

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE — MINISTERS' ATTENDANCE

Point of Order

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Madam President, I seek your advice in relation to standing orders or perhaps even a ruling from you. Standing order 15 refers to questions without notice, not questions without notice of which some notice is given. I note that we have limited opportunity in this house to question ministers without notice because we have only three ministers. One appears to be absent from question time today. My understanding is that we have not been given notice of that minister's absence from question time. Therefore, we are unable to ask that minister a question in the normal way. I understand that the Leader of the Opposition has also not been given advice in relation to the same matter. I seek your advice on how the conventions or standing orders of the house apply with respect to this matter. I think that there have been similar occasions when there have not been ministers present in the house. It is quite unusual for us not to be notified that a minister will be unavailable for question time.

Hon SUE ELLERY: I do not think it is really a point of order, but when we were in opposition, there was an administrative process in place by which notification was issued by the people who assist in the preparation of the answers. From what Hon Martin Aldridge has said today, it would appear to me that that process either has not been put in place or has, on this occasion, failed. I will undertake to re-establish that process—if I need to. I am not sure where responsibility for it lies, but I give the house an undertaking that we will put that system in place.

The PRESIDENT: I thank the Leader of the House for making that contribution, and I am sure she will put in place the arrangement that previously existed. In response to Hon Martin Aldridge, the difficulty is that from time to time ministers are absent from the chamber on urgent parliamentary business. It is not something new; it has happened throughout different governments. I note that today we have parliamentary secretaries in the chamber who represent that particular minister referred to, and we have other ministers who are able to provide a response to the question that would have been asked. I appreciate that the member may have wanted to ask a question without notice. That might be difficult, but it is not an uncommon practice for a minister to be absent for a range of reasons. Today demonstrated that a response was provided for a question of which some notice had been given. The Leader of the House has made a commitment to try to ensure in the future that when a minister is going to be absent, adequate notice will be provided in advance of questions being submitted. Hopefully, that will be of some assistance to you.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Further to the point of order, I ask, in considering my initial request, if that is the case and it relies upon an administrative arrangement, which clearly has not worked this week, is there any compulsion for any minister to turn up to question time?

The PRESIDENT: There is a requirement to have a minister in the chamber to respond to questions. I am going to be making a statement about questions to ministers and parliamentary secretaries in a couple of minutes. Maybe my statement might actually assist you. However, what has happened today is not unusual. Other ministers and parliamentary secretaries are able to fill the gap on 99 per cent of the occasions when questions may be put and a minister is absent for a range of reasons. I think we will just wait and see. Hopefully, that arrangement will be rectified and things will work more smoothly.