



The Hon Tony Burke MP
Shadow Minister for Finance
Manager of Opposition Business
Member for Watson

Mr Andrew Southcott MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Procedure
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600


Dear Mr Southcott

INQUIRY INTO THE CONDUCT OF QUESTION TIME

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry into the Standing Orders in relation to Question Time and the conduct of Question Time more broadly.

My response to the Committee's terms of reference is as follows:

Constituency Question Time

- As the Committee has noted, the Government recently announced a trial of so-called "Constituency Question Time" to operate during the last half of Question Time each day. In announcing this trial, the Prime Minister made the following comments: *"After five questions have been asked from the government members in the traditional way, further questions will be addressed to ministers by government backbenchers on matters of interest to their local constituency. Local issues are absolutely the bread and butter of every member's job. This will typically involve five questions from government members on their local constituency. It is entirely up to the opposition whether they want to give their backbenchers a say or not."*
- I agree with the Prime Minister's comments in at least one respect – *"Local issues are absolutely the bread and butter of every member's job"*. That is why during this term of Parliament, Labor backbenchers have regularly asked questions of the Government during Question Time about issues which are important to their local constituents. These questions were allowable before the Government's Question Time trial began. They remain so. In fact, changes to Standing Orders were not required in order to allow the Government's Question Time trial. It is clear that the only changes which have occurred are changes to the Government's tactics in the House.


- The Government's trial of "Constituency Question Time" was to last until the end of the year. I will watch with interest as to whether the Government continues this trial into the new year and whether improvements or changes are made.
- I note that in the future there may be room to make changes to the parliamentary day which could provide better opportunities separate to Question Time for Members to pursue matters relating to their constituency with Ministers.

Question Time conduct

- Standing Order 104(a) requires an answer to be "directly relevant to the question". However, rulings have recently been made that an answer is "relevant" and satisfies this Standing Orders where a Minister speaks about the policy topic of the question. The Standing Orders at present clearly require an answer to be relevant to the actual question and do not make reference to the policy topic of the question. I am concerned that the current practice which has been adopted makes it a simple matter for Ministers to avoid answering questions during Question Time, which in turns raises questions over the ability of the House to hold the Government to account.
- Standing Order 100(f) limits each question to 30 seconds, while Standing Order 104(c) limits each answer to 3 minutes. However, in this term of Parliament, there has been a practice to cut off Members who are asking questions as soon as they reach 30 seconds, but allow Ministers to go beyond three minutes in order to briefly finish an answer. In the interests of free-flowing parliamentary debate, a small amount of flexibility on these time limits should be applied across both questions and answers.

I look forward to the outcome of the Committee's inquiry.

Yours sincerely



20 December 2015