




Speech By
Hon. Jeff Seeneey

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

Record of Proceedings, 2 April 2014

MOTION: ESTIMATES HEARINGS

 **Hon. JW SEENEY** (Callide—LNP) (Deputy Premier and Minister for State Development, Infrastructure and Planning) (3.55 pm): You have to assume that the previous speakers either did not understand the motion moved by the Leader of the House or were deliberately trying to make claims that were simply not true. The motion before the House increases the amount of time that is available for scrutiny of the government. It increases the amount of time that each minister has to report before the committee. It increases that time from one day to two days—two full days.

Honourable members interjected.

Mr ACTING SPEAKER: Order! Those on my left!

Mr SEENEY: For many years the estimates committee process has been crammed and limited by time. It has been limited by time that we complained about when we were in opposition. I remember every shadow minister on this side of the House complaining about the fact that we only had two hours or we only had three hours to scrutinise the budget bills in the estimates process. I also know that since we have been in government ministers themselves have said they have not had enough time to put the government's positives in the estimates process.

Opposition members interjected.

Mr ACTING SPEAKER: Order! Those on my left! The Deputy Premier will resume his seat. The Deputy Premier has not attacked the opposition. The Deputy Premier has simply explained the position, and I will soon be warning members for unruly interjections. The Deputy Premier has the call.

Mr SEENEY: Mr Acting Speaker, you cannot challenge the basic mathematics of this. Each committee will have to sit for two days. Previously each committee sat for one day. That is double the scrutiny. It is double the time for ministers to put their case before the committee, and it is double the time that members of the opposition have to ask questions. We have in the motion limited the hours—that is true—for each day because some estimates committees had to sit until nine o'clock at night.

Mr Rickuss: On Friday night.

Mr SEENEY: On Friday night.

Opposition members interjected.

Mr ACTING SPEAKER: Order! Those on my left!

Mr Pitt interjected.

Mr ACTING SPEAKER: Order! I warn the Manager of Opposition Business under standing order 253A.

Mr SEENEY: I take the interjection from the member for Lockyer because he is exactly right. It illustrates just how stupid the claims are from the other side that somehow this is lessening the scrutiny. When the former government had a controversial issue you got stuck on an estimates

committee at nine o'clock on a Friday night. There were a lot of controversial issues when we were in opposition around the department of natural resources particularly—things like vegetation management, water reform and things like that. They were always in the estimates committee process on Friday night. They were always put on Friday night. How much scrutiny was there about that? What we are ensuring is that these issues will be considered by the estimates committee at a reasonable time of the day when people are able to tune in and to take note of what is happening.

The committees will sit at a reasonable time of the day, and to ensure that they can do that they will sit for two days rather than one day. That cannot be construed as restricting the opportunities of the opposition. It is extending the opportunities of the opposition. Do the mathematics.

Dr Douglas interjected.

Mr ACTING SPEAKER: Order! I warn the member for Gaven under 253A. You will have every opportunity to have your say.

Mr SEENEY: Do the mathematics. Under the proposition that has been put forward in this motion, the committees will sit from nine to five, or eight hours a day. Eight hours a day times 14 committees is about 112 hours of committee time. Under the old system, even if every committee had sat until 9.30 at night, it would have been 12½ hours a day times seven days so it would have been 87 hours. That is 87 hours as opposed to 112 hours. How is that possibly reducing the opportunities? It is 87 hours as opposed to 112 hours. Not only that, a significant portion of that 87 hours was at night-time; it was after dinner when nobody was watching and no-one was taking any notice. A considerable part of the 87 hours was at a time when nobody—

Ms Trad interjected.

Mr ACTING SPEAKER: Order! I warn the member for South Brisbane under 253A for unruly interjections.

Mr SEENEY: Under the proposition, we will have 112 hours of committee time held during the working hours of the day. That simply cannot be construed as reducing the opportunities available to the opposition or as somehow constraining scrutiny. Of course it is not.

An issue was raised by a previous speaker about it constraining members from taking part in one or more committees. It does not do that at all. If the Leader of the Opposition wants to come and ask me about my travel backwards and forwards to Monto, which is the only question she ever asks me, she can do that. In fact she can do it on two days in a row. She can come and ask me on Tuesday and then she can come back again and ask me on Thursday if she likes, and so it is with the more serious questions that she might like to ask. She has a two-day window in which to ask any particular minister any particular question, and as she has done in the past she can drop into particular committees and ask a question. That is still possible. The opportunity to do that is still there for the Leader of the Opposition or indeed any other member, whether it is the member for Gladstone or whoever. The advantage is that they will not have to hang around until half past nine at night to do it. They will be able to do it during normal working hours.

So it is a complete and utter nonsense to suggest that this is somehow curtailing debate. What we have heard from the opposition, more to the point, is almost a fear that they are going to have to do the work. How many times over the last two years have we seen the opposition run right out of questions at estimates and government members have had to ask the questions? The government members have had to try to ask questions of the ministers.

Mr Rickuss interjected.

Mr SEENEY: That is right, filibuster to help them out. We have seen that happen, especially during those late night sessions when the crossbenchers have this bad habit of flitting away and disappearing and we have very few non-government members there. This will mean that the non-government members of the committee will have to work and they will have to work harder. They will have to work to get questions for two days. They will have to turn up to their committee for two days, and that might be a bit of a problem for members who sit up in the back corner and do not turn up to parliament very often. It will be a bit of a challenge for them to turn up for two days rather than turn up for one day.

I want to make some comments more generally about the committee system. As I have said to this House a number of times, I and a number of other senior members in this parliament put a lot of effort into reforming the committee system in the parliament. We went to New Zealand and we looked at the committee system there, and we put in place a committee system that was entirely different to anything that existed before. We put in place a committee system that allowed the committees to address a whole range of issues, including for the first time bills before the House. We also recognised that it was important for the committee system to continue to serve the purpose of

examining the government's financial bills that were introduced into the House during the budget process, so each of those committees continues to have that role.

I think the committee system has been something of a success. The committee system in this parliament is maturing. The committees meet on Wednesday mornings in this parliament and they all meet concurrently. They all examine legislation at the same time, and they all have public hearings, depending on their own agendas, at the same time. That has not curtailed the activities of any of those committees. Are any of those committees seriously going to suggest that their efforts to examine the legislation have been somehow hampered by the fact that there are six other committees sitting in different parts of the building? That is just nonsense. If you followed the logic of the argument that has been put here today, each of the committees would only meet for half an hour on a Wednesday morning because one committee would meet for half an hour in the red chamber and then vacate it so the next committee could meet, and then they would meet for half an hour and then they would have to vacate the room so the next committee could meet. If you followed the logic that was put forward by the opposition, that is where you would end up and of course that is nonsensical and stupid.

One of the challenges for us when we set up the committee system was to make sure that there were enough committee rooms available for all of the committees to meet at the same time, and some considerable effort and capital has been expended towards meeting that. We have the facilities here for the committees to all meet at the same time, to all engage in whatever process it is and to do it concurrently. They do that every Wednesday morning that this House sits, and there is absolutely no reason why they cannot examine the budget bills in the same way as they examine every other piece of legislation. It will be just like when the committees examine legislation. When the committees examine the government's budget bills, those procedures will be recorded and they will be available for examination. They will be available for detailed consideration either on that day or on subsequent days, and the opportunities to question what has been said will actually be greater because the opposition will have the opportunity to go back over what was said on the Tuesday and pursue it further on the Thursday if they want to and if they choose to do that. That is not an opportunity that has been available previously. They will be able to do that at a time of the day that is a normal working time of the day.

I would submit that this is a change that is overdue. It is a change that is a natural consequence of the changes that we made to the committee system in the parliament. It is a change that is a natural consequence of the maturing of that committee system. The committees will examine the budget bills in the same way as they examine every other piece of legislation that comes into the House and goes before them. That is what is being proposed. There can be no suggestion, in my view, that this process limits that scrutiny or limits the ability of the opposition. It does quite the opposite. It provides considerably more opportunity, and that is a good thing. I am a believer in the system of democratic government that requires a government to submit itself to the test that should come from an opposition, but unfortunately that test does not come from the one that we have in this parliament.

The other thing that is worth noting—and once again this is something that we put in place as part of that review of the committee system—is the CLA, the Committee of the Legislative Assembly, and the role that it plays and the opportunities that members should have to ask questions of members of the CLA. Under this proposal, the CLA will meet on the Wednesday. So we will have committee hearings on the Tuesday, the CLA will meet on the Wednesday and we will have committee hearings again on the Thursday. That will provide an opportunity for almost every member in this House to attend the annual meeting of the CLA and to ask questions of the CLA members about the decisions that have been taken regarding the administration of this House. It is an important change. Members who were not here before we had a CLA cannot be blamed for not recognising the difference. The CLA has put the elected members in charge of the parliament, in charge of our own destiny to a great extent. It is right and fitting that once a year the elected members should have the opportunity to ask questions of the members of the CLA who appear before them in that committee hearing format.

It is simply quite absurd for the opposition to carry on the way that they have this afternoon. Either they are opposing for opposing's sake, which I think is probably the best guess, or they are opposing out of sheer fear and terror—fear that they will not be able to rise to the occasion and participate in an estimates process that will go for twice as long as they are accustomed to. They will not be able to avoid their inadequacies being demonstrated. Estimates is not just about testing government ministers. Estimates is also about testing the shadow ministers. It is also about everybody in the general public having an opportunity to see how shadow ministers handle the challenge of estimates. For these shadow ministers—

Opposition members interjected.

Mr ACTING SPEAKER: Order! Those on my left!

Mr SEENEY:—the proposition that they are going to be tested twice—two days in the week—rather than once is filling them with terror. They know that they will be exposed at estimates every bit as much as a minister may be if they were not up to their role. That, I would suggest, is the real cause for the mock outrage that we have seen here this afternoon—the ranting and the raving, the yelling and the carrying on—without addressing—

Mr Mulherin interjected.

Mr ACTING SPEAKER: Order! The Deputy Leader of the Opposition will cease interjecting.

Mr SEENEY: The Deputy Leader of the Opposition is a classic in estimates. If he had his way estimates would not last for five minutes. We are going to ensure that—

Mr Stevens: It ruins his hibernation.

Mr SEENEY: He has to wake up. We are going to ensure that there are 112 hours of committee hearing time, and every one of those 112 hours will be during normal working hours. That replaces a situation where we had 87 hours—even at best—of committee hearing time, and a significant portion of those hours were after dinner, late at night, when nobody took any notice. I would say that honourable members really have to struggle to argue that that is lessening the process. That is building a better process—112 hours during normal working hours as compared to 87 hours, about 25 or 27 of which would be after dinner or late at night when nobody is watching. How on earth can any argument be made with any integrity that that is lessening the process? Of course it is not.

I look forward to the estimates process. I look forward to the opportunities that we as ministers will have to put forward the positives of our government. There is a great story to tell that we do not get a chance to tell because the opposition never ask us about it in here. They never ask us about the government's agenda. They never ask us about the government's proposals. They never ask us about the government's achievements. I say to the member for Mackay in particular that during the estimates process he will have the chance to do that. In fact, he will have double the chance to do that. He will have double the chance to ask me the questions that he is not game enough to ask me in here, and I look forward to that process very much.

This is a natural evolution of the changes to the committee process that we put in place. Just as those committee processes have added an extra depth to the consideration of the legislation that passes through this parliament, these changes will add an extra depth to the consideration of the government's budget bills during the estimates process. We should always be keen to try to improve the processes of this parliament to ensure that this parliament carries out the functions that democracy requires it to do. This change is a good change. It will ensure that this parliament works better. I—

(Time expired)