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Parliamentary Reform: Opening Parliament to the People

Labor Policy Discussion Paper

Parliamentary Reform

Labor believes that the foundation institution of our democracy is the Parliament.

The processes of Parliament under the Westminster system have served us and many other states and nations well over many hundreds of years. However, like all effective systems reform is required from time to time.

The Westminster Parliamentary system is based on adversarial principles. In the last few decades this adversarial approach has often degenerated into an openly hostile, aggressive approach between political parties and Oppositions and Governments.

This does not serve the interests of the community. The discussion and debate of ideas is welcome. Open abuse and aggression should not be.

The Westminster system and current Parliamentary practices exclude people from the parliamentary process. Labor believes that our Parliament needs to be opened up to more participation from the community.

Labor's Parliamentary reforms are focussed on reducing the adversarial nature of the Parliament and opening the parliament up to the community.

An Inquiry into Parliamentary Practice

A Territory Labor Government will initiate a major inquiry into the conduct of Parliament and its impact on the community.

We believe the institutions that underpin our democracy must operate in a way that creates public confidence and respect.

This inquiry will be co-chaired by a retired judicial officer and a retired parliamentary official such as a former Clerk and will include retired representatives from all parties in the Territory and nominated representatives of the community.

Labor Proposals

Labor will suggest the inquiry consider the following reforms.

1. An Independent Speaker

OPTION ONE - the Speaker as an independent MLA elected to the Parliament.

OPTION TWO - The position of Speaker could be made that of a Statutory Officer and independent of all Members of the Legislative Assembly. The position could be appointed by the Administrator on the recommendation of a Committee made up of the Chief Minister, the Opposition Leader, a representative of each Party represented in the Parliament, a representative of independent MLAs and the Clerk.

OPTION THREE – retain the current process for electing the Speaker which is done by a majority of Members of the Legislative Assembly.

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK

Would an independent Speaker improve the operation of the Legislative Assembly?

Are the current roles and responsibilities of the Speaker effective in ensuring a robust but respectful parliamentary culture?

2. Reforming Question Time

Question Time based on questions without notice is a relatively recent part of the Westminster system- evolving over the last century and a half. It was originally an opportunity to question the Executive on any issue and seek to get answers quickly.

Today it is a gladiatorial contest where the questions asked are largely designed as part of a political strategy by all Parties represented in Parliament. It is the most adversarial part of any Parliamentary day and the centrepiece of Parliamentary aggression and hostility.

It is likely any move to an independent speaker would significantly improve the conduct and function of parliamentary question time

In addition, Labor will suggest the inquiry consider the following issues and make recommendations on whether the current provisions of the standing orders are sufficient or whether they could be reformed to create a more open, transparent and relevant operation of the Legislative Assembly.

a. *Dorothy Dixers*

Is the practise of Dorothy Dixers – questions from Government Members to Ministers conducive to the primary function of Question Time which is to enable scrutiny of Government decisions and performance? Should the current practice be maintained, amend or abolished?

b. *Questions and Answers*

Are the current rules around the specificity of questions and the relevance of answers during Question Time appropriate or could they be improved?

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c. *Questions and Answers that matter to the community*

Do the current rules governing Question Time encourage an appropriate focus on the issues that affect the day to day life of Territorians? Would introducing an electorate focussed Question Time once per sittings to allow electorate specific issues to be canvassed improve this focus?

d. *A Chief Minister's Question Time*

Would introducing a Chief Minister's question time once per each Sittings session to allow questions directly to the Chief Minister improve the accountability and scrutiny of Government?

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK

Do the current practises in Question Time provide for appropriate scrutiny and accountability of Government?

What other reforms might be made to question time to improve scrutiny of Government?

3. Opening up Parliament to the People

Labor believes that one of the reasons the community is increasingly alienated from parliament and the political process is that the lack of relevance Parliament has to their everyday lives. Parliament has ceased to be the people's house and is instead focused on political point scoring and the daily tug of war for media attention.

Labor understands that people want their Government and Parliamentarians to get on and do their job. Labor believes opening up the Parliament to the community leads to better decision making and more effective Government.

As part of the inquiry into Parliamentary practice Labor will recommend consideration be given to:

- a. a root and branch examination of the standing orders to modernise them with a view to increasing transparency and openness and making Parliament more accessible to Territorians.
- b. The setting aside of an allocated time in each Parliamentary sitting week for representatives of different groups to present their case to Parliament. For example the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory, the Council of Ageing, the Chamber of Commerce, Unions NT, and the Youth Roundtable.
- c. The opportunity for members of the community to determine what is debated and considered by the Parliament. This could include the ability for petitions with a certain threshold of signatures by eligible NT voters to be debated in the Legislative Assembly with the opportunity for the lead petitioner to address the Parliament.
- d. That Parliament be upgraded to allow presentations to include modern technology
- e. Ministerial statements, which could also be able to use modern technology in their presentation, will be accompanied by an opportunity for questioning of the Ministers delivering the Statement and their Chief Executives and senior Departmental representatives.

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK

What other reforms might be made to ensure Parliament is more responsive to the concerns and aspirations of Territorians?

To improve the transparency of Parliamentary processes Labor will recommend the Inquiry also consider:

- a. That all Members of the Legislative Assembly Declaration of Interests are online and available for scrutiny.
- b. Changes to the Estimates Committee process

Labor understands the important role the Estimates Committee plays in scrutinising Government expenditure. We also understand that this involves a considerable workload on the public service. Consideration should be given to simplifying and streamlining the operation of the Estimates Committee.

One possible reform would be splitting the two week hearing into separate one week blocks. The first week would allow for Opposition and Independent MLAs to scrutinise the proposed expenditure and outputs identified in Government Budget Papers.

The second week, to be held in October/ November, would scrutinise the actual budget expenditure and policy performance of agencies as part of the Parliament's deliberation of Departmental Annual Reports.

