



Estimates Committees

Includes information and commentary by Honorary Research Fellow Dr Paul Reynolds.

The parliamentary system originated primarily to raise money for the purposes of governing and often to levy taxes for war. Thus its most important and basic role became to oversee the raising and spending of public monies. A two-step process evolved. First, the government of the day alone can both initiate legislation to raise taxes and charges and propose patterns of expenditure. However, the corollary was the second step that government must seek parliamentary approval for revenue raising and spending. This then must mean scrutiny by, and debate in, Parliament on these budgetary measures.

The current system of Estimates Committees in Queensland evolved from earlier and less satisfactory processes. From 1860, when debating the estimates of Government Departments and other instrumentalities, Parliament resolved itself into a Committee of the Whole House. However, wholesale scrutiny was prevented as all governments from 1860 until 1990 arbitrarily decided which estimates would be debated, thereby retaining control over the process for essentially political motives.

In the wake of the Fitzgerald Inquiry¹ and Report the incoming Goss Government retained the process of the Committee of the Whole House for the next four years (1990-1993), but ensured that all estimates were debated in the period allotted to the Budget. However, on further consideration, it was agreed that this objective could be undertaken more efficiently and thoroughly by delegating detailed scrutiny to a series of Estimates Committees. This proposal had been favourably canvassed by the Electoral and Administrative Review Commission (EARC) and was brought into being, in May 1994, when the open Budget Estimates Committee system was established under Sessional Orders. The system was modelled on the Senate Estimates Committees, with some features borrowed from the process used in New South Wales.

When the estimates committee system was inaugurated, six separate committees were established by Sessional Orders. Each committee consisted of seven parliamentarians, four Government members and three non-Government members. Four committee members were required for a quorum. A question was to be decided by a majority of committee members present and voting. In the event of a tied vote, the chairperson had a casting vote.

In 1995, a number of submissions to the Select Committee on Procedural Review pointed out the advantages of having more committees to obviate problems that were appearing with scheduling and allow longer sessions for each department. Moreover, the committee recognised the difficulties that some estimates committees encountered by having responsibility for more than one large department. Accordingly, the committee recommended that

seven estimates committees be established with the chairperson of each committee being a member of a political party which forms the Government.

The seven Estimates Committees were designated A to G. Each had seven members, four Government and three non-Government. Each committee has responsibility for a group of associated departments. For example, in the Estimates Committees hearings for 2007, the portfolios of Health, Child Safety and Police and Corrective Services were grouped in one Committee and the portfolios of Transport and Main Roads, and State Development, Employment and Industrial Relations were grouped in another.

In May 2011, the Parliament of Queensland (Reform and Modernisation) Amendment Act 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 tasks is to conduct the budget estimate inquiries for their respective portfolios. The size of membership of portfolio committees and the balance of Members between Government and non-Government Members is based on a formulae set out in the *Parliament of Queensland Act 2001* and depends on the composition of the Legislative Assembly at any given time.

Following the second reading debate on the Appropriation Bill(s), the proposed expenditures set out in the Appropriation Bill are referred to the portfolio committees. Each committee examines and reports on the proposed expenditures for its particular portfolio.

Members of the Legislative Assembly who are not members of the particular portfolio 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 hearings. Usually, each committee is scheduled one hearing day, and is able to hold hearings between 9am and 9.30pm on that day. However, as trial for 2014, each portfolio committee has been scheduled for two days on which to conduct estimates hearings between 9am and 5pm.

The Minister and the Chief Executive Officer of the relevant Department or 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.

Queensland Parliament Tertiary Factsheet

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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.

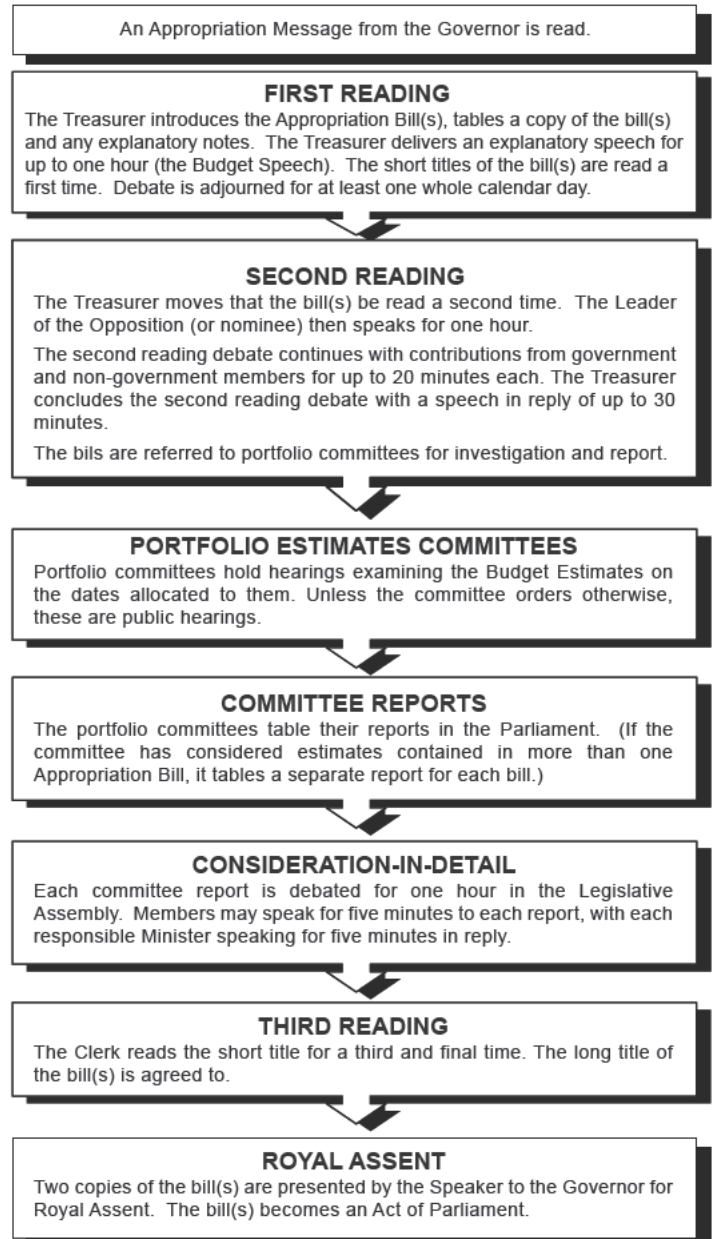
Questioners at estimates hearings are allowed a wide range of scope, with questions ranging from items of detail to broad policy. The Minister may inform the committee that a question will be taken on notice and an answer will be provided at a later date.

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.

Following the Consideration-in-Detail stage, the Treasurer then seeks leave of the House to move for the Third Reading of the Appropriation Bill(s). After the Third Reading, the Bill has been passed by the Legislative Assembly and it is then taken by the Speaker to the Governor to receive Royal Assent. This then becomes the Government's Budget for the next financial year.

In summary form then the following chart gives a schematic picture of the current process for the Budget and its stages of passage through the Parliament.

The Legislative Process in the Queensland Parliament for the Annual Appropriation Bills



¹The Fitzgerald Inquiry was the common name given to the Commission of Inquiry into Possible Illegal Activities and Associated Police Misconduct, presided over by Tony Fitzgerald, QC 1987-1989. The Inquiry investigated allegations of police and political corruption which resulted in many changes and increased government accountability.