

APPROPRIATION (RECURRENT 2018–19) BILL 2018
APPROPRIATION (CAPITAL 2018–19) BILL 2018

Estimates Committees A and B Reports and Minutes — Presentation

MS L.L. BAKER (Maylands — Deputy Speaker) [5.03 pm]: I present to the Legislative Assembly the reports and minutes of Estimates Committees A and B.

[See papers 1389 and 1390.]

Estimates Committee A Report — Adoption

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr T.J. Healy): The question is —

That the report of Estimates Committee A be adopted.

MS L.L. BAKER (Maylands — Deputy Speaker) [5.03 pm]: As members are aware, the estimates committees were held over three days from 22 to 24 May in both chambers. On each of those days the two committees sat between 9.00 am and 10.00 pm. I would like to sincerely thank members and staff for their contributions and cooperation, which helped manage the logistics and timetabling challenges that these proceedings involve. I particularly thank the committee clerks, Dan Govus and Rachel Wells, who did a fantastic job overseeing the two committees, and their colleagues in the Assembly and committee offices. Everyone put in a magnificent effort to make sure that everything ran smoothly. Members may be interested to know that this year the number of questions asked was slightly higher than that in the previous year and the percentage of questions asked by the opposition was greater. Of the 2033 questions asked across both committees, opposition members asked 92 per cent in Committee A and 95 per cent in Committee B. The number of supplementary questions was slightly lower this year, with 63 asked overall compared with 72 last year. Timetabling the estimates is always challenging and I want to acknowledge the work of the cabinet services branch at the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, which coordinated the attendance of ministers and advisers across the schedule. I also acknowledge our Acting Speakers. I specifically start with my colleague the member for Mirrabooka, who is greatly experienced in this house and in the standing orders and helped greatly by chairing Committee B during this process. I thank the other Acting Speakers, the members for Southern River, Forrestfield, Geraldton, Moore, Wanneroo and Girrawheen, most sincerely for their hard work.

Estimates is a very demanding time for members, particularly when they are also required to sit on committees and chair committees. In that regard I particularly thank the members for Geraldton and Moore. I thank all members for their cooperation this year and commend these reports to the house.

DR M.D. NAHAN (Riverton — Leader of the Opposition) [5.05 pm]: I would like to make a couple of comments. Estimates is really about the opposition holding the government to account. I would like to congratulate and thank the various organisers and clerks and Acting Speakers for their effort. It is a long process and sometimes it is a big effort to stay awake. I thank them very much and we appreciate it.

I would like to make some general comments about the process. I participated in quite a few divisions and watched more on the monitors. I have to say that there was a great deal of variability in ministers' cooperation with the estimates process. I do not want to blow his horn—too many people have done that lately—but the Treasurer was a particular stand-out. I would like to highlight a couple of things. First, it is easy to get filibustering from your own side, but that did not happen. Second, he answered questions—crafty as he is—generally to his ability. He also delegated when necessary and appropriate. We would not want a free range on some of the agencies that he deals with, such as the Western Australian Treasury Corporation.

On the other side, I was not in the Minister for Tourism's divisions, but I watched them. He basically refused to answer most of the questions.

Ms C.M. Rowe interjected.

Dr M.D. NAHAN: He did not. I am being honest. Members should go to the Hansard website, draw it down and watch.

He also had people filibustering on his side. If we are not honest about this, the system will not improve. Honestly, members should watch the Minister for Tourism present in estimates during his whole portfolio period. He also did education for the minister in the upper house. I encourage everybody to watch the videos. Those on the government side might think it is a good exercise in inhibiting the opposition from getting access to information, but estimates are an essential part of our democracy in which the opposition is able to scrutinise the budget in detail with the ministers. It is actually consideration in detail for the budget issues. There was a great deal of variability. Of course, we may be more persistent with those ministers who failed to answer the questions adequately.

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I would like to suggest something. Questions in estimates have to be about the information in the budget. That is fair enough. Our budgets are now quite open and transparent on most issues. However, government business enterprises enter the budget in only a number of areas, particularly asset expenditure, revenue payments and dividends, income tax equivalents and, of course, community service obligations. That is fair enough and I am not arguing that that should be altered. We have the general government sector as opposed to the GBE sector. These enterprises such as Synergy and, to some extent, Western Power but, more importantly, Water Corp are major financiers of the budget. They are major agencies. Because questions in estimates have to stick to issues of detail in the budget, the questions that we can legitimately ask about, for instance, Water Corp are limited.

That is because information about it in its annual report and the budget is limited. By the end of the forward estimates, the Water Corporation will provide the government \$1.2 billion in net income; that is a lot of money. We know a lot about and can discuss issues of various tax types or the GST—although that is more complicated—but when Water Corporation becomes one of the top five sources of income for the government, we need to look at the innards, if you wish, of that corporation. I do not know how we will deal with it, but I would like to flag that. It is a very major issue going forward.

I would like to end by saying that although I cannot say we enjoyed the process, because it was a long process, in the main, apart from the variability of people, I thought estimates was a very worthwhile process and I thank everybody involved, including most of the ministers on the other side.

MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah — Leader of the House) [5.11 pm]: I want to make a very brief contribution. Having been through numerous estimates committees as a minister, a backbencher and as a long-serving Whip, I want to acknowledge the work of the Whips. In cooperation with the Deputy Speaker, it is a very important task to coordinate the composition of the committees. I congratulate the members for Balcatta and Vasse, the respective Whips of the government and the opposition, on their work in ensuring that the estimates committees for 2018 operated effectively and efficiently. I note that the number of questions asked, particularly by the opposition, was very significant. The statistics highlighted by the Deputy Speaker referred to that. The estimates committee was an important part of the budget's consideration, and I want to put on the record my appreciation to both Whips from the Liberal Party and the Labor Party for their contribution to the process.

MRS L.M. HARVEY (Scarborough — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [5.12 pm]: I rise to add a few comments in support of what the Leader of the Opposition has said about the estimates process. Bearing in mind that the now Premier went to the election promising to deliver gold standard transparency, it was a significant disappointment for the opposition that in our second estimates process under this government there was a distinct lack of transparency in particular portfolios. I was on the estimates committee when the Minister for Tourism was representing the portfolios of Hon Sue Ellery from the other place. We were asking specific questions about education and training. Obviously, the Minister for Tourism, as a representative of a minister from the other place, is not across those portfolios and we did not expect him to be, but it was very disappointing to see a sea of bureaucrats sitting there with information on bits of paper that they were handing to the minister and the minister refusing to release it. He refused to provide information and refused to accept questions seeking supplementary information, requesting that we ask for information as questions on notice. Those sorts of responses are not what we expect. It was incredibly disappointing that a very competent director general such as Sharyn O'Neill was sitting beside the minister saying that she had the answer to this question and that question, and the minister ruled it out and said not to provide it. That is not gold standard transparency. To add insult to injury, the Minister for Tourism treated the entire estimates process as some kind of opportunity to spout political rhetoric back at the opposition. He was not genuinely interested in having an interrogation of this budgetary process that we were presented with.

Mr D.J. Kelly interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Members!

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Instead, we got platitudes and insults. If that is how the minister wants to conduct himself, it is entirely up to him. He is a reflection of the government, the Premier and the gold standard transparency he promised to provide. Other ministers acted similarly. We saw bureaucrats willing to provide information and ministers saying to put it away. We have that footage in the office of the Leader of the Opposition—evidence of exactly what I and the Leader of the Opposition have said. This goes to the heart of the big election commitment that this government made to provide a higher level of gold standard transparency. We do not have it. Indeed, even when I place questions on notice to some ministers, I am being directed to a webpage without having information provided to the Parliament that is appropriate for an opposition to seek. We are collecting all of these examples and we will bring them to the attention of the public. The government needs to be careful with that kind of attitude if it continues to fail to provide information that the taxpayers of Western Australia have a right to know about. It is their money that the government is budgeting and allocating to projects, and it is their money that the government is refusing to provide transparency on.

Mrs M.H. Roberts interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Members!

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: We will collect these examples and bring them to the attention of the community, because the community does not like governments behaving in that way. It is secretive, it is not transparent and is not an appropriate way to deal with the taxpayers' money that the government is now responsible for.

MR D.R. MICHAEL (Balcatta) [5.16 pm]: As the Leader of the House said, it is traditional that the Whips also make a very brief statement around this time. The member for Vasse is not here, so I will give thankyou on her behalf as well. Thank you to all members. Scheduling all members to come to various estimates sessions is a bit difficult and a bit of a jigsaw puzzle. I can imagine with opposition numbers it might be a bit more difficult to do that and a bit more of a workload, so thank you to all members. Given the long hours of estimates, from 9.00 am to 10.00 pm, I thank the clerks, the Legislative Assembly staff, catering staff and building management who keep the place running—Parliamentary Services—for keeping things going for those long hours. I thank staff at the Department of the Premier and Cabinet who, as the Deputy Speaker said, came up with the timetable. On the member for Vasse's behalf, I thank the LOOP staff who also obviously put in very long hours researching and coming up with some of the questions and angles for members. I also obviously thank ministers' officers and the ministers for all their hard work.

I know that when the Leader of the House was Whip, he used to make a couple of observations, so I will try to make these as lighthearted as possible without getting too political. I will make a few observations about estimates. First off, the estimates committee meeting that we had went for, I think, two minutes this year. Again, members bemoaned that the meeting was not catered for, with not even a gingernut biscuit, but the meeting went for two minutes, which was very good. It involved me, the Leader of the House, members of the opposition and the clerks. I understand there was a meeting for the chairs of the committee. An opposition chair, and I will not embarrass him, suggested that last year it was not fair that the opposition had to provide so many questions. I think that chair might be disappointed given the statistics we have just heard that between 92 per cent and 95 per cent of questions were from the opposition. I note that we had a very generous chair in the estimates hearing for police. It took about 45 minutes for a question actually linked to a budget line item to be asked, so the chair was very generous!

Mrs M.H. Roberts: So was I!

Mr D.R. MICHAEL: And so was the Minister for Police as well!

Every year there are a couple of divisions in which no questions are asked and the public servants who are here tend to spend hours and hours in the strangers' bar looking at the coffee machine and wondering when they will get their time. That happened again this year. I note that the Governor's Establishment does not tend to get too many questions year on year. I said in my first year that I would not dream of pushing for reform of the standing orders, but maybe there is a way that we can come up with an agreement about divisions that no-one wants to ask questions about and to get rid of them or have them passed in the first part of the first day's estimates hearing so we do not have those public servants here wasting taxpayers' money, their own time and, obviously, the service delivery of their own agencies.

I wandered up to the Legislative Council chamber to Estimates Committee B and saw the consideration of local government. As members know, I do not eat meat anymore and there was a bit of blood about the Local Government Amendment (Suspension and Dismissal) Bill 2018. The member for Carine was asking some questions of the minister and the minister was very forthright in his answers, and I could not stand watching anymore because it was pretty gruesome. The member for South Perth was tempting the Leader of the House to sing (*How Much is That Doggie in the Window?*) in relation to puppy farms. One thing I have learnt is that all members in this house should refrain from tempting the member for Mandurah to sing. We should not be doing that—so maybe the member for South Perth could heed that.

In questioning ministers, sometimes a minister will not know the answer, and I noticed that the member for Dawesville was asking, I think it was, the Minister for Sport and Recreation about his knowledge of Ed Sheeran, which was impossible for the minister to answer. I am not very good at Ed Sheeran myself; I like different types of music. Sometimes we cannot answer such things. The member for Carine was asking some questions of the Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Interests about the Italian languages program and the schools that may have cut the program after some changes under the former government. The minister, with all due respect, pointed the member to the Leader of the Opposition's office and said he might like to ask the opposition leader. I remember the speech from that, but we will not go there, Leader of the Opposition.

During the consideration of energy and government trading enterprises, we had Synergy up and the Treasurer; Minister for Energy. It was after 7.00 pm. The Leader of the Opposition, obviously as a former minister, has a particular interest in energy, but it was a little like story time for the first part in reminiscing about the old days and how things used to work. It was a bit like story time and Fat Cat had gone to bed, so maybe he was trying to send us all to sleep. To the Deputy Speaker and for those members who do not know—they will probably think

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I am very sad for knowing this—the clock up there is about 26 seconds slow to our iPhones and everything else. That probably cost the opposition one question on two nights when the Deputy Speaker, who I think knows this, shut down estimates at about half a minute to 10.00 pm on both nights. I was looking at my watch thinking, “There’s enough time for another question.” Well done, Deputy Speaker. The member for Girrawheen might have told off a government member, the member for Bunbury, for trying to ask too many government questions. The member for Girrawheen was doing the right thing by the opposition!

Just as a side note, and I mentioned it to him earlier today, on Wednesday the member for Kalgoorlie had lunch in the dining room on the Labor Party members’ table. We should have more of that. I am from the City of Stirling at a time when I was mainly the only Labor Party councillor and we all had to get along. We should have more of that, member for Kalgoorlie. He is always welcome and his allegiance should never be questioned.

Having said that, estimates is serious. Estimates in here and—for me, when I was a staff member—annual report estimates in the other place are incredibly important for oppositions to keep governments to account. I am really pleased to hear the statistics that came out today. From the moments I saw of the hearings, I did not see ministers dodging questions, I did not see too many government questions, as we have heard, and again, on behalf of me and the member for Vasse—hopefully she will allow me to do this—I thank everyone for their cooperation during estimates this year.

Question put and passed.

Estimates Committee B Report — Adoption

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr T.J. Healy): The question is —

That the report of Estimates Committee B be adopted.

Question put and passed.