



*AUSTRALASIAN STUDY OF  
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(Queensland Chapter)*

*Operation of the 1994 Qld  
Estimates Committees: A  
Retrospective*

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**Dr Reynolds:** Thank you ladies and gentlemen for your attendance. The Honourable David Hamill is ill and cannot join us. However, he insisted that some of his points should be given to the meeting. I will do that on his behalf.

I can begin by observing that Estimates matters have always been vital to the operation of Parliament. The right to tax was central to the crisis in the Constitution in the seventeenth century. The battle between Crown and Parliament which culminated in the Cromwellian Interregnum of 1649 to 1658 was fundamentally about the right to tax and who possessed that right. It was then resolved on the battlefield. The Parliament had the right to tax but upon this the constitutional seal was set in 1688 when, in the Glorious Revolution, William and Mary, as joint monarchs, accepted without let or hindrance Parliament's unchallenged right to tax.

It took another 150 years of British parliamentary evolution for this principle to be worked through in all its particulars but, if we take an historical dimension, we can see that the right to tax is the right to govern and the right to govern confers the stamp of legitimacy on Government. It is pertinent for our Constitution that, only once since Federation, namely in 1975, has this principle been called into question.

As far as Queensland is concerned, until 1990 the Estimates debates were under the total control of the Executive. Cabinet decided after the Budget was brought down which departments' Estimates were debated. This meant that Parliament's scrutiny of Executive Government was severely curtailed, hampered by the Executive's decision. After 1989 the current Government's policy was that all departments' Estimates would be debated in Committee of the Whole, a situation which prevailed until 1993. The Government then decided that a better scenario would be to break the House into a series of committees to scrutinise all departmental Estimates.

I am unsure whether it is correct to observe that this decision was a first for a Lower House in the Australian jurisdiction. My distinct impression is that Estimates Committees have hitherto been the province of Upper Houses. However, right or not, this decision certainly broke new ground in Queensland. As far as I can discern, dividing the Legislative Assembly into Committees to examine the Estimates of line departments had two results. Firstly, it potentially enhanced the parliamentary committee system. This had embryonically been put in place by the Ahern Government—1988 to 1989—when the Parliament finally grappled with the notion of standing and ad hoc committees, clothed in the powers of the Parliament itself, having investigative rights and the power to make recommendations. It is very appropriate that Bill Hewitt is in the audience tonight because no-one was more vocal about this in the Parliaments of the 1970s and the 1980s than the Honourable Bill Hewitt and the Honourable Mike Ahern.

Secondly, reading the reports of the Estimates Committees, it was apparent that it was Ministers and their departmental advisers who were subject to detailed scrutiny, not in a general sense, but as the committees' deliberations were being put together and teased out, Opposition and Government members, together with other people present and Hansard full reporting ensured that the Estimates Committees became microcosms of the Parliament as a whole. When reading the Estimates Committees' reports, you see that there is some ambivalence in various Ministerial responses. Some Ministers took the process very seriously; some Ministers, regrettably, did not. Most back bench members took this process seriously and their concerns come out in the committees' reports.

This then leads me to paraphrase what David Hamill intended to say. This can be couched under two headings. One was that, as an Opposition frontbencher for much of the 1980s and then as a Government Minister from 1989, under the old system the Estimates were debated in the House and Ministers responded to policy debates. In fact, Estimates debates were about policy because members engaged in wide-angled talk. Therefore, he felt that Ministers did not tend to familiarise themselves with line issues. They spoke for 20 minutes to introduce their Estimates; then they sat in the chair while their Estimates were debated—and often they were debated for eight, nine or ten hours—then they rose to summarise, and that was the end of the matter. Certainly, local members took everybody around their departments, around their constituencies and around every road and bridge that was in place. That was fine, too, but the Minister tended, in the House, to respond in a wide-angled way.

Mr Hamill felt that with the present Estimates Committees Ministers had to be much better briefed in detail as committee members were now more inclined to ask very detailed questions, make more detailed observations because they were now sitting in the Estimates Committees not only as private members but as members of the Parliament. Therefore, they were making specific points about things which they were interested in. Ministers now had to be better briefed. But the Honourable David Hamill said that, if there was a danger, it was that the Ministers could kick these concerns to their departmental advisers. They came to the

committees in order for the Minister to duck the detailed questions and say, "Fred Nerk will answer that", or "Mary Bloggs knows about that." So the Ministers could stand back from it.

Finally, where does it all go from here? One of the weaknesses of the committee system is that the reports are presented, laid on the table and printed, but are not necessarily acted upon. This is where a fundamental problem with the committee system presents itself. Under the Westminster system, there is only one body which has the right to tax, namely the Government. No other constituent part of the Parliament has this right. Committees can report to the Parliament but it is up to the Executive how they handle those reports, especially those which involve the subvention of public money. I have argued long with the PCJC that this is the fundamental flaw in its make-up: That the CJC may report to a backbench members' committee but there is no further line of authority. When I asked the Honourable Mike Ahern why he set it up that way, he said, "Because the National Crime Authority was set up that way." In my opinion, this is a flawed model.

Senator Parer was a very honoured member of the Brisbane business community before he became a Liberal Senator for Queensland. He has served on a number of Opposition front bench shadow portfolios. Senator Parer has been a member of several Senate Estimates Committees. The floor is yours.

**Hon Warwick Parer<sup>1</sup>:** Thank you very much Paul. .... Just for interest and by way of background—the early Senate Estimates Committees were established after a long period of Coalition Governments in Canberra. If my memory serves me correctly, the driving force behind the Estimates process was Alan Missen. Alan Missen was very keen to see this process adopted, because he wanted us to follow the American system of accountability to some degree. So it all developed from there.

Curiously enough, in retrospect—and I do not mean to be political when I say this; also, I wasn't there at the time—because the system was set up by backbenchers such as Missen, who was a member of the coalition, according to reports from our Ministers at the time the most direct questions asked during the Estimates process were from the then Government's backbenchers, not from the Opposition. In retrospect, I think the coalition might have wondered, "Why did we let Missen get away with this?"

In one or two months' time, I will have served on Estimates Committees for very close to 10 years. When I first went to Canberra, I was told, "You are on an Estimates committee", and I had no idea what an Estimates committee was. I was introduced to the process via a crusty old Labor chairman who was about to retire. The Minister on duty was Peter Walsh, who was guaranteed to put fear and trembling into the hearts and minds of even the toughest politician. The chairman took me aside and asked, "Look, do you know what this is all about?" I said, "Not really." He said, "My job is to finish this Estimates committee as fast as possible. Your job is to bring down the Government." Perhaps I am being a little cynical. However, as time progressed, I realised that what he said wasn't entirely incorrect. Later, I might discuss some of the things that we pursue in Estimates and our reasons for doing so.

Curiously, this year the whole Senate Estimates committee system has changed substantially. The Government's decision to bring down the Budget in May rather than in September resulted in a total rearrangement of the Estimates process. In previous years, the major round of Estimates hearings occurred in October, after the Budget. At that round we had the Budget, the Estimates and also the annual reports for the previous year, so we could weigh up what was coming forward in the next year by comparing it with past years' results.

In March, there used to be a round of hearings that covered additional appropriations. There were great spats between the Opposition and the Government, because the Government used to say, "You must limit your questions to what is in the additional appropriations", whereas we felt that we could broaden that out not only to cover the additional Estimates but also anything that had occurred in the Budget session of Estimates and the additional Estimates. This used to be a source of great concern for chairmen, particularly those who wanted to complete the Estimates as fast as they possibly could.

However, under the new system the Budget Estimates hearings are held in May and the forward Estimates are examined without having the benefit of the past year's annual reports. As to the additional Estimates, which are held in November and which are currently going on—in fact, last Thursday I was at Estimates committee hearings—rather than merely considering the additional appropriations, these committees are able to cover the whole range of Government programs.

The second major change to the Estimates committee system followed a report by the procedures committee in June this year. The report, which was adopted in its entirety,

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<sup>1</sup> Senator Parer became a Liberal Party Senator for the State of Queensland in 1984. From 1985 he was a member of several Senate estimates committees. Also from 1990 he was a member of the Opposition Shadow Ministry. In 1996, he became Minister for Resources and Energy.

replaced the eight standing committees and six Estimates Committees with eight pairs of standing committees. Each of the eight major areas of public policy had been assigned a legislation committee and a reference committee. The legislation committees report on Bills, or draft Bills, on the annual and additional Estimates and on annual reports. The reference committees report on any other matter referred to them.

There is another change. The appointment of chairmen to the reference committees very much reflects the political balance of the Senate. The coalition has 36 Senators, the Labor Party has 30 and the remainder, with the exception of two Greens and an Independent, are Democrats. So the committee chairmen are appointed on a pro rata basis, which is an interesting development.

So the old system of having Estimates Committees A through to F has disappeared entirely and we have had to relearn the system. As I mentioned, the legislation committees, of course, have all of the functions of the old committees and one more. Whereas the old-style Estimates Committees did not have the power to call for persons, papers and documents, the legislation committees do.

I would like to make some comments on the Estimates process from the point of view of the Opposition. Bearing in mind the remarks made to me early in the piece by one old chairman before he retired, there is a general observation that very few questions are actually asked by Government members. In fact, to one crusty old Senator from Tasmania, who has since left the Parliament, I said, "You must get bored silly. You have to sit here to make up a quorum. Why don't you ask a question?" He said, "I am acting under instructions, mate. We are not allowed to ask questions." So that was a distortion of what was the original intent of the process.

The questions we ask can be drawn from a wide range of sources. First and foremost, the Auditor-General's reports are by far the most important. We refer to the annual reports, of course, which we read fastidiously, and also newspaper articles. The general public is a source and there are also leaks and whistleblowers. Let me tell you, the last source is not as common as you might expect. In the 10 years that I have been in Federal Parliament, in only two instances have I received leaked information—and not from people whom I knew; to this day, I have not met the source of those leaks. The leaked information arrived in envelopes with a kid's handwriting on the front. I will not tell you how it was leaked, just how the information came into my hands.

By far the biggest source of questions is interest groups who want questions asked which they do not wish to raise themselves for fear of some sort of retribution. Alternatively, they may have been unable to get answers to their questions. That is a very big source of questions. Interest groups approach Senators who have interests in the relevant portfolio areas. You have to be able to sift out the wheat from the chaff; there are still a few lunatics out there and you have to be able to pick them.

However, in the main questions are developed through hard work and research. The preparation of effective questions for an Estimates Committee hearing is a process that cannot take place in a few days. Throughout the course of the year, it is best to set aside material on which to base your questions. There are also different reasons for asking the questions that we ask. The No. 1 reason, of course, is accountability. Keeping the incumbent Government honest is really why the Estimates system was set up in the first place.

The other reason depends on the year and the timing. Between 1990 and 1993, I was the shadow Minister for Administrative Services—and I see that there are some Administrative Services officers here tonight. My line of questioning was based simply on finding out information. I was not interested in what the Minister said; you do not believe the Minister. I was very much interested in hearing what the officers of the senior public service had to say, because it was of great assistance to us in developing our own policy. That might surprise you, because you might not expect that sort of thinking. It looks like a gladiatorial contest and a bit like question time in some cases.

A major reason for taking that approach—and earlier I explained this during a chat with someone—was that the department was going through the process of commercialisation and adopting accrual accounting. For example, it had set up trust accounts. The public sector had enormous difficulty coping with the movement across to accrual accounting. It was useful not only from my own point of view at the time but also very useful for the people in Administrative Services who were having to do battle with the new system. I make a point of never criticising them in their difficulties. I felt that it was a good move and that we should not try to score brownie points on that issue because it might somehow stop the process, and I thought that that would be to the disadvantage of the country as a whole. So that just shows you that it isn't all bad.

The non-Government Senators always face a dilemma at Estimates, that being the question of whether to pursue Ministers through intensely political questions or to emphasise instead the information-gathering side of the Estimates process. Now and then, a bonus—for example, a whiteboard—will come out of the woodwork. In the main, it is more likely that such an issue will surface when Ministers refer questions to their own department, because departmental officers have an obligation to be honest in their responses.

In my experience, Opposition members are best off using Estimates as a mechanism for gathering information. As I said, the process is very useful for that. Estimates hearings always seem to take place late at night after media deadlines—and I do not know whether that happens here. The *Hansard* reports of these hearings are rarely available until several days later. The best place to raise overtly political matters is in the Chamber.

There are no time limits on Senate Estimates hearings—none. They do have a notional allocation of two days, which we have right now, and people tend to try to fit in with that system voluntarily. There is no great joy in stringing something out for days and days unless you have a whiteboard or unless someone is trying to evade questions. There are no time limits for Senate Estimates. I think the time limits placed on Queensland Estimates Committees are the major disadvantage of the system here. Paul talked about Executive control. Once you have the majority of numbers and you start putting on time limits and these other crazy things that you have in Queensland, about which I will talk in a minute, you then have control over the system, which you shouldn't have.

One of the disadvantages of having no time limits is that Estimates can be very, very dull. I will relate a wonderful story. At the time, I had not been in Canberra for very long. You would remember the crusty old Estimates chairman of whom I spoke before when his committee was examining the Estimates of Peter Walsh's department. A Democrat Senator, whose name I will not mention—and that Senator is no longer in the Federal Parliament—came into Estimates with a big, thick pile of questions to ask. He had been around to all of the academic institutions compiling a list of terrible questions, such as "How many wires are there in a three-pin plug?" It reached the stage where Walsh said to him, "Senator, you are driving me and everyone else in this room around the bloody bend." The Senator's top lip quivered and he said, "I will put them all on notice." Walsh said, "Good. Clear out!"

The next day, the Senator turned up all ready to go with another big heap of questions. We all sucked in our breath and thought, "Oh my God, not more of this." I was watching Walsh. He got redder and redder. He scribbled a message on a piece of paper and sent it over to me via an attendant. The note read, "Warwick, I have tried being rude to this bloke. It doesn't work. What will I do?" I couldn't help writing on the bottom, "Try harder, Peter. I know you can."

Having said that, I think a certain amount of tedium is a small price to pay for democracy and accountability, so you have to put up with this. They tell us that politicians are a microcosm of society. After all, the whole process revolves around the spending of, as Paul said, taxpayers' money. Every taxpayer needs to be assured that this money is being spent wisely. This is often forgotten by all levels of government. I think that you would all probably agree with me about that.

The Senate does not have a rotational system for asking questions. As a rule, the committee chair allows the members of the committee to pursue a line of questioning to its logical conclusion before moving to another member. The principal difficulty I see with the State's rotational system is that Estimates hearings are by their very nature a forum for questioning the Government of the day. It is hardly in the career interests of Government members to ask hard questions of Ministers or departmental officers.

Having that rotational system means that it is absolutely inevitable that the Minister on duty will have his staff write the question—a dorothea dixer—to hand up. It does not matter which Government is in power; that is what they all do. The public service will have all of the questions two weeks in advance and will have the answers ready.

To use the recent hearing into Customs as an example, which was held just last week—the only members of the committee who asked questions were Senator Ferguson, a Liberal Senator from South Australia, and I. So it still worked. Those of us who don't follow the system of that recently retired Democrat who used to ask tedious questions are mainly only interested in things that interest them, things that might have an effect on policy or areas where they think the Government has done something wrong. I think the Queensland rotational system just compels Government members, in at least a token portion of their 20 minutes, to ask dorothea dixer questions.

I noticed that a Queensland Labor MLA asked the Premier at one stage—

"In the important area of trade and investment, some new initiatives have been introduced in an effort to increase the export of Queensland goods and services as

well. There seems to be a general recognition that trade and investment in Queensland is expanding—and the Premier has been able to demonstrate this in his previous answers."

This is a question. It continued—

"To expand exports even further, an allocation of \$2.1m has been made available to Queensland export firms through the Queensland Export Development Scheme."

Only then did he ask the question. That is not what Estimates are supposed to be about.

In the Senate Estimates hearings, most of the questions are answered by the public service. You can often pick a Minister who is very confident in his own portfolio and one who is not by his inability—and, in fact, I was pretty curious about Paul's words before—to flick these questions across. Those who are not confident will resist. They will use all sorts of excuses—for example, policy. The classic excuse is commercial-in-confidence. That is a ripper. Or the question might concern a Cabinet paper or something like that. From our point of view, I have always preferred Ministers to move them across, because you are always suspicious that the Minister is trying to evade by stopping—not by not asking—the public sector from answering the question. This is recognised in Senate Standing Order 26 (5), which states that the committee may ask for explanations from Ministers in the Senate or officers relating to the item of proposed expenditure. So there is that freedom there.

At the recent Customs hearing, the Minister, Chris Schacht, responded to 28 questions out of the 110 put to the department— about 25 per cent. As I mentioned, from where you sit, when you start seeing that happening, you start to pry even further. That can drag hearings out, too, because you think that an evasiveness game is being played. You are probably wrong, but that is the feeling that you get. It is a sort of body language thing.

The Queensland system places the onus on the Minister to respond to questions. In the Estimates hearing for the Department of Housing, Local Government and Planning, Mr Mackenroth answered all but four questions—a score of 97 per cent. So while I thought Chris Schacht was a bit much at 25—a bit effusive—I see that the Minister answered 97 per cent. To me, as a member of that committee, I would take the view that he does not want his department answering my questions. We would have the ability to pursue that.

The Premier gave evidence to a committee on behalf of the State Auditor-General, even though the Auditor-General is supposedly independent of the Executive. It is my belief that this system greatly reduces the value of Estimates Committees. Members of Parliament can question Ministers at any stage during question time. And the opportunity to question public servants comes very rarely.

The Senate Estimates committee has a highly effective mechanism for handling questions on notice. There is a hole in the Queensland operations. In Canberra, questions can be submitted on notice during the hearing as well as before it. The Government is obliged to answer those questions within a relatively tight time frame. This means that non-Government members are able to obtain detailed and accurate information relatively quickly. Under the Legislative Assembly system, Sessional Order 18 (1) restricts the use of questions on notice to those occasions when the Minister or the departmental officer at the hearing cannot offer a comprehensive response or wishes to add to that response.

We have a system of supplementary hearings also. Under your system, there is a time limit for questions on notice. As I said to someone when I arrived here, what happens if they do not respond? Nothing! Under our system, we can make a reservation on an Estimates Committee and if questions are not answered within the specified period they also become the subject of the supplementary hearing until they are answered. Under your system, the Minister doesn't have to answer at all. He can say, "Put it on notice. We don't know. We have not got an officer here who understands what you are talking about." Nothing happens, end of story. So it really is something that should be addressed.

The Senate Estimates are supposed to consider the Estimates. In practice, the definition of Estimates is extraordinarily broad. Generally, questions can be asked about any area of Government activity and an answer can be expected. Last year, Estimates Committee E put a series of questions to the ABC Chairman, Mr Hill, about the approach taken by a number of journalists at the 1993 Federal election. The Minister on duty at the time was Senator Collins, and the Chair of the committee allowed the question. After the topic was exhausted, Senator Collins wrapped it up by saying, "Madam Chair, I do find all of this terrific. Perhaps we should get into some Riesling, cheese and cabana and workshop it, but it is really getting a long way from the Estimates." However, in the main, they are pretty good. They generally let them go.

The Federal Government's mature approach, I believe, can be contrasted with what happens in Queensland, which could be seen as an attempt to weasel out of discussing an

issue which at the time was the latest issue in the State Auditor-General's report. I will touch on the Auditor-General in a minute, because I think the Auditor-General is critical to the whole business of accountability and democracy.

Estimates, of course, are not the only mechanism for ensuring Government accountability; there is an Upper House, the parliamentary committees, the ombudsman and the Auditor-General. The Audit Office has an advantage not enjoyed by members of the Opposition, or by anyone else in the Parliament, that being that it is able to look at a great deal of the operations of departments. During the past few years, the Commonwealth Auditor-General—and he would claim this publicly—has been starved of funds, which is a quick way of keeping him a bit quiet and a transparent and insidious way of limiting the essential work of his important public office. The Audit Office's invidious situation is now being resolved only because the Government does not control the Senate and because this was a deal that was made. It is interesting how deals are made.

I will tell you about what happened. When the whiteboard issue was current, we wanted to hold a Senate committee inquiry. The minor parties made a deal with the Government. The Government said, "If you don't let this go to a Senate committee inquiry, we will make the Auditor-General independent of the Executive Government", and that is what has happened. So out of that came some pretty good stuff. It gave the Auditor-General some independence.

The Senate Estimates Committees have performed a valuable role since they were first established in 1970, and I believe they have been a comprehensive and transparent mechanism for increasing the Government's accountability. It is not just the Government—the politicians—it is also you people. I often wondered what use some of the questions were that we were asking but, we would ask them; the departments would take them seriously because they were sure that if something was going off track and was not fixed up by the next Estimates, it would probably be on for young and old. So it was important. So from an overall accountability point of view, not just ministerial but also public service accountability, I think they have played a very important function.

The Government has argued that the rules governing the committees are based on interstate models. This, I think, is what has been introduced here. I do not think that that is a fairly good reason for doing it. In the absence of an Upper House in Queensland, the Estimates committee, I believe, must be as open as possible. That is the only way to go. I am delighted to see that the Estimates have been introduced. I suppose it is as much of a chore for you people sitting on the other side of the table as it is for people who have never experienced it before from the political side, but I still think that there have to be changes made if it is to really fulfil the function that it was originally intended to do.

**Mr Dunning<sup>2</sup>:** Senator Parer, ladies and gentlemen. There is always a temptation, I think—particularly for somebody in my somewhat unique situation here—to be heavily critical. I have resisted the temptation. So from that point of view you might find what I have to say dull and boring.

I thought I would take the opportunity of talking to you about the system that I knew for some years prior to 1990, and even prior to 1994, and then talk to you about what happened in 1994 and what I found about that and then make some suggestions as to what could be done perhaps to make some changes. I had to disagree with the Senator; public servants do not look forward to any form of examination. There is absolutely nothing that we would do to want to have any more than what we have got. If you look at my successor as Director-General of Administrative Services, there is the Parliamentary Public Works Committee, the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee, the Estimate Committee, the Ombudsman, the Auditor-General, the CJC and questions in the House. Nobody could be examined more thoroughly than that. So it is not something that you would look forward to.

The old system, or the system prior to 1990, was most interesting because most of the speeches of Government members and the Minister, of course, were written by public servants. That gave some with a flare for writing the opportunity to be able to write some most interesting stuff. I thought that some of what I wrote was pretty good. It always said nice things about the Government and I think, in many cases, the debate was actually used to launch campaigns for the Government of the day. Public servants, as you know, two—only because that is all that little seat in the corner holds—were required to sit there during the lengthy, somewhat boring debate that went on. I always found the debate—and the word "debate" means contributions are coming from two alternate sides—somewhat amusing. I recall one

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As a graduate of the University of Queensland with a Bachelor of Commerce Degree, he has fulfilled many senior roles in the State Public Service: Director-General for Administrative Services, a position he held from December 1989, but he was Commissioner for Railways in 1989 as well; he had held senior positions through the Transport and Railways Departments. Mr Dunning is now Chief Executive Officer of Evans Deakin Industries Limited.

such debate on Transport Estimates, where an Opposition member spent 13 minutes of his allocated 20 minutes discussing why the Commissioner for Railways had put up the rates for the Catholic Education Office to put free literature on a railway station in the north. At one stage the Minister called out that it would be okay—"We will drop the rates"—but the full 13 minutes were taken before he moved on to boom gates or something like that.

As you know, in those days the Minister introduced the debate, outlined the Government's reasons for the expenditure program and they were, as previous speakers have pointed out, largely policy in nature and did not always refer too much to what I would have thought was what the debate was about, and that was examining the Estimates of that particular department. We were always grateful, of course, that you did not get a turn every year. Sometimes, if there was a bit of a problem, you could actually go three years without your turn, and none of us wept over that. The interesting thing about those debates was that they went on with alternate speakers, as you know. I am not suggesting that the quality deteriorated during the debate but sometimes that became evident by the numbers in the House. Quite often you felt quite lonely there with only a few people listening while members brought to your attention the urgent needs of transport in the Cook electorate or something like that.

The public servants, of course, took copious notes and did their very best to obtain the answers to the queries that might have been raised by members during the debate. Sometimes, I had actually seen public servants pass the final speech to the Minister nicely prepared at the end for him to be able to respond. I always admired those people. I could never do it. Members spoke far too fast for me and I could never get it written down. My handwriting was not good enough. So I had to rely on dot points for my contribution. But often I used to analyse the response. I had a Minister who, I thought, summed it up nicely. He said, "By the time you get to the end of it, they have all forgotten what the queries were." So he said, "The easiest thing was to get up and look serenely at the House and to thank honourable members for their participation and advise that the items queried would be investigated and responses forwarded in due course." Several Ministers said that. It was a nice form of words. It had a bureaucratic ring to it. It could have been said in Westminster and everybody would have been happy. We did, in fact, respond to those queries. In point of fact, we used to prepare answers. It was quite a tame affair generally for public servants.

The only time I ever recalled that there was any effort or any concern on our part—and thank God it was not my department; it was somebody else's—I recall the Opposition were able to actually table an account for the purchase of some liquor for the Road Safety Council board meeting. Included in the account, of course, which was from a notorious Fortitude Valley hotel, were a 1125 millilitre bottle of rum, two bottles of Johnny Walker Black Label—I presume we had not been able to get to the famous Blue Label at that stage—and various other items which were to be consumed by the Road Safety Council. I was grateful, very grateful.

If you moved through the nineties, the system did not change a great deal other than at least the Estimates were performed every year but, of course, the time frame was short and members did not have that much time to be able to examine the Estimates, although I think with the change of Government there was a perceived attempt on both sides to make the debates look better. I think that just comes about—there is nothing political in that—simply by a change of faces, time and that sort of thing. Also, it is really a comment based on my somewhat limited experience back until the mid 1980s.

The new system was interesting because it seemed to me that it was somewhat of a copy of the State system in New South Wales. So when that was coming along, we all had a little lecture on how it should go: there would be a question of one-minute duration maximum with an answer of three minutes. As the Senator said, there is the rotational system. The Opposition were given first crack of the whip and that sort of thing. I remember talking to my colleague who was in charge of public works in New South Wales and I said to him, "Is there anything you should tell me?" He said, "Well, what you have got to do, you have got to get the question to fill up 60 seconds." He said, "Anything less than 57 seconds and you have failed. So you have got to fill the time up with that. Most importantly, of course, you have got to do something with the answers on the Government side. You cannot do much with the answers to questions from the Opposition because you do not know the questions, but at least you know half the questions because you are writing them. Then when you have written the question and you have written the answer, that all looks good." He said, "If you have got a few skeletons in the cupboard, sometimes it is as well to rattle one of those out to give it that, you know, ring of confidence that you are baring all." We did not have any problems in Administrative Services this year so we did not have to do that.

I really saw it as the ultimate in the Dorothy Dix. I mean, here you had the question of a full minute and the answer of three minutes. We had some difficulty with some Government

members who, unfortunately, got the questions out of order, but I have no doubt that, with training, that will be able to be dealt with. I think that it was essential in the first year of operation that there had to be some training. I know—and I speak seriously now—for public servants particularly and, I would have thought, for all members of the House that the effort that was put in by the House staff, and I think that was directed by the Speaker, in ensuring people were familiar with, if you like, the rules governing the debate was extremely helpful. It is a bit of a shame, I think, that there was this requirement to make certain that the question and answer period were filled to their limit. You found that in answers to questions—and let me hasten to add, this is no reflection on my immediate past Minister because I did hear other debates—there was an urge to fill the answer period to the ultimate of three minutes. If you think about the 20-minute rotational arrangement with a minute for the question and three minutes for the answer, you got only about five questions if you were lucky. There was also the parliamentary system of cutting off whoever was speaking at the time as soon as the 20 minutes was up and then transferring to the other. As a public servant and having an interest in fair play, I wondered about that. It cut both ways. I mean, it worked for the Government as much as for the Opposition, but I rather thought in this rather important area where the whole concept was the accountability of the Government in its expenditure, that we could have used a selection of rules or some moderation in ensuring that the answer to the question was given. What amazed me with some of these was where the Opposition was asking the question and it was failed to be answered, the question was not re-asked when the next time came around. It was as if we had moved to a new pasture and that was it.

Some of the requirements, of course, are that you need large numbers of personal staff to make sure that you have got the answers at hand. I think we almost set a record at 43, or something, of advisers. It was quite an assembly. You certainly need somebody with nimble fingers beside the Minister to make sure they can turn the pages quickly, and big print so that he can read the answer to it. I mentioned to you that there was this suggestion by my colleague in New South Wales to try to make the whole thing look real by asking a controversial question in sometimes an attempt to throw the Opposition off. A lot of effort was put into preparing the questions and answers and that brought about, in my view, a distinct advantage and something good that flowed out of the system, I guess, when we sat down and said, "Well now, I wonder what sort of questions we might be asked?" Because bear in mind public servants are here—and as I mentioned at the start, the last thing we wanted to do was to be examined—so we looked at what would be the worst sort of questions that we might be asked.

There were some interesting ones that we looked at. I mean, travel is always good—"How many telephones have you got?" "How many conferences have you been to?" "How many overseas trips have you had?" "How many cars do officers have?" "How many drive them home?" "What is the cost of office fit-out and accommodation"—I am giving you a few tips for next year—increase in staff, cost overruns on various jobs, any black holes and, of course, ultimately, "How much money did you spend on alcohol and entertaining?" In preparing all of this and making sure that we had the answers to this, what I found was that, as Director-General, it gave me a greater depth of knowledge of my own department and certainly my Minister because he had to be across this; he had to answer it. I had to bare all to him. I had to tell him how much money we had spent. I actually went overseas during the period under review and I was personally staggered at the cost of it. In fact, I even checked on my own to see why it cost so much. So from that point of view, that is its prime advantage. It well and truly causes you to look at it and then to have to go and tell your Minister what all of these things cost. I think we discovered that one of our regions had a portable telephone per four staff and things like that.

One of the other problems, I think, is that in the system that we have used—and I know New South Wales does this—the success of how you went is determined by the hit rate of questions that you anticipated the Opposition would ask. I understand that, in New South Wales, if you get less than 70 per cent you are a dismal failure. We did not count up ours and I did not look at what Admin Services did during the last round of Estimates to see what percentage were actually answered by the Minister. I do know that a number of questions were answered by the public servants. I think having public servants present, and particularly those who are not so much at the coalface but very close to it and certainly would have a responsibility and accountability for a particular program or policy area of the department, is very important. They contribute to providing real and honest answers to the whole process. So in that respect, of course, I would support what Senator Parer said and say that, in many cases, the process could be enhanced by asking the public servants to respond to some of the questions.

It is infinitely more penetrating than the old system. I mean, I could say that, for this year, the care and preparation that we put into it—and I know that was replicated in the other 17 departments of the Queensland Government—brought the advantages that I have set out

before of knowing so much more about exactly what you were doing and identifying in the process, I might say, the cost of some of the administration or the cost of individual programs and causing you to think again as to whether you will continue with those in future years.

Some of the disadvantages that I saw—and there were not many—and where I thought an improvement might be able to be made—I think politicians sometimes miss this—is that we must recognise that public servants do make mistakes. In the normal course of business in the private sector, private sector employees make mistakes, too. I suppose, depending on the severity of the mistake in all sectors, it depends on what might happen. I mean, ultimately, it could be termination. Sometimes in the private sector, that could be fairly rapid. But I think if you start from that view that sometimes people make mistakes, if one is discovered, depending on the seriousness of it or otherwise, that should be recognised. I found that looking at what happened here, some of the Ministers certainly strayed from the question and it was difficult to see if, in fact, they actually answered some of them. That matter seemed to be just missed in terms of an Opposition question. Ministers tended to carry on for the full three minutes, often indulging in grandstanding, self-gratification, repetition, filibustering and generally avoiding the question and waiting until somebody donged the bell.

I found some Ministers said that they would take questions on board. Intriguing. I did not know what that meant. It did not seem as if they ever got answered and, I think, really from that point of view, the question should be taken on notice. I know in our particular case, questions were unable to be answered, and I think if you are in a situation like that, the honest thing is to say that you do not know the answer to the question but you will obtain it. I mean, with some of the questions that we were asked, or my Minister was asked, it would have been impossible to have had that information at hand and impossible to have had the person there to be able to say precisely how many accidents happened in the workplace in the year under review or something like that. I mean, the information is available and can be made available. Again, I know in respect of one question, if I recall, we pointed out the enormous cost of what would be involved in deriving the answer to the question. Was it really all that important? It was not, and the Opposition agreed.

I noticed some Ministers avoided questions by saying that the information was contained in the Estimates of other departments. This is great if you are in Estimate Committee E at the end because it is too late then to be able to find out that information. Again, there seemed to be some confusion over whether ministerial expenses could be reviewed or not. That seemed to always be contained in another department.

My impression was that Government members can be well prepared—and I guess this is a criticism that is always raised—whereas with Opposition members, it seemed to me that their briefs were poor and sometimes their questions were way wide of the mark. I found it disappointing on both sides that there seemed to be no follow through. There was no, in my view, desire to finalise the matter. I mean, a good question was asked and then it was sort of hanging there and there was an answer given, which was far from satisfactory, and then the next question about a totally different thing was asked. It just went on like that. That was not a regular occurrence, but I thought that it happened more often than it should. Perhaps that will improve over time.

I agree with the comment about the rotational system. That seemed to chew up the time. If the questions were particularly relevant from the Government side, it would have been better to have asked a few just to colour the scene, or something like that. There should have been a concentration on asking real questions and getting the answers. In most cases, given reasonable time, supplementary questions and the like, I would have thought that the questions would have been better answered by public servants than Ministers. That is no reflection upon Ministers, because my feeling is that they could not possibly hope to be across the detail that was asked in most of the questions.

I mentioned that I was disappointed about the follow-through. I wonder whether that could be improved by providing staff to Opposition members to help them with research. If they had officers with whom to have conversations—not from the point of view of leaking or anything like that—they would at least receive some explanation of the accounts. After all, that is what is being examined.

In summary, as to my feelings about changes that I would suggest—the Queensland system, which I am sure is modelled on the New South Wales system, would not seem to be as good as the Commonwealth system. Generally, the Commonwealth system provides for responses to be obtained from public servants. It certainly puts public servants under much greater pressure, although it does not necessarily create tension. Merely building up tension does not achieve what we are after. What we are really about is trying to find out exactly what has been going on and ensuring that, if improvement is necessary, it can be made.

Supplementary questions and even questions on notice provide for full answers to be given. I think there is scope for the time element to be changed substantially. I would be loath

to suggest that questions should be allowed to ramble on. As we know, some people have a bad habit of making comments when they should be asking questions. The person being questioned loses track of precisely what they were asked. A good committee chairman is absolutely essential to ensure that questions are asked and asked in a reasonable length of time.

As you know and as Senator Parer has pointed out, Senate Estimates have achieved some results—for example, the whiteboard affair and some changes to Customs. I am sure that there are numerous others as well. A former colleague of mine is in the Commonwealth Administrative Services Department. He has told me about some of the penetrating questions that one of the lady Senators has asked from time to time which kept him going.

If we are going to get the best out of a system like this one, we need to ensure that it is reviewed constantly. We have to make sure that we look at the outcome, which is after all a careful examination of the accounts of the department in question. We need to ensure that members of both sides are given an equal opportunity to be provided with research and to ask meaningful questions. In return, of course, we need people to be put in a position where honest, clear and concise answers are able to be given. They may not be able to be given immediately on the spot. There should be an honest attempt to do that and the correct staff should be made available to allow that to happen. However, from time to time, a number of questions on notice would not be a bad idea.

As a public servant, I have found this year's whole exercise well worth while. There is no question about that. It was penetrating. The benefits were probably far greater for departmental staff than the politicians realised they were. That has been the great advantage of the whole process. Thank you very much.

### **Discussion and Questions**

**Mr Briskey:** I was very interested in what Ross was saying about Estimates being very important for public servants. That is probably the main thing that I got out of the Estimates Committees this year. Having been party to the old days of debating every estimate of every department every year and having seen the Estimates Committees working in Queensland this year, I have noticed vast differences. However, I think there is still some way to go. I would be interested to hear whether Ross thinks there is still some way to go. I know you said that you thought they were quite good. Your comment was that the Federal Estimates Committees would be the model to follow. Could you speak more about that please, Ross?

**Mr Dunning:** The sort of thing that made some of the Estimates almost laughable was the Dorothy Dix questions in equal number. Firstly, in our case, there were 43 public servants sitting there who knew the questions and the answers. We knew when we were up to No.8 or No.10. We knew what the whole thing was about. The Opposition was thinking, "We have to sit through 20 minutes of this?" We tried to make the questions and answers interesting, but there is a limit to what you can do with questions about cars and so on.

My feeling would be that, if there is a real question, it should be asked. You would expect that the Opposition is probably going to ask more questions. The other piece of advice that I would offer is to give the answer. There is no sense in making a political speech for three minutes until somebody gongs you. The best way to stop that from happening is to not have a gong. Instead, the chairman could say, "I think the Minister has responded well enough to the question now", and just cut it off.

**Dr Kennard:** Mr Dunning, I am a bit confused about something. I preface my remarks by saying that I am not too certain whether a public servant is a servant of the Government or a servant of the State. If the public servant is a servant of the Government and the public servant disagrees with the way in which the State is being governed—and I realise that there are lots of ethics, which I do not understand in these terms—can the public servant, other than by leaking information, express a point of view? I am reminded by *Yes, Minister* that the ship of state leaks at the top.

**Mr Dunning:** I think most public servants would regard themselves as servants of the State first, although there is a considerable shift in the interpretation of that. I am sure that the Westminster system Australian style is shifting, at least for the most senior of the public servants, who are being seen as servants of the Government. I say that cautiously because you have only to see what happens when Governments of either political persuasion change. However, as a protection mechanism, public servants are not required to answer questions on Government policy. They answer matter-of-fact questions, not questions about policy.

Most public servants, particularly in the Canberra scene—and Senator Parer would probably make this comment—would very quickly claim privilege. Senator Parer was dead right when he said that you go for two responses; namely, "This is a question on policy", or, "This is commercial-in-confidence issue."

**Senator Warwick Parer:** Generally, I would say that Federal public servants feel some responsibility to protect their Minister. However, a number of times we hear, "Why don't you pursue this question with Treasury or someone else", because the people being questioned are upset about a particular line of questioning. In the main, the public servants whom I have struck have always been scrupulously honest in their responses. Sometimes you can notice a distinct degree of discomfort. The greater the discomfort becomes, the more we pursue it.

I agree with Ross. Over the past few years, I have been concerned to see our movement towards what I see as the American system. For example, when you have an election and the Government changes, even the local policeman and the lollipop person on the school crossing lose their jobs. I think that concern is shared by a lot of people in the public service. There was no better system than that which we had for so many years, that is, people in the public service could feel that they could give advice to Governments of whatever colour without fear of the consequences. The more we move in that other direction, the more concerned I become.

This is something that concerns the senior public servants to whom I have spoken in the Federal scene, and I presume that it is the same situation in Queensland. It is a fairly uncomfortable sort of situation when you are there for the sole purpose of protecting a Minister who may not be worth protecting or is doing something wrong. That then puts you in the position of having to be a partner in a wrongdoing, which is at the expense of the taxpayers and voters in the community.

**Mr Jim Fouras MLA, Speaker of the Queensland Legislative Assembly:** Ross said that the Estimates process was of great benefit to public servants. As the Speaker, I was the first cab off the rank. However, I have a very small responsibility—a budget of \$35m, most of which goes to members' salaries and entitlements. Nevertheless I found the briefings to be an extremely useful exercise. Firstly, as a result of that process, I think I was the best informed that I had been since I became the Speaker. Secondly, the process allowed me to gauge the relevant capacities of the senior personnel that I have around the Parliament. The process did allow me to have a look at them.

However, as Senator Parer said, Terry Mackenroth answered 97 per cent of the questions; I answered 100 per cent of them. I am a bit concerned about that. My rationale is that if you have a small department and if you are not able to know everything about it, you are in trouble. Nevertheless, three questions were put on notice. I will share the most interesting one with you. It actually made the television news that night. I just couldn't believe it. The question asked why there appeared to be a discrepancy between the allowance paid in lieu of overtime to my driver and that paid to Mr Borbidge's driver. The fact of the matter is that it was different, but the media said that there was something wrong concerning the level of overtime payments. However, there was no such thing. The driver gets a fixed amount in lieu of overtime.

I will finish by saying that it is a much enhanced process. However, there is a lot of room for improvement. There is no doubt about that. I would suggest that the critics take it slowly. In my experience, Oppositions are parliamentary reformers and Governments never are. In most places where this has happened, it has been because the Government of the day has not had the numbers. That is the only reason that Governments have allowed it to happen in most places. So I think that credit ought to be given to a Government that introduced the process even when it had the numbers to stop it.

**Dr Reynolds:** Senator Parer, what do the Estimates of the President of the Senate look like? The Speaker has just told you about his.

**Mr Dunning:** What the Speaker said was very true. I hasten to add that I would not like him to think that my comments were meant to be overly critical. They were really saying, "Here is something that was good." I emphasise that it was good, but there are some things that we could do to make it better.

**The SPEAKER (Mr Fouras):** Ross, heaven forbid, I do not think you were at all overly critical.

**Mr Hewitt (Minister for Environment, Valuation and Administrative Services 1980-1983):** I would like to make a few rambling observations, if I may. First, I would like to speak about the system that I lived with for many years and which, in turn, was inherited from previous Governments. Sitting days were allocated for a debate on the Estimates, with three sitting days for each Estimates. The first sitting day went from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The second day went from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. The third day was from noon to 4 o'clock. So for each department, three days were set aside to examine the Estimates. The Minister introducing the Estimates was not limited by time. Ministers were allowed—and they often did so—to take

one and a half to two hours to introduce their Estimates, which was an incredible waste of time.

Because so much time was then applied to debating a Minister's Estimates, very frequently members were rounded up at any price to fill up the list of speakers. I very quickly noted that it was almost obligatory for a member on the Government side to say, "I congratulate the Minister." He might have been the most mediocre Minister in Christendom, but it was almost obligatory to say, "I congratulate the Minister." Being a bit of a rebel by nature, I always resolved that I would never congratulate him; if he had done a good job, that was nothing more than he had been paid handsomely to do, anyway.

One of my early arguments was that, if they restricted the Minister's introductory speeches and, if necessary, restricted the number of speakers on the list, they could have processed two Estimates in the course of midday to 10 p.m. each day. So there was ample time to debate every Estimate every year, but it was sad that it took so long.

As to comparing the system that you now have in Queensland with the Commonwealth system—I would urge everyone to move slowly. We are still very much in the formative years here in Queensland. We are still in the process of learning about committees and what they are all about. I think we should allow members of all political complexions a bit of learning time to get used to the committee system and what it is all about before we inflict further changes upon them.

I was interested to hear the comments in relation to questioning public servants. It has always seemed to me that public servants have a far greater understanding of the Westminster system than do politicians. When there is a change of Government, public servants have no difficulty understanding that they owe loyalty to the Government of the day. They switch that loyalty, give proper advice and have very little problem effecting the transition. By way of contrast, members of incoming Governments are usually quite paranoid. Because a public servant has had a long association with a portfolio, ipso facto he is politically tainted and has to be pushed aside. That is always sad.

Politicians should go into a sharp learning mode and understand that public servants can and do transfer loyalty very effectively. The best example to cite is that, when Menzies came to office in 1949, he inherited Dr Coombs, who was a rampaging, unabashed Fabian socialist. There was heavy pressure on Menzies to dispense with Coombs, but he did not do so. They formed a great relationship and both understood the rules.

At the risk of being tedious, I will go onto a slightly different tangent. Last Saturday night, my wife and I went to see a film. I am really not digressing too much. The name of the film was *Clear and Present Danger*. It featured a gentleman named Harrison Ford [who] plays the role of a gentleman named Ryan who becomes the head of the CIA. He is instructed to carry out an operation against drug lords in Colombia. But the first thing that he has to do is go before a Senate committee to have the expenditure approved. I believe this part was factual. I do not believe they would go into fantasy to that degree. I noticed that the American committees have the power not just to look at Estimates, peruse them and ask questions; they have the power to say whether or not those funds will be spent. A lady Senator asked the question, "Can you give an assurance that military forces will not be used in this operation?" Ryan said, "Absolutely." Military forces were used and that is the thrust of the film, so there is no need to see it now because I have told you all about it.

**Dr Reynolds:** I would respond to that, Bill, to say that the Constitution of the United States gives the American Senate the right to advise and consent. That is where that power fundamentally derives from. Our own Constitution gives the Senate no such power. So the Senate can advise and consent on Cabinet matters, on treaties, on Supreme Court judges and on Government expenditure.

**Senator Parer:** Bill, I do not think I go along with the American system. There are a lot of things about the American system that I do not like. Just off the top of my head, because I have not thought it through, you can imagine the wheeling and dealing going on before they approved a certain expenditure—the deals being made. Luckily, we do not have this in this country. It boggles the mind to see how the damned thing would operate. You can imagine, you would have to have your own whiteboard saying, "He owes me three and I owe her five." I think that it would be an appalling situation to work under. That is just an off the top of my head observation.

**Mr Dunning:** I do not think that I can make any comment about the US system because I know so little about it, but perhaps one comment that I would make, too, about the change of staff that occurs in a change of Government is that I agree with Bill's comments that, by and large, public servants have intense loyalty to the Government of the day. I mean, in my own department, every staff member was well aware—four and a half thousand of them—that I considered the worst sin of all was disloyalty to the Government. I mean, leaking

was not on. In my view, leaking is out. You do not have that sort of thing going on. I was in Western Australia the other day seeing the Minister for Transport. I am told that all of his personal staff who are public servants actually, bar one, the policy adviser, were the staff of the previous Labor Minister. I found that incredible, actually. The policy adviser whom I was talking to told me that there had been no difficulty at all and most of the Ministers had done the same thing. So I think that there is hope in looking at that.

**Ms McLean:** I guess I could ask a fairly naive question. I have been involved in debating, so I am familiar with this thrill of the kill type stuff that can go on, but it seems to me that the process was about getting better information and accountability and that there was a lot of time that went into second guessing, and third guessing, what the questions might be. It might have been better picking up on something Ross was saying—that we could have spoken to people beforehand or, shock and haemorrhage, whether perhaps we did not even share the questions beforehand so that we knew where we could have been focusing to get the right information to the right people.

**Mr Dunning:** I am not quite sure I have got the text of the question. Were you suggesting that the questions and answers that had been prepared and examined be given to the Opposition?

**Ms McLean:** Either that or something long the lines that the Opposition gives us a week's warning about some of the major areas that they are going to focus on so that we could perhaps have the information ready.

**Mr Dunning:** By and large, my understanding was that the 18 departments—and others; there were more than that, probably—but the 18 departments coped with the questions that were asked from the Opposition reasonably well. I do not know to what extent the numbers were put on notice, but it was very few. I think in my own department, it was about four or five, or something like that. So there were not many. You could imagine that the documentation that was prepared for the Government contained warts and all so there was the need to protect that from FOI. That precaution was taken because it was there. It would have provided the Opposition with a full question time for the rest of the Government's term. By the way, I do not have a problem with that. I think that the Government deserves to be provided with the information about its department—in this case, warts and all. It is up to them to decide what they should do with it.

**Senator Parer:** Can I comment on that? I think what you are suggesting goes down the track we do federally. We can put questions on notice, a week, two weeks before Estimates and where we are searching for straightforward sorts of things, we often do that because it saves an awful lot of time at Estimates. I understand—and this is the information that I have got—that under the system here, you cannot do that. You are restricted, actually, from doing that. That is quite right, is it? Yes. It is restricted to only if they do not know answers during the actual Estimates themselves. It is fairly useful, particularly when you are chasing something that might be useful for future policy development and stuff like that. If you have got a ripper—you know, a real skeleton under the bed—you are not going to give it on notice, that is for sure. But often they will come to us, certainly before the supplementary Estimates, and say, "Look, will you give us some idea what you are going to ask?" Often the reason given is, "So we know what officers to have there." In the main, that could make a lot of sense, because why should you have 45 or 50 people hanging around if you are going to ask only three or four questions? That is another reason for being able to go down that track.

**Mr Pearce MLA, Member for Fitzroy:** I make an observation for comment, and being a member of one of the Estimates Committees and a supporter of Estimates Committees because I believe that it is one way of making Government accountable, I do not think that Estimates Committees will ever achieve their real purpose until Government members are allowed to ask the questions that they would like to ask.

**Mr Dunning:** No, it was not Peter Beattie either, but he did ask a question about a city just north of here that he is very fond of. I mean, it was not a Dorothy Dixier but, fortunately, the Minister was able to have the answer for it. I was fortunate. It did not matter; we could have answered the question. But I think as a parting shot he thought, "At least I am going to ask one that is not question number 19." I think that you have got to do that. Again, there is a sense of party loyalty. You do not surely want to put one of your own Ministers on the spot and embarrass him, or her.

**Mr Pearce:** I said it was an interesting observation

**Senator Parer:** I had commented on this earlier about the whole origin of Estimates when it went back to the 1970s when Alan Missen was the guy who actually pushed it along. The stories told to me by the Minister—I was not there in those days, of course—that they sort of tried to base it on the American system, and even though I have said some rude things about the American political system, this is the system that it was really based on. The

information given to me by people like Sir John Carrick is that the worst questions they got in Estimates came from coalition members because they had the freedom to do that. As it has evolved over a period of time, it has become such that they just sit there and say nothing because there is no time limit and there is none of this rotation system, which I think you really should look at. Even though Bill said, "Go slowly", I think that is one that you could really go fast on, to be frank. However, you do get occasions when Government people will have a go, but it is very rare, very rare.

**Dr Watson MLA, Member for Moggill:** I thank Senator Parer, Mr Dunning and the surrogate for Mr Hamill, Dr Reynolds. It is a pleasure to thank these gentlemen for their time. I am one member of Parliament who supports Estimates Committees, something that I have stated on a number of occasions at other meetings and certainly at a number of meetings with public servants. Having gone through the Queensland system as a member of the Opposition, I feel that we will have to change the process a fair bit if it is to work out in the long run. Ross and Warwick examined a fair few of those issues tonight. We should pay attention to what they have said.

The thing that struck me about the Estimates Committees—and this came out in different ways—is how structured they were. They were almost false. There was a rotation every 20 minutes, which involved stopping and starting. Essentially, you wound up asking about five questions in that period because it took a minute to ask a question and three minutes for the answer. That rotation did not allow us to interact.

From my experience on the Parliamentary Criminal Justice Committee, the Federal and Queensland public accounts committees, I can say that the great advantage of those committees is that, if someone is pursuing a line of questioning, whether it be a Government or Opposition member, you have a chance to say, "Look, hang on, I want to follow up on that particular issue." So when Jim Pearce asks a question on the public accounts committee and something occurs to me, I would be able to say, "I would like to follow up what the member for Fitzroy asked about." In that way, you end up getting more out of the process. In the long run, this would help to overcome the "us and them" mentality of the current Estimates committee process.

The PCJC and the Public Accounts Committee tend to be a bit more bipartisan, because their structure allows and, in fact, encourages it. That is pretty important. Also, the committees need to be in a position to demand answers. Our system was structured such that questions had to be asked through the Minister. It was up to the Minister to decide whether he would answer a question or pass it on to one of his advisers. Again, that was too restrictive. That structure does not allow flexibility. The parliamentary Estimates Committees need to have the flexibility to be able to ask a question when necessary and to whom they wish.

There is a need for change and it is important that we recognise that necessity. If we in Queensland and elsewhere in Australia do not ensure that there is public accountability for the taxes that are raised and spent—and real accountability—so that people can see that they are getting value for money, then we will see other types of pressures coming to bear on our society. Recently, the High Court said that it will have a legislative function. Its eminent justices do not think that parliaments are fulfilling that role in some respects. We might even find the courts suggesting that the parliaments are not fulfilling their role of ensuring accountability for the expenditure of money. They might start getting into that area, too.

We have to really ask ourselves what the function of a Parliament is in our society and whether it is actually fulfilling the demands that society is placing upon us. Whilst this is important for the Parliament, it is just as important for the members of the public service. In essence, whilst they may be serving a Government, they are in fact serving the State and in some respects are also responsible to the Parliament. Interestingly, Ross mentioned that Government members and the respective departmental public servants had all of the questions in advance. As a member of the Opposition, I thought that was what was happening. It is nice to have it confirmed.

I agree with Jim Pearce that it would be nice to see Government members being able to ask questions that they would like to ask instead of simply having to ask the questions that the Ministers want them to. We might be able to do that eventually if Ministers get the impression that their egos are not on the line and that they are not going to be evaluated simply on the basis of their performance in front of an Estimates committee. They need to understand that they are not necessarily the ones who are being questioned or on display, but that the department is responsible for the expenditure of money. The Parliament, both Opposition and Government members, are really interested in how the departments are spending the money. Warwick was right when he said that the value of Estimates Committees, like the public accounts and public works committees, is in extracting information contained within the public service and allowing that to be examined publicly.

We have a long way to go yet, but it was a good start. This year, 1994, has to be seen as a learning experience, a learning experience for the Parliament, the Ministers and the public service. I think 1995 and 1996 will get better. We can make it better by listening to some of the things that Ross Dunning and Warwick Parer said tonight. I hope people take their comments on board, because they have a lot of wisdom gained from years and years of experience in the Federal system and in the public service. We were very fortunate to be able to benefit from their sharing that experience with us.

I must also thank Hansard for its usual great service. I am sure that even this speech will end up being quite good when you read it.

I would ask you all to join with me in thanking Warwick, Ross and David Hamill's surrogate, Paul Reynolds.