

APPROPRIATION (RECURRENT 2016–17) BILL 2016
APPROPRIATION (CAPITAL 2016–17) BILL 2016

Estimates Committees A and B Reports and Minutes — Presentation

MS L.L. BAKER (Maylands) [4.17 pm]: On behalf of the Deputy Speaker, I present to the Legislative Assembly the reports and minutes of Estimates Committees A and B.

[See papers 4216 and 4217.]

Estimates Committee A Report — Adoption

The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms J.M. Freeman): The question is —

That the report of Estimates Committee A be adopted.

MS L.L. BAKER (Maylands) [4.17 pm]: As members are aware, the estimates committees were held from 24 May to 26 May. On each of those days we had two committees sitting—committee A and committee B—from 9.00 am to 10.00 pm. It was quite a timetabling challenge for the staff and I would like to thank them for their contribution, particularly the clerks, parliamentary officers Lachlan Gregory, Rachel Wells and Denis Hippolyte, and all the Legislative Assembly Office staff, as well as Jaclyn Berry and Jeanette Bourke, who put a great deal of effort into making sure that everything ran smoothly. I thank the Deputy Speaker and the Acting Speakers involved, the members for Southern River, Forrestfield, Mirrabooka and Morley, for their contributions, and in particular the members for Geraldton and Murray–Wellington who stepped in to help out. It is quite a demand on members' time, particularly when they are also required to sit on the estimates committees.

Members may be interested to know that a total of 485 opposition questions and 165 government questions were asked. In Estimates Committee A, 250 opposition questions, 81 government questions and 906 follow-up questions were allocated. During Estimates Committee B, 235 opposition questions, 85 government questions and 859 follow-on questions were allocated. The interesting aspect is that during Estimates Committee A, 93 supplementary information requests were made and all have been answered. During Estimates Committee B, 96 supplementary information requests were made and all have been answered. I thank members for their cooperation, and I commend these reports to the house.

MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah) [4.19 pm]: I think, being opposition Whip, it is important I make a contribution to the debate on the estimates committee reports each year. I think I might be the longest serving opposition Whip in the history of the Western Australian Parliament—I am not sure; I might check that out—because I have been Whip for eight years.

Mr R.F. Johnson: Certainly the best!

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Absolutely!

I acknowledge the contributions of opposition members; I am sure that if the government Whip makes a contribution, he will acknowledge his members. I also acknowledge members who make themselves available at short notice if there is a need to be transferred into a committee hearing due to the absence or illness of others. Madam Acting Speaker, are we debating Estimates Committees A and B concurrently?

The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms J.M. Freeman): The question at the moment is that the report of estimates A be adopted.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: That is good; okay.

The ACTING SPEAKER: We have not got to the question that estimates B be adopted, but —

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I will make my comments on committee A, and I will hold off making my comments about committee B until we deal with that motion.

Having been opposition Whip and taken part in the estimates process for the past 15 or 16 years, I want to make a couple of observations. The first is that there was a cabinet reshuffle earlier this year that resulted in existing ministers taking on new responsibilities and shedding a portfolio or two, and the addition of new ministers—namely the Ministers for Child Protection and Disability Services. The Deputy Premier also became Minister for Women's Interests. One of the things that concerns me somewhat is that in some committee A hearings large divisions were able to be allocated only, effectively, three hours. I want to refer, first of all, to the fire and emergency services division that was held on Tuesday in committee A. The Minister for Emergency Services also had responsibility for the State Emergency Management Committee, the secretariat of fisheries, Corrective Services and the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services. One of the disappointing things is that quite often in estimates hearings we find that time goes so quickly that we have to start to ration the time, and

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I do not think we give proper and due regard to some important portfolio areas. Using that example, I think that is why it is important to understand, from a procedural perspective, that ministers are briefed, if you like, or encouraged to ensure that they allow the acceptance of supplementary information. Quite often, particularly a member of the opposition will request supplementary information. On a number of occasions in a number of the division hearings I attended I did not want the minister to give me a waffling answer, so I simply put my question on record and asked for a supplementary answer because I wanted to save time. Indeed, some of the requests for answers, particularly of a supplementary nature, required, if they were recited verbatim by the minister, significant time. The aim of estimates should never be to try to play out the time.

I will give credit to this year's process in that the member for Maylands, who read the report on behalf of the Deputy Speaker, highlighted that the opposition was able to ask a significant number of questions. I acknowledge that. Whether the answers were to the point or what we were after is up for assessment by others. The point is that three hours is not long enough for divisions in which a minister is handling significant portfolios. Given the bushfire disasters et cetera that have occurred in fire and emergency services in the last financial year, the issues around Corrective Services and the burgeoning prison muster, and issues related to the reasons behind increased incarcerations, and of course given that the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services plays a significant role, I do not think three hours was long enough for that particular portfolio area. Included in that was the issue of fisheries. An important fisheries bill on the management of our state's fisheries will be debated in this place later this week. Five significant divisions had to be shared over a three-hour period.

Hopefully, I might be answering some questions next year during estimates hearings rather than asking them. I would not like to be too presumptuous —

Mr R.F. Johnson: I think you probably will.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I thank the member for Hillarys for his confidence!

I think it is important for the minister to understand why supplementary questions are asked, particularly if they are asked early on. If I am fortunate enough to be answering questions next year, members will not find me being verbose. I could never be accused of that! It would hurt me if I was ever accused of being someone who was overly verbose in this place and I think that would be an attack on my character; I am sure I would be appropriately aghast!

Let us look at the divisions handled by the Premier on the Tuesday between 2.00 pm and 6.00 pm, for which an extra hour had been allotted. Given that the Premier, of course, is the premier minister of the cabinet, it was appropriate for a minimum of four hours to be allocated to the portfolios the Premier has responsibility for. Bear in mind that the Premier's portfolios changed very recently before the estimates hearings, after which he took on the important portfolio of WA tourism. One of the problems with not having a minister in this place, particularly a minister with an important portfolio, is that we are left to the determination of the parliamentary secretary or indeed the nominated government member who is to act on behalf of the minister in the other place.

After the dinner break on the first Tuesday of the estimates committee hearings, the member for Joondalup as parliamentary secretary represented the Minister for Planning. The member for West Swan may comment on that, but again, sometimes the heads of the parliamentary secretaries, the want-to-be ministers, expand rapidly during the estimates hearings and they see it as their opportunity potentially to demonstrate their knowledge of the portfolio when they should defer to the relevant public servant, who is in the best place to provide the answer to a question from a committee member. We had a few examples in which the parliamentary secretaries or those representing the minister in the other place during the estimates committee hearings were perhaps of the view that they could stonewall in some cases when questions were asked. I must admit that I was not in any hearings in Estimates Committee A when there were any lively exchanges. That is because of my nature. I am not an adversarial person. I am a lover, not a fighter. I did not see any fireworks.

Ms L.L. Baker: Didn't you get thrown out last year?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Yes, I did. There was a rush of blood to the head. I was obviously not well that evening a few years back. Perhaps I was tired and emotional, and I was kicked out by one of my own party members. The member for Albany was in the chair and he threw me out. However, I might say that I got the front page of the *Mandurah Mail*. Some might say that was my intention, but I could not possibly make a comment on that at all!

Mr P.B. Watson: The headline was in the paper before I even threw you out.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: That is not true. I will leave the important elements of the Treasury division in Estimates Committee A on Wednesday to the members for Victoria Park and West Swan to comment on, and

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indeed I will leave the divisions for WA Health, the Department of Culture and the Arts and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to the member for Kwinana, if he wishes to comment.

Mr W.J. Johnston: There is no minister here.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: That is dangerous. We know what happened last time the government did not have anyone in the chairs on the other side. Oh dear! The member for Hillarys is salivating. I would hate to be the cause of another going home early. It has happened the first time this millennium; it could happen again. I will make a foghorn noise! I do not know how Hansard will write that. Where is the Leader of the House? Watch out! There is no-one here. The member for Belmont may not know how precarious the situation is.

Ms R. Saffioti: Offer her something.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I will offer her something. We can offer her anything. There will be plenty on offer. I will leave that to my learned friends. There is still no minister in the house. Goodness gracious! I might sit down.

Mr R.F. Johnson: They're going against the rules, you know? They are supposed to have a minister in the house.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Exactly. I think it demonstrates the chaos and confusion of this government. We seek him here, we seek him there. There is the Leader of the House. Did the Leader of the House hear my very good impression of a foghorn?

Mr J.H.D. Day: Unfortunately, I missed it. But it does not sound like I missed much.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I could always give the Leader of the House another rendition if there is a chance.

I want to go back to speaking about Estimates Committee A on Thursday. I do not know whether the member for Gosnells wants to do this, but in the section relating to the Minister for Environment we were expected to deal with eight divisions. They are all very important. One of the sad things—I have seen this happen on numerous occasions now because I have sat in on the environmental portfolio in opposition and as the minister, of course—is that we never get to some of the important areas. For example, we quite often do not do the Perth Zoological Parks Authority or the Botanic Gardens and Parks Authority, although we had an interesting interchange about the proposed chairlift and the Kings Park Board was apparently very impressed with my comments. Is that right, member for Gosnells?

Mr C.J. Tallentire: The Friends of Kings Park.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: That is right. The board may have felt otherwise, but the Friends of Kings Park were very conscious. We were expected to deal with eight divisions in three hours. This was an example of our problem. Some negotiation allowed us more time because last year the Department of Sport and Recreation had one hour. Given the importance of the stadium project and others, we had to negotiate to extend the Department of Sport and Recreation division to at least an hour and a half. Given the nature of the projects related to that, particularly the stadium and others, that really was not a lot of time. We also had to negotiate to make sure that the Water Corporation and the Department of Water divisions were given appropriate time.

Next year, whomever may be looking at this, I think we need to—it will be up to what the new government after the next election decides to allocate to portfolio areas—note that when questions are asked and requests are made for supplementary information, there is an understanding that that is so that we do not eat into the limited time available to the committee. Indeed, when a parliamentary secretary is representing the minister from the other place, the parliamentary secretary is not expected to answer particularly technical questions. Therefore, it is appropriate that the director general or the appropriate public servant who is accompanying the minister, and indeed who is there to assist in answering questions, is given that opportunity so that questions are answered appropriately.

I want to finish by thanking members of the opposition. When appropriate we were also able to accommodate other members of the house who needed to ask important questions and have those questions asked. I want to thank the members of the committee and, of course, my very hardworking assistant or deputy opposition Whip, who receives no remuneration for her role, but she gets a lot of appreciation from me.

MS R. SAFFIOTI (West Swan) [4.39 pm]: I have a few comments on the Appropriation (Recurrent 2016–17) Bill 2016 and Appropriation (Capital 2016–17) Bill 2016. I sat through many of the hearings in Estimates Committee A. I was there for the divisions for the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, the Metropolitan Redevelopment Authority, the Department of Planning and the Department of Sport and Recreation with my colleague the member for Albany. This was the first time that we did not have the

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Minister for Planning in this place and we had the member for Joondalup doing a representative role, which I thought he did pretty well. He was not too bad at trying to keep—what is the word?—the crease.

Mr B.S. WYATT: Nightwatchman?

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: No, he was trying to occupy the crease. I was disappointed that the Minister for Culture and the Arts did not retain the planning portfolio. There were a lot of questions to be asked about his involvement in the opening of the BHP Billiton Water Park at Elizabeth Quay that, unfortunately, we did not get to ask directly in this place. As I said, I thought that the parliamentary secretary did a pretty good job of dealing with the issues promptly and not trying to occupy the crease by any stretch of the imagination.

I also thank the chairs, and in particular I note the Deputy Speaker, the member for Kalgoorlie, who I thought did a pretty good job and was very fair in allocating questions. Now that she is no longer running for Parliament, I can say these things! I genuinely think that in my time in this place she always seemed to be very fair in that role.

I want to continue my point about members occupying the crease. We saw a couple of instances—the Department of Sport and Recreation was probably the worst—in which ministers basically avoided questions at all costs. Even worse, the Minister for Sport and Recreation, in a sense, brought in two bodyguards—the member for Pilbara and the member for North West Central. What happened there was actually quite patronising of the minister. We were trying to ask some pretty straightforward questions, such as the cost of the stadium, and we had these crazy interjections from these two characters on our left saying how dare we question the minister! It was quite patronising that the minister thought she would require these two D-grade bodyguards in the chamber. I was perplexed at why these members would do that.

Mr P.B. Watson: If you're going to have bodyguards, you wouldn't take those two!

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Exactly, member for Albany! I have seen some dodgy bouncers in my time, but those two would be the dodgiest!

In occupying the crease, some of those dorothies were completely over the top and not necessary. Ultimately, the role of the estimates hearing is to get factual information on the budget. It should not be something that ministers fear and so do not want to answer questions. I was surprised about some of the answers we received. I listened to the report by the member for Maylands, and I think there may have been a mix-up somewhere, because the answers came back a week earlier than normal. They should have come back last Friday, 10 June—that has always been process—but they came back a week earlier. Although I noted that the member for Maylands said that every question was answered, in many instances the answer was: we have not had time to prepare the answer so we will table the information later. I think there was a stuff-up on the government side and it got the dates wrong. Supplementary information normally comes back the Friday before we come back to Parliament, but it came back a week before that. That being said, many of my questions did not have answers provided, because the departments did not have time to prepare them. I have five or six responses in which departments have said that they did not have time to prepare the answers and they will table them when they are ready, which is not ideal with supplementary information. I will go through that in more detail during the third reading stage.

As I said, I found this the most productive of all the estimates hearings I have attended. They always land on my birthday, and maybe one birthday, while my children are here eating my favourite Miss Maud's green princess cake, we will find out the true cost of Perth Stadium. I have sat here on a number of my birthdays trying to find out the full cost of the stadium, yet the taxpayers of Western Australia still do not have the magic number that the opposition has been striving to get, budget process after budget process. The minister said she had prepared a fact sheet, but she did not seem to know what was in the fact sheet. She was quite belittled by her answers—I am trying to expose my Treasury background! It was a frustrating process, but I congratulate the chairs, in particular the Deputy Speaker, the member for Kalgoorlie, who did a very good job when I was in the chamber and she was managing affairs.

MR W.J. JOHNSTON (Cunnington) [4.43 pm]: I join my Labor colleagues in congratulating and thanking staff of the Assembly for working so hard. I imagine it is not their favourite week, being here late each night. People might not realise that there is more work in an estimates week than in a normal sitting week because, of course, we are sitting from nine in the morning until 10 o'clock at night Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, so chamber staff have to be here more than they would on an ordinary sitting day. We all know that committee staff also come over to help the chamber staff. We thank them and appreciate the dedicated service they give to us for the week. Equally to the staff of Parliament House are the security staff and dining room staff, who have to service a small group of people. Sometimes there are only about 15 of us in the building, but they still need to make the services of the building available to us because they do not know what we are going to need while we are here. With those thank-yous, I move on to some of the information that we look at.

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The purpose of the estimates hearings is to try to delve into the budget and get more information. People outside the chamber do not realise that it is the only time that members can ask follow-up questions on specific information. In this chamber we have the set piece of question time with six questions for the opposition each day the Parliament is sitting, but that is the theatre of Parliament more than trying to extract information. Members can get questions in the other chamber if they are lucky enough to find a member who will use one of their questions to ask a minister in our chamber information, but, again, we cannot follow up on that question. Of course, written questions take a month to answer and if members want to ask a follow-up question, it is a month later. The estimates hearings are the only chance members get to ask for information and then to follow up on that. I know that government members feign anger because the opposition is asking follow-up questions, but, of course, that is the purpose of the estimates process. If the government wanted a shorter estimates process, the minister could simply answer the questions, which would be a bit shocking!

I want to draw members' attention to a couple of things that we found out through the estimates process in Estimates Committee A. The first goes to the Water Corporation's handling of the Minnivale Reservoir incident in which workers were exposed to asbestos. Last year, the minister dined out extensively in the media criticising the member for Bassendean for drawing the community's attention to what happened at Minnivale. I never understood why the behaviour of the member for Bassendean was questioned because, quite frankly, he was doing exactly what a member of Parliament should do on finding that an agency has potentially exposed people to deadly asbestos: he raised it in the public. In fact, I was surprised that a couple of journalists commented to me outside the chamber that what the member for Bassendean had done was a bit unfair. That surprised me because it seemed to be exactly what a member should do. On the particular day last October, I also asked the Minister for Water a question and a follow-up supplementary question. My question was driving at the timing between the minister finding out about the Minnivale matter and its being referred to WorkSafe. I asked those questions again in committee A, and, funnily enough, the minister was not able to answer them. As members know, there is a process by which we can seek supplementary information. The member for West Swan referred to the fact that we got these answers back on 3 June—just a week after the committee hearings. I refer to some information I got back on the Minnivale question—supplementary information A87 and A88. The supplementary information states —

Question: Mr Johnson asked when did the Water Corp first realise that the material at Minnivale may contain asbestos? We know the date of the incident at Minnivale. When did the Water Corp first form an expectation that it might have included asbestos? From that date, when was Worksafe advised?

The answer we received states —

On 11 September 2014, —

I think that should be 2015, but the answer is delivered as 2014 —

an environmental consultant visited the Minnivale Reservoir site as part of an inspection program and took samples of the fascia panels and mastic. Samples confirmed the presence of asbestos and the Water Corporation's Asbestos Asset Register was updated on 10 October 2014 to include Minnivale Reservoir.

Worksafe was advised on 16 October 2015.

Again, I note that the first two dates in the answer is 2014. Of course, if it was 2014, that is an absolute outrage. If people at the Water Corporation do not resign for not having advised WorkSafe for over a year, there is no accountability in health and safety in this state. If it is 2015, as I suspect, why it would take nearly a week to advise that WorkSafe needs to be further investigated because, again, that is a breach of the law because an employer has an obligation to advise WorkSafe as soon as practicable after discovering something like this terrible situation. In any event, at least we now know that it took the Water Corporation at least a week and perhaps a year and a week, depending on whether those dates are correct.

The other question I asked, supplementary information A88, was: when was the first occasion that the minister's office was advised of the issue at Minnivale? The answer stated —

On 12 October 2015 the Minister and staff were verbally informed that there may have been an asbestos related issue at Minnivale reservoir. This was confirmed in writing on 15 October 2015.

Let us get this straight. The minister was advised before WorkSafe. Let us think about this. What sort of executive is running the Water Corporation that they thought it was more important to tell the minister about an asbestos problem than to tell WorkSafe? What sort of ridiculous thoughts are in the minister's mind if she thought it acceptable and defended her conduct in this chamber when she took four days to sort out the media strategy rather than dealing with the health and safety of workers? If the minister does not come into this

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chamber and explain why she deceived the people of Western Australia, we have a serious problem. A media strategy was more important than saving workers' lives. We had the nonsense of the Treasurer in the matter of public interest today saying that if we do not build Roe 8, we will kill people. Here we have the Water Corporation exposing people to asbestos and it dealt with the media strategy before it talked to WorkSafe. It is a disgrace. I want to hear from the chief executive of the Water Corporation why she allowed her organisation to deal with the media strategy before she dealt with WorkSafe. I want to ask the chief executive of the Water Corporation: Where is the WorkSafe final report? Why has it not been published? We have been going for months now and we do not know the answer to any of these questions.

The minister needs to get off her proverbial and do her job. Her job is not to run the Water Corporation; her job is to make sure that the Water Corporation is being run properly. If the board of the Water Corporation is not holding its chief executive to account, its members should all quit; they should all resign today. What has happened is an outrage. This is not a bad reflection on the member for Bassendean; it is a disgrace that people are sitting down at the Water Corporation drawing a salary. As I said, it is not the minister's job to run the Water Corporation. I am not saying that she should resign; I am saying that she should do her damn job because she has not up until now. Up until now, she has done nothing but run a spin strategy. People were exposed to asbestos—a deadly carcinogen that leads to the terrible death of workers. We are talking about the third wave of asbestosis and mesothelioma now. This is a primary exposure and it took the Water Corporation four days after telling the minister about the problem before it thought to do its job—its lawful requirement to tell WorkSafe. It is a disgrace. How anybody at the Water Corporation can keep their job after this display is beyond me. If the minister does her job from now, she should keep it. The fact is that she has not been prepared to do her job for one day between 12 October 2015 and today. She should hang her head in shame. She is getting paid an awful lot of money and she is not doing her job. This is a disgrace. This is what we call a cover-up. To deal with the media strategy before putting the interests of working people first is a disgrace. It is a cover-up. It was wrong then and it is wrong now. Somebody has to be held accountable for this and it should be the chief executive officer of the Water Corporation. It is absolutely outrageous that the chief executive of the Water Corporation should tell the minister's office but not tell WorkSafe. That is a breach of the law, quite frankly, and she cannot keep her job after that. How can she possibly keep her job when she broke the law? I would like to know that. What the heck was the minister doing? She came into this place on 22 October 2015, I think, and criticised the member for Bassendean for exposing the cover-up and the fact that the government was not doing its job and that the Water Corporation was derelict in its simple responsibility to workers. Somehow the member for Bassendean has to apologise. Oh my God; where are we in this world when the person who exposes the truth gets criticised and the minister who does nothing gets protected? Why can the chief executive officer of the Water Corporation deal with the media issues with the minister's office but cannot even get on the phone to ring WorkSafe, which she is legally required to do? It is an absolute and utter outrage and the government needs to fix this problem and fix it straight away.

I want to move on to a couple of other things that we found out in Estimates Committee A. We dealt with the Department of Parks and Wildlife. Of all the ministers in the chamber, the Minister for Environment is the one who does the least amount of work, and everybody understands that. I always love the fact that the minister likes cutting ribbons but he does not like doing any work. We saw that when the minister admitted that he had given environmental approvals that he knew were invalid, but we will leave that aside because that is not what we are on about today. The minister likes to talk to the public about prescribed burning. I asked the minister a very simple question. Members can read *Hansard* if they want to have a look. It was very amusing. He talked about prescribed burning. I asked him what he had achieved compared with his targets. He gave a long answer. I kept asking him what he had achieved. I did not ask about any of that; I asked him what he achieved. He went on and gave another long answer. I took a point of order. We ended up getting the information I asked for. He is happy to put out so many media releases about prescribed burning. The Treasurer loves talking about prescribed burning. When he was a backbencher, he once spent half an hour in this chamber talking about the need for prescribed burning. All I was asking the Minister for Environment was what he has achieved. Again, through supplementary information A76, I finally have the answer to my question, which states —

Mr W.J. Johnston requested the annual total, the annual achieved and the underachievement for the last six years of the controlled burn program.

The minister became the Minister for Environment after the election in 2013. In 2012–13, there was a prescribed burning target of 200 000 hectares and the achievement was 23 468 hectares, so less than 12 per cent of the target was achieved. In 2013–14, the target again was 200 000 hectares and the achievement was 78 234 hectares, or 39 per cent. In 2014–15, the target was 200 000 hectares and 147 082 hectares was achieved, or 73.5 per cent. Never once has the government got anywhere near its target. Indeed, if we go back over the answers for 2009–10, 2010–11 and 2011–12, there is only one year, 2009–10, when the target was achieved. For

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six years the government had a 1.2 million-hectare target and it has achieved 700 000 hectares of that, which is barely half the target. I am sure there are many reasons for the government not being able to achieve the targets, but the question is: why is the government happy to run around and put out media releases when it is not prepared to show what has been achieved?

I want to finish because a couple of other members want to speak. My final question is about the biodiversity audit database. Apparently, it is the only database in the world that cannot output an ASCII file. I cannot believe that all this money was spent on a database that is unique. In the entire world, every other database can output an ASCII file, but the government of Western Australia has apparently bought a database that cannot.

MR R.H. COOK (Kwinana — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [5.00 pm]: I want to make a few comments about the Estimates Committee A report. In my time in Parliament I have seen the estimates committee go through a range of iterations. I have had different feelings of bitter disappointment with the process, and in other years it has been quite a forthright and useful exchange of information. The early days, which would be 2009 and 2010, will be known as the years of the horror chairing, when different interpretations by different chairs were made around the way estimates was run and whether someone could have a supplementary or follow-up question. There were different interpretations of these things and also different interpretations about how much opportunity the lead questioner from the opposition had to ask questions. In the following years, there was significant improvement amongst the chairpeople and they had a consistent understanding about the way estimates would work. I want to take the first few minutes of my speech this afternoon to commend the way in which the meetings of Estimates Committee A were chaired. I thought they were done in good spirit and with genuine commitment to the democratic process. There were not the usual churlish or sniping responses from the Chair about persistent questioning. There was an appreciation that the estimates committee hearings are an opportunity for opposition members to delve into the detail of the budget papers and build up a better understanding of the way programs work, their effectiveness and the resources allocated to them. In a lot of respects, it is as much in the government's interest that the information be forthcoming and government members conduct themselves in an open and accountable fashion as it is for opposition members because the more information we have, the better we can be in providing a constructive role as Her Majesty's opposition.

From that point of view, Estimates Committee A was chaired and managed very well. I put on record my appreciation of the staff—not only the chamber staff, but also the staff throughout the building—who put on a fairly logistically significant event. A whole range of public servants came into this place to facilitate a process. If we think about the size of the Department of Health's budget, there are no fewer than a dozen advisers who all command significant salaries and, of course, we know that the director general of Health conducts a very significant salary. We harness a great bank of public sector resources to undertake the estimates committee process. For that reason, if we are going to undertake the estimates committee process, it is important that we do it properly and that it serves a purpose to make sure that democracy is not only seen to be done, but also is done. That takes me to my next point about the effectiveness of the estimates process in providing the opposition with enough time to cross-examine the government.

In the years after 2009 and 2010 when we had that difficulty, perhaps, with the chairing and so on—I will not reflect on that because all the Chairs, particularly you, Mr Acting Speaker (Mr I.M. Britza), are extremely good and fair—there was a great opportunity to go into a number of questions in great detail. We were able to get off Broadway, if you like, in the health issues that we discussed. We did not focus on just those health issues that would serve as our key message for the day or the basis of a media release; the members of Parliament assembled were allowed to indulge in cross-examining in greater detail areas of the health budget that were, of course, important but perhaps did not attract the same level of media interest because they were not of great moment at that time. Nevertheless, the information we discovered was extremely important. I was surprised at how little opportunity there was to get beyond more than about half a dozen questions about health. It is true that for the questions we did ask, we were allowed to drill into some of the detail, but we found that the whole process was over and done with in the blink of an eye. As the Treasurer and certainly the shadow Treasurer have pointed out on many occasions, Health now accounts for 30 per cent of the budget. For that reason, I found that having just two and a half hours of the entire estimates committee period to spend on the Department of Health's budget was manifestly inadequate to get into the detail of the subject matter. Although we are used to the minister perhaps spending a little more time at the crease answering questions at a fairly leisurely pace and getting frustrated with that, we found ourselves getting frustrated with the public servants who were providing very useful information because we were conscious of the fact that we were going to be denied the opportunity to spend any time on the portfolio. The Minister for Health also undertook the estimates committee hearing for the Department of Culture and the Arts, of course, and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs between two o'clock and six o'clock. Quite frankly, that was just not enough time to undertake a proper examination of the Health budget. I came away from the estimates process with a sense of if we are going to do estimates, we should do it properly and allow for a proper dig, or extensive cross-examination of the minister and the public

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servants to make sure that we have a better understanding of the way the budget has come together. It is not because we are trying to find some sort of “gotcha!” moment on the government; that rarely happens nowadays. It is so that we can make sure we are discharging our responsibilities as members of Parliament to hold the government to account. If we are not going to do it properly—if we are going to spend just two and a half hours on 30 per cent of the budget—let us give it away and reinvent the estimates committee process. Perhaps we should have a joint sitting of estimates for the lower house and upper house in which we can send people away to undertake a proper cross-examination of the budget, utilise the services of more members of Parliament, spend more time on a particular budget area and properly go about our responsibilities as MPs. If we are saying that a two-and-a-half-hour dig into the health budget is a proper exercise of the Parliament, we are kidding ourselves. I do not mind if, at the end of the day, we decide that it is not working and we can find some other way of doing it, but let us not kid ourselves in thinking that such a small period of time on a single portfolio is an adequate way of discharging our responsibilities to the taxpayers. I, for one, was quite amazed at how little time we dedicated to that area. As the process went on, the member for Midland, as the shadow Minister for Culture and the Arts, was given complete rein over the time allocated for the culture and arts budget because it was obvious even to government members that there just would not be enough time for any level of questioning. I found that to be a disappointing aspect of this year’s budget estimates hearings.

I must say, I am used to the situation in which we ask the health minister about a particular aspect of mental health hospital infrastructure and the Minister for Health says, “No, no, I don’t deal with that; you need to ask the Minister for Mental Health.” We then wait with great anticipation for the mental health portfolio discussion, and the Minister for Mental Health says, “Oh, sorry, that’s mental health infrastructure; you’ll have to go back to the Minister for Health for that particular answer.” I am used to that, but I am very grateful to the Minister for Disability Services, who actually offered me the best answer I got to a question about a mental health program in a tertiary hospital—an eating disorder program; she just happened to know a bit about it, and answered the question in her section of the estimates process.

That was very pleasing, but again, I think we sell ourselves short in the estimates process. We assemble an awful lot of public sector resources in the number of staff we bring in here and the hours that we keep them in this place. We use up an awful amount of resources in bringing committee staff across to assist in putting together the estimates program for our benefit. In that sense, it is an indulgence of the Parliament, so I think we have an obligation to do it properly and make sure it is done properly, even if that means more work for the opposition and the government because we all have to apply ourselves to the detail of the budget. That ultimately is for the good of democracy rather than what might be seen to be simply a claim by the opposition to spend more time in front of the government. It is a very, very worthwhile exercise, and not just for opposition members, although it does mean that we get to become much more acquainted with the budget and the way it works; it is also an invaluable process for members of the government backbench, because they are forced to familiarise themselves with the detail of the budget and, from that point of view, it is a good learning exercise for them. It is also an important part of stress-testing the government’s budget to make sure it has done the thinking necessary to make it a good budget.

Mr C.J. Barnett: Maybe we should have rolling estimates that go on for three or four months, agency by agency.

Mr R.H. COOK: Yes, and obviously we are all under pressure, because it is an appropriation bill, to get the process over and done with, but I think we sell ourselves short by forcing it through in such a short time. It is an invaluable opportunity for all members of Parliament to be involved in that process.

From that point of view, I just wanted to put on record my appreciation of the public servants who joined us and also to the government ministers who, much more so than on previous occasions, were happy to come forward with supplementary answers to questions and even to assist members in compiling the questions to be answered to make sure they were put together in a competent way. I found it to be a good process, but was just incredibly frustrated with the time limitations that we impose on ourselves.

MR C.J. TALLENTIRE (Gosnells) [5.14 pm]: I rise to add my voice to the views that members have expressed on the operation of Estimates Committee A. Let me begin by saying that I was very concerned that my portfolio area had only three hours, from 2.00 pm until 5.00 pm, to go through eight divisions. Admittedly, some of those divisions were in the heritage portfolio, but it meant that there was a very significant time constraint on us and therefore it was not particularly helpful when we had government members asking lengthy questions that had apparently been prepared by the agency and the minister was able to give a long answer that really could have been the subject of an exchange of papers. I do not think that is a good use of our time, especially when something like eight divisions are compacted into a three-hour period.

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I will return to this matter in subsequent debate around the budget, but I was concerned that there was, on the part of some public servants, a lack of knowledge of their portfolios. We invite them here because they add to the detail; they have the capacity to be across the whole detail of a portfolio area in a manner that is way beyond the level of detail in which a minister may be able to report to us. Unfortunately, in my area it was very disappointing to see the director general of the Department of Environment Regulation make a thousandfold error on the state's greenhouse gas emissions. We ask that the public service be expert; we really expect the public service to have those sorts of very basic facts and figures accurately in their minds, and if they are challenged, that they accept that they might have to go back, but in this case, when the director general of the Department of Environment Regulation told me that the state's greenhouse gas emissions were 86 000 million tonnes, it was a very serious error that he seemed to be quite oblivious to. What is more, the minister was oblivious to it as well. I went back and said, "Look, are you sure you've got that figure right? I think you're barking up the wrong tree there." I went back again and again and again—six times—and on six occasions he maintained that the figure he had in front of him was 86 000 million tonnes of CO₂. That is ridiculous. It just shows that he had not followed at all any of the global discussion on greenhouse gas emissions, which shows of course that the government is not resourcing that agency to have the necessary expertise. I am concerned that we do not always have the experts in front of us. We expect the public service to come and support the minister and to back up the minister with accurate detail, but just going on that one example—I could turn to some other examples in that portfolio as well—when the public service gets it wrong, we see an erosion of expertise within the agencies, and that is very serious for us. It means we do not have a good basis for decision-making.

Question put and passed.

Estimates Committee B Report — Adoption

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr I.M. Britza): The question is —

That the report of Estimates Committee B be adopted.

MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah) [5.17 pm]: I will be very brief. I do not wish to hold things up because we want to get onto the substantive third reading debate at 5.30 pm; there are some members who will not be able to be here after the dinner break.

Estimates Committee B was, of course, conducted in the other place. Very briefly, the comments I would like to make relate also to timing, particularly with regard to the time allocated to the regional development portfolio. This is a difficult one because there are essentially 14 divisions dealt with under the regional development portfolio. There are 12 divisions for the broader regional development area and nine relating to the nine development commissions. Division 22 is allocated to the lands portfolio and division 23 to the Western Australian Land Information Authority. I have sat on this committee a number of times. I believe that not enough time is given to the regional development commissions. That means that, unfortunately, we have to rush through and deal with the development commissions in a very brief and fleeting way.

Another issue is Minister Harvey's portfolio area of Women's Interests. This issue arose in Estimates Committee B on Tuesday, 24 May. We have found on numerous occasions that our capacity to ask questions of the Minister for Women's Interests is not accommodated by the estimates committee process. That is bad. This issue has been highlighted to government on numerous occasions not only by the member for Girrawheen when she was the shadow Minister for Women's Interests, but also now by the member for Fremantle as the shadow minister. It is very frustrating when important issues associated with the status of women and women's interests cannot be answered by the minister responsible. That is a grave problem, and the government needs to address that in some way. I suggest that, at the very least, women's interests should be dealt with in the same way as we deal with off-budget agencies such as WA Treasury Corporation and the Insurance Commission of Western Australia. If no division can be found within which members of this place have the capacity to ask questions in estimates of the Minister for Women's Interests, we should create that capacity. In the past, we have been told that question time gives us the opportunity to ask questions of the Minister for Women's Interests. That is all very well. However, if members have questions about women's interests, they should have the right during budget estimates to ask those questions of the minister responsible. The current minister responsible is Minister Harvey, yet for the last eight years we have not been able to have a question related to women's interests answered by the minister. That is a slight on the estimates committee process.

I want to refer also to the divisions under the portfolios of the Attorney General. Given that the Attorney General is in the other place, Minister Harvey was the responsible minister for those divisions. I reiterate the comments that I made about Estimates Committee A. A minister representing should not try to stonewall. If a public servant is available who is able to answer the question, the question should be referred to that person to answer.

MS J.M. FREEMAN (Mirrabooka) [5.23 pm]: I want to speak briefly about Estimates Committee B and the Attorney General's portfolio of Commerce. I have carriage of that shadow portfolio responsibility. I congratulate

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the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Commerce for his efforts during the estimates committee process. I also congratulate the 10 advisers from the Department of Commerce who came to answer questions. That goes to show the broad scope that is covered by Commerce. Commerce deals with, for example, the buying of goods and ensuring the safety of goods; safety in our workplaces; the capacity of our workplaces to provide fairness and equity; energy safety; the regulation and delivery of building services; and tenancy disputes and advice. If we think about it, Commerce probably covers the areas of greatest concern in our community. Therefore, it should be of great concern that the Department of Commerce is suffering serious cuts to its staffing. That came out during the estimates committee process, not only on the day, but also through supplementary information. It was evident during the debate on the Commerce division that a group of dedicated officers are suffering from the loss of positions, particularly in labour relations.

It is also of great concern that although the parliamentary secretary did a good job and often referred the question to an adviser so that we could get a direct answer, we did not have the capacity to hold the Attorney General and Minister for Commerce responsible, because that minister is in the other place. I therefore concur with the suggestion by the member for Kwinana that instead of the Legislative Assembly holding its estimates committees in this place and the Legislative Council holding its estimates committee in the other place, we should think about how we can best conduct the estimates committee process to the benefit of the people we represent. We should think about how we can make the best use of budgetary resources and conduct budget estimates in more of an across-house situation, perhaps by way of a joint standing committee that is held over a longer period of time, such as the Premier has suggested.

The member for Mandurah talked about women's interests. There has been no action by this government on the gender pay gap. We were unable to question the Minister for Women's Interests about her advocacy around this very important issue to women, not only during their working lives and in being able to support their families, but also for their retirement incomes. It is interesting that the Minister for Women's Interests is separate from the Minister for Community Services, yet the Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Interests was able to represent women's interests through his Treasury portfolio. I see that I am going to get the wind-up. In terms of the Attorney General's division during the estimates committee hearing, I suggest that we all look very closely at the appalling cuts to legal aid and what that means for justice and equity in the communities that we represent. I would like to thank all of the officers and the parliamentary secretary for the running of Estimates Committee B.

Question put and passed.