



SPEAKER

Ref: 2014/00134.92

Mr Ross Vasta MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Procedure
PO Box 6021, Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr Chair

Inquiry concerning the conduct of Question Time

Thank you for your letter dated 4 September, received in my office on 10 September 2019, in relation to a Standing Committee on Procedure inquiry concerning the conduct of Question Time.

In the Northern Territory, we are well into the third year of an innovation commenced early in 2016 which the Standing Orders Committee is again reviewing as part of the ongoing review of Standing and Sessional Orders.

Sessional Order 2 trialled in 2016, reviewed in 2017 and readopted on 20 March 2018 states:

Notwithstanding anything in the Standing Orders, during the conduct of Question Time, on each Wednesday when the Assembly meets, no Government Member will ask a Minister or Committee Chair a question without notice, but no single Minister may be asked consecutive questions without an intervening question being asked of a different Member who is a Minister, Committee Chair, Speaker or other Member who is able to be asked a question without notice pursuant to Standing Orders, however one supplementary question is permitted in line with Standing Order 106(4) (b).

This Sessional Order clearly prevents 'Dorothy Dix' questions being asked this one day of the week.

After some initial attempts to define Ministers by portfolios where a Minister will have multiple portfolios, I ruled that the intention was clear so that a line of attack could not be taken against one Minister as an individual person no matter which portfolio the questions asked related to. Therefore it is out of order to ask, for example, the Hon Nicole Mansion (Treasurer, Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services and Minister for Multicultural Affairs) a question related to treasury matters immediately followed by a question related to police matters because, notwithstanding they are distinct portfolios, it is the same person in the ministerial role.

Members were a little critical of the Government in the early stages as this is the only day of the week a Minister will definitely not receive consecutive questions, whereas on any other day they may receive a 'Dorothy Dix' question intervening between two others from opposition or cross bench Members and thus have to answer three or more in a row.

In any event, the objections faded, Members adjusted fairly quickly and the procedure has been in operation for some time now.

While I am unable to pre-empt the findings of the current review of a number of Sessional Orders, I doubt the Standing Orders Committee in its forthcoming report to the Assembly will propose any elimination of this specific Sessional Order.

It is my view that all Members have come to appreciate that this one day is completely allocated to opposition and cross bench Member questions.

Wednesday was the day chosen because it is also the day when General Business matters are considered by the Assembly immediately after Question Time for approximately four hours, thus making Wednesday afternoon a Private Members period from 2.00 pm until 7.00 pm.

Apart from this innovation, our Question Time operates along very similar lines to that of the House of Representatives, with perhaps a little more leniency from the chair in the Northern Territory about matters of question content and answer relevance when points of order are raised.

In a small Assembly of 25 Members, as opposed to the 151 in the House, we have found that Members appreciate a lenient approach to such matters. That is not to say that questions and answers are routinely out of order, just that the Assembly has developed a culture of some leniency when transgressions are not detrimental to the good order of the Assembly on the day.

I wish you and your committee colleagues all the best with the inquiry and look forward to reading the Committee's report in due course.

Yours sincerely



Hon Kezia Purick MLA
Speaker

18th September 2019