




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

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APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL

**Health, Communities, Disability Services and Domestic and Family Violence
Prevention Committee, Report**

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (4.29 pm): I rise today to speak to the estimates report of the Health, Communities, Disability Services and Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Committee. I will start, as so many others have, by reflecting on the process of estimates. It is supposed to be a way for elected representatives to scrutinise what the executive is doing—what it is doing on our behalf and what it is doing with public money. In a state without an upper house, no proportional representation and the ruthless two-party cartel system that we have going on here, it is a modest but incredibly important mechanism for accountability. I address the voters of Queensland for a second: you are being sold a raw deal. Every time a public official dodges scrutiny, it is at your expense.

Plenty of LNP members already have criticised the estimates process, but I have not heard any solid proposals about how to improve things. That is not terribly surprising since, for them, it is essentially a waiting game. When it is their turn in government we know that they will be just as ruthlessly secretive. Unless we see some actual proposals, we can assume that they are only interested in complaining.

On 6 August I wrote to the Premier urging her to launch a review of estimates and to bring in some immediate reforms. I table a copy of that letter for the House.

Tabled paper: Letter, dated 6 August 2018, from the member for Maiwar, Mr Michael Berkman MP, to the Premier and Minister for Trade, Hon. Annastacia Palaszczuk, regarding strengthening accountability and budget estimates [\[1175\]](#).

I drew her attention to the comments, as we have heard from so many, of former Labor Speaker Mr Mickel, who criticised the ‘protection racket’ by government MPs and called for an all-party review. The process is fundamentally broken and needs urgent reform. I attended every day of the hearings over the two weeks and was the only MP to do so. What I saw was incredibly disappointing: constant interruptions from government MPs and time-wasting monologues from ministers who often went to extraordinary lengths to dodge difficult or embarrassing questions. It is not just government MPs; opposition members regularly wasted the committees’ time with pointless questions. Nevertheless, responsibility ultimately rests with the chair of each committee, who is always from the government.

Good governments welcome scrutiny, and estimates has the potential to be a key part of a healthy democracy. Sadly, politicians have short memories. If we look back to the Newman years, I am sure Labor would have been grateful for a tougher estimates system. All Queenslanders need a bulwark against the excesses of autocratic governments, and now Labor has the chance to achieve this.

Even while a review is underway we could adopt some very quick fixes. We could easily double the amount of time for questions by having two committees sit simultaneously. This is standard practice in other jurisdictions and would not involve significant extra cost. There are plenty of committee rooms—here and in the Annexe. Let’s use those rooms. We could make sure that all hearings are chaired by non-government MPs. We could get rid of Dorothy Dixers from government backbenchers. We could

publicise the hearings widely and encourage ordinary people to attend. Maybe we would lift the tone of estimates a little if we were to do that—maybe even put on some free lunch. We could expand the questions on notice process to give all MPs a chance to ask written questions ahead of the estimates hearings. Right now that privilege is the exclusive domain of committee members of each committee. This could all happen immediately by a simple resolution of the Legislative Assembly.

Obviously the Greens support more far-reaching democratic reforms like proportional representation, an upper house for Queensland, banning corporate donations, plus caps on donations and expenditure. Fixing the budget estimates process is one small step towards a more robust democracy and it would be a fine legacy for this government to leave.

To the content of the hearing, I was glad for the opportunity to cover some issues in detail—for example, on access to abortion services. This is a matter of public healthcare funding and service delivery. Once abortion law reform is passed in Queensland, we will still be in a situation where about 95 per cent of all terminations performed in a health facility are outside the public system where costs can be very high—anywhere from a couple of hundred dollars to \$5,000 out of pocket. If you live in regional Queensland, odds are that you have to travel into the big cities, sometimes staying overnight to get access.

I asked the health minister how the government plans to roll out free access via the public health system and, unfortunately, the plan appears to be to wait and hope. Undoubtedly decriminalisation will remove stigma and make access easier, but it will not, by itself, change the sometimes very substantial costs. 'Wait and hope' is not a plan for service delivery. Abortion is not a form of elective surgery; it is a serious and time-sensitive matter.

Ms LEAHY: Mr Deputy Speaker, I rise to a point of order. I seek your guidance in relation to whether this is anticipation of debate.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Weir): That is a very good point. Be careful with your language with 13 seconds to go.

Mr BERKMAN: With my 13 seconds to go, the Greens believe that we should be expanding our advanced universal public health system, not leaving things up to the free market. We have a network of public hospitals and public health clinics across Queensland where important termination services could be delivered as part of mainstream public health care.

(Time expired)