

Introduction

- 1.1 Consideration in detail of the main appropriation bill (Appropriation Bill (No. 1)) is an important part of the consideration of the annual budget. It is the estimates consideration for the House and gives Members the opportunity to scrutinise and examine ministers' proposals for expenditure. Unlike the Senate's estimates process that takes place as committee proceedings, the process adopted by the House gives Members the opportunity to debate the detail of the bill directly with ministers.
- 1.2 It is standard practice for the consideration in detail of the main appropriation bill to take place in the Federation Chamber.¹ Proposed expenditure for the ordinary annual services of government is scrutinised portfolio by portfolio. Members are allowed an unlimited number of five minute periods to speak within the period of time allocated to each portfolio and the relevant Minister usually appears to answer Members' questions.
- 1.3 *House of Representatives Practice* outlines how the debate works in practice:

The order for considering the proposed expenditures is the order in which the portfolios are listed in the schedule which is traditionally in alphabetical order. As this order may not be convenient to individual Ministers or shadow ministers, it is the usual practice for a Minister to suggest a different order for consideration.

...

In recent years debate has become progressively more focussed as successive Deputy Speakers have encouraged a question and answer format in the Federation Chamber rather than general debate. Consideration of each portfolio sometimes starts with introductory remarks by the responsible Minister. Shadow

1 *House of Representatives Practice*, 6th edn, p. 432.

ministers usually play an important role and may speak first. Members seek the call to question the Minister, often not taking their full five minutes. Ministers may respond to questions individually, may wait until several Members have spoken before responding, or may respond to all questions in their closing remarks. Ministers may also offer, or be requested, to take some of the questions on notice.²

- 1.4 Under the standing orders, consideration in detail of the main appropriation bill is the same in almost all respects as consideration in detail of other bills.³ In practice, however, this particular debate has a unique style and format. The lack of specific provisions in the standing orders has led to some confusion surrounding the conduct of the debate.
- 1.5 The Procedure Committee has previously considered proposals to specifically provide for the question and answer format of the debate in the standing orders, formalising elements of existing practice. The Committee has also considered proposals to introduce shorter time limits, to improve the flow of the debate, and allow for more contributions in a given period. In the past, the Committee has declined to make any recommendations in relation to such proposals without having sufficiently consulted Members.⁴
- 1.6 In recent years, a recurring concern has been the allocation of the call during the debate. Current practice is that both government backbenchers and non-government Members participate, usually directing questions to the relevant Minister. When there are government backbench Members participating, the call is typically allocated as it is during question time.⁵ The concern is that the allocation of the call in this way results in a disproportionate allocation of time to the Government.
- 1.7 On 16 June 2015, concerns were again raised on this issue. In response, the then Speaker stated:

Earlier in the week in the Federation Chamber, the member for Grayndler raised questions about the allocation of the call during consideration in detail of the main appropriation bill, Appropriation Bill (No. 1). There have been issues raised about this matter over some time, although as a general practice it has now evolved that a question and answer format is generally used,

2 *House of Representatives Practice*, 6th edn, p. 432.

3 See Standing Orders 148-151. Standing Order 149(d)(i) provides for schedules to be considered before clauses during consideration in detail of an appropriation or supply bill.

4 See *Role of the Federation Chamber: Celebrating 20 years of operation*, May 2015, pp. 27-29. *Maintenance of the Standing and Sessional Orders*, June 2013 (43rd Parliament), p. 22.

5 eg Government Member – Minister – Opposition Member – Minister etc

rather than a general debate. However, there are valid issues to be raised about how best to deal with the consideration in detail of the appropriation bills. With this in mind, I have spoken to the Chair of the Standing Committee on Procedure and asked that that committee examine the way in which we deal with the consideration in detail of Appropriation Bill (No. 1) to see if we can work out a more satisfactory way that is consistent, because different deputy chairs can give the call in different ways.⁶

- 1.8 On Thursday 25 June 2015, the Committee adopted an inquiry into the consideration in detail of the main appropriation bill with the following terms of reference:

Inquire into and report on the consideration in detail of the main appropriation bill with reference to:

- the conduct of the debate, including the allocation of the call; and
- the adequacy of the Standing Orders in facilitating the debate.

Structure of report

- 1.9 There has been no call over the course of this inquiry for any change to the broader budget debate. The Committee has therefore confined its deliberations to the consideration in detail stage.
- 1.10 Chapter 2 discusses the history of the debate and the roles of the key people in the proceedings: deputy speakers, ministers and members. It then considers the two key areas of concern: the question and answer format of debate and the allocation of the call.
- 1.11 Chapter 3 offers the Committee's view on how this debate should proceed into the future, and offers some specific guidance for those with a role in the proceedings.

6 H.R. Deb (18.6.2015) 59.

