



Speech By  
**Michael Berkman**

**MEMBER FOR MAIWAR**

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Record of Proceedings, 1 September 2021


**APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL**

**APPROPRIATION BILL**

**Consideration in Detail (Cognate Debate)**

**Appropriation Bill**

**Community Support and Services Committee, Report**

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (3.06 pm): I rise to make a contribution on the estimates report of the Community Support and Services Committee. In doing so, I want to start by sincerely thanking all of the parliamentary staff and the countless public servants who stand behind the ministers and directors-general in preparing for estimates. I have been in their shoes and I know how much work goes into preparing for estimates, and I am deeply grateful for that.

We cannot overlook the fact that this year estimates had all of the same problems it did last year, the year before that, and every time I have seen it. The work of those public servants is wasted because we are simply not given enough time. That is the core of all of these issues with estimates. Government members, whether they are committee chairs or members, refute this time and again. They claim it is good enough that non-government members get a majority of the time for questioning in these hearings, but it is simply not enough time overall. Look at our hearing: we had one hour and 15 minutes for the whole of seniors and disability services; an hour and 15 minutes for the whole of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partnerships; less than two hours each for youth justice and children; and less than two hours for housing and communities and the digital economy. When you take away all of the government time, all of the Dorothy Dixers, it is still not enough time.

I raise this issue time and again because the crossbench in particular misses out every single time we get to estimates. This was laid bare this year where we had caps on the number of people in the room. It made it absolutely clear how little time we get. There were sessions where there was five minutes, seven minutes allocated for crossbench members to ask any questions. There might only be two of us Greens in here, but we represent 10 per cent of the voters in Queensland. It is absurd that we are given so little time, along with other crossbench members, to ask questions on behalf of our constituency and on behalf of those people who vote Greens and want to see the government held to account on the issues that are important to them.

We have heard chairs tell us that we need to ask better questions, but when you know you have half a second to ask a question, when you know you are going to get cut off, you have so little time, it affects the way you ask questions. It limits the scope to conduct a constructive line of questioning. You cannot provide context, so you necessarily load that into a preamble that then gets you pulled up on spurious points of order. The crossbench in particular inevitably finds itself choosing between asking a follow-up question to get a real answer or asking another question on a different topic.

Going to those points of order we have seen so many times, they were as absurd this year as they have been every other year I have seen estimates. It does not really seem to matter what the question is. If it is going to elicit an uncomfortable answer, one they do not want to give, then the chairs or the members of these committees are ready to misconstrue the standing orders and call a point of order. I think we need to give a little training in what a hypothetical is. It seems that members of these committees do not understand what a hypothetical question is. Simply asking a question is not asking an opinion, but a number of times these were thrown up at us to effectively slow down the questioning, to chew up time and make it easier on ministers. It is a shocking indictment on the way the government runs these sessions.

The Clerk gave us some really important evidence in the first of the hearings this year. He made it absolutely clear that most of the cost of estimates is a sunk cost. The bottom line is that it will essentially cost us nothing more to run estimates for longer. There is no reason not to extend the amount of time we spend in estimates hearings. For the government to continue to do so shows their complete disinterest in accountability and transparency. It will cost Queenslanders nothing more to get the accountability and transparency they are so desperately calling for. If we want people to have faith in government and governance here in Queensland, we need to allow that kind of scrutiny and to allow some additional transparency.

I am not one to rush to the defence of the member for Everton but I did think the response to his question on social housing was a pretty shocking example of this. He asked for the social housing waiting list numbers on 30 June and was given the numbers for last year. When someone asks me what I did on Saturday, I do not tell them what I did Saturday a month ago. The implication was clear. The minister stands in here now and says that the numbers are not publicly released. If only there was someone who was in a position to make those numbers public! Imagine! It is an absolute joke.

My time is short but the point has been made clear. We have to get rid of Dixers, we need independent chairs and we need to give everyone a chance to ask the questions that need to be asked.