

Agreed summary of oral submission to the Victorian Independent Remuneration Tribunal's review of the Members of Parliament (Victoria) Guidelines

Joint submission from:

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Supporting the electorate

- It should be easy for constituents (such as small not for profit groups) to seek assistance from an MP's electorate office for small photocopying requests, perhaps with a limit on the number of copies that may be printed per job.

Outdated monetary limits

- The \$25 per day payment limit for engaging student volunteers is too low and should be aligned with other relevant sectors.
- The \$2 limit on promotional items is too low.
- These monetary limits should be indexed to reflect contemporary values.

Expenses incurred for committee work

- Concerned that the Guidelines require an MP who is a member of a parliamentary committee to incur travel expenses up-front and then wait a considerable time for reimbursement.
- The process and funding arrangements vary between parliamentary committees which may lead to an inconsistent application of the Guidelines.

Rolling over unspent allowances and EO&C Budget

- Consider whether allowance and EO&C Budget amounts may be combined or rolled over from one year to the next so that an MP has access to an amount when needed during the parliamentary term, rather than in a given year.
- Additionally, consider whether the EO&C Budget may be provided as a combined amount over the four-year term.

Communicating with constituents outside of electorate

- Guidelines currently prohibit MPs from distributing communication materials at festivals or events that are not physically located within the MP's electorate. It is common (particularly for regional electorates where boundaries become blurred) for an event to be held in a neighbouring electorate that will service the entire region. MPs expect to see and are aware of their constituents attending these events, even if they are located in a different electorate, and an MP should be able to communicate with their constituents at these events. This prohibition prevents MPs from effectively engaging with the community.

Party political communication

- The Guidelines provide a limited ability to describe the political party you are a member of. This does not reflect the practical reality of engaging with constituents, who often ask which party the MP belongs to. It would be more transparent if MPs could indicate their political party, which would better reflect the practical reality that MPs are elected based on being a member of a party and representing that party's policies and positions.
- The Guidelines are unclear around the use of 'political dialogue' in communication materials, and what is, or is not, appropriate. This is especially difficult to discern around elections.
- There is a concern that the Guidelines are designed in a way to prevent an MP from fulfilling their role, rather than assisting the MP to comply with the rules.
- There would be benefit in amending to Guidelines to be clear and concise about what an MP is permitted to do in relation to 'political dialogue'.

Role of an Electorate Officer

- Consider whether the rules specifying the duties that may be performed by an electorate officer reflect the reality of the role, particularly in relation to the MP's breadth of responsibilities and the role of the electorate officer in supporting an MP.
- The Commonwealth regime provides a reasonable model to consider and could even be adopted entirely. The Commonwealth rules offer greater clarity and reflect the reality of the role.

Travel expenses

- Consider changing the Guidelines to allow taxi expenses to be claimed when an MP travels to the airport within Victoria. The Guidelines are inconsistent as they allow to you claim taxi expenses once you land at your destination, but not when travelling to or from the airport in Victoria.

Training staff

- The Tribunal should review the \$1,000 limit for training staff. It would also be beneficial to consider the role of the Department of Parliamentary Services in providing training and ensure consistency with current offerings (some training courses are free while others attract a cost).
- Another issue is the ability of staff to travel to the electorate office (or other location) for the training, particularly in regional offices, which may increase the costs incurred.

Software and IT systems

- Most electorate officers use software packages to perform their work (e.g. to design communication materials). Constituents expect materials to be presented in an informative and interesting way.
- There is a limited set of software packages that can be centrally accessed and therefore MPs or electorate officers are required to purchase these packages. There needs to be an allowance made available for MPs to access software packages, possibly \$1,000 to \$2,000 per year.

Communicating with electorate about matters of state importance

- The meaning of 'public duties' is currently interpreted in a narrow way. The result is that communication materials about issues not directly related to the MPs electorate are deemed non-compliant with the Guidelines. MPs should be able to communicate with their electorate about issues of general importance for the state. The Commonwealth rules again provide a useful model for consideration.