



Speech by

Mr R. QUINN

MEMBER FOR MERRIMAC

Hansard 28 October 1999

**APPROPRIATION BILL
Estimates Committee F
Report**

Mr QUINN (Merrimac—LP) (Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party) (12.32 p.m.): In rising to speak to the Estimates Committee F report, at the outset I place on record my appreciation for all those departmental officers who came to the hearing on the day and provided material in both written and verbal form. It is no easy task for officers of the department to get themselves ready for an Estimates hearing. There is an enormous amount of number crunching to do and perusal of information both on the day and prior to those hearings. I think it would be remiss of any of us if we did not voice our appreciation of the amount of work done by the officers within the various departments not only within the 9 to 5 time frame but also in terms of their own time after the 5 o'clock bell goes.

At the outset I also say that the change in format this year from cash accounting to accrual accounting certainly presented some difficulties for most members—from both sides. Direct comparisons from previous years simply were not possible. I think it will take a number of years before the process settles down and all of us are completely au fait with the new procedures and understand them completely. For my part, I do not profess to have complete knowledge of the process at the moment, but hopefully that will come in the future.

In my view, there is a need for some standardisation or uniformity in the way the documents are presented. I know that within Education there were the departmental accounts and then we had three statutory authorities. While they all conformed roughly to the accrual accounting processes, there were a number of anomalies which I brought up in the Estimates hearing itself. While each of them was only small, when all those small anomalies are added together it simply is not possible to have faith in the accuracy of the documents. There is a need—certainly in the case of Education—to go back and have a look at uniformity or standardisation.

One of the questions I asked was whether or not the executive officers of two statutory authorities had the authority to sign off on the documentation contained in the MPS statements. The response from the executive officer of the Board of Senior Secondary School Studies was, "I believe so." Because two of the statements had been countersigned by the executive officers and the other statutory authority account had been signed by the chairman of the board, I think there is a need to go back and have a look at the Act and clarify any legal irregularities, if they have occurred. My reading of the Act says that the board is empowered to construct the budget and the board reports to the Minister and, unless the CEO has the authorisation of the board through a resolution of the board, then it may be open to debate whether or not it is within the power of the CEO to sign that particular documentation.

In terms of standardisation, that is an issue that the boards and the Ministers could look at. I think there may be similar occurrences in other Government departments where there is a mixture of executive directors and board chairmen signing the relevant documents. As I said before, it would make it easier across all portfolios to have this common approach. That is an area that we need to be looking at.

Mr Wells: I will take it on board.

Mr QUINN: I raised it on the day, but I did not want to pursue it on the day because I wanted to get on with the job of examining the financial details. I think it is one of those areas where, unless we look at the legal aspects, we may find that someone will challenge it further down the track and we will not have a proper answer. As I said before, the answer that the officer gave was, "I believe so." That sort of said to me that he was not sure. If he had the authority he would have said, "Yes." The alternative, of course, would have been, "No", and then we could have been in some difficulty during the day.

The other issue I wish to raise, apart from the consistency and the construction of the documents themselves, relates to the priority that the Government has placed on education. I raised this issue the other day when I spoke about Estimates Committee A in that the Premier's Department received an increase in its budget of \$58m and the Education Department's increase was not much more than that. When there is a substantial increase in the Premier's Department budget of 41% and Education's budget has an increase of somewhere between 2% and 3%, that shows a lack of priority.
