



Estimates Committees

One of the most important powers that the Queensland Parliament holds over the Government is the control of the appropriation of public funds (Supply) from the public accounts. From 1860 to 1991 the Legislative Assembly used a financial Committee of the Whole House system to examine and approve Government requests for appropriation. Estimates were debated in the House, but not all departments were the subject of such debates, leading to accusations from successive Oppositions that the less efficiently run departments were escaping parliamentary scrutiny.

Evolving from the recommendations of the Fitzgerald Inquiry, and more specifically from the proposals from the Electoral and Administrative Review Commission, the open Budget Estimates Committee system was established under Sessional Orders in May 1994. The system was modelled on the Senate Estimates Committees, with some features borrowed from New South Wales. The estimates committee system provided a better means for parliamentary scrutiny of the Government's expenditure proposals for each department. Under this system, there was the opportunity in a structured parliamentary forum to question Ministers about decisions that had led to the framing of the Budget.

In May 2011, the *Parliament of Queensland (Reform and Modernisation) Amendment Bill* changed the way in which the Parliament's committee system, including the estimates committee system, operates. The main changes to the estimates process included allowing Chief Executive Officers of Government Departments and Statutory Authorities to be directly questioned, increasing the time allowed for questioning, removing the previous rigid time format restrictions, and creating permanent portfolio-based committees to examine government departments.

The work of portfolio committees covers all ministerial portfolios and government departments. One of their main tasks is to conduct the budget estimate inquiries for their respective portfolios. The committees are made up of an equal number of Government and non-Government members with the chair of each committee having a casting vote.

On Budget day the Treasurer tables the Budget documents. A message from the Governor is presented, the Appropriation Bill is introduced and the Treasurer's explanatory speech (also known as the Budget Speech) is made outlining the Government's policy proposals and estimated receipts and expenditures for the forthcoming financial year.

The debate is then adjourned for at least one full day to allow for parliamentarians and the public to consider the Bill and the accompanying Budget documents. The second reading debate is then resumed and the Leader of the Opposition replies to the Budget Speech. Both Government and Opposition members have an opportunity to debate the Bill. The bill is then read a second time.

After the second reading, the proposed expenditures set out in the Appropriation Bill are referred to the portfolio committees as Estimates Committees. Each committee examines and reports on the proposed expenditures for its particular portfolio. One day is allowed for each committee to hold a public hearing.

Members of the Legislative Assembly who are not members of the Estimates Committee are able, with leave of the committee, to ask questions at the public hearing. In theory, at least, any Member can ask questions at each of the Estimates Committee hearings. Each committee



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Authority must attend the committee's hearings and may be questioned directly by Members. Members cannot ask questions of other public officials. However, a Minister or the Chief Executive Officer, may refer a question to another public official.

There is a provision for Questions on Notice which must be answered by 10am on the day prior to the hearing. Each Minister must provide answers to up to 20 Questions on Notice. At least 10 of the questions on notice are to be allocated to non-Government Members of the committee.

Questioners at Estimates Committee hearings are allowed a wide scope, with questions ranging from items of detail to broad policy. The Minister may inform a portfolio committee that a question will be taken on notice and an answer provided at a later date.

When the committee's hearings are completed, the members meet, discuss the information gained and compile a final report. Any committee member can incorporate in the report a statement of reservations or a dissent to the majority committee report. The final report is tabled in Parliament and each one is debated in the House during the Consideration-in-Detail stage before it is adopted.



An Estimates Committee in action in the Legislative Council Chamber