

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PROCEDURE AND PRIVILEGES

Forty-third Report “Standing Order 5: Days and Times of Meeting; and other miscellaneous matters” — Motion
Resumed from an earlier stage.

HON HELEN MORTON (East Metropolitan) [5.11 pm]: I just want to summarise what I was saying. I am aware that it is unlikely that my speech and that of Hon Nick Goiran or whomever else is going to change people’s views, but I want to make it absolutely clear why this issue is so important. I know that Hon Sue Ellery took offence at my saying, “Yes, you did work”, but my point was that although she was Parliamentary Secretary to the Attorney General; Minister for Health, there are ministers on this side who carry 13 or 14 portfolios. When I was a minister, I carried 16 portfolios. I am not complaining about it other than to say that that is what happens. The member’s team was carrying the load for her when she had the privilege of operating with two portfolios. Other than members on this side of the house, no-one else other than Hon Col Holt has had a portfolio responsibility.

This standing order change is an issue that applies only on Tuesdays. The reason for that is not because Tuesday is the only day when there is no 15-minute break, but that Tuesday is the only day with a four-hour process in which ministers can be involved non-stop. Ministers could be listening to debate on legislation, then have to go straight into committee, then straight to question time and then straight back into committee. This does not have anything whatsoever to do with a cup of tea. Water is always here on the table. This has nothing to do with tea and coffee or whether we all want to have it at the same time; it is about ensuring that a minister has a 15-minute time slot to go to the toilet or to check answers to questions. I found myself in the position quite often. When a minister is covering 15 or 16 portfolios and they have answers coming in not only for their own portfolios, but also for those they represent for other ministers, they are not supposed to answer the questions until they have approved them. If a minister is to approve them, they have to read them—and most likely those answers all come in in the last hour or two prior to question time. If a minister is listening to debate on a piece of legislation or handling legislation during Committee of the Whole House, the only time they have to look at those answers—to read them, to answer them and to sometimes ring advisers and tell them the answers may not be correct and needed to be strengthened or something of that nature—is in that 15-minute break. It would be inappropriate for ministers not to listen to debate on a portfolio they have responsibility for—and I certainly would not walk out of the chamber for 15 minutes during debate on an area I had responsibility for.

Again, I mentioned that during the committee stage, ministers are unable to leave the chamber unless the Chair of Committees and advisers leave, and then there is the ringing of the bells to come back anyway. Then, of course, question time is slotted into the middle of that four hours, and ministers have to check questions, ring advisers and make sure the answers they are about to read out—as Hon Nick Goiran commented, sometimes they have seen them for the first time—do not contain some of the nasty things we do not like in this house like websites. In that case, they have to ask that the question be put on notice or say that the answer is not good enough or that the question will be answered the next day. That is what happens when people do not have those few minutes to check answers. As I said, at the same time, ministers often have to represent up to seven or eight other ministers and give their answers.

I finally reiterate that this is only an issue on Tuesday. Other programmed events for the house on Wednesdays and Thursdays give ministers the opportunity to do those things in the time leading up to question time or when they are about to deal with legislation. These four hours without a break on Tuesdays at the moment put ministers in those difficult situations. As I mentioned, there are now three ministers who handle more than 13 portfolios in the house. They are responsibilities that everybody takes seriously, and we are expected to take them seriously and to provide informed debate. We have to understand the issues we are talking about. Again, that 15-minute break has nothing to do with tea and coffee, nor is there any great need to have it all at the same time; it is about having that tiny bit of a break to enable people to either go to the toilet, if that is what they need to do, to check answers or to get their information together in a way that enables them to make a coherent argument about any of the issues being brought to the house. This will not have such a big effect on this Parliament, because after a couple of days, this Parliament will probably not meet again until the new Parliament. This will be an issue for whichever party is in government after the next election and the house will be worse off for not having something as simple as a 15-minute break.

HON COL HOLT (South West — Parliamentary Secretary) [5.17 pm]: Listening to Hon Helen Morton, I have a great deal of sympathy for what she says, having seen the workload that she had during her time as minister and the many, many hours she spent sitting at the Committee of the Whole House table answering questions. I have a great deal of sympathy for that. I have been here for eight years now, and the Nationals are of the opinion that we will support recommendation 1A. Although there are occasions on which the long four-hour stretch conspires against some ministers, the opinion is that we are happy with the current arrangements—and we continue to support them. We have been through these debates about timing before. We recently tried to

bring back Wednesday evenings for long sitting days and not everyone in this house agreed. It comes down to a very personal opinion about how members work and interact with this place, and how they handle the workload that comes along with those extended roles. The Nationals will support recommendation 1A.

Question put and passed.