

# 9 Matters of public importance and urgency

On Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays 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”.

## 1. 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. The matter of urgency should not itself be framed as a substantive motion (for example, “That the Senate condemns...”).

## 2. 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 a letter proposing an MPI or urgency motion. In order for the proposal to proceed, it must be supported by four senators, not including the proposer, rising 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.

## 3. How are MPIs or urgency motions submitted?

Standing order 75 sets out the requirements for lodging proposals. In practice, proposals are accepted by the Sub-Table Office at 8.30 am each sitting day. Proformas for these proposals are available on the Senators’ intranet ([Senate Connect](#)). Proposals must be signed by the senator concerned and delivered in hard copy. If more than one proposal is submitted at this time, the President will determine, by lot, which proposal is to be reported.

Proposals may be withdrawn by the proposer at the time the President reports them or at any time beforehand.

The Clerk Assistant (Procedure) can provide advice about the form of these proposals.

## 4. Time limits

The time available for an MPI or urgency motion is normally 60 minutes, but if no motions to take note of answers are moved after question time, the time is extended to 90 minutes.

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.

## 5. 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.

## 6. 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 [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 unamended urgency motion) is put.

## 7. What is the effect of an urgency motion?

A vote on an urgency motion is technically a vote on whether the subject of the motion 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. [Chapter 9](#) of *Odgers' Australian Senate Practice* 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 on 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 guide, government senators or their staff should contact the Clerk Assistant (Table), on extension 3020 or [ca.table.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:ca.table.sen@aph.gov.au); and non-government senators or their staff should contact the Clerk Assistant (Procedure), on extension 3380 or [ca.procedure.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:ca.procedure.sen@aph.gov.au).

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