



Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory

Standing Orders Committee

Summary of issues raised in submissions received in respect of the current inquiry into the Estimates Committee process

Treasury

- Questions directed to all agencies should be submitted once with advice that they are to be directed to all agencies.
- Answers to across-agency type questions to be tabled ahead of the Estimates Committee hearings.
- Greater period between the Budget sittings and the Estimates Committee hearings.
- Database as the most efficient way of organising and disseminating the information about questions.
- Questioners to indicate the priority order of their questions.
- Rule to formally allow witnesses from other agencies to appear with an agency and its Minister if required by the Minister.
- More time for the entire process, ie. including the Committee reporting to the Parliament and passage of legislation. For example, a 5-day week, say 9.00am to 9.00pm.
- More structured timetable for ministers and agencies to appear.
- Processes established for the questioning of agency witnesses should be followed (at times agency officers were questioned directly).
- Short breaks and tea facilities made available for witnesses.

Feedback from various Government Agencies received by Deputy Chief Minister

- Confusion arising from the Secretariat who, in liaison with Treasury, allocated questions to agencies they believed were more suitable.
- Difficulties caused by questions being sent twice to agencies with different numbering systems.
- The imposition on agencies to provide 10 copies of tabled documents.
- The dysfunction of normal agency activities resulting from the unpredictability of when agency's would need to attend the hearings.

Government Whip

- An assessment of the suitability of other venues within Parliament House.
- Estimated cost of nine extra sitting days.
- Options for improving administrative procedures, including:
 - Standing Orders for the relevance of questions and supplementary questions.
 - Standing Orders that place the onus for responsible use of time onto the Opposition and other MLAs.

Ombudsman

- Process extremely beneficial.
- Inordinate time spent dealing with Office of the Ombudsman. Understanding and familiarity with the process may result in better utilisation of time.
- Scope for improvement in the formatting of questions so that they can clearly convey the information sought.
- Each Minister be allocated a day to appear before the Committee.
- Consider order in which agency's budgets are considered to provide opportunity for generic questions to be answered first.
- Answers to written questions provided prior the hearings.
- Agencies to prepare answers in suitable format to enable written questions and answers to be released to the public and accessed in an electronic form as each portfolio considered.
- Web site set up to allow people to access questions and answers at an appropriate time.
- Estimates Committee to sit at a later time to consider whether there are any supplementary questions arising from questions on notice.

Auditor-General

- Briefing to Estimates Committee and other relevant persons, prior to commencement of the committee stage, by offices from NT Treasury to explain how the budget papers were compiled, particularly any assumptions made and/or changes prior to the prior year.
- NT Treasury be the first agency to appear before the Estimates Committee, this provides opportunity for agency wide questions to be answered first.
- Maximum time be set for each Minister not exceeding four to five hours.
- Change order in which Estimates Committee questions agencies. Rather than proceeding by Ministerial portfolio, the order could be by individual agency starting with Treasury then followed in descending order by the highest spending agencies. If time runs out low spending agencies would be omitted from the process.
- Written answers to questions to be provided to Committee members at least one day before an agency appears. This will provide Committee members the opportunity to consider supplemental questions.
- Guidelines be provided to Members emphasising that the questions be budget specific the objectives of which are to inform the Parliament about agency budgets, expenditure intentions and associated outputs.
- One Estimates Committee
- Hearings be conducted outside designated parliamentary sitting days.
- All questions and answers to be read into the Hansard.
- Standing Orders relating to relevance of answers by minister be clearly defined specifically for the Estimates Committee.
- Time limit for committee process overall should be established.
- Committee Chair decides who takes precedence in asking questions.
- The Chamber could be considered as a venue.
- There was sufficient time if used efficiently.
- Members can pursue issues on their electorates as long as there is a clear link to the budget papers.
- There should be sufficient time to read answers to questions and properly formulate supplementary questions within the confines of an agreed maximum time per Minister

Department of Health and Community Services

- Each Minister should have a specific and finite time span for appearance before the Committee, say four hours with a maximum of six hours.

- The system of written question/written answer is changed. Consideration is given to a process whereby members indicate, at least one week in advance, particular areas on which they wish to focus. Ministers, with the assistance of their departmental staff, could then provide answers in an almost "question without notice" situation.
- A generic question be asked in writing and a single combined answer given.
- Questions be grouped in a coherent fashion.

Northern Territory Tourist Commission

- One Estimates Committee.
- Questions in writing prior to the hearings, with opportunity for supplementary questions.
- Scrutiny of written questions to condense similar queries into the one response.
- Answers to all written questions delivered to Legislative Assembly Members day before Minister is scheduled to appear, this will avoid Ministers reading out prepared responses. Written answers can be put directly into *Hansard*, which is accessible by the general public.
- Three days for Estimates is sufficient if hearing time used effectively, provision of written answers would facilitate this.
- Questions of similar nature be grouped together.

ABC Television

- A camera position without passing traffic.
- Camera operators to be able to film from directly behind the Committee members and alternately from behind those appearing in front of the Committee.
- Inadequate space in the hearing room.
- Poor audio quality. Employing isolated microphones and/or a sound mixer panel operator be employed for the duration of the hearings.

CLP parliamentary Wing

- One Estimates Committee
- Estimates Committee hearings conducted outside designated parliamentary sitting day.
- Allocation of a full sitting day for each Minister.
- Next Minister called on if the preceding Minister finishes before allocated time.
- Estimates Committee sits between 9am and 11.30pm each day.
- Questions put to each Minister as:
 - written questions prior to the hearings of the Estimates Committee
 - Questions without notice; and
 - Supplementary questions.
- All written answers to be provided to members of the Legislative Assembly at least three days prior to the hearings of the Estimates Committee with the relevant Minister.
- All questions and answers to be read into the *Hansard*.
- All generic questions be given precedence over other questions
- Questions of a similar nature asked by individual members be grouped.
- Standing Orders relating to relevance of answers by ministers be clearly defined specifically for the Estimates Committee.

Department of Business, Industry & Resource Development

- Questions clearly framed and grouped by content.
- More equitable time allowed for each Minister.
- A clear timetable of the schedule by Ministers.

Department of Justice

- Continue with the question and answer process with written answers tabled with a reasonable amount of time before the Committee hearing.
- Each Department allotted a fixed amount of time before the Committee when it can respond to supplementary questions.
- Questions can still be taken on notice with the Minister deciding if he/she want to respond or not.