

9. Matters of public importance and urgency

On Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays there are up to two opportunities under [standing order 75](#) for senators to **discuss** a *matter of public importance* or **debate** a *matter of urgency*.

What's the difference?

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 is debated and the question is put at the end of the debate. The matter of urgency should not itself be framed as a substantive motion (for example, “That the Senate condemns...”).

In order for the proposal to proceed, it must be supported by four senators, not including the proposer, indicating their support.

How are MPIs or urgency motions submitted?

Up to two proposals may be considered each day and must be submitted to the Sub-Table Office (SG.105) or by email (table.notices.sen@aph.gov.au) by 8.30 am. Templates for MPI and urgency motion letters are available from the senators' intranet ([Senate Connect](#)). If more than two proposals are lodged, the matter is determined by the President, having regard to advice from the whips and an informal roster agreed to by the parties and independent senators. In practice, the opportunities for MPIs and urgency motions are divided up amongst the parties in proportion to the number of seats held by the parties and independents and it would be unusual for more than two proposals to be lodged.

Time limits

The time available for each proposal is 30 minutes, and senators may speak to a proposal for up to 5 minutes each. In practice, informal arrangements are often made between the parties and independents to allocate different speaking times, and the speaking clocks in the chamber are set in accordance with these arrangements.

Can an MPI or urgency motion be amended?

An MPI may not be amended because it is not a motion. An amendment to an urgency motion can only be moved if leave is granted (if no senator present objects) or following the suspension of standing orders (see [Guide No. 5](#)—Suspension of standing orders).

Note that if a motion is moved to suspend standing orders to enable an amendment to be proposed in relation to an urgency motion, any debate on the suspension of standing orders is included in the overall time available for debate on the urgency motion itself. If the time for consideration of the urgency motion expires before the question on the suspension of standing orders is able to be put, the suspension motion lapses and only the main question (on the unamended urgency motion) is put.

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 a substantive matter as the motion may 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.

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; and non-government senators or their staff should contact the Clerk Assistant (Procedure), on extension 3380 or ca.procedure.sen@aph.gov.au.

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