, however, this remains outstanding.

Toilets

There are a number of accessible toilets through Parliament House, and in recent times there have been improvements to some of them. However this upgrading needs to be continued as some toilets have significant access and privacy problems.

We would like to see automatic doors installed on all disabled toilets with electronic locking and unlocking. At the very least, we would like easy sliding doors that are easy to lock. At present, some of the doors will slide but their locks do not line up and make it impossible to lock the doors. This is rarely a problem for able bodied people able to choose from a number of cubicles to find one that locks properly.

Summary

As the "People's House", Parliament House must be fully accessible to all. The CRS review went to many of the key access issues, and the implementation of these needs to be made a priority, particularly in the light of the National Disability Strategy.

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