

*Joint Select Committee on End of Life Choices — First Report —
“My Life, My Choice: The Report of the Joint Select Committee on End of Life Choices” — Motion*

Resumed from 12 September on the following motion moved by Hon Colin Holt —

That the report be noted.

Hon COLIN HOLT: I was away on urgent parliamentary business last week, so I did not have the opportunity to make some opening remarks on this report before giving others the opportunity to speak or potentially defer noting the report. I am really interested in outlining some of the processes that the committee went through in doing the work of the Parliament on the very sensitive issue of end-of-life choices. That relates to the whole gamut of the inquiry. People’s minds go straight to the question of voluntary assisted dying but the content of the report was much broader than that and included the work done on palliative care as well as things like advance health directives.

One of the great opportunities we have when we become a member of Parliament is to be a member of a committee—either a standing committee or a select committee. From my experience of all the committees I have been on, there has been a bipartisan approach. Everyone on the committee has the right aim in mind—that is, to do some work on behalf of the Parliament, which, by extension, is to do work on behalf of the community. This is the first time I have been a member of a joint select committee, which consists of members of both houses. I found that to be an interesting experience considering that we operated under Assembly standing orders, which we have no recognition or knowledge of in this house until we have to work with them. Even going through the process of how different houses of Parliament deal with the issues of the day or how they work in committees was an interesting experience. Beyond that, every committee member who devoted many hundreds of hours to read submissions, listen to evidence during hearings and deliberate on the report did so with the right aim in mind. Committee members were completely respectful of those who gave evidence quite openly and willingly. That was a strength.

Committees do not often go back and ask witnesses how they found the experience. There is not really that kind of opportunity during a committee hearing to ask: How did that go for you? How did you find the experience? That is way too formal. We really want some informal feedback about what witnesses thought of the process. I think many of the witnesses would have found it to be a worthwhile experience. I hope the fact that they showed a great deal of courage and bravery to discuss those issues that were close to their heart gave them some faith in the process, and that they got a decent hearing. It did not really matter what side of the debate people were on or what information they had; it was about providing that respectful opportunity to hear from witnesses both in open and closed sessions, to respect the evidence they gave no matter what their viewpoint and to respect the questions that were asked at the time to ensure that the committee had a complete understanding of the issues. I was very encouraged by that.

My thoughts are directed to a lot of the new members here, who potentially have a long parliamentary career ahead of them. I encourage them to take up the opportunities to work on either a standing committee or a select committee, especially those that inquire into subjects that they are passionate about and interested in. If they have that interest, they will go onto a committee mindful of how they can work on that issue to make Western Australia a better place. From my experience, every committee that I have been on has been that way. I assume that those members who have had the privilege of being on a committee would agree. There is a large work commitment when working on committees. This committee has probably been the largest that I have been involved in. If we are going to be fair dinkum, we have to go to the hearings, read the evidence and think deeply about the issue and how we treat witnesses and not interrogate witnesses but take evidence from witnesses. We all approach it in that way and I think the Parliament wants us to approach it in that way. I am very pleased that members have that attitude.

A number of recommendations came out of that committee. Not all will be agreed to by the Parliament, members of Parliament or even the community. The role of the committee is to take the evidence, weigh up the evidence, and come out with some recommendations to move the issue or debate forward. I do not want to get into the debate on the specifics of the findings; that is for another time. This report will be on the table for a while. We are waiting to see the government’s response. Obviously, that response will spark a whole new debate on the content of the report.

I want to reflect on the attitude of the committee. I thought it was exemplary. I was saying to someone the other day that I do not think we would say that we enjoyed the committee work but I think we enjoyed the role we played on that committee. The committee work was quite confronting when we took evidence from the many people who wanted to talk to that committee. I found it harrowing at times but I really enjoyed the role that I had to play in making sure that I was a committee member who not only respected the views of witnesses, but also gathered the information on behalf of the community and the Parliament.

I remember waking up one night during the throes of taking evidence. I have always been pretty good at compartmentalising my life. I do my work, go home and park that over there. I try to think about something else when I am at home and do other things. I remember that I woke one night. My mother is 91 and completely

capable; she lives by herself and is in very good health. She is losing a few of her marbles—she will not mind me saying that—because she tells me the same story over and over again multiple times.

Hon Peter Collier: What’s wrong with that? I do that all the time.

Hon COLIN HOLT: I say to her, “That’s quite normal, mum; don’t worry about it.” She says, “I do repeat myself.” I say, “Don’t worry about it; we all do it. Your son does it.” I woke in the middle of the night thinking about her after listening to some of that evidence. It really shocked me at the time. I spoke to my wife about it at the time and I thought about the experience we have when we get close to death. Gathering that evidence had a real impact on me. Some of that comes through in some of the personal stories in the report. It is a powerful experience and it has added greatly to how we deal with the issue of end-of-life choices. I wanted to share that with members and the community and put on the record that we are probably not immune to those issues. We are not a bunch of cold, heartless people who sit in Parliament with a stiff suit on; we are here on behalf of people in the community, trying to look into these issues on their behalf. I have not spoken to other committee members about how they felt and their experience of being on that committee. It is worthwhile reflecting on this and talking to the chamber about it. There is an important distinction between the content of the report and the process and the things that people go through while they are giving evidence.

The CHAIR: The question is that the report be noted.

Hon COLIN HOLT: I will not go for too much longer; I will get on to some of the other stuff.

I want to reiterate that the committee has done a great deal of work. It has done 12 months’ worth of work to get to this point. I encourage every member to read the report fully. There are 600 or 700 pages in the report. It is not easy. It will probably take members a few sittings to get through it. I think we should take the opportunity to debate and reflect on the information in that report in these sessions. We in the Legislative Council are quite lucky to have the opportunity to debate committee reports every week. I know there was some angst in the other place when the report was presented because the Legislative Assembly has quite a different process when dealing with tabled reports. There can be debate only at the point of tabling. That may change down the track, but Legislative Assembly members currently have to wait for the tabling of the government response to speak on reports. I am not sure whether they get to debate it then either.

Hon Alison Xamon: We are the superior chamber!

Hon COLIN HOLT: This is a really good opportunity to discuss reports. We were earlier talking about the standing orders, and we really should preserve this time because it gives us the opportunity to debate issues more fully, especially with a report of this magnitude in both a written sense and what the issue is about.

I encourage members to read that report and bring their thoughts and reflections to the chamber. I am sure there will be more to say after the response is tabled. We will see what comes out of that. I am certainly happy to note the report.

The CHAIR: The question is that the report be noted. Do any members wish to make a further contribution at this stage?

Consideration Postponed

Hon NICK GOIRAN: I move —

That consideration of the first report of the Joint Select Committee on End of Life Choices be postponed to the next sitting of the Council.

By way of brief explanation to members, I know members will want to continue the debate, discussion and the noting of the report, as do I, but I am conscious of the fact that due to the processes in this house, some members of the Select Committee into Elder Abuse did not have an opportunity to contribute their remarks on the tabling of the report last Thursday. I am pretty keen to get to that report, which is the next on the list.

Question put and passed.