

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

13th Assembly

Select Committee on Opening Parliament to the People

REF: COMM2016/00023.34

The Hon Natasha Fyles MLA
Leader of Government Business
Parliament House
Mitchell Street
DARWIN 0800

Dear Leader of Government Business

Re: Response to comments and invitation to attend next meeting

Thank you for your letter of 10 March 2017 providing comments on the Select Committee on Opening Parliament to the People's draft recommendations.

The Committee largely agrees with the policy intent of your comments but there are some points where the committee considers that the implications of what is proposed would have significant adverse consequences. As these issues are vital for the effective operation of the proposed reforms the Committee would welcome the opportunity to discuss them with you in detail.

The first issue of concern is the proposal that the Assembly has issues based committees. The Committee is concerned that this requires a radical change to the functions of these committees to that proposed in the Green Paper. Your letter suggests one committee to perform social policy inquiries and another to look at economic matters and financial scrutiny. This removes some of the key features of the proposal detailed in the Green Paper, such as aligning the committee's responsibilities with those of Ministers and Agencies so the lines of scrutiny can follow the lines of government accountability, and having a committee identifiably responsible for each area of Government activity. This will greatly weaken the committees' ability to scrutinise the performance of Agencies in delivering programs.

The Committee does not agree with the pairing of 'economic' and 'scrutiny', as the Green Paper proposal is for all the committees to scrutinise the performance and financial management of Agencies. Removing the public accounts function from a 'social and legal' committee would weaken that committee's ability to monitor Agency performance in delivering on social issues.

The Committee is further concerned that the proposed issues based committees would maintain the relatively ad hoc approach to scrutiny by the Northern Territory's

committees to date. While this has allowed for effective individual inquiries, it has not provided a robust system for accountability.

The Committee notes that there was no objection to the proposal for portfolio committees as set out in the Green Paper raised in submissions or hearings, and that in evidence the Auditor-General endorsed the expansion of the public accounts function to all portfolio scrutiny committees given its effective operation in Queensland.

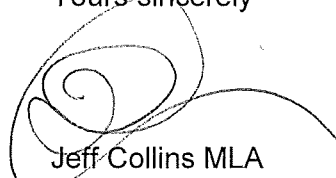
The second issue of concern is your expectation that streamlining existing committees would enable support for the new committees to be met within existing resources. While the proposed committee reforms would increase efficiency, this would not make up from the greatly increased workload of the committees. Inadequate resourcing would result in a failure to produce positive outcomes, place a significant burden on Members, and undermine the reputation of the Legislative Assembly. The budget allocation to committees is already low, and the minimum required supplementation outlined in the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly's submission would only return committee funding to the same level as it was 2011-12.

The Committee's third issue of concern is limiting petitioners to those on the electoral roll. While this would make it easier to confirm if a person was qualified to petition, it would have the unacceptable consequence of removing the right to petition of Territorians who are not on the roll. The Committee does not propose to remove the right of children to petition the Assembly.

Another issue requiring further consideration is the allocation of time for committees during sitting weeks. The Committee changed from its original proposal for Wednesday morning due to concerns raised in evidence.

The Committee therefor asks that you attend its meeting at 12 noon on Wednesday, 15 March 2017 in the Litchfield Room to discuss these matters.

Yours sincerely



Jeff Collins MLA
Chair
13 March 2017