

The ANAO pays for itself and then some

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Page 12 | Section: OPINION

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EDITORIAL

ALTHOUGH Harry S Truman is best remembered as the former haberdasher who stepped up to lead America on the death of Franklin D Roosevelt, he had another claim to fame. That was as the chair of the Senate Special Committee to Investigate the (US) National Defence Program (1941 to 1944).

Better known as the Truman Committee this body, which was tasked with auditing all aspects of US defence expenditure, was one of the most effective spends by any government, anywhere and at anytime.

During Truman's tenure, at a total cost of about \$US360,000, the committee saved the US government an estimated \$US15 billion. It also improved the quality of munitions and established the importance of rigorous, and frequent, audits of government expenditure beyond any possible doubt.

It is an unfortunate fact that left to their own devices politicians and bureaucrats are happy to spend other people's money with gay abandon. That inconvenient truth is the raison d'être for one of the few true friends the Australian taxpayer (aka the little Aussie bleeder) has in Canberra - the Australian National Audit Office.

The ANAO, which is as old as federation, has done a sterling job for more than 120 years in searching for costly examples of waste, extravagance and just plain incompetence in government departments and agencies. And, like the Truman committee, it has paid for itself too many times over to count.

It's an obvious case of spending some money to save much, much more.

That's why it seems absurd that, yet again, the ANAO is facing "an issue" in regard to "sustainability of funding". Surely if there is one government agency that deserves to have its funding assured year in and year out for decades to come it is this one.

It is hard to fathom therefore why it has endured a long history of funding cycles in which a few years of plenty soon alternate with drought and famine.

The latest looming famine, identified in the ANAO's recent annual report, appears to be an unexpected consequence of excellent performance or, to put it another way, a textbook example of "no good deed goes unpunished".

Because the ANAO, whose reports are much loved by journalists as gifts that keep on giving, has been so effective the government wants it to do more. Its remit has also been extended to include another seven departments - a 50 per cent increase on its previous "to do" list.

The trouble is that despite being told by the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit "the ANAO will require additional funding in future years if it is to meet both its legislative requirements and other outputs under the current framework" the Albanese government is yet to kick the tin.

This, given its unedifying record of caution since coming to office, may be because it doesn't want to announce an increase in public sector spending - no matter how minute - during times of economic uncertainty and a cost of living crisis.

One can only hope that this is not the case. The JCPAA report, which recommended the ANAO be exempt from the APS wide two per cent efficiency dividend, couldn't have been clearer.

"Saving small sums on the ANAO's budget only costs the government larger sums later on," it said.

Increasing funding to the ANAO is actually an easy sell. Australians aren't stupid and realise that an organisation specifically charged with reining in waste and inefficiency will save taxpayers money.

The extra level of accountability the ANAO provides also strengthens our democracy and increases the efficiency of government departments and agencies just by being there.

The ANAO is one of the few friends the taxpayer has in Canberra.