



NO. 10—MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE AND URGENCY

Each day in the routine of business there is an opportunity under [standing order 75](#) for senators to **discuss** a matter of public importance or **debate** a matter of urgency. This opportunity arises after “Discovery of formal business” on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays and after “Motions to take note of answers” on Thursdays.

What’s the difference?

The difference is a procedural one. A matter of public importance (MPI) is **proposed** to the Senate for **discussion**. There is no question before the chair so no vote is taken at the end of the discussion. A matter of urgency, however, takes the form of a motion:

That in the opinion of the Senate the following is a matter of urgency:

[the matter of urgency is then specified]

The motion, moved without notice, is debated and the question is put at the end of the debate or when the time allowed for the debate expires.

How many senators are required to support an MPI or urgency motion?

At the appropriate point in the program, the President reports the receipt of an MPI or urgency motion. Five senators are required to support an MPI or urgency motion—the proposer or mover and 4 other senators. Senators indicate support by standing in their places. In this way a matter which is regarded by 5 or more senators as warranting immediate debate may be debated or discussed without the usual requirement for notice.

How are MPIs or urgency motions submitted?

Under standing order 75 proposals are delivered in writing to the President after 8.30am but not later than 12.30pm on a sitting day. Proformas for these proposals are published in the *Pocket Guide to Senate Procedure* or on the internet on the Senate at Work page, under the heading [For Senators: procedural proformas](#). The proposal must be signed by the senator concerned and delivered in hard copy to SG.105.

If more than one proposal is submitted, the first proposal received is reported by the President. If more than one proposal is submitted simultaneously, the proposal to be reported is determined by lot, with the proposal that **remains** in the ballot box being the one that is reported by the President.

Proposals may be withdrawn by the proposer at the time the President reports them or at any time beforehand.

Time limits

The time available for an MPI or urgency motion varies according to the circumstances. Normally, 60 minutes are set aside for the discussion or debate but if no motions to take note of answers are moved after Question Time, 90 minutes are available.

Individual speaking times are 10 minutes although this is commonly varied by agreement beforehand and with the leave of the Senate (unanimous consent of all senators present). If speaking times are varied by leave, the clerks are instructed to set the timing clocks accordingly.

Subject matter

Proposals for MPIs and urgency motions are accepted if they relate to matters of Commonwealth ministerial responsibility. They provide an opportunity to debate or discuss topical issues of public policy and government performance.

Can they be amended?

An MPI may not be amended because it is not a motion. An urgency motion may not be amended unless standing orders are first suspended (see [Brief Guide No. 5—Suspension of Standing Orders](#)) or unless **leave** is given. Any debate on the suspension of standing orders is included in the time available for the debate. If the total time available expires before the question on the suspension of standing orders is put, the suspension motion lapses and only the main question (on the urgency motion) is put.

What is the effect of an urgency motion?

A vote on an urgency motion is a vote on whether the matter is a matter of urgency. The vote is often regarded, however, as a vote on the substantive matter. The motion may therefore be cast in terms that make it difficult for a party to vote one way or the other on the motion. [Odgers' Australian Senate Practice, 11th edition, page 187](#) gives the following example:

...if the motion is to declare that the level of unemployment is a matter of urgency, a vote on the motion is regarded as a test of the Senate's attitude to the level of unemployment. If the party supporting the ministry votes against the motion this may be regarded as an expression of indifference to unemployment, but if the party votes for the motion this may be regarded as a confession of ministerial failure.

If an urgency motion is agreed to, any senator may move, without notice under [standing order 154](#), that the resolution be transmitted by message to the House of Representatives for its concurrence.

Need assistance?

For assistance with any of the matters covered by this brief, contact the Clerk Assistant (Table) (government senators and their staff) on extension 3020, or Clerk Assistant (Procedure) (non-government senators and their staff) on extension 3380.

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