

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL — SITTING HOURS

Motion

HON ROBYN McSWEENEY (South West) [11.44 am] — without notice: I move —

That this Council discuss the Legislative Council sitting times with a view to changing them.

Today I want to have a good discussion about changing our Legislative Council sitting times. I believe I am being very brave now that my very good friend Hon Norman Moore has retired, and I doubt that a discussion such as this would have ever seen the light of day if Hon Norman Moore was still in the house. Those who know him would understand that after 35 years in this house, he did not like change. As the longest serving female in the Liberal Party and in the house, and having sat many long tedious hours in this chamber, I have finally come to realise that the hours that we sit are very silly hours. Why do we sit these times? We need to modernise. Our many new members have had some time to reflect on the sitting times and no doubt they find sitting here after 10.00 pm rather ridiculous. This place in historical times was once full of old men —

Hon Sue Ellery: There's still a few.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: That is very uncharitable of Hon Kate Doust to say that.

Hon Sue Ellery: I am happy to own it; it was me.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: It was Hon Sue Ellery.

Now we have equal numbers of men and women and the average age of members is younger. However, I am getting older and the sitting times are getting longer, so it seems. This is for not only members of Parliament, but also parliamentary staff who are on call to look after the house when we sit.

I have used the words “tedious hours” because it is a well-known fact that the body slows down at night and the brain is not as alert as it is during the day, although after listening to some of the comments that are made in here day after day, some people may say that is not the case.

I have made a speech in this place at 2.20 am. What a ridiculous time to make a speech—20 past two in the morning! Who was listening? Nobody was listening. The longest I have ever sat in this house in the 12 years I have been here is to 3.00 in the morning. Hon Simon O'Brien, who has been here 16 years, as has Hon Ljiljana Ravlich, will have no doubt sat much longer. President Hon Barry House has been here longer than all of us and has probably sat many times around-the-clock. I have left this discussion open so that all members can get up to speak if they wish to and give the powers that be an idea of what times the house should sit. I have my own ideas and I will now put them to the house.

On Tuesday, we sit at 3.00 pm because we have party room meetings in the morning, but I do not see why we should have to leave it until 3.00 pm when we can sit at 1.30 pm, which would allow for members to eat lunch and then come into this house. Dinner does not have to go for one and a half hours. Why do we need one and a half hours for dinner? One hour is long enough. If members have guests or family members attending, that can be catered for. The house can still continue to operate. That is a two-hour saving. Instead of finishing at 9.45 pm and having 40 minutes of members' statements, bringing the time to 10.25 pm, we can bring it back to 7.45 pm and finish at the reasonable time of 8.25 pm. We take 10 minutes for each member's statement each night. This could easily be five minutes, which is long enough. We could have it as a statement or a grievance and probably give more people time to speak. If it was five minutes, we could halve the amount of time for members' statements to 20 minutes, which would make the finish time 8.05 pm on a Tuesday night, which sounds more reasonable to me than staying here until well after 10.00 pm.

I am at great pains to say that just changing the sitting hours will not interfere with the number of hours spent on productive time. We will be more productive if we do not have such late sittings. On a Wednesday, we start at 2.00 pm due to committee meetings in the morning. On a Wednesday, if we start at 1.00 pm, and once again have one hour for dinner, we would save one and a half hours. Instead of finishing at 9.45 pm, we would finish at 8.15 pm. With 20 minutes for members' statements, the house would rise at 8.35 pm. Some people may come up with the idea that we sit straight through, and then we could leave earlier and have dinner after the house finishes, but that is for other people to suggest.

On Thursday we start at 10.00 am and go through until 5.20 pm, and then we have 40 minutes of members' statements. If we were to start at 9.00 am and still have one hour for lunch, as we do now, and end at 4.20 pm, and then have 20 minutes of members' statements, the house would rise at 4.40 pm. The hours we work would be much more productive. Others certainly could come up with better proposals than I have offered; however, I believe I have taken all perspectives into account. The staff who are always on hand and provide a wonderful

Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon Kate Doust; Hon Col Holt; Hon Phil Edman; Hon Nick Goiran; Hon Peter Katsambanis; Hon Darren West; Deputy President; Hon Sue Ellery

service to members would be catered for, members would not be left sitting here until well after 10.00 pm at night, the dining room would still be patronised by members, we would still have plenty of time for business, and we would get home at a reasonable hour. Committees have been catered for, as have party room meetings. The other parties in the house may have other ideas, but that is why I have put this forward for discussion. It seems ludicrous to me, given that we know that our body clock is much fresher during the day, that most of us sit in this place late after a huge dinner because we sit in the dining room for an hour and a half. I see some members touching their waistlines—not the women, of course, just the men! There is absolutely no need to have an hour and a half for dinner. These times could be pared right back.

The other discussion I have been having around the chamber is about afternoon tea. I am very loath to mention taking away afternoon tea, so members will be pleased to hear I am not going to propose that, but there is no reason that afternoon tea cannot be put out there at three o'clock in the afternoon, and if members want to go and have afternoon tea, they can and then come back into the chamber. That could be done if we are to bring the hours back so we need not sit until 10.20 at night. That is just another suggestion.

Really, the hours are silly and are for a time back in the early nineteenth century when it suited a bunch of old men—very esteemed older gentlemen!

Several members interjected.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: It suited those esteemed gentlemen who were lucky enough to be members of the Legislative Council to come into this place at odd times. A lot of people around here now have smaller children—and even members with older children, as I do, like to see their children at times. I think it would be much more productive if the sitting times were changed. It is more for our work to be productive that I would like to see the Legislative Council sitting times changed, because I think that sitting in this place making decisions and going into Committee of the Whole after dinner does not bode well for good decisions. Even though we make very good decisions in the Legislative Council and we fix up a lot of legislation that comes from the other place that I am loath to mention, I believe the sitting times need to change. We need to modernise our Legislative Council and have much more friendly sitting hours.

HON KATE DOUST (South Metropolitan — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [11.53 am]: Unfortunately, Hon Robyn McSweeney finished slightly earlier than I thought she was going to finish. I am really pleased that Hon Robyn McSweeney put this matter on the agenda. It is not a new issue; we have debated it a number of times over the years. In about 2001 or 2002, we had quite an extensive discussion in this chamber about sitting times. I remember Hon Barbara Scott, me and number of other members rising to talk about the need to have reform in the upper house, specifically looking at changes to sitting times. At that point in time, I had quite a young family; my three children were under the age of 10 at the time, and it was a bit of a juggle to manage those types of things. But things have changed. I take on board Hon Robyn McSweeney's comments about Hon Norman Moore, who was certainly quite intractable on these issues; I think that is putting it politely. He was probably more intractable than most people on these matters, and that was partly because that was the way things were done during his period in this place and he saw no reason to change some of those options.

This is a significant matter to be addressed, and I hope other members will support these matters being pursued via the Standing Committee on Procedure and Privileges. Quite significant changes have been made to our standing orders in the past year or two, and although some of these issues may have been canvassed lightly at the time of that review, of course we had that intractable person present and he was not going to be a party to such change. Sadly, he is no longer with us, even though I hope he puts his hand up again for Liberal preselection for another go at some point in time.

As well as looking at sitting times, a number of other things need to be considered. One thing that has always struck me as being kind of crazy in this place is that two out of three afternoons—it used to be three afternoons—we stop for 15 minutes, and we leave the chamber for a cup of tea! Hon Norman Moore said that that was a good thing for members to do so that they could socialise and have a break and just take the heat out of issues, but I do not know of any other workplace in this state in which production or work stops and everyone leaves the room so they can go and have a cup of tea for 15 minutes. It is old-fashioned. I have probably been in a lot more workplace lunch rooms than most people in this place in my working life, and the idea of shutting up shop and having a cuppa is outdated. People now have staggered tea-breaks or they go off and get a cuppa in their 10-minute or 15-minute break. I do not want Hon Nick Goiran jumping to his feet about standing orders, but we should look to how the Legislative Assembly manages its afternoon tea-break. It does not shut up shop; I think it has a coffee machine now and there is a room where people can go and have a cup of tea while debate is ongoing—while the work is still happening. I think that is a much more productive way of managing business in the house than actually stopping, going out and having a cup of tea and then coming back in. That is 15 minutes

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on at least two days that can be saved without blinking, and we would find that business would roll on much more effectively.

In terms of some of the times proposed by Hon Robyn McSweeney, I think she was just putting out a starting point, which is a good thing to do. People might have some issues about party meetings prior to sitting or briefings or other meetings, so those types of considerations would need to be taken into account in addressing these matters.

As to finish times, I think we have just gotten into the practice of accepting that we finish late. I do not think it necessarily has to be like that; I think there can be adjustments. A few of us in this chamber remember the period about 2003-04 when we briefly spent time sitting in what is now the Parliamentary Library while this part of the building was renovated. During that time we had a sessional order that rearranged our sitting times. I think we only sat one late night, we finished early on a Wednesday, had our standard Thursday and sat on a Friday. Friday, from memory, was predominantly government business time. I found that worked quite well, because it meant that if I had other matters to deal with in my electorate, I was not having to queue up and battle to get a pair for a Wednesday or Thursday night and I could actually go and deal with that matter—or if members wanted to spend time with their families, so be it. I think it gave members a bit more flexibility and people were fresher, and when it came to Friday, we found we could get through quite a substantial piece of work. I do not know whether it was because the other chamber was not sitting and there were not those other distractions, but it seemed to work quite well. I think that sessional order was in place for about a year, and then it came to a stop. A couple of country members did not feel comfortable with sitting on a Friday. Those types of matters could also be canvassed.

Another area that might be looked at is that traditionally committees have sat on Wednesdays. Some committees now meet on a Monday to provide that flexibility and that works well, but some other standing orders could be reviewed that might enable committees to perhaps, on the odd occasion when required, meet during a sitting period. Again, Hon Norman Moore was violently opposed to that happening, but there may be occasions when committees might need to meet to sign off on a report or get a small piece of work organised. If we look at productivity changes that might assist the chamber in its workflow, we could take a number of other factors into account as well. It is healthy to have a discussion like this. I hope this might be picked up and looked at by the Standing Committee on Procedure and Privileges, and it is probably a shame that Hon Robyn McSweeney did not seek to refer this matter to that committee, which might have given them some work over the break into 2014.

Hon Robyn McSweeney: I would have been popular then, wouldn't I!

Hon KATE DOUST: Absolutely! Given we have a lot of new members in this place with a lot of different work experiences, it would be really healthy to give members the opportunity to again look at these types of issues and how sitting hours impact on them in their work life. It would be different for a metropolitan member versus a regional member. I am looking at Hon Col Holt, who I know spends a bit of time on the road away from his family trying to manage constituency matters. It is not just looking at how to make adjustments for the health and wellbeing of members, but also how they can be more productive for their constituents.

I know things have changed in the last 10 to 15 years and constituents have instant access to members of Parliament via text and email, and some members use other forms of social media such as Facebook. Those sorts of things have changed the way we interact with our constituents. However, we need to look at how we manage business in this place as well. I know from time to time we tweak the order of business and how we conduct it, so it may be when that we look at a framework of hours we also consider the nature of our business. We can consider a range of factors.

I believe this is a very healthy conversation to have. It is a real shame that when we have had those conversations in the past we have not been able to allow those changes to kick in and to get proper feedback on them. It really did come down to one person not liking the outcome and saying that we would not do that again. I think that with fresh faces, new ideas and new ways of doing business in this place it is probably time to bring this chamber into this century and up to speed. We can perhaps look at the sitting hours of other Parliaments and how their operating hours impact on their effectiveness. Hon Peter Katsambanis is probably a good person to make comment on this, having experience in another Parliament. I do not know what the sitting hours are in Victoria.

I congratulate Hon Robyn McSweeney on raising this matter. It is a very good matter to raise and one that we have touched on from time to time. We have had some slight changes to our sitting hours, but there has not been any significant change to make us more productive and more modern. Perhaps this is the conversation we need to have over a period of time to consider modern arrangements and to address how we better manage the occupational health and safety issue surrounding this workplace for all of the members here.

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HON COL HOLT (South West — Parliamentary Secretary) [12.03 pm]: I will make a quick contribution to debate on the motion. I thank Hon Kate Doust for her comments and for raising the very real issue of occupational health and safety for not only members but also staff in this place, which we probably have not considered too broadly.

We need conversations about these matters. Personally, I enjoy these hours because when I am in town it means that is my time to work; however, that is my opinion and there are plenty of other people in this place who have different life and family circumstances and these hours would not suit them or their families. If we do not raise these issues and continue to have the conversation, we will probably never change the sitting times or modernise those sitting times to meet the current needs of this Parliament and our constituents.

I am thankful for Hon Robyn McSweeney for raising the issue in this place. I would say that for country members, the three days a week that we spend time in Perth on parliamentary duties suits us well. If a country member has a ministerial role, they have the Monday to spend in cabinet or in their ministerial office and they can still have the Friday doing constituency work, often in far-flung regions that require some travelling time. If we review sitting hours, we should look at how they fit with flight schedules on some of the major air routes that get members in and out of town, specifically for members of the Mining and Pastoral Region who often miss a flight by half an hour or an hour on a Thursday and have to wait the night to get on a plane before they can head home. I am sure they would appreciate an extra night in their own bed.

I will look at the demographics, especially from a National Party point of view. Hon Martin Aldridge will be away next week for the birth of his first child, and congratulations to him. He is at a different stage in his life than I am. We have to consider the younger members who may be starting a family as well as a career in politics. Somehow we have to find a balance that suits the needs of all members. If we do not have these discussions in which people have the opportunity to raise how it fits with their personal circumstance, we will never change, and where do we go from there? Although I do not feel any great need to change the sitting times, I definitely see the need to have a conversation so that every member has the opportunity to raise how sitting hours fit with them. I thank Hon Robyn McSweeney.

HON PHIL EDMAN (South Metropolitan) [12.06 pm]: My wife found out about this motion last night and asked me to speak about it. I was not going to speak, but she was desperate for me to speak, so I am standing up because of my wife, believe it or not! I am a father of two young children, and basically I was a member of Parliament when both of our babies were born. I said to Virginia that we do not know any better, because these are the sitting hours we have experienced. My wife did say she was thankful that I did not beat Kim Beazley when I stood against him in the 2004 federal election, because I would never have been home to raise our two young children. I take my hat off to our federal parliamentarians who leave on a Sunday and come back on a Thursday. Regardless of which party they are from, they do it the hard way with air travel. Some people think that travelling on a plane all the time is fantastic, but eventually people get used to it and it is a bus, as Hon Mark Lewis just said.

I understand there is a lot of history behind late sitting times. I could not find anywhere else in Australia that has family friendly hours, but I have not had enough time to research it. Historically our sitting hours probably came from the days when members of Parliament in Western Australia were major landowners in Western Australia and they would run their farm or business during the day and it suited them to go about running the state at night. Nevertheless, I have got used to the sitting hours, although they do muck up my sleeping time quite a bit, especially on Wednesday nights. By the time I get back to Rockingham on a Wednesday night after a 45-minute drive from Perth—my personality is a little bit hyper, as some members will know—it is a bit hard for me to drop off to sleep, and sometimes I do not sleep at all. That is probably why I look absolutely terrible right now as I am speaking on this motion. I do not sleep most Wednesday nights, before I come to this place on Thursday. I have learnt to live with that. I guess I could take a sleeping pill, but I have decided not to go down that road.

Hon Nick Goiran interjected.

Hon PHIL EDMAN: We are not going to talk about 24-hour sittings, Hon Nick Goiran!

If we were to change the sitting times so that we had family friendly hours or sat more often, it is my opinion, from my experience of being in this place for a bit over four years and from watching and listening to the opposition, that I do not think it would make any difference because members opposite would still talk as long as they could to stop bills passing through this house at times. I do not agree —

Hon Kate Doust interjected.

Hon PHIL EDMAN: I never interjected when members opposite spoke, so I would appreciate some courtesy from that side.

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I do not agree with members speaking as long as they want to on a bill. Forty minutes should be adequate time for a member of Parliament to talk about a bill. I agree with Hon Robyn McSweeney that maybe members' statements could come down to five minutes. I also agree with both Hon Robyn McSweeney and Hon Kate Doust about afternoon tea. I am definitely not one who wants to get rid of having a hot cuppa, but whether we have to stop Parliament for 15 minutes is something that we could look at. I do not know whether that happens in the other house. They do have afternoon tea, but I do not think that they stop the house, like we do, to have a cup of tea or coffee. I do not remember what date this was, but the lower house did change its sitting times to be a bit more family friendly on Wednesdays. I cannot remember when that was, although I am pretty sure that it happened during the last term of government. I also appreciate and understand the hard work that ministers do in trying to run their departments. They need time during the day to do what they need to do for the state, and then they undertake their parliamentary duties in this house at night. We must respect our ministers and the Premier. Our four ministers in the Legislative Council do an outstanding job for the state of Western Australia, including my leader.

I am glad that Hon Robyn McSweeney—I did not have any sleep last night and members can see that I am completely ratted! I am looking forward to getting home tonight and having a decent sleep, although I have another late one tonight as I am going somewhere else. I am glad that Hon Robyn McSweeney moved this motion, because it has allowed me to reflect on my personal life at home. Members obviously all know about my sleeping disorders now that that is on the public record. That is wonderful! The main thing is that I have done this now, and that will get the wife off my back tonight!

HON NICK GOIRAN (South Metropolitan) [12.12 pm]: I have been inspired to contribute to this debate. I was in my office listening to the contribution of Hon Robyn McSweeney and had not prepared anything on this motion, but I felt that it was essential that I did make a contribution. I say at the outset that I have an enormous amount of sympathy for the comments that were made by members this morning and into this afternoon. But I just want to say this: the reason we keep saying that things are not family friendly has absolutely nothing to do with the sitting hours; it is to do with the role of being a member of Parliament. By way of explanation, I am sure that members will know and appreciate that we get invited to an inordinate number of meetings, functions, events and the like. I am sure that other members, like me, end up having to give apologies and to say no to many more things than they can say yes to, simply by virtue of time. What I want to say to members is that to the extent that they feel it is not family friendly to be sitting late at night—and I will get to the definition of “late at night” in a moment—I suggest that all that will happen if the sitting hours were changed is that they would be expected to accept all the other invitations to events and functions that they receive, in addition to everything they do at the moment. I caution members about having too much enthusiasm for not sitting in the evening, because there is an opportunity cost.

I will give my own perspective on whether something is family friendly. I have a lot of sympathy for the comments made by members, including those of Hon Phil Edman. As I say, it is the role of being a member of Parliament that impacts upon the family. Before entering this place I was a legal practitioner. Lawyers are notorious for working long hours. Maybe it comes as no surprise to members to learn that in my case I was—I will use the word carefully—religiously starting at 8.30 in the morning and finishing at five o'clock in the afternoon. I did that because it was incredibly important to me, and the members of my firm understood this, that I would be home in the evening for my family. This job has been the biggest change for me with respect to the impact on my family—without question. As I say, I feel that it has very little to do with the sitting hours.

I also want to address the concern that members have that we are somehow incapable of making decisions after the dinner break. I suggest to members that in my experience, when someone sits on a board, inevitably the board will make all its decisions in the evening. It is customary for boards to be sitting between the hours of, let us say, 7.30 and 10.30, and sometimes longer. Hon Phil Edman used to be a local government councillor. I am sure he will concur that councils often sit in the evening and often for long hours. It is not unusual or unreasonable to be asked to be making decisions at 7.30, eight o'clock or nine o'clock at night. Where members absolutely have a point is the silly situation of sitting at 11, 12 or beyond. I believe that the other place sat to one o'clock in the morning the other day. I think that is unreasonable—that is my view—and I would not support any extension of the hours. But I give a word of caution to members about getting too carried away with changing the sitting hours. I probably share the view of Hon Col Holt in that how it is at the moment does, in some respects, suit me. Frankly, the whole job does not suit me. I am not here because of the job.

Hon Robyn McSweeney: What are you here for?

Hon NICK GOIRAN: If it were not for the fact that members feel that they can make a useful contribution, they would not do this job. Frankly, it is an underpaid job and the workload that is required is excessive. We all knew that before we signed up. I sold my legal practice knowing full well what it was like. I made inquiries with other members about what the role of a member is, what is required of a member, what a sitting week looks like and

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what a non-sitting week looks like. As I conclude my comments, the thing I feel very passionate about in some respects, because I believe it is not understood in the wider community, is that it is not as if we have nothing to do when we are not sitting. There is this misunderstanding that somehow the role of members of Parliament is when we are in the chamber, which in many respects is only a small portion of what we do. I am sure that during a non-sitting week members are out at night anyway, as I am. We are out in the electorate during the day. Whilst I would probably concede that the hours I work in a sitting week are longer and more exhausting than during a non-sitting week, nevertheless, it could hardly be suggested that we twiddle our thumbs during a non-sitting week.

I just want to state the case for the 90-minute dinner break. The reason I suggest that there is a case for it is exactly for the purpose of family. My practice has been to use the 90 minutes in a couple of different ways. I was told before I came into this place to be careful about how much I ate, because there seems to be a bit of a tendency to increase the waistline the longer one stays here. I was warned about that and was encouraged to learn that there is actually a gym on the ground floor. It was my good friend Hon Phil Edman who introduced me to the gym. The dinner break is a useful opportunity to make use of the gym, and Hon Robyn McSweeney has been there on the treadmill with me on a few occasions.

With respect to family, if we have young kids who go to bed at a reasonable time, during a sitting week we often do not get to see them because we leave early in the morning and we get home after they have gone to bed. So it has been my practice to contact my family during the dinner break. If I have gone to the gym or to the dining room and that has taken a period of time, I use that extra time during the dinner break to have a conversation with my kids. I know that the criticism will be that we can do that at any time. But with all due respect, members, our primary responsibility is to be in this chamber, and I think that is a point of difference between us and the other place. So although there has been criticism of Hon Norman Moore's view of the world with respect to afternoon tea and the like, he made a good point. Yes, we can be away from the chamber on urgent parliamentary business. However, I would definitely object to any suggestion that committees meet during sitting hours, because if a committee had to consider an issue, and at the same time a matter of particular import was being debated in the chamber, it would put committee members in the unenviable position of having to decide where they are supposed to be. I would certainly find that unacceptable.

We need to be a bit more real about this and accept the fact that this job is hard, and the general public does not understand, and, frankly, it does not care, and the media is the same. This job is hard. We knew that before we signed up to it. Just accept that. By all means, as Hon Col Holt has said, let us have the discussion, and if there can be some improvements and someone has a creative suggestion, I certainly will not be a stumbling block to that. But just accept that it will be tough no matter what we do with the sitting hours.

HON PETER KATSAMBANIS (North Metropolitan) [12.21 pm]: It is a pleasure to speak on this motion, and I commend Hon Robyn McSweeney for bringing this motion to the house. This is an interesting motion in the sense that it gives us all an opportunity to express our general views about sitting times and how we operate in this place and as members of Parliament, without putting to this place a particular point of view of what we should or should not do in the future. Through Hon Robyn McSweeney's experience in this place she has obviously come to realise that this is an issue that is worth discussing, and I agree with her, even though I have been in place for only a very short time.

Members have brought up a number of aspects during the debate, and I would like to cover some of them. I would also like to give members my perspective, which I think is unique in this place, because I have previously served in another Parliament and I have also spent significant time living in Western Australia and working for a federal member in Canberra. So I have had the opportunity to experience the lifestyle that comes with sittings in three different Parliaments.

Hon Kate Doust asked what it was like when I was in the Victorian Parliament. The sitting times in the Victorian Parliament were pretty similar to those in this place, except for the fact that on a Wednesday there were no committee meetings—that practice did not exist—and Parliament kicked off at ten o'clock in the morning. I have not been to the Victorian Parliament for a long time, but I have looked at the parliamentary website, and it seems that the upper house in the Victorian Parliament is continuing to sit at similar times. On a Tuesday it kicks off at two o'clock in the afternoon and runs through to about 10 o'clock at night; and on a Wednesday and a Thursday it kicks off at about 10 o'clock in the morning and runs through to 10 o'clock at night. I notice that it has a Friday sitting schedule as well, which goes from the morning through to late afternoon. I am not sure whether that is a common occurrence or a prescribed sitting time for any Fridays that might be required; I did not delve into the details of that.

Extract from Hansard

[COUNCIL — Thursday, 5 December 2013]

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The lifestyle in my time, from 1996 to 2002, was just as demanding, just as difficult and just as sedentary as it is in this place. It created significant health problems for many of my colleagues at the time, some of them similar to the experience that Hon Phil Edman recited in his contribution to this debate. I have to say that if we accept sleeping problems—possibly insomnia or any other thing we want to call it—as an occupational hazard of being a member of Parliament, we are condemning ourselves and those who come to this place after us to horrific and unacceptable work conditions. Many members on the other side come from a background in which they have tried to improve people’s working conditions. So it is about time we looked at our working conditions in this place. It should not be an occupational hazard for members of Parliament that we cannot sleep at night. It should not be the case, as Hon Nick Goiran I think alluded to—he did not make the direct comparison—that we should consider the occupation of a member of Parliament as being from the outset unfriendly to families, or family non-friendly or whatever term we want to use. We should work hard to make the Parliament a safer occupational workplace, not just for us, but for all the staff of the Parliament—the clerks, the assistants, the people who work in the dining room, the security people —

Hon Michael Mischin: Hansard.

Hon PETER KATSAMBANIS: Yes, and Hansard. We should also consider the staff in our electorate offices and the staff in ministerial offices, because although those people might notionally work nine to five, they are often up late at night monitoring what is happening while we are sitting in this place. So we should look at the health and wellbeing of everyone associated with the Parliament.

We should also look at making this place family friendly, because, if we do not, we are basically saying to a large chunk of people in our society, “This place is not for you”. That is wrong. This place should be open to everyone who has an interest in the parliamentary process and in making a difference in the state. It should be open to all those people to put up their hands without being unduly penalised with the destruction of their family life or the destruction of their health and wellbeing. That is why I thank Hon Robyn McSweeney for bringing this matter to the house.

My experience when I was working as a staffer in Canberra indicated to me that there are worse working environments than this place. A very learned person in this state once described to me the occupation of a Western Australian federal member of Parliament as being the worst job in the world. I agree with that person. I think it would be worse still for those three or four members—depending on how we class the seat of Pearce—of the federal Parliament from Western Australia who represent areas outside the metropolitan area. I have seen the impact that has on those people. I have particularly seen the impact it has on their staff. The turnover of staff who travel to Canberra with federal members of Parliament from Western Australia is extraordinary high because of the impacts on their health and wellbeing. For 18 months I worked as a staffer for a federal member of Parliament and travelled to Canberra, and I used to say that I lived the life of a fly in, fly out worker, except for the fact that when a FIFO comes back to Western Australia or Perth, they get time off to spend with their family, whereas I would fly back from Canberra on a Thursday night and arrive home at about midnight, and I would be expected to be at my desk at eight o’clock on Friday morning and work through the day. So I did not get that benefit of having time off to be with my family.

As Hon Nick Goiran said in his contribution, it is not as though on non-sitting days we work nine to five. For 80 to 90 per cent of the week, most of us kick off well before nine o’clock, and that includes Saturdays and Sundays. Most of us attend functions until the late hours of the evening when Parliament is not sitting, and we also attend weekend functions. So this lifestyle is a continuing one.

We come back to the issue of the sitting hours of this place and what we can do about them. I will use myself as an example from yesterday. I kicked off with the first of two committee meetings at half past eight in the morning, and we were still here until after 10 o’clock, which is almost a 14-hour working day. That is not overtime or an occasional 14-hour working day; that is the average working day of a member of Parliament on a Wednesday. What sort of productivity can we get out of a 14-hour working day, and then incorporate on top of that the health and wellbeing aspects and the family impact and it is just ridiculous, and we should look at fixing it. I do not think this will be the first occasion but it is a relatively rare occasion on which I agree with Hon Kate Doust. I think afternoon tea is a complete anachronism. It is not a 15-minute break but more like a 10-minute break, because when the bells ring five minutes before the end of the afternoon tea-break, we all get up and file back into this place and look sheepishly at each other for a couple of minutes until they stop ringing. It is ridiculous and stupid. With an afternoon tea-break on a Wednesday and a Thursday in Parliament, we do not need to wonder why we are right down the bottom of the list in the public polls on respect for various professions and occupations. It should have been abolished years ago, so let us take the opportunity now and get rid of it.

Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon Kate Doust; Hon Col Holt; Hon Phil Edman; Hon Nick Goiran; Hon Peter Katsambanis; Hon Darren West; Deputy President; Hon Sue Ellery

The general hours that Hon Robyn McSweeney has proposed are about right. Kicking off at two o'clock on a Tuesday would be a good idea, and running through to about eight o'clock. I do not mind if the dinner break is an hour or an hour and a half—I probably prefer an hour but I do not think anyone will split hairs about that. On Wednesday we do not need to hang around here until two o'clock after our committee meetings have finished. We can kick off at midday and go through until eight o'clock. The times on Thursday are about right. We could start a bit earlier and finish a bit earlier and allow people like Hon Colin Holt and his colleagues from country electorates to catch commercial flights back home that night or to drive back under safer conditions than they do at the moment. I commend the motion. I support it and I hope we use this to bring some real change back to this place.

HON DARREN WEST (Agricultural) [12.32 pm]: I commend the member on the motion. This discussion is very important and needs to be had, and I concur, which is somewhat remarkable, with many of the remarks of Hon Peter Katsambanis. I always think it is a nice touch when members opposite display some compassion and sympathy for the workers. It is fantastic, I love to hear it and I hope there is more of it. It is always welcomed when members opposite show some genuine concern for the workers. It is an excellent point and one on which I would like to elaborate with the indulgence of members opposite. Many people get up early every morning and work unusual hours. Some people work more standard hours, like shearers for example. They get up early and turn up to the shed at 7.30 am; they work for two hours; have half an hour for a cup of tea and a piece of cake; go back to work for another two hours; take an hour off and pop up to the homestead for a cooked lunch; work for another two hours; have another cup of tea and then work through until 5.30 pm. Perhaps in this place we could emulate the working hours of shearers; that might be a useful way to become more family friendly. But what about interstate truck drivers? They often work a 14 or a 16-hour day. They work unusual hours under duress, and sometimes on badly maintained narrow country roads having to cart the grain from the wheat bin that used to be carted on the rail. Lots of truck drivers have to —

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Hon Liz Behjat): Member, do not stray too far from the motion. We are talking about the sitting hours of the Legislative Council, not about carting grain.

Hon DARREN WEST: Thank you, Madam Deputy President. There are people everywhere who work unusual hours. People in hospitality often have to work on weekends. These are the people we represent. I was out of the chamber for a short while on urgent parliamentary business, but I did not hear from any member about the people who actually employ us; the taxpayers and voters of Western Australia. They work extraordinarily unusual hours that are sometimes family unfriendly and we represent those groups of people. People work in hospitality on weekends, and sometimes late at night or sometimes all night, so perhaps we can work some unusual hours too. I am not saying that we do not need to have a debate. I am not saying that the sitting hours are perfect. We are a diverse, eclectic mix of people from different parts of the electorate who have different views, so it will be difficult to find a solution or a model that suits everybody. Usually, when there is not a model that suits everybody —

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order, members! There is a little too much conversation going on around the chamber at the moment.

Hon DARREN WEST: We are employed by the taxpayers of Western Australia, so what do they want? They want their local member in their electorate. They want access to their local member and for him to take their views into Parliament and vote accordingly. If what they want is their member in their electorate—they tell me it is great when I am back in the electorate—we need to come to Parliament, do the business, work some long, hard days, get our parliamentary duties done, and then get back to our electorates where we are wanted. How do we better use that sitting time? The current arrangements with the two late nights are not good for me. I do not enjoy them and like Hon Peter Katsambanis, I think we should start a bit earlier and finish earlier. But it gives us the opportunity to do urgent parliamentary business. When we are sitting we can meet with groups before Parliament sits. We can work on some of our shadow parliamentary secretary or ministerial portfolios or our ministerial or parliamentary secretary work. The hours give us a bit of a mix, which is somewhat reflective of the electorate. Can anyone define “family friendly”? It is a term that is often used and I think family-friendly sitting hours would be taken to mean hours that would enable us to spend as much time with our families as we can. The current arrangements are probably not far from that because, realistically, we are here for around 20 to 22 weeks a year, which gives us the rest of the year to work around a more family-friendly arrangement and ways of going about our job as members of Parliament.

Being a member of Parliament is a fantastic job. It is a highly sought after career. Many more people wish to become a member of Parliament than do become a member of Parliament. It is an honour to serve the people in one's electorate, and it is an honour to work in Parliament. We know that one of the sacrifices we must make is to spend some time away from our family. We go into this job with our eyes wide open and we make the choice. If we have to sacrifice some time to attend school assemblies and perhaps not attend every sports day, those are

Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon Kate Doust; Hon Col Holt; Hon Phil Edman; Hon Nick Goiran; Hon Peter Katsambanis; Hon Darren West; Deputy President; Hon Sue Ellery

the decisions we make when we become a member of Parliament—it has been that way from time immemorial. Members must take the good with the bad in any job. Members make choices, just as shearers, interstate truck drivers, hospitality workers, and people in non-government organisations who work unusual hours make life choices about their careers, and many of them make fantastic choices. As a member of Parliament, it is a given that no matter what model we come up with, no matter what arrangement we make on sitting hours, sacrifices will have to be made. If people decide that their family is more important than making those sacrifices, they can decide not to become a member of Parliament, resign from the Parliament or pursue another career option. That is an option available to all of us. Fortunately for the Parliament, we are all here. There is no reason to say we cannot improve the system. We can improve every system: good, better, best. We should never let it rest, until our good is better and our better is best. We can continue to improve anything. I agree with Hon Robyn McSweeney; this is a great motion and a great discussion that must be had. Unless these discussions are had, improvements are not possible.

I will touch on the electorate and those who employ us. A common theme among all occupations around the state of Western Australia, across Australia and indeed the world—there seems to be a trend, whether good or bad—is that everyone is spending more time working and less time recreating and being with their family. That is just a notion of the modern world. It is especially so for members who live in faraway places. They have to spend more time travelling as part of their work. They need to spend more time commuting to and from meetings, as well as to and from Parliament. That is what we sign up for.

I welcome the motion. I think it is a worthy discussion to have. It has been a great debate and I have enjoyed the contributions of all members. But we must bear in mind that we serve our electors; and, if that is what the electors want, that is what we should be prepared to give.

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the Opposition) [12.40 pm]: I will take a few minutes to contribute to the debate and say, as everyone else has said, that I congratulate Hon Robyn McSweeney for bringing on the matter. It is an important matter for us to talk about. Accurate things have been said by everybody who has contributed to the debate. I would agree and disagree with some elements of some points that members have made. I think that we ought to work towards doing more of the work of this house during daylight hours. That is a sensible thing for us to work towards. I cannot think of another workplace in the world in which every element stops for people to attend afternoon tea. For example, in schools, the classroom work stops while they have the lunch recess, playtime and all those things at the same time, but, of course, the teachers still work because they supervise the children, whether on yard duty or whatever it might be. It is a sensible thing that people have the opportunity to take a 15-minute tea-break and the house continues its business. It is a sensible thing that we have lunch and dinner breaks. I am not sure that the most efficient use of our time is for everyone to do it at exactly the same time and therefore the business of the house has to stop. I do not think we need an hour and a half for a dinner break. Immediate changes could be made that would make it easier to do our work.

We have to factor in the work of committees. That is a really important part of what Parliament does, so we need to make some time during those hours for committees to do their work. I am not necessarily sure that it will always be appropriate for committees to meet while the house is sitting. We would not want a situation in which people could be forced to be absent from an important debate in either the chamber or the committee because one party had the numbers on a committee. We have to balance those things to get it right. Equally, it is still the case in society that women bear the major responsibility for their family obligations, whether that be raising children, looking after aged parents or the whole gamut of things that women are expected to do. I think that the hours we work make it difficult for people who are trying to juggle those responsibilities. There are reasons to look at our hours to make sure that they are a bit more sensible. I know that the Leader of the House has a positive point of view about this. I do as well. I think there is a mood for us to do this seriously, and I hope that we take the opportunity to do that.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.