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IN THE SPOTLIGHT: PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

FRIDAY, 15 OCTOBER 2021

Brisbane

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Mr SPEAKER: I respectfully acknowledge that we are sitting today on the land of Aboriginal people and pay my respects to elders past and present. I thank them, as First Australians, for their careful custodianship of the land over countless generations. We are very fortunate in this country to have two of the world's oldest continuing living cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples whose lands, winds and waters we all now share.

This is Queensland parliament's 'In the Spotlight: Parliamentary Committees' panel discussion celebrating the 10th anniversary of the introduction of our modern committee system here in Queensland. I want to acknowledge that we have several members of parliament here today. Thank you very much for your attendance. We are hoping to do regular events such as this that we can stream on Facebook to get greater interaction. As I was just saying to one of our panel members, it is a great part of my job to be involved in these sorts of events that put that spotlight on our history within the Queensland parliament, but also making sure that we have educational opportunities for our young people as well. I will put the message out there to ask if you could please turn your mobile phones off. That would be great.

Today I am joined by a very experienced panel. You may be wondering why there is such a big distance from the front table to other members, and even where we have our member for Noosa sitting at this end, and the reason is nothing to do with COVID. What we have is two former rock stars of the Queensland parliament in Lawrence Springborg and Judy Spence. By way of introduction, Judy Spence was the chair of the Review of the Parliamentary Committee System Committee. It is always funny when you have to say that, because I know you had struggles with that at the time. She served as a minister of the Crown and was a former member for Mount Gravatt and Sunnybank. Lawrence Springborg was the deputy chair of the Review of the Parliamentary Committee System Committee and is a former leader of the opposition, government minister and member for Carnarvon, Warwick and Southern Downs. Mr Springborg is currently the mayor of the Goondiwindi Regional Council. Our third panel member is Ms Sandy Bolton. Sandy has been the member of Noosa since November 2017 and is currently a member of the Business Committee and Legal Affairs and Safety Committee and it will be great to hear her perspective about what it is like to be a current member of a committee and how she thinks the committee system is continuing to evolve.

Today's event is going to be taking the form of a panel discussion followed by questions from the floor and, if we have online participants, we will have that opportunity available to them. The Clerk of the Parliament, Mr Neil Laurie, will moderate today's proceedings and provide more details about how this will work shortly. Thank you for doing that, Neil. I am a bit tired of presiding. It is good to have someone else doing it for a change.

One of the key functions of the parliament is the scrutiny of the government of the day and this is a very important accountability measure to ensure that the government's power is wielded appropriately in the interests of the people of Queensland. Put simply, the parliament helps to ensure the government makes the right decisions at the right time and for the right reasons. The unicameral Queensland parliament that we have launched a committee in 2010 to look at how parliamentary oversight of legislation could be enhanced and how the existing parliamentary committee system could be strengthened to have that greater accountability of the executive. The review committee was also tasked with reporting on the effectiveness of the existing committee system at the time and looking at timely and cost-effective ways in which it could more effectively evaluate and examine legislative proposals. By all accounts the review committee operated in a truly bipartisan manner as it was envisaged for the system that it would recommend.

In its report, the review committee noted the proper scrutiny of the executive helps to ensure accountability and transparency and, in turn, better administration and it was noted that a strong and well-resourced system of parliamentary committees can enhance that interaction between the parliament and the community. We will hear a lot more about that today during the discussion, but I think I would like to quote one statement made by the chair, the Hon. Judy Spence, at the time. She said it could 'potentially result in the most significant changes to the Queensland parliament since the abolition of the upper house

in 1922'. When looking at the 55 recommendations proposed in that review and the subsequent system that we have ended up with, I think it would be difficult to argue that it hasn't been one of the most significant changes. Our panellists will delve into that in greater detail.

We will talk to the scrutiny of bills and subordinate legislation in terms of the separate functions that the committees have, the examination of public accounts and public works, the examination of budget estimates and the oversight of statutory office holders and, of course, look at undertaking major policy inquiries referred by the Assembly. These are things that have eventuated with the system as it currently operates and I think when you start looking at the broader powers given to committees to self-refer inquiries, that is also a very interesting element as well. When you look at the dedicated time that we have each week to ensure that committees are meeting and making sure that they are able to debate the committee reports within the parliament itself, it shows that the committees' recommendations and commentary is important when it comes to the scrutiny of legislation and, of course, we are very excited whenever we have that wonderful time of year I like to call estimates season. People have a different terminology for what kind of season it is, but ultimately it is a terrific opportunity for the parliament as a whole to challenge the executive and ask the questions that I think all people deserve an opportunity to have an answer to.

Under the new portfolio system the important role of the Parliamentary Crime and Corruption Committee to provide oversight of the Crime and Corruption Commission was maintained. Since 2011 the PCCC has undertaken two significant inquiries, the inquiry into the Crime and Misconduct Commission's release and destruction of Fitzgerald inquiry documents in 2013 and the inquiry into the CCC's investigation of former councillors of Logan City Council which is currently on foot. The parliament may also establish select committees to inquire into specific issues and there have been some well-known ones in recent times, including the Coal Workers' Pneumoconiosis Select Committee which looked at the issue of black lung amongst coalmine workers in Queensland. The fact that we have a Committee of the Legislative Assembly has also led to further strengthening of the system. I know our panellists will speak more to that as we go forward.

In terms of statistics—because I think it is important to see just how busy this committee work is and what they are involved in—some of the big inquiries over the last decade have included the Civil Partnerships Bill in 2011 which attracted 6,000 written submissions and heard from 20 witnesses in person; the North Stradbroke Island protection and sustainability bills in 2015 and 2016, which attracted over 300 submissions and the committee held eight public forums and hearings on North Stradbroke Island and in Cleveland, hearing from 114 individuals; the human rights inquiry in 2015 which inquired into whether to introduce human rights legislation in Queensland, which attracted 500 submissions and direct and specific consultation with First Nations communities undertaken during this inquiry supported by the parliament's then Indigenous liaison officer. The subsequent human rights bill inquiry in 2020 was another significant one and then, of course, we have had others, including the introduction of four-year terms for Queensland parliament in 2015 which was established in response to two private members' bills and the resolution of the Assembly for the committee to inquire into the matter. It required a referendum to see what we now have, and that is fixed four-year terms in Queensland.

I think one of the most prominent of recent times—and I note the chair is here today, Aaron Harper—was the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021. That was only the second part of the inquiry, given that there was an initial inquiry referred to the committee to look at the issues facing many older Queenslanders in particular but also those people who are suffering from terminal illness. That received 1,346 substantive submissions, 1,818 survey responses, including support or not for the bill, 2,950 form submissions. Public hearings were held in Townsville, Rockhampton and over three days in Brisbane. That was on the bill, not including the original committee inquiry work. So as you can see—and people do talk about the extra salary that people get for being on a committee and doing that committee work—there is an awful lot of work that is done by the MPs involved. I want to take this opportunity to say that these committees would be nothing without the committee secretariat and the work that is done to support the work of those committees and on behalf of MPs I give thanks to those members of the secretariat who have done that work because it is absolutely vital to come out at the end of these inquiries with something that is actually meaningful for those members.

I will leave my remarks at that, but I do want to say that I am excited by this opportunity this morning. It is great to have people from across the political spectrum on our panel and, of course, people who have played such an important role in delivering our modern committee system here in Queensland. I will hand over to the Clerk of the Parliament, Neil Laurie, who will talk about the process that we will go through today and some of the housekeeping rules in the Red Chamber. I look forward to answering some of your questions a little later on. Thank you.

Mr LAURIE: Thank you, Mr Speaker. To everyone online and in person, welcome to the 'In the Spotlight: Parliamentary Committees' panel discussion. Today we have an audience comprising physical attendees in the Legislative Council Chamber, including current and former members of parliament, members of the Queensland Chapter of the Australasian Study of Parliament Group and parliamentary staff. We are also joined by a number of participants on Facebook Live. We will start with a facilitated panel discussion about the recommendations of the Review of the Parliamentary Committee System Committee, the establishment of the portfolio committee system and the advantages and disadvantages of the system. I will be asking panel members to share their experience with us and to discuss any potential areas of improvement. We will then proceed to questions from the floor here in the chamber and then online questions. During the question and answer session, if you have a question please raise your hand if you are physically present and one of our staff members will provide you with a microphone. For those attending via Facebook Live please send us your question and we will read selected questions to the panel. I will just point out that this is a parliamentary discussion so I would like all participants to keep your contributions relevant to the discussion topic and to be respectful and refrain from using unparliamentary language or otherwise we will have the sergeant-at-arms come. Our online participants have agreed to the rules of discussion prior to entering the event on Facebook Live. Once again, welcome to the live event. I hope you enjoy what I am sure will be an informative and productive discussion of the important role of the portfolio committee system in Queensland.

I would like to start the discussion today by directing questions to Ms Spence and Mr Springborg. I would like each of you to reflect on what issues or problems the review committee was aiming to address in developing its recommendations? Was there anything in particular in mind at the commencement of the process or did it very much develop through the process?

Ms SPENCE: I will start. I acknowledge the traditional owners, Mr Speaker, and all my colleagues as well. The impetus behind the establishment of the committee was that I think most of us felt that the committee system in the parliament had gone quite stale. The Queensland parliament's committee system was very vibrant in the first 50 years of this parliament and then through most of the 20th century it had gone quite stale. The most important committee was the refreshment committee for about 70 years and then when the Goss government was elected it was quite an exciting time to be on committees. Lawrence and I were on committees in those days. It was a new era of the committee system but that probably only lasted about eight or 10 years and then the committee system I think was just going through the processes. As a minister for all of those 10 years I have to say I do not remember any committee making any recommendation that I took any notice of, particularly because they were not doing that kind of work. I also realised as a backbencher the government had put through swimming pool legislation and I had been in the cabinet when that had gone through. In fact, during my time in parliament we changed swimming pool legislation three times and everyone always agrees with it. It is motherhood stuff. You cannot disagree with anything that is contained in swimming pool legislation.

When I was a backbencher people were coming to me and saying, 'This is a problem. This is a problem. This is madness. This is madness.' I realised that very few people in that parliament really—we would have all debated it in motherhood terms, but we did not really understand the detail of that legislation. No-one had ever really got to that and dug down to that extent. That made me realise that none of us were really doing legislation much justice in the House. I think I put in my report that we had all become community ombudsmen because our main role was to get re-elected. I think a lot of people lost sight of the fact that they were legislators first and foremost.

They were some of the motivations the government had for establishing a committee to look at how the committee process was going. It was a wonderful point in time for this to happen because people like myself, Lawrence and Robert Schwarten had been in parliament for 20 years when we did this work and we actually liked each other, didn't we, Lawrence?

Mr SPRINGBORG: We still do.

Ms SPENCE: There were no party politics in the room. The other members of the committee had all been in parliament for at least 10 years; they were all very experienced people. We left all that at the door and we had an honest look at how the parliament was operating. We all went to New Zealand to look at their committee system. Lawrence and I went to Canada together and looked at their committee system and we learnt a lot along the way. Obviously we had to bring it back and make it work in Queensland. I think that answers your question, Neil?

Mr LAURIE: I think so. That is good. Lawrence?

Mr SPRINGBORG: I think Judy answered it exceptionally well and I have to say ditto to everything there. The other great thing of course—and Judy touched on this—was the attitude that the committee members brought to it. It would be very easy if you are going into these committees and you have been a

member of the executive to approach it as some sort of protectionist racket where you are not going to do things because it would be a 'winner takes all' thing and you do not want to disempower yourself by any decisions you may make now that could affect you in the future. Of course, what Judy just said is exactly the approach she took.

She was a very experienced member of parliament. She had served a significant period of time on the executive previously. She could see the things that worked well and the things that did not work well and needed improvement. I was very much the same back in the nineties. I had been in the executive for a period of time and had been a long time in parliament. We came in together in the very first election in 1989. You see the things you like and the things you need to improve.

In order to go through this process you need to make sure you have a real appreciation of the parliamentary process, not just a token appreciation because the parliament exists as a place of accountability to keep the executive in check. That is supposed to happen even though, of course, an executive needs to be able to put together enough numbers in the parliament to have confidence. It is an important role to make sure we improve the legislative process as part of that.

The committee system that was around—you are absolutely right. There were some select committees from time to time, there were a couple of standing committees and there were still constraints around that. The great thing is when we approached this we saw it as a blank canvas; it was pretty transformative. It is somewhat ironic that we are sitting in this place discussing this today, 99 years after its abolition. That was mentioned before, the abolition in 1922. Next year there will either be a celebration or a reflection on what happened in this place in 1922. I think it is fair to say that this has transformed things. It was pretty major. We made some very significant changes around members taking back control of their parliament, even to the point that I think the Speaker of the day was not necessarily enamoured with some of our recommendations because it was putting us back into real, absolute control. It was about making the place work better. I think by and large that has been the outcome of the recommendations.

Mostly they were supported by the government of the day and mostly they were legislated. I do think there are some things that, upon reflection, we could probably enhance and improve after 10 years. It has made things work a lot better and support the people better. It has given people a greater degree of confidence that they can at least have some say in legislation and they can actually build the principle of the legislation into something that mechanically can work much better for them and, as Judy said a moment ago, iron out some of those anomalies along the way. It is true; you used to go in those places and it was a defensive thing. We defend the executive, someone else attacks the executive and everyone reverts to this sort of approach that, 'It must be right because they say it's right.' It gives us a chance to be better informed, and collectively you can identify these problems that you can at least agree need to be fixed.

Mr LAURIE: Judy, you touched upon this when talking about the pool legislation earlier. Obviously public engagement was part of your focus as part of the inquiry. What did you hope for in terms of expected outcomes of public engagement, and do you think that has been realised?

Ms SPENCE: I think the committees are doing a terrific job of public engagement. That is exactly what we hoped for. I looked at your statistics and they are marvellous. The Speaker mentioned it in his speech as well. The committees are getting out there, calling for submissions. People in the Queensland community are responding in kind. It has absolutely worked as far as public engagement is concerned. You cannot understand unless you were there in the day when we did not have a lot of public engagement prior to this committee system. I was the chair of the Public Works Committee for six years or so and we were lucky to get a handful of submissions when we went out to public consultation. Congratulations to everyone involved for the work they are doing in getting out to Queenslanders and making the committee system well-known.

As I was driving here this morning I heard on the radio that the report that was tabled in parliament yesterday on the Integrity Commissioner is now going to a committee. That is great. It is great to hear. I understand you have four committees meeting today and they are all having public hearings. At the very least, you are doing a great job of that kind of engagement.

Mr LAURIE: Do you think it has led to better legislative outcomes?

Ms SPENCE: I see on your statistics that the government is accepting about 85 per cent or even more of the recommendations that come from committees. Surely some of those recommendations come as a result of the public engagement. No committee system is going to be perfect. I was talking to Sandy before and she is a bit frustrated that some of the recommendations she wants to see go through the committee get knocked back on the way. Lawrence and I and others on the committee at the time always knew that the government of the day was going to do what they wanted because that is what governments are elected to do. I suspect the committee system has benefited the government of the day as well. You

are doing their work in so many respects. We always thought that the committee system would be excellent for opposition because it is a rolled gold opportunity to do the public engagement and get to know who the figures are in your portfolio area. It is as good for opposition as it is for government members or a government minister. I think that is working very well.

Mr LAURIE: If we accept that the new parliamentary committee system has strengthened the parliament, the next question that has to be asked—and Lawrence, you might want to answer this—is whether or not the reforms went far enough or if there is anything missing?

Mr SPRINGBORG: If you look at the reforms, aspirationally, I do not believe you could actually take a committee system much further than we did. It was basically about making sure that the government comes in with their legislation. They go through the first reading. It then goes out to the public for consultation, feedback, scrutiny and review except by exception. I do not think you can go much further than that. The process of having the senior office-bearers in the parliament on both sides involved in trying to get a better legislative program to actually run the parliament I think is a very good idea. I do not think there was really any deficiency in the report. The question possibly is, upon reflection, should some of those things that were not implemented be implemented? In terms of the issue of committees being able to look at petitions, I do not think that happens.

Mr LAURIE: No.

Mr SPRINGBORG: The reason I am looking at you is that when you have been out of this place for four years you are not sure what legislative amendments may have happened along the way. At the time there was also the aspiration that when you implement these, you do not need a public works and a public accounts committee. Upon reflection, has the work that a public works system or a public accounts committee did been properly dealt with in a legislative committee environment? Are there essential things there that we have missed along the way? Should we look at improving that?

I think the biggest impediment you have is attitude. If you have people who have a really open attitude to the way that committees should operate and a real appreciation of the parliament and their executive members and their opposition members, you will always get far better outcomes than if they see it as a pale imitation of what is the political iteration of the time. As Judy said, you cannot really overcome those sorts of things.

Our committee proved the point that if you work on a collaborative basis, you understand it, you are prepared to be open and you are prepared to work, you can lay down the best potential framework, and I think we have done that. In a unicameral parliament, what we put forward in what had traditionally been a 'winner takes all environment' for the previous 90-odd years I think was very transformative. If you want to do something, reflect upon the bits that were maybe not picked up at the time that could be now.

Mr LAURIE: Judy, you mentioned in your opening speech about visiting the New Zealand parliament. I know it has been quite a while since 2011 when I think you visited New Zealand. However, from your reflections, what did you take away from the New Zealand parliamentary committee system, being a unicameral system fairly close to Australia?

Ms SPENCE: We copied a lot of what they do. There are some things that they were doing that we did not think would fit the Queensland parliamentary experience. I think they had a much more formalised system of community engagement than what we adopted. I think they were receiving petitions. They were probably not a lot different.

Mr LAURIE: You were impressed by the New Zealand system?

Ms SPENCE: We were impressed by the New Zealand system very much, but we were also impressed by the Canadian parliaments. They were doing this as well long before even New Zealand was. These great parliaments in Canada were all considering legislation and they were doing great community engagement. I think it was an eye-opener for us. Also the Canadian parliaments in particular had a lot of non-government chairs. Half of their committees might have non-government chairs, so we were really stretching the point when we suggested one, which the government has taken up. There is room for improvement in the future and maybe that is one area.

I see here that some of the things that we recommended have not been picked up. We wanted bipartisan support of committees for appointments of other statutory positions besides the CMC one. We suggested that should happen for the integrity and the information commissioners and the Ombudsman. I think there is a lot more work that could go on in terms of stretching the committee system in the future. Ten years might be a time for reflection to see whether you guys can push the envelope a little further than what we did 10 years ago.

Our recommendations were very groundbreaking compared to what we ever had in the past. I remember one senior member of cabinet, who is now senior in this government, said, 'It will bring the government down.' I said, 'No it won't. It works elsewhere,' and it has worked very well here. I understand that the estimates committee process has become a bit stale again. I am sure there is another area for improvement for discussion for the future.

Mr LAURIE: Lawrence, you had the benefit that perhaps Judy did not of actually seeing the reforms come into operation because you were here as a member for a bit longer after Judy left. From your perspective, did you feel that in terms of the legislative process members became much more informed about legislation after the new system came into place?

Mr SPRINGBORG: Absolutely. There is no doubt that we were more informed. You had members who had particular interests who were able to specialise and take a particular level of keenness and involvement around those sorts of areas. I think there is absolutely no doubt about it.

I think also through the Committee of the Legislative Assembly there are many things that actually work in an enhanced way in relation to the parliament. That does not mean that from time to time government does not take the opportunity to use its numbers in the House to truncate discussion on things and those sorts of things. I do not think there is anything in the world that overcomes that other than, as Judy said a moment ago, as you develop a culture and an understanding over a period of time you can modify those things such as the Canadian parliament and the New Zealand parliament did where they have been doing these sorts of things for much longer. I think by and large it had significantly improved. There were some really good recommendations made in those committee reports and some of them were picked up by government.

By and large, I do think that we need to still create a greater culture of appreciation from the executive. If you look at this the right way, it can help you generally, and that is not to take away from the fact that we are seeing recommendations being picked up, but if you look at the default position—'I will put in a statement of reservations'—it basically means that the system could have potentially broken down to an internal partisan situation within the committee. Rather than trying to come to a consensus outcome, you end up with that. Of course, you still run the risk of good things that have been identified that have not been included in the enhancements that have been at least suggested for legislative improvement. By and large, I think it has been very successful. As Judy said, it is time for us to potentially refresh, look at some of those things and look at the things that we could do a little bit better upon reflection.

Mr LAURIE: Sandy, I turn to you as a current member and reflecting upon your role on the committee and as a crossbench member which is a bit unusual. From your perspective, how do you see the operations of the committee system?

Ms BOLTON: I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians, as well as fellow panellists and everyone who is in attendance. It is a little different for a crossbencher. The system is predominant during estimates time. If you think about the quota and the allocation of time to the crossbench, we have three totally diverse parties, plus an Independent. In that quota at a session, you might get four to five minutes in a session to ask questions. It is very difficult to capture the diversity and especially, say, for example, on my committee, you have visiting crossbenchers who want to ask questions, so you have to make a determination. You might only get one or two questions in, so how do you negotiate that, especially as it is so diverse when you think of myself being in Noosa and the Katter party which is dealing with some of our most remoteness. The simplicity of some tweaks to the system to accommodate that we are a diverse Queensland would be welcome. The representatives of the crossbench really struggle at those times. We have put forward suggestions, including putting questions on notice so we can get those important questions in. That just gives an example of some of the tweaking to actually get that full-bodied assessment of not only a bill but also at estimates time holding government to account and being able to actually work out where the money is going and how it is being spent.

Mr LAURIE: The committee system review committee looked at the estimates process and at that time there were very strict time allocations in place for the estimates committees, and they actually recommended that those time allocations in the standing orders being disposed of, which they were. Judy, do you find it curious to note that even though all those time limits were disposed of, there has been a drift back to this strict allocated time?

Ms SPENCE: I think it is very unfortunate. I looked in my foreword to the committee report and we said, 'We expect estimates will be conducted with free-flowing question and answer sessions and that senior public servants as well as ministers be directly questioned at estimates hearings,' as they are in the federal parliament. I am disappointed that that has not happened. I am not sure why that has not happened. I think it is really about the maturity of the government, the maturity of the chairs and the minister who is

going before the estimates committee to have the confidence to allow that to happen. Lawrence and I were here. We learnt how to do this from the likes of Tom Burns and a whole lot of people who had been in this parliament for 20 or 30 years, who were not afraid of taking an honest question from the floor. They did not have to have everything scripted.

Mr SPRINGBORG: No.

Ms SPENCE: We were like that ourselves, Lawrence. I think it is about maturity and experience to be able to hold your own and take whatever is coming. That is how estimates should be conducted. It is up to the current members of parliament to actually ruminate on that and how things might work better in the future, I think.

Mr LAURIE: If members go back to the transcripts of the 1995-96 estimates process when Tom Burns was being questioned by Brian Littleproud and it went on for hours, it was just like a conversation. No-one in the chair or the committee even said a peep. They just went backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards for a good number of hours. There was no angst or controversy or anything. It was quite amazing to watch.

Ms SPENCE: I just add that that is why we thought those policy committees—because that committee would be together and learning about the portfolios that they would know so much more about the portfolios than the old estimates committees ever did, that they would actually have that body of knowledge to ask those free-flowing questions because they were much more experienced than those of the old estimates process. The estimates process was very poor before we did this report 10 years ago. It was very stilted, very old and very boring. We were just hoping that these sort of recommendations would refresh it and give people more confidence to have a different approach.

Mr SPEAKER: I may be one of those unusual ministers who absolutely loved estimates. I loved the opportunity to go in and talk about your portfolio area, but show that you knew about your portfolio area and you were in control of that area. I always looked forward to the opposition questions more than the government questions—always—because they were always something that was more topical with more interest. I think, again, the opportunity for the parliament—not government and opposition and crossbenchers, but for the parliament—to actually hold the executive to account has to ensure that the estimates process does flow. I give credit to some chairs who have done a terrific job with that—I think they have done a great job—but I think in order for people to tune in and for them to be interested, we have to have that opportunity to allow those questions. I know there has been lots of conversations about estimates and what it looks like going forward. Obviously, we would hope that that could be done in a spirit of bipartisanship to look at how, if anything, needs to be changed, and what that looks like going into the future.

Mr SPRINGBORG: I think it is a really interesting point. If the minister and the committee chair views it as a protection racket, then it will never work. However, if you look at it as an opportunity to actually engage, discover things and to operate properly, you will always get a far better outcome. I have seen both in this place, from both sides, and that is the disappointing thing. Again, we put down here what we believed a better way forward. Judy mentioned Robert Schwarten before. I remember sitting here on a couple of estimates committees as an opposition member and Schwarto, as we loved to call him very affectionately, he would come in and you could see he was absolutely confident. He was across his portfolio. He did not worry about anything that anyone might say, which was different to other ministers who would take every single question and control it; see it through the lens of control and containment. I remember Schwarto—and I hope he does not mind me saying that in his absence—would sit back and say, 'Okay, you answer that,' and somebody from out the back would come up and answer that. I would say, 'That is pretty good, Robert,' and he would say, 'Yes, it is interesting for me to actually see if what I had been told, or what I think the situation is, is exactly the same as that person who goes up there.' He was actually very confident in that process, and I think that was admirable. If you approach it like that, if you are across your portfolio, across your brief, you have confidence, then you should not be scared of it. That is an example of someone who was very open. He could do his politics tough—to have confidence to get other people up there and engage in the process.

Mr LAURIE: Sandy, did you want to say something?

Ms BOLTON: Yes. Again, I will go back to the reality that the crossbench faces. The two majors, of course, with each portfolio and each estimates hearing, obviously there will be certain questions that is a common position. For a crossbencher to be able to attend for the full two weeks of hearings, we have to ask for permission to attend as a visitor. All the chairs are fantastic; they always say yes. To then be able to go in, as crossbenchers we have to apply and discuss with the opposition our allocation. The crossbench makes up 17 per cent of the opposition and we say, 'Alright, can we get a question in?' It is difficult because

as an Independent, I have to literally be across every portfolio to be able to ask the questions relevant. In regards to the recommendations—Judy, you mentioned earlier some that were not taken up 10 years ago—I think they are really important. We all hear about the dorothies. To be able to give more time to accommodate the diversity by limiting those ministerial statements, the dorothies, to be able to free it up, and I think that comes from not only the crossbench but probably the opposition as well.

Mr LAURIE: Judy and Lawrence, once again going back to the original report, the issue of transparency was something that was front and centre in that report and how important it was that the new portfolio committee system acted in the most transparent way that it could. I think the standing orders that were adopted afterwards talked about the presumption that everything be transparent. Can you explain why that was so important to those reforms?

Ms SPENCE: I think we were quite frustrated that the government had really dropped the ball for a long time on giving enough attention to the committees and resourcing them effectively. We said in our report that there were no dedicated committee rooms in the parliament at that time. There were no videoconferencing facilities. There was just so many things that we did not have that other parliaments had for their committees. I was a member of that government for most of those 20 years. We had neglected the committee system, so as a result they were not transparent. All of us were incredibly frustrated that the CJC—the CMC Committee at the time; it keeps changing its name—basically held everything behind closed doors. That was the one committee that no-one could ever see deliberations of. Yes, that was a very important motivation for many of our recommendations. I have not observed what is happening with the committees in the modern parliament, so I am not sure how successful we have been with getting the committee deliberations and performance more transparent. Someone else will have to comment on that. Maybe Lawrence?

Mr SPRINGBORG: I would agree with Judy that the motivation was that this should always be held in public, except by exception, and that was our very strong motivation. There is a very good reason for that: people do have the right to see this. You are looking at really the highest court in the land, when you think about it. It is the highest court in the state. The Queensland parliament can do all sorts of things, therefore committees have extraordinary powers and that is vested by the parliament. Therefore, people should be able to see what is going on there, except in the most extraordinary of circumstances. Once you do that, you operate and you think differently. If you presume that you should be closed or you are able to close most of the time, the attitude actually changes. You start to do things that are less accountable, that are less open, that are less collegiate—all of those sorts of things. When your actions are actually exposed, people can more easily question them. I think that by and large, from what I can gather, that is the way things tend to operate. From my perspective, as the mayor of a local government council, I have only gone in camera once in my 18 months.

Ms SPENCE: That is good.

Mr SPRINGBORG: Once. That was on a commercial-in-confidence matter and we were negotiating. We had to do it because we did not flag our hand for obvious reasons. As soon as we finished negotiations, we went out of in camera and basically all that information was published so people could actually see it. I do not think we should be scared of it. If there are minutes and those sorts of things, I do not think we should be scared of it. Why would you be scared of it? You would only be scared if you cannot justify something. I do think that that sort of transparency and that lens of scrutiny makes an enormous difference to attitude, the way you conduct yourself and also confidence in the system.

Mr LAURIE: From your perspective, Sandy, as a current member—what do you think about the issue of transparency?

Ms BOLTON: I am totally supportive, though I do acknowledge comments—and when we have spoken that all hearings and all meetings be recorded and to be up there—would that encourage or discourage what we are trying to get towards—collegiate or partisan agreements? Would it encourage more of the theatrics that can be experienced in the chamber? I think it is a difficult one. To develop that culture where we are trying to get to the best outcome requires a combination of things. Coming in at a grassroots level, coming in fresh, seeing how the system worked, one of the key areas to get the best outcome, more partisan within committee, is in either a chair not having a casting vote or a rotating chair or something similar so that you have to work to get to those best outcomes, because the reality is—and Judy mentioned the high percentage of where government accepts the recommendations—if the opposition cannot get those recommendations through because of the casting vote, you are not getting again that true reflection. The only way you can put anything forward from the crossbench or from the opposition is through a statement of reservation. I am about total transparency, but I think we have to get that culture of working together really solid so that it does not turn into theatrics.

Mr SPEAKER: Between 2012 and 2015 I was the deputy chair of the Finance and Administration Committee. To Sandy's point, we had a very interesting task that was set for us. The government of the day had already flagged that they were looking at making significant changes to the workers compensation scheme in Queensland. At the same time we as a committee were tasked with doing the statutory review of the scheme. What was very interesting was with a government chair, myself as the deputy chair, an Independent in Liz Cunningham at the time and some others it would not have benefited us in that particular instance to have too much public coverage of the deliberations. We did the submissions publicly—we did all those things—but how we were able to achieve the outcome we were able to achieve was because we were able to work together in that way and there were not the theatrics.

What was very interesting was the outcome of that was quite unexpected probably for the government, and you were in the cabinet at that time, Lawrence. Michael Crandon was the chair, the member for Coomera, and he had personal experience with his father dealing with issues—a work related injury and illness. What was interesting is that that committee not only recommended to not change the workers compensation scheme—or not to touch it because it is the best in Australia—but made a significant number of recommendations as to how it could be improved. What was interesting is I thought that particular report was a case where that committee, even though it was chaired by a government member, made recommendations to a government which were essentially against the government of the day's particular political view on what they wanted to achieve.

I think it is a good example of where, even though the government did not accept the recommendations by and large of the committee and they went forward with their agenda, it was a very stark thing to see a government ignore a bipartisan committee which made certain recommendations. So I think it was quite a powerful statement to say even though the government, given that they had a majority in the House, was able to push forward, that committee made really strong recommendations which were counter to the government of the day's agenda. I think it was really a stand-out for people to start saying, 'Even though the agenda's going forward, this committee was able to highlight and agree in a parliamentary way as to what should happen.' So I think that there are some really interesting cases, and it would have taken a fair bit of bravery, I would have thought, for that particular chair, and I was not in the party room to know. I believe that those are the sorts of examples where you can see that we can achieve really great things through the committee system. Of course, it was probably a bit of a starting point for a whole range of other things that happened with committees during that particular term. To your point, deliberations sometimes need to be held privately so that you can get that mutual understanding of the issue and that agreed position sometimes which of course does not have to be on party lines.

Mr LAURIE: If we accept that private meetings for deliberation purposes help a bipartisan approach at times, is there any harm then in publishing the record of the actual proceedings afterwards in terms of the votes that take place so at least there is transparency about how votes are actually being conducted?

Mr SPEAKER: That is a good question. I think with some of those things it might be a bit like when people look at statistics and if they are at too granular a level—say, an SA1 or SA2 or something like that—you can identify it because everyone knows who lives in their street and who does what or what they are involved with. Some of those things would identify and flag where there were political arguments, but equally the report itself, unless there is a statement of reservation or unless it is a very vocal opposition to that, probably covers that and speaks to the fact that there were agreed positions and these are the recommendations, because the report still has to be adopted by that committee.

Ms SPENCE: Also I think, Neil, that a record of the vote might actually encourage people more to vote along party lines than not. There could be a real danger in that, actually.

Mr LAURIE: We might take some questions from the floor and online. I have some questions online here, and I invite any member of the panel who wishes to answer to answer this question. A question from Alexis Pink: estimates hearings have become quite adversarial. What changes would you make to make it more focused on public accounts than politics?

Ms BOLTON: I am happy to go first. I think some of the things that I have already mentioned to decrease such as the time for ministerials, the dorotheias. My interns had done some work and even things like taking questions that might be outside of the estimates realm and having a separate question time at the beginning so that estimates goes purely with the budget but also having time so as to not fight over limited time. I think that increases some of the angst and the adversarial nature.

Mr SPRINGBORG: Neil, I think it is a very difficult thing because politics is about politics and I think that for just about everyone who is in here, and with all due respect to Sandy, we do see most things through some form of a political prism, whether it be local politics or whatever the case may be. There is a general overarching view that we try to do things in the best interests of the state and our community as we see it

and so there are probably no surprises that there is going to be a bit of this overflow in here with regard to politics and how you perceive things. If you have a very open culture and an engaging way—and it comes back to the way something is chaired and still the way the minister is involved in that—you can diffuse those situations. I think if you limit opportunities or you force people to go, 'This is our real chance to grandstand once a year,' then you are going to see more and more of it. I just do not know how you overcome that. I do not think that there is any perfect way to deal with diffusing that in a political environment.

The estimates process in the federal Senate works reasonably well, but there is still a level of overarching politics that goes on in there. I think it is diffused by the fact that it happens so much that it has become like behind the beltway stuff. A lot of it does not even get out there because it is just what the Senate does on a routine basis. It is always doing this. It is always bringing in senior government officials. It is always talking to ministers. It is always doing these sorts of things, so it becomes quite unremarkable. One of the challenges you have if you make it this big fest once a year is that of course people are going to focus. The opposition comes in here with their gotcha moments or even other members because someone has leaked something and away you go. It used to be that you would have half a minute in the sun in the media and now it is around about five seconds because of the way things go, so you go in there and you are being noticed and so you give yourself a great big tick, but if it is something you do all of the time and if it becomes more of an embedded part of the way government and parliament operates I think it becomes less and less remarkable and therefore I think it changes the way that people see it and the way that people use it.

Ms SPENCE: I think you could get rid of the ministerial statements. As a person who was a minister for 11 or 12 years, I delivered a ministerial statement every time at an estimates sitting and it was pretty pointless really. It just took up maybe 10 minutes of the session.

Mr LAURIE: That was the point, wasn't it?

Ms SPENCE: That was the only point of it really! I do not know how long the sessions are going for these days, but it seems from what you are saying, Sandy, that they need to go a bit longer so that people have the opportunity of asking questions. What frustrated us and led to this report was that prior to this report they were very structured. The opposition got X number of minutes; the government got X number of minutes. It seems like you have gone back to that again, so that is probably something else that needs to be freed up if we are going to have a more engaging estimates process.

Mr SPEAKER: I might just say, Neil, that there have been a number of different options that have been floated as to how estimates could be changed and it is not my place to make commentary on that because one of them is an opposition approach where they have considered having the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker chair estimates. I think that that in itself is unfortunately a reflection on the chairs and that is not what we want to see. I think people are subject experts in those areas and that has been something that has come from the process, but that is certainly something that has been mooted. There is one thing that is a fairly technical thing, but schedule 7 is obviously the list of the public officers who are able to attend and be questioned in parliament, and that is determined by the government of the day. Sometimes that has been very, very large and other times it has been, I guess, shrunken to suit particular political opportunities, let us just say that, at the time. That schedule should always be as large as it can possibly be and expanded because anyone who holds some kind of a public position should be accountable through the process, obviously making sure that those officers are appropriately senior officers and not having junior officers who did not sign up to be interrogated in such a way. That is probably one very obvious thing—that is, great attention to detail around schedule 7 should be paid.

Mr LAURIE: Of course a lot of the Senate estimates is done in the absence of the ministers, which might be another reason there is less politics.

Mr SPRINGBORG: As I said, Neil, if you want to really look at changing the way and not having it that fortnight festival once a year where it becomes an extension of the parliament, just make it a part of the process and look at those sorts of things, which is quite an out there approach but you would see the opportunity to be able to drill down and get the sorts of things that you want to get. I think it is worthwhile thinking about. It is probably a bridge too far, but that would actually help with some of those things.

Ms BOLTON: If I could just add something about efficiencies. When I looked at it over the first couple of years, you have departments that for weeks prior are preparing for questions that are never asked. There are obviously more efficient ways and even for all portfolios we are able to submit questions on notice so departments actually know really what is coming up and so you can get the information you need. I just think there is a lot of tweaking because overall we have really good chairs from my experience who have a really tough job. There can be inconsistencies, especially at estimates time, between the rules and

regulations. I think Robbie Katter made a statement one day to the effect that what is happening with estimates is that it provides a veneer of accountability and it is because of the stringent rules that are around it that it is conflicting and making it very difficult.

Mr SPRINGBORG: If I could say very quickly, and I know we are holding other people up, but Sandy's point is an excellent point with regard to the amount of resources that departments put into this. They spend weeks and weeks going through and preparing an interminable number of estimates briefs and there are mountains of paper and then they have estimates training for the senior officers and estimates training for the ministers. My approach was that it was all a waste of time and people would say, 'Why?', and they would get a bit indignant. I would say, 'Because the question that's going to catch me is not in any of these.'

Mr SPEAKER: I have a counterview to that though, Lawrence. I would say firstly that mock estimates are a waste of time. As a minister I never thought that was useful, but I believe that the process that the departments go through and even what our Parliamentary Service goes through to prepare that information is a very valuable exercise for those agencies to clean out, bring out their dead and figure out what is working and what is not. So I think the process in itself is good, but you are absolutely correct that it often does not translate to anything that is relevant to the questions that may be asked. However, I think the process is important because with a lot of those things I think even some of the senior executives in departments find out and did not realise were happening.

Ms SPENCE: What is going on.

Mr SPEAKER: I think that is probably a very healthy thing to happen from a bureaucrat's perspective, if you like.

Mr SPRINGBORG: And that comes back to my other point: if that is what it is about, then why do we not have this as an ongoing process throughout the year? If that is what it is truly about, then it takes a lot more of the politics out of it to the true administration of government from the public accounts perspective, so efficiencies. That is the way you should be looking at it so that you get your separate political process to all of that.

Ms BOLTON: Can I just add to that as well? In the lead-up and all the time preparing for estimates, in terms of everything else that goes on within your communities and what is urgent there is a huge delay with response times. It is not as efficient as it could be. I take what Curtis says about that opportunity, but it is huge each year. You know you are not going to get to the other things on behalf of your community and the questions that are not estimates related, but are issues. Suddenly you are looking at eight, 10, 12 weeks. I think it can be done better.

Mr LAURIE: I am trying to be a good chair by not interrupting. I was going to give anybody on the floor an opportunity to ask a question.

Ms NELSON: I am a former member for Aspley. I have some points to make and a question. I look around here and think, 'What a great shame we abolished the upper house in 1922.' It would have solved a lot of problems if we contemporised that. I still think it is probably a good idea that one day we have a referendum and bring it back. Secondly, and more importantly, how are regulations created under legislation reviewed? How often are they reviewed? Given that councils in Queensland are all creatures of state legislation, how are their regulations and policy decisions reviewed under the model law and other local government acts or other acts of parliament that are relevant? Who does it?

Mr SPEAKER: There is a lot in that!

Ms NELSON: It used to be done.

Mr SPEAKER: A point was made earlier, focusing on the fact that we are talking about the 10-year anniversary of the committee system, obviously having a standalone public accounts committee in the past and having a scrutiny of legislation committee in the past meant that those functions were quite separate and having portfolio committees has by and large tried to pull all those things together under these committees. As long as you do not forget about those other important roles of the public accounts side because now they are definitely far more about scrutiny of legislation, to the point where the old scrutiny of legislation committee used to basically do a tick-and-flick exercise around fundamental legislative principles and that was about all they did.

Looking at subordinate legislation, looking at regulation and looking at all of those other aspects is something that the committees are charged with. They have a responsibility to do that work. I am not aware that they are not doing that work. I have seen reports on subordinate legislation coming through the House

on a fairly regular basis, so I think that that work is occurring. Local governments are a little different because, whilst they might be a creature of the Local Government Act, they are still an autonomous level of government. Of course they have their own approach. Given the local government ombudsman is there, there are a lot of those things there that should be coming under that particular arrangement; but I think it would be a very brave state government to suddenly decide to play even bigger brother to local councils than the regulations that they have.

Ms NELSON: They used to. I was deputy chairman of the committee and we did. I think it is a grave problem in Queensland. We only have to look at the number of people to face court in the past decade. We only have to look at the dissatisfaction with the delivery of those regulations and the impact on people's lives. I would strongly recommend that perhaps your committee look at the reintroduction of the subordinate legislation committee on its own, which was a bipartisan committee in the 1980s, because there is a lot of concern amongst people in Queensland about the regulations that councils are passing which enable them to disempower their citizens in many ways. I could give you a couple of good examples, but I won't waste your time, Curtis.

Mr LAURIE: I have a very concerned mayor at the end of the table.

Ms NELSON: Quite the contrary: I don't think he is concerned at all!

Mr SPRINGBORG: Sandy may have a view on this. I was not on the committee that you say, Beryce, used to do these things years ago so I do not know the level it went to—the regulation of the parliament or the subordinate instruments. Certainly I think local governments labour under an extraordinary amount of accountability at the moment with the Local Government Act and the various requirements we have, state planning policy and what has been brought in as a consequence of the Parliamentary Crime and Corruption Committee and Operation Belcarra. I know when we go to make a local law it is very well prescribed to us the process that we have to follow. We have only done a couple in my time there. It goes to public consultation. With all of these sorts of things, it comes back, it is very prescribed and is laid down in legislation. I know that we have to seek the consent of the local government minister on a whole range of things and we seek that advice. I would hope that in our circumstance we are not doing the sorts of things that you are talking about that is causing that particular grief. I come back to Curtis's point before—the level of oversight or intrusion that council would see in this area would be a concern to me. I would be happy to hear about this historical context because, to date, I was not aware of that.

Ms NELSON: The most well-known incident in the 1980s was the Swiss loan issue where local councils were borrowing outside of the law and they had passed little clauses themselves. We had to stop them doing that. That is just one of many examples. Looking at the Canadian system may not be a bad idea.

Ms BOLTON: Can I make a brief comment? It was brought up when my interns were doing some research and they actually did bring up: because of the workload with subordinate legislation that comes into our committees—and my one in particular has an enormous load—we probably do not do it justice. It was brought up that there should be a separate committee to deal with subordinate legislation. That was just a comment.

Mr LAURIE: Any other questions from the floor? There is a question online. Justin Jackson asks: with the introduction of fixed terms, how do you envisage committees will evolve in the future? I suppose the question really is: will fixed terms make any difference to the committee system?

Mr SPRINGBORG: I am very proud of the fact that under my stewardship as opposition leader we motivated and put forward those two private members' bills which actually then caused us to adopt a bipartisan approach with the government to go out and put this referendum to the people of Queensland. Indeed, that was the first referendum I understand that has been passed by the people of Queensland since 1906—certainly it was the first one that started life as an opposition motivated piece of legislation in the parliament. I think that this is a transformative thing for Queensland, regardless of whether you think it should have been a three-year fixed terms or whatever the case may be. The fact is that we now have certainty. It takes away the manipulation that happens so people can actually work back from there. I think that is a good thing for planning and a whole range of things. It should not alter anything because the intention is the same. If you have a good committee system, it does not matter if you have three-year non-fixed terms, four-year fixed terms or five-year fixed terms. The Canadians have five-year fixed terms. I think that they can actually go a couple of years early as we have just seen over there. The term does not matter. The attitude, instrument, structure and culture are the most important things.

Ms SPENCE: I think fixed terms will help the work of the committee because you know when the election date is going to be and you can plan your schedule accordingly. People forget that the Premier would just call an election at the drop of a hat, no-one would know about it and you would be halfway

through a committee report that would never get completed or halfway through legislation that would never get reintroduced. I think it has certainly enhanced the committee work. I think also that the CLA has given certainty to what goes on in the parliament. You forget that before the CLA existed the Leader of the House would just drop a piece of legislation in the parliament and we would all perhaps be required to debate it the next day or then. We would be here all night doing it. We would be scurrying around trying to work out what it was about and putting a speech together. There is just so much that this system introduced that gave all members of the parliament some certainty about what is going to be debated and when it is going to be debated. That never existed in our days. There was often no conversation between the then leader in the house and the opposition about what was going on in this parliament. The government of the day would take no prisoners and run the place as it saw fit.

Mr SPEAKER: I think it has flow-on effects into things such as sessional orders as well relating to how long people have to make a contribution on a particular bill. Those have been truncated somewhat and it has taken away the filibustering to some degree—and that is not a bad thing. It allows an opportunity for more people, in theory, to speak on a bill but then gets that succinct messaging through and ensures people stay on point, by and large. Again, that is part of the Speaker's role at the time to ensure people are relevant to the bill. Four-year fixed terms and that planning and not having to have carryover inquiries, carryover legislation, is an enormous benefit. It was a good question.

Mr LAURIE: Paul, did you want to make a contribution?

Dr: Just to say that when the committee on committees was meeting, the opportunity was for me and others to urge the New Zealand system. I remember the Clerk's very detailed submissions to the committee. I just want to ask a question. The New Zealand committees can amend legislation referred to them. Our committees can only recommend amendments. Did the committee make any sort of study of that and what conclusions did you come to?

Ms SPENCE: We did discuss that, Paul, at the time. We were quite shocked, I think, that the committees in New Zealand and other places like Scotland can actually amend legislation. I do not think pretty much any of us on the committee thought that was a good idea. I think we always held the view that the government of the day is the government of the day and it should be their prerogative to accept or reject amendments to legislation and not give that role to backbenchers to do fundamentally. We would all be ministers and we did not want to give up that responsibility or right as government ministers of the day. We discussed it. We knew it was being done in other places, but none of us thought it was a good idea, did we, Lawrence?

Mr SPRINGBORG: That is a really good point. I do not know whether we were stuck in our own paradigm and we thought it was a bridge too far or whatever the reaction would be. It comes back to the maturation of the committee system in those places. Interestingly, New Zealand had quite a developed committee system and I think they actually had a culture that started to develop before MMP, their multi-member parliamentary system, over there. It is probably helped and enhanced by that. Having said that, in Scotland, if you look at it over there, I do not think that the Scottish parliament works in almost this perpetual process of lack of majority. Certainly the current state over there with their first minister, they have quite a significant majority and they still amend legislation as I understand it. We cannot just look at the paradigm of the political dynamic: one is a perpetual state of no government having a majority. I do not think anyone should eliminate looking at that in the future or any committee. We have gone a long way despite what might be seen as a deficiency or enhancement for the future.

Dr REYNOLDS: I just thought it might be a different way of doing something, as you say—about our culture. The New Zealanders abolished their Legislative Council in 1971. They have had quite a long time to develop a committee system. But you are right: they preceded the MMP and have gone through several evolutionary stages in New Zealand. What you have now is probably mark three or four from what started.

Mr SPRINGBORG: I will ask a question. I notice it was reflected on by Judy and it has been mentioned that about 80 per cent of the recommendations of the committees have been picked up and implemented. What percentage of those representations come from the government members of the committee versus the non-government members of the committee?

Ms BOLTON: Again, I go back to if you have a chair who has a casting vote—but this is not a reflection on the chair—ultimately those recommendations are from the government of the day. For those on the opposition, they use their statement of reservation because there is not the capacity to change the outcome.

Mr LAURIE: I think it would be fair to say, though, that a lot of recommendations for amendments come out of the stakeholder engagement process. They are not just purely government amendments per se. The amendments at the end of the day are driven by the stakeholder processes and the scrutiny of

legislation processes that go on—and some of them are very technical amendments because there are drafting errors or issues that have been picked up during the process that would once never have been picked up. One of the reflections I make is that we used to see bills come into the House and not long afterwards there would be an amending bill to that bill to fix up issues that were not picked up because we did not have a proper scrutiny process beforehand.

Mr SPEAKER: Can I add to that. We had a minority government between 2015 and 2017, and I have to say that the combination of the committee process as well as the government needing to speak with crossbench members in order to pass legislation—I think there was only one bill the government put up that was not passed during that time—meant it was probably the best parliament I have been involved with because the committee system was providing a significant amount of value-add. Some of that is to make sure we can ward off unintended consequences of the bills as they are drafted; another is bringing in that stakeholder benefit.

Also, having crossbenches providing their own perspectives made the government during that time have to ensure that those things were taken into consideration. I think it really did improve the quality of the legislation. No-one wishes to see a minority government situation in Queensland all of the time. It does not matter if you have a majority of one or 20, the government will still get its legislation passed. But, in that particular case, it was parliament in full effect. It was probably one of the best things I have seen where contributions were being made from right across the political spectrum, and I think we got better legislative outcomes as a result.

Mr LAURIE: There is a question from online. Sean McKay has asked how the portfolio committee system has impacted the scrutiny of bills, particularly since the advent of the Human Rights Act? Sandy, you are probably the only member, apart from Mr Speaker, who has been here since the Human Rights Act was passed. Has that made any difference to the bill process from your perspective?

Ms BOLTON: No, not as an MP. The process itself has not made a difference. Obviously, there is an extra workload because it has to go through that separate process. As an MP thinking about a bill, you start thinking about all the other consequences that are accommodated in there, if you know what I mean. It has added an extra element in your deliberations.

Mr LAURIE: So it prompts thoughts about things that may not have been there before?

Ms BOLTON: It does.

Mr LAURIE: Are there any other questions from the floor? John Carter has asked whether videoconferencing could be used to enhance public participation in committees. I think we can say that videoconferencing has been used, particularly during the COVID period. The COVID period has probably increased the usage of it, even though it was in use beforehand. Does anyone want to make a comment on videoconferencing?

Mr SPEAKER: I might say something purely from my role as Speaker and having to oversee committee travel with the CLA. We want committees to get out and be amongst communities right around Queensland. It is a very important thing but, equally, you cannot do that on every single bill to the extent that some people would expect, and nor does the workload and time allow that for MPs to complete their inquiries.

Videoconferencing is something we have to do a lot more of, even in a post-COVID environment, to ensure we are getting best value for money. I think most people would agree that nothing beats that face-to-face opportunity. Being a regional member of parliament, however, I have to say that, if it meant that we were able to get greater buy-in from rural and remote parts of Queensland, then I would be looking to do whatever we could to ensure we could have an increased usage of videoconferencing. We see people suffering from the tyranny of distance and not being able to engage sometimes in the political debate or the hearings that we have in terms of inquiries on bills.

Mr LAURIE: Alexis Pink has asked another question, which I suppose goes to the whole point of today—that is, does the committee system do a good job in providing a counterbalance to the government of the day?

Mr SPRINGBORG: I am happy to take that. I think by and large, yes. As Judy said before, there is nothing perfect and I would agree with that, but the important thing is to be prepared to critique things and look at how we can improve. I think if you took it away we would be a lot worse off and that should be the test, in my view.

Ms BOLTON: Absolutely I would agree. I think it is a great system. Those of us who sit on portfolio committees learn and gain knowledge. Even with the public works and accounts, there is not the capacity I wish there was for us to do more of those, but that tangibility to look at a facility or an initiative in a bill is vital. I have been fairly clear that there are some tweaks needed. It is a great system but it needs some tweaking.

Ms SPENCE: The whole committee system was introduced to balance the power of the government of the day but also to educate members of parliament and government ministers on what the community thinks about various things. I love this story. I was chair of the public works committees in the early nineties. The Goss government was building the Brisbane convention centre and my committee heard from the disability sector—these were the early days of listening to the disability sector actually—who were really upset that there was no capacity for someone in a wheelchair to go through the front door of the convention centre. They had to go through a backdoor, and that was dreadful for that person.

We made a recommendation that the government change the design of the Brisbane convention centre to allow disabled people, people in wheelchairs, to access the front. I know Wayne Goss was terribly angry because that added an additional \$5 million to that building to do that, but that is a great example, isn't it, of people listening to the community. No-one would have thought in those days how important that was for someone with a disability to have the same access rights as everyone else. That has carried forward to modern-day thinking. The committees can be very powerful things and make governments listen.

Mr SPEAKER: To use that tired saying that consultation is about having your say, not having your way. Committees provide that outlet. They provide an opportunity for people to engage and to put their point of view forward. A good government will listen to the points that are being made and it is a great way for them to take the temperature of the electorate. But, at the end of the day, there is still going to be a majority government which will do what they need. I have never believed that it is a waste of time for people to go through that engagement process because it highlights and airs grievances and, as I said, adds value. To go to Lawrence's point, we would be far worse off if we did not have the portfolio committee system we have today. It certainly has been highlighted a few times that we should always be striving to improve that system to ensure we get the right outcomes for the people of Queensland at the right time.

Mr LAURIE: We will go to final comments.

Ms SPENCE: I would like to congratulate everyone involved in the committee system of the Queensland parliament for the work you are doing. In so many respects, we are doing better than other state parliaments in Australia in terms of how our committee system works. As someone who has actually contributed a submission to a committee on a piece of legislation, I was very grateful to have that opportunity as a community member now, and I am sure that the many thousands of people who give submissions every year to your committees feel the same way. I think the committee system is working very well. I am sure there is room for improvement in some respects. When Lawrence and I moved these recommendations 10 years ago, a lot of people looked at them in horror, didn't they?

Mr SPRINGBORG: Absolutely.

Ms SPENCE: There was a lot of tut-tutting and 'How could you?' but I would like to remind people that we had a large committee—I think there were seven or eight of us on the committee—and it was unanimous, and when we moved this legislation in the parliament it was unanimous. It was groundbreaking at the time. Most of the recommendations have been picked up, and you are doing very well. We come back today pretty happy with our recommendations and the success they have achieved over the last 10 years.

Mr SPRINGBORG: I would agree absolutely. Again, I pay tribute to Judy because her attitude was critically important in that. You had to navigate this process in a bipartisan way through parliament. If you look at it, and I have not set it down on a percentage basis, almost eight out of 10 things were picked up by the government and the parliament. That is quite extraordinary if you think about it, in the context of the winner-takes-all approach to Queensland over such a long period of time. Do not ever stop still on this. Be prepared to be critical, be prepared to review and be prepared to actually enhance it along the way. Can I ask a question, Neil? On the issue of the recommendation of the PCCC about including the possibility of lay members, that never was legislated.

Mr LAURIE: It has never been.

Mr SPRINGBORG: This is almost like a Q&A to you. I remember a great civil libertarian in the late eighties when the Fitzgerald report was brought down asked, 'Who is going to watch the watcher of the watched?' The CCC and its previous iterations do extraordinarily important work in this state. They have to be there and they do amazing work. I look at the Parliamentary Crime and Corruption Committee and I note what they are going through at the moment and I think they are doing very good work with regards to that.

I think there is logic in relooking at that for the future. When you are looking at a committee such as that—which does have an opposition chair, which is very important—make sure you do not have a process of churn when it comes to membership going from one term to the next. You build skills and there are oversights in that which are critically important to take forward. I think if there could be a compact between those who sit in this place that the executive members that make the decisions around appointment always have an eye to that, particularly on committees such as that. There you go; that is a takeout. It might be a silly one but I think it is worth looking at in the future. It is a very important role.

Mr SPEAKER: I have said most of the things I was going to say. Whether it was intended by the committee or not, one of the things I have started to see occur—and it may well be that it evolves more into the future—is the distinction in parliament about there being politicians and parliamentarians. The reason I say that is that not everyone aspires to be a minister of the crown. It is something I have experienced and I know others at the table have as well and we are always grateful for those opportunities, but there may be people who wish to make their mark in the parliament by being a committee chair and making sure that is their focus. I have seen that start to occur. I would like to see more of that because these committees are very important to the scrutiny of legislation and they are very important to public accounts, overall accountability and transparency. If you have people who are doing that almost with a no fear or favour approach, then they are not going to be worried about what opportunities they may not get as a parliamentary secretary or assistant minister. They want to focus on doing their bit in committees and adding value to the parliamentary process like that. That is something I would like to see over time coming forward.

Ms SPENCE: That is a good point.

Ms BOLTON: I would like to congratulate both Lawrence and Judy for what you did 10 years ago and what we are benefiting from. I would also like to add that, being 10 years on, it is time for a review as part of developing on top of that good system so we get a more efficient and effective system in line with community expectations and what they seek from us. Continuing on from what Curtis was saying about committee chairs, those tweaks will make their jobs so much easier and also encourage more to be chairs because that will be enhanced. I hope this 10-year anniversary brings forward that, yes, there will be a review of the system and it gives the opportunity for everyone—from government, opposition and crossbenches—to be able to feed into that.

Mr LAURIE: I would like to close by reflecting on a couple of things. When I first came to the table of the House in the mid-nineties, the standing orders that were in existence at that time were essentially the same standing orders that were adopted by the House in 1860. They had been tweaked over the generations but not terribly much. Putting aside the committees for a moment, a major reform in the House itself, for example, was to change the standing order which said that a bill when introduced had to sit on the table for seven days before its second reading debate could occur. That changed to 14 days and that was seen as a major reform in the operations of the House.

But, after your report, the changes in the House itself were quite dramatic. Our legislative process and the very structure of our sitting days in the House itself have been very much shaped by what was in that report. We have spoken a lot about the committees and the work undertaken by the committees and how they can be improved, but the report actually impacted dramatically on the work of the House and the way the House worked as well.

The other thing I would note is that the reform did not just stop with your report and the immediate aftermath of that. In 2016 the Constitution Act was amended. The portfolio committee system was essentially entrenched in that legislation to say that there must be a portfolio committee system. Before that, they were really only established by an act which could be changed overnight. I know that the Constitution is still an act that can be changed but there is a difference between changing the Constitution and changing an act. There was some recognition of the importance of that in that bill itself which went through at the same time as the four-year terms were entrenched. Another part of that entrenchment was a recognition that only in exceptional circumstances would legislation not go to a committee. Once again, there was entrenchment six years after your report to indicate that, yes, this is an important aspect of our system. I take all of that as a very positive thing to what has happened with the committee system. As everyone has said here today, there are still tweaks that can occur, particularly around estimates. That seems to be the point that brings most people together—that is, that there could be some reform.

They are my concluding remarks. I would like to thank all of the panellists, and I would ask everyone here to join me in thanking the panellists today. I would like to thank those people who personally came to watch today as well as those people who watched online. Thank you very much for your attendance. With that, I bring the seminar to an end.