

Legislative Council
Hansard
Tuesday 1 September 2026

[excerpt...]

The President, **Mr Farrell**, took the Chair at 11 a.m., acknowledged the Traditional People and read Prayers.

MOTION

Report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee of Public Accounts (No. 19 of 2026)
Establishment of a Parliamentary Budget Office - Consideration and Noting

[5.01 p.m.]

Ms WEBB (Nelson) - Mr President, it's such a pleasure to rise to make a contribution on noting this report from the Public Accounts Committee. I would absolutely begin by congratulating Public Accounts Committee, the members in this place and the other place who participated in the inquiry and delivered the report to us for consideration. It's such an interesting topic and one that's been thrown around and discussed at different times over the years that I've been here and no doubt before that. I think it can be really appealing to do inquiries into matters that relate to the mechanisms for how this place can work better and how we can do our roles better. I recall early in my time here being part of an inquiry into the production of documents, another sort of technical matter about how we do scrutiny and our role in parliament better. Those are always really educative inquiries to be part of and, as the member for Pembroke mentioned, often you can do really good cross-parliamentary work together in those sorts of inquiries. This one looks like a really interesting topic, a thorough process undertaken and a thought-provoking report provided.

I agree with the statement in the executive summary on page 5 where it says, 'The Committee notes the establishment of a PBO represents a significant and lasting investment in the quality of Tasmanian democracy.' I agree with that completely. I absolutely squarely support the establishment of a PBO. It goes on to say,

For Members of Parliament, particularly those from minor parties and/or independent members who lack access to Treasury resources, it levels the playing field, enabling more rigorous and credible policy development throughout the parliamentary term.

That's absolutely correct and that's reflected in some of the commentary during these contributions - the member for Huon was speaking just then about the ability she would have had to potentially access costings delivered through a PBO on putting forward her motion this morning. That builds capacity across the parliament, not just in the traditional parties of government, but across other members as well and that is something that means we will function better as a parliament if we're building that capacity in an ongoing basis.

I also note, and I think we all had this brought to our attention and had our mind sharpened around the issue when Saul Eslake put out his independent review of Tasmania state finances back in 2024. I agree with the way he described it in that report. It's page 117 where he said:

The Review considers that the establishment of a Tasmanian Parliamentary Budget Office would significantly enhance the effectiveness of Parliament's

role in scrutinizing fiscal policy decisions, and in promoting more informed debate both in Parliament and within the broader Tasmanian community of budgetary and fiscal policy issues.

Absolutely. Not just building the capacity within this place, but having that flow out into the community to help build understanding, and build a fluency when we're having public discussion around budgetary and fiscal policy issues is really important. It's particularly important in a small parliament, too, I think, to think about how we build capacity here for us to undertake the core roles; those core roles being scrutiny of the executive and our ability to do that, but also our roles putting forward legislation and policy as well in our own ways, as members of this place, and doing that in an informed, transparent and accountable manner.

I think the member for Pembroke was absolutely spot on in his contribution where he posed the question of why would you want to build this capacity and have this resource available and that there's an incredibly good argument there that it makes our parliament function better and in doing that we get better governance of our state which is going to have positive impacts flowing through in terms of policy, in terms of budget out into the community. I think that's absolutely correct.

It can be very difficult for members of small parliaments - and we're certainly a small parliament here, compared to other jurisdictions - to really be as supported as they may be. The resources we put into parliament and whether that's, for example, the Parliamentary Library and Research Service, whether that's access to OPC services, whether that's our committee system and the staffing and resourcing of our committee system, all of those things are really important components to sit behind us, as members, to give us the ability to do our jobs better when we know we're quite stretched to cover the roles we need to undertake here.

The fundamental that I absolutely agree with from this inquiry report is that we should have a Parliamentary Budget Office. I think excellent thought has been put into some of the administrative matters that need to be considered in establishing and legislating a Parliamentary Budget Office described in a range of the recommendations in the report; things in there that deal with the necessity to have independence from government and for this entity to be established to have an independent role and not be directed or influenced by the government of the day is important. The measures around confidentiality protections are really important considerations; I appreciate the consideration that's been given in the report to those. Administrative matters around appointment to roles and those sorts of things - very thorough and covered off in the report and I am really supportive of those. It's good to see that such clear thought has been put behind each of those elements there about what would be required in order to put a legislative foundation behind this entity being established.

I absolutely agree that a Parliamentary Budget Office, if it was established here, should be a full-time ongoing entity rather than a periodic one stood up for certain periods of time around elections. I agree with the arguments around that and won't go into too much detail to restate them here, but to me it makes sense. Certainly, for me, the main role that I think the PBO plays is to deliver the ongoing capacity while we are doing our job here, during a parliamentary term. So, standing up an entity just around election time I think misses the most important part of the role of a PBO, so that simply wouldn't fly in my mind.

I agree with the findings and the discussion in the report around the fact that the PBO should be established in a way that's connected and part of parliament as a service of parliament and not as part of, say, a department or a separate government entity of any kind. I think because it naturally becomes part of the foundational services that support the work here in parliament,

I think that that's correct, and there's a lot to be said for the way that shared services can occur then and that can alleviate some of the potential costs involved in establishing a PBO.

However, it's interesting in saying that it should be part of parliament, I think that that gives rise to then some questions and that leads us to some of the areas that I'm a little less sure about in terms of things recommended in the report. If you have an entity established that is of the parliament and part of parliament, you then have to be clear about how it's being used and by whom and towards -

Ms Forrest - It was really around the payroll and things like that. It's wasn't any more than just some of those back-office things.

Ms WEBB - Sure. But anything that's an entity of the parliament I think leads us to questions about how it is being used and by whom it's being used. And, for me, establishing it in that way fits with the way I imagine a PBO best functions and most appropriately functions, which is to support the work we do here during parliamentary terms, building our capacity for our scrutiny role, for our policy and legislative role, exploring those elements, and improving those elements of our work. I think it then potentially poses some questions, when we look at the other aspect that's proposed for the role of the PBO in the report, which relates to election periods and I'll speak a little bit more about that because I think it's a really interesting area and one to continue to grapple with, for sure.

I appreciated the scrutiny, or the look around at other jurisdictions with PBOs and how things are dealt with there. And it's clear that the model for Tasmania that's proposed in the report isn't entirely replicated in any of the other jurisdictions. And that's fine. We should design something that's fit for purpose for Tasmania, drawing on and learning from other jurisdictions the way we would for other policy areas, or other reforms that we might be looking to do. But I did think it was interesting to see that, in terms of the mix of roles of PBOs, and if we think about them as being two very clear, sort of separate roles, one being the supporting the ongoing work of MPs and the parliament during parliamentary periods and the second area being matters to do with elections and election commitments and promises. There were no jurisdictions that have those two roles fully present in the same way that the model suggested in the report for Tasmania does and I think there's probably good reasons for that. That's certainly an area that I felt was potentially problematic and definitely requires, I think, some more thought towards landing on the right mix of roles, and how we deal with certain risks inherent in that. I did note, you know, that in terms of the federal parliamentary budget office, its key role was responding to requests made by senators and members for costings and policy proposals, or for analysis of matters relating to the budget. So, that's obviously during the parliamentary period and that's fine. It does publish and present information to enhance public understanding. That's fine. And it does a report after every general election that provides the transparency around fiscal impact of election commitments of major and minor parties, and independents that choose to be included. So, that's a post-election role for that federal PBO, not a 'during the election period' role. So, it's not designed to inform votes in the moment, but it's designed to provide a public record about what was promised in those election commitments, which becomes a point of reference I imagine going forward, which is very valuable. I would agree with that. I would absolutely agree with the value of that role. So, it's not a 'during the election period' role.

I saw too, in Victoria, the other one that has - of course the federal one - is an ongoing one, the Victorian one is an ongoing one, not just periodic. The Victorian PBO provides ongoing policy costings and advisory services to members of Parliament of Victoria to inform policy development and public debate, which is fine. That's the 'during the parliamentary period,' which is I think really essential. I think in Victoria, they have an arrangement that's

involved with elections. And I'm sorry, I can't recall now - I seem to have misplaced my notes about it - how they deal with the election period matters. I think they do an impact - actually, it's in here, is it? Excuse me, Mr President, bring up the page that I had here. Victoria has, in terms of election services, has prepared reports aggregating the impact of party election platforms before an election, which is broad but voluntary, in terms of participation. So, that does have some 'during election' role, but also does that impact of party election commitments after the election work. That's the part I think is consistent and works without risk or potentially problematic areas with it. But they do some during election work as well. Then of course we have New South Wales that stands up their PBO during the election periods, instead of having the ongoing one. That model makes much less sense to me. And it does say the parliamentary budget officer provides costings of election policies in response to requests by parliamentary leaders, together with budget impact statements for all costed policies. So again, I think they stand it up during elections but not for everybody involved in the election. Sounds like they've got a much narrower focus to who is able to put forward their election platforms and policies for costings there in New South Wales in a more narrow sense than we are proposing here.

I'm just sharing in my contribution the things that have jumped out at me and really got my thought processes rolling around the merit of what is the appropriate role for a PBO during an election period if we were to have one in place.

I'm very interested because, of course, we have a process in place at the moment where policy commitments and things can be put through from major parties to our Treasury for, I think, acknowledgment and some slight oversight of costing, but the costing itself, I think, is done by the party putting forward the policy to Treasury. Treasury then just says essentially, 'That looks about right,' or perhaps, 'That doesn't look about right.' I don't think they do a full overhaul, and they certainly don't necessarily have time to do a full overhaul. I am interested to understand, if we were to stand up a PBO that also has a role in this area during an election period, does it replace the Treasury one we have now. Is it in addition to it? Is there a way we look at harmonising them? Or perhaps I've misunderstood and there's distinctly different roles that need to stay.

My main concern around it is the practicality of it. The election period role that's being proposed in the recommendations in the report and the risk of politicisation. On those two matters, I think, we don't have fixed terms, so, we don't know when elections are going to be called and they can be called, as we are all well aware in recent years, quite abruptly and, when an election is called, there's actually a very short time frame between the parliament being prorogued, the election being called and then the election being held. At the most it's six weeks typically.

Then there's a period of time before nominations are due and then what we've seen is a pattern in recent elections is that nominations close on a Thursday, a particular date on a Thursday and pre-poll opens the following Monday and we have three to four weeks of pre-poll prior to an election. So, people are already voting three weeks out, three, four weeks before an election. If you see an election called, six weeks later, it's going to be an election. People will be voting for the second half of that six-week period at pre-poll.

I think the idea that a PBO costing election platforms and commitments from the breadth of potential candidates outlined in this report is problematic, is probably not realistic, and I don't think it necessarily would be able to fulfil the intent. I understand the intent there. We do want people to go to elections with the best information possible to inform their vote. I absolutely agree with that intent, and, of course, interestingly, through another committee of the parliament, the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, doing reviews of elections currently, it's interesting to address matters that have come up there in evidence that relate to

people going to election, going to vote in elections, with the best opportunity to be as informed as possible and as accurately as possible. So, I really have sympathy for that intended outcome and how to achieve it.

Whether it's realistic to have things put forward to a PBO, perhaps with no notice whatsoever, potentially a couple of weeks into an election period, because that's how long it might take for people to get up and going with their platforms or their commitments, and then have that turned around and delivered into the public domain in a way that's meaningful for a substantial amount of the voting, knowing that in pre-polling at the moment we're sitting at about 30 per cent of people pre polling, it's an open question and warrants, I think, more consideration and more of a look.

I also note there the potential risk of politicisation, and I know that in the report there's some consideration given to that, and I really appreciate that consideration given, and I'm in no way dismissing the worthwhile consideration that's been given, but I think more consideration is warranted around it because, while there is the recommendation that points to the publishing of a prioritisation framework, the way that reads to me in the report is that in a way that framework would relate to the work of the PBO during a parliamentary term and how we as members in the course of our work can access the PBO and have work done, and it makes sense to me that a framework would be developed to determine how access to that, and how the resources of that are allocated, absolutely. It would have to be an entirely different framework that described how that process of prioritisation and allocation of resources would work during an election period for the role the PBO had then, because it's a very distinct and different role and environment during that period compared to the parliamentary period.

So, you're talking about two frameworks that would be required here to be transparent about how prioritisation and resource allocation was going to happen. We would have really clear questions then about who develops the frameworks, who has input into that and, importantly, who approves the frameworks that describe how the PBO would do that prioritisation and allocation of resources. None of these things that I'm raising are to suggest that it's not possible to arrive somewhere on this question. I just don't think we've quite given it the full consideration needed yet in this report. We've got a starting point -

Ms Forrest - It wasn't intended to.

Ms WEBB - That's exactly right, and that's why I'm trying to be very clear that I'm not being negative about the work done in this report. I think it's taken us well down the track. Lots of the elements of it are very well developed in this report, and I thoroughly agree with them. I'm just spending a little bit of time talking about this area, which I hope that we would see further work done now to build on this very worthwhile foundation that's begun.

So, that's interesting in in a way because it's - funnily enough, I probably find myself to some extent in agreement with the dissenting report of Mr Roger Jaensch, MP, member for Braddon, which I'm sure he'll be most surprised to hear if he hears of it. His dissenting report does not in any way take away from the very vast bulk of the recommendations in this report and the intent of the report and the very clear fact that it thoroughly recommends a PBO be established. He doesn't take away from that with his dissenting report, and neither do I in my consideration of this good work. But he does raise some of these similar concerns. So, I was interested in the fact that these were already things I was giving consideration to then read his dissenting report and see some similarities of concerns raised.

He also primarily has an issue around the role proposed in recommendations here for the

election period of time. I appreciate in his dissenting report he's provided some information there, for example, looking at the 2025 state election, seven registered political parties, 45 independent candidates, 239 policies published during the election period, which excludes policies of unsuccessful candidates. So, there were more in the public domain, and a short time of that election period. It was announced fairly abruptly, 11 June and was held on 19 July 2025. A very short period of time. That's a really big ask to turn around substantial bodies of work to cost policy platforms and commitments from a broad range of participants in the election. You do risk advantaging some parties and candidates from that process and would need to be incredibly robust around how that is dealt with. It's very difficult to avoid entirely the risk that the PBO, in that role, could be seen as influencing the political process, the electoral process and outcome. Which is concerning to me.

It's interesting, because I stand here raising these concerns and these thoughts that I've had about it, very much aware that in most other instances and on many matters relating to the our electoral system and our democracy, I'm always very careful to want to see a level playing field, and to want to see non-major party candidates, particularly independent candidates, treated as fairly as possible and the capacity for them to contest as candidates in our elections be boosted and made available as best as possible. That's certainly a fundamental principle that I adhere to. Yet, here, I'm concerned about the inclusion of everyone having access here and what that means to prioritisation and to allocation of resources and to practical reality.

I think it was interesting in the dissenting report that Mr Jaensch put some suggestions for consideration, and I think that's all very interesting. Some of those things I may agree with, others I may not. What that does, though, is point to probably where I had landed to what a great foundation from which to do more work on this specific area of the proposal.

What I would want to be very careful and clear about is that I wouldn't want the potential matters that could be requiring more work on that area to hold up the idea that we would establish a PBO in the first place. Absolutely, there is no reason, even if there are more questions to answer in that area to not proceed with establishing a PBO and, hopefully, Mr Jaensch landed in that space as well that we could implement PBO initially certainly to fully cover the role it would play during a parliamentary period for members of parliament and all the excellent recommendations in the report that relate to the administrative arrangements around that and the appointments things, the confidentiality matters, the independence from government situated with shared services with parliament, all of that, is well and truly there to be picked up and brought forward. And perhaps the elements relating to a role and how that role looks and is undertaken during election periods could be something for further consideration to be added potentially later once that further work has been done.

The thing that really gets my goat is when the government might use something like that as an excuse not to proceed holus-bolus, and that would be a real shame, because we've had two years' worth of work here from PAC. We have a really robust report in so many ways with a really clear core recommendation that has been endorsed by a cross-parliamentary committee and I think it would have the support in a broad sense from most members of the parliament in standing up and establishing an ongoing full-time PBO as a resource for us all.

I hope that that does come to pass. I encourage the government to absolutely take on board that recommendation. I congratulate PAC for this inquiry and the power of work done in it. It's really interesting to read through and to see the different consideration that's there.

And, even though I have put on the record here my reservations around just some very small elements of the recommendations in that one particular area relating to the role at election

time, I agree with the vast majority of them straight out of the gate.

And I do agree with that comment that this encourages all sides of politics towards fiscal responsibility and, in this state, at this time, in this financial fiscal environment, we really desperately need that encouragement. So, thank you to PAC for providing us with this opportunity to become better educated around this and for the excellent work and core suggestion there that this parliament does establish a parliamentary budget office.