

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES AND FINANCIAL OPERATIONS —  
ESTIMATES HEARINGS**

*Statement*

**HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the House)** [5.21 pm]: I want to talk about two things and both of them are related to estimates. I appreciate that it has been a difficult week for the opposition. It has been a difficult three weeks.

Several members interjected.

**The PRESIDENT:** Order! The Leader of the House has the call. Hers is the only voice I want to hear.

**Hon SUE ELLERY:** It has been a difficult three weeks for the opposition since the Leader of the Opposition, Mike Nahan, came back from holidays. It has probably been a difficult 18 months for the opposition, so I can understand its frustration. It should have come back at the start of the session after winter recess full of vim and vigour ready to hold the government to account. Instead, there was a major distraction in the form of whether the current Leader of the Opposition was going to remain leader. If my point of view counts at all, long may he reign. So, I can understand a bit of frustration.

The first issue about estimates I want to raise is that raised by the Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council in consideration of committee reports yesterday. Members will forgive me if I paraphrase, I do not have the *Hansard* in front of me, but he was expressing some concerns about the allocation of time that members of the opposition had to ask the questions they wanted to ask compared with members of the committee. I want to share a couple of stories with the house. Being the opposition is difficult; there is no question about it. It is difficult to get information because oppositions have fewer resources, but if they use estimates well, they can be a goldmine for an opposition. I understand that there is a degree of frustration because it is harder to get information in opposition. I will shortly share two stories with members, but I think that the point Hon Peter Collier was making was that there was something fundamentally different in the way estimates was run, something that had not happened before. My proposition is that oppositions always think that they are not being given a fair go in estimates, and I know that because I have been in opposition.

I will share one instance when I took to counting minutes. Members will know that in the *Hansard* the time stamps appear on the page of the transcript. I took to counting the number of minutes that Hon Ken Travers had given me to ask questions when I was a shadow minister so I could argue with him that he was not allocating me the correct number of minutes, because I was so sure that he was unfairly allocating time to members of the committee and not to me as the opposition's lead speaker on a particular issue. I am going to refer to Hon Stephen Dawson; he may want to be out of the house on urgent parliamentary business! Other members who have been around for a while might also remember that at one point Hon Stephen Dawson, who was also a shadow minister, was so cross about the allocation of time that he thought he should have been given but was not that he expressed that crossness in the chamber, and if I was being unkind I might say he stormed out.

**Hon Stephen Dawson:** A hissy fit, I think it was.

**Hon SUE ELLERY:** He chucked a hissy fit. That was when the committee was chaired by one of our own and our frustration was such that we genuinely believed we were not being given enough time. I make the point that it is not new that an opposition thinks it is being treated unfairly in estimates. Both Hon Stephen Dawson and I were outraged at various times when we were in opposition that our good friend and great Chair of the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations Hon Ken Travers was not allocating us enough time.

The other point I want to address was just raised by Hon Nick Goiran. It is important to note this. I was the representative minister. I was being asked whether I would provide information about a conversation that the minister I was representing was part of. I had not been briefed on any of that. The fact that the officer that the member wanted to ask was sitting next to me was irrelevant. If it was my portfolio, we would have a different proposition, but I thought that the person who ought make the judgement about what degree of information was released from that conversation was the minister. She obviously was not there. I have been accused of obstruction. In fact I said, "I'll take the question on notice; I'm sorry that you don't like the answer, but I'll take the question on notice." I was not saying that I would not contemplate providing an answer to the member's question, but my job, when I am representing another minister, is to put myself in the shoes of the other minister and if I cannot be sure because I have not been briefed on that particular area about the sequence of events, then irrespective of who was sitting next to me, my first obligation is to check what information the minister is happy to release and what information the minister is happy for her director general to release. That is my obligation that I met. That is fundamentally different from if the member had been asking me that question about my portfolio.

The other thing to bear in mind about the estimates process is that witnesses do not appear and do not answer other than through the minister. That is standard practice and it always has been. It has never been any different.

Witnesses do not give answers to questions in estimates unless that answer goes through the minister. By way of shortcut we often find an officer will say, “Through the minister”, or they will look to the minister to get the approval that they are okay to answer a question when a flow of discussion is happening in an estimates process, but witnesses cannot give an answer unless it is through the minister or the representative minister. I was not shutting down a witness, because the witnesses can only give an answer through the minister or the representative minister. I was doing what I should have done as a representative minister: not being across the detail, I wanted to make sure that the minister got to make the judgement about what information was released. That is what I did. That is not obstruction. What would have been obstruction is if I had refused to take it on notice. Estimates used well can be a goldmine; it really can. But I do understand, I really do, because I sat over there for eight and a half years. I do get the frustration of being in opposition—I really do. I can understand, for example, Hon Martin Aldridge’s frustration that he struggled to get information out of the parliamentary system in which questions on notice and answers are recorded. I can understand that. We still have the system; this is not of my making. I do not know how it works but we still have a system that involves two sets of numbers being applied to questions asked. We get a number as it goes into the system and another number when it comes out of the system. It is very easy to get confused and lost in our system. Trying to find tabled papers in the parliamentary IT system can take hours and hours. To the extent that I am able to influence that, I will try. It is not a matter that the government controls; it is a matter for the Parliament. I might ask the Labor Party people to take it up with the parliamentary services committee if that is an appropriate place for it to be raised. But I do have to say that it is nothing new. It was also like that for the whole eight and a half years that I was the Leader of the Opposition.

I think we have to have a bit of perspective on estimates and about the allocation of time. I can assure members that Hon Stephen Dawson and I were absolutely convinced that we were being ripped off by our good friend Hon Ken Travers to the point that I spent hours—this is how much time one has in opposition!—counting the number of minutes that had been allocated to me versus the number of minutes that had been allocated to committee members.