



Speech by

**HOWARD HOBBS**

**MEMBER FOR WARREGO**

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Hansard 21 August 2003

**APPROPRIATION BILLS—ESTIMATES COMMITTEE E**

**Mr HOBBS** (Warrego—NPA) (3.21 p.m.): I am pleased to be able to speak to the report of Estimates Committee E. The previous speaker made some comments about the estimates process, and I think it is appropriate that I do so as well. It is important to have an estimates process of some type. The purpose of estimates, as I understand it, is so that we can obtain some information and make sure that the government and the ministers are accountable. I do not believe that the process we have now is effective because of the way it operates. This applies to all of the committees, not just our committee.

Government members basically read pre-arranged questions and the minister reads out prepared answers. This does not lead to very deep questioning of the minister. I am trying to be constructive with my comments. A member could ask the minister the same question in the parliament or just go and see the minister at some time if that is how it is going to be done. One benefit of estimates committees is that ministers probably go and get a good briefing from their departments beforehand and get up to speed with what is happening in their departments. It is quite effective in that way. That is the way I see it.

Questions on notice are a problem. Even if some questions on notice are long, there is no reason why answers to some of those questions cannot be provided earlier. There is a tendency on the part of some ministers to wait till the last minute. The sessional order states that questions on notice can be provided up to 24 hours prior to the hearing. Many members are only just arriving to take part in the process in that 24-hour period, so they cannot always do that. When members have detailed questioning, it is not reasonable to try to hold up that process to the very last minute.

In our particular case, Estimates Committee E, the committee determined that answers to questions on notice should be in by 14 July—something like eight days before the hearing. That would have been quite good. Even five days before the hearing would be a help. It seems as though a lot of the departments—and not just in our committee—held answers back until the very last minute. Some ministers gave them earlier as well. I think that there has been a little bit of manipulation of the system to try to benefit the government. I do not think that is in the spirit of accountability.

A number of issues were discussed in relation to local government. One that comes to mind is the funding that is available for earthquake monitoring. I asked the minister about that, but the minister or the department were not really able to answer my questions at the time. I am pleased to say that since then the minister has written a letter to the editor saying that there is a report of some sort. However, it seems as though the minister or her department—which has spent \$20,000 on this report—have not really seen the original report by the Seismology Research Centre. That is disappointing. I think we need to do some more work in relation to that issue.

We face a very serious situation in relation to the Grants Commission in that the federal grants have not been approved. There is obviously a breakdown between the state minister and the federal minister. I support a five-year phase in, or even a four-year phase in, as does the state minister. Irrespective of that, some more work needs to be done in relation to negotiations to resolve that issue. I have been talking with the federal people as well about this—

Time expired.