



Speech By
Michael Berkman

MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

Record of Proceedings, 24 February 2021


APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) (2020-2021) BILL

APPROPRIATION (2020-2021) BILL

Consideration in Detail (Cognate Debate)

Appropriation (2020-2021) Bill

Community Support and Services Committee, Report

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (12.43 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the estimates report of the Community Support and Services Committee. It is important at the outset to once again voice my concerns about how the estimates hearings are conducted and the serious flaws inherent in the process as it currently stands. I again raised these concerns with the Premier in the estimates hearing, in addition to letters I have sent in previous years, and I made some suggestions again in my statement of reservation in this committee report. It is a little bit like groundhog day here: each and every year the issues are the same and the government seems resolute in completely ignoring these criticisms. As a means of holding the government to account, the estimates process, as it stands, is weak at best. I have come to wonder whether it may in fact be worse than nothing. It creates the veneer of accountability, but it really does not do what it says on the box.

Any Queenslanders not watching these hearings to properly understand the extent of the farce could quite reasonably assume that the process provides a meaningful opportunity to scrutinise proposed budget spending and the operation of Queensland's executive government as a whole, but it is not. I am not alone in holding this view. People who have many more years experience in this place than me have made the same criticisms, including a highly regarded former Labor Speaker no less.

The change this year, however, is that the opposition has finally come on board and agreed to support a number of the reforms that I have been proposing since my very first experience of estimates. Every year in this place I have suggested that we should abolish or severely restrict Dorothy Dixers from government MPs. The opposition leader has now come out in full-throated support of my suggestions in this regard and correctly notes that Dorothy Dixers are just an opportunity for ministers to wind down the clock. If ministers' answers to Dorothy Dixers are—

Honourable members interjected.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Bush): Order, members!

Mr BERKMAN: Uncomfortable truths, perhaps. If ministers' answers to Dorothy Dixers are so important, they can put them in a ministerial statement or call a press conference. Let's not pretend that backbenchers are asking their own genuine, hard-hitting questions in estimates. We do not need to waste valuable time in estimates when government members and ministers have countless other opportunities for pantomime outside of the estimates hearings.

The opposition has also picked up my suggestion that all hearings are chaired by non-government MPs to prevent government chairs shamelessly misinterpreting and misapplying standing orders and abusing their positions. It was all too common again in these estimates hearings to see baseless points of order used to protect ministers and the government's interests.

The opposition leader is now also actively advocating for an increase in the time available for hearings, as I did throughout the last term. There are plenty of ways to increase the amount of time available for estimates other than the approach taken by the former LNP Newman government, which, as we have heard countless times from the government, ultimately limited members' opportunities to ask questions and attend multiple committees. In addition to that, we could also extend the opportunity to ask questions on notice to members other than full-time committee members. There are other ways that we could improve the process and improve transparency of the system overall.

The opposition leader's comments were very strong—I would not disagree with most of them—calling it a sham. It is good to see that the opposition agrees that the process needs to be fixed. I understand that the opposition leader will write a letter to ensure the process improves. I wish him the best of luck with that. He would not be the first to write a letter about these issues and he will not be the last, but hopefully it makes some difference and progresses the necessary reform of the committee system as a whole and estimates specifically.

With the time that I have left I will make some general comments. This committee has oversight of some of the portfolio areas that are of fundamental importance to Queenslanders and particularly to some of our most disadvantaged—issues such as community housing, arts, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partnerships, children and youth justice.

(Time expired)