

Extract from *Hansard*
[ASSEMBLY — Tuesday, 20 August 2013]
plc-4a

Chairman; Mr Mark McGowan; Speaker;; Mr David Templeman; Speaker; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Mr John McGrath; Ms Andrea Mitchell

Division 1: Parliament, \$55 359 000 —

Ms W.M. Duncan, Chairman.

Mr M.W. Sutherland, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly.

Mr P.J. McHugh, Clerk of the Legislative Assembly.

Mr R. Bremner, Executive Manager, Parliamentary Services.

Mr R. Hunter, Deputy Executive Manager, Parliamentary Services.

Ms E.L. Ozich, Chief Finance Officer, Parliamentary Services and Legislative Assembly.

The CHAIRMAN: This estimates committee will be reported by Hansard staff. The daily proof *Hansard* will be published at 9.00 am tomorrow.

It is the intention of the Chair to ensure that as many questions as possible are asked and answered and that both questions and answers are short and to the point. The estimates committee's consideration of the estimates will be restricted to discussion of those items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must be clearly related to a page number, item, program or amount in the current division. It will greatly assist Hansard if members can give these details in preface to their question.

The Speaker may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee, rather than asking that the question be put on notice for the next sitting week. I ask the Speaker to clearly indicate what supplementary information he agrees to provide and I will then allocate a reference number. If supplementary information is to be provided, I seek the Speaker's cooperation in ensuring that it is delivered to the committee clerk by Friday, 30 August 2013. I caution members that if the Speaker asks that a matter be put on notice, it is up to the member to lodge the question on notice with the Clerk's office.

I now ask the Speaker to introduce his advisers to the committee.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIRMAN: I give the first question to the Leader of the Opposition.

Mr M. McGOWAN: Welcome Mr Speaker; it is good to see you down here!

My question relates to page 59 of the *Budget Statements*, which deals with the provision of information and services under "Service Summary" and to the services provided to members. As members know, there has been some consternation amongst members of Parliament from both sides of the house about the provision of relief assistance in members' electorate offices. I note that under the law that issue is within the control of the Speaker. I note also that the Speaker provides assistance to members in terms of information and services; therefore, I am also asking this question under that and about how the issue I will refer to has come to pass. Did the Speaker have any say about the withdrawal of assistance to members for relief services in their electorate offices; and does he have a resolution to this issue, which is causing grief to members on both sides of the house?

The SPEAKER: Leader of the Opposition, the position is that the President and I are the employers of electorate office staff. However, the funding comes from the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. We do not have control over what funds are made available. We administer the employment of employees on a day-to-day basis. In fact, the funding comes from the Premier's department, so the Leader of the Opposition should address the question to the Premier. That aside, the President and I have met with members of the human resources branch and spoken to the Premier. We are waiting for an answer from the Premier about some type of resolution to the matters raised by members with both the President and me.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Further to this issue, has the Speaker had direct contact with or written to Mr Conran—who issued the directive on a Thursday evening to electorate offices that was effective immediately—to express the concerns of members?

The SPEAKER: I have not written to Mr Conran, but two representatives from the Department of the Premier and Cabinet met with us. We verbally set out the complaints and worries we were asked to raise. We have also spoken to the Premier about it. We are waiting for the Premier to get back to us.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Is it the view of the Speaker that this directive is contrary to the act, under which he is the employer of electorate officers for members of Parliament?

The SPEAKER: I do not think it is contrary to the act, because there are two legs to this. One is the day-to-day employment of officers, their terms and conditions and that type of thing. We are basically the employer in that respect. However, the financing of relief staff is a financial consideration that comes from Treasury. We have no

power to say that it should give X amount of dollars to pay for extra electorate office staff. There are two legs to this. At first blush, one would think that we have total control, but that is not the case. The financial side of it—the money made available—is allocated to us.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I appreciate the Speaker's answer. However, as the person responsible for electorate office staff, including their occupational health and safety, surely the Speaker has a role in expressing concern. I understand he has received a number of emails and letters from electorate staff in particular and from members highlighting the increasingly difficult situations in which electorate officers can sometimes find themselves. As members of Parliament, we attract all sorts of attention. When we are not in the office, our electorate officers are the first point of contact. Is the Speaker aware that this directive can, does and will render our officers, because of the nature of the directive, alone in their offices thereby increasing concerns about their occupational health and safety? What urgency is being placed on this issue to have it resolved as soon as possible?

The SPEAKER: The occupational health and safety aspect was raised by a number of people. I have received one email from an electorate officer who cited an incident that happened in an electorate office. There are other times when people can be alone in an office, such as when one person goes to a meeting. It is a factor that is being raised with us and we raised it when we had our meeting. It is an important issue to resolve. I intend to raise it again this week with the powers that be to see whether we can come to some type of resolution. That is where we are at. It was brought up again last week and it will be raised by me again this week.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: My question is on the same issue. I point out that there can be a scenario in which there is not only one officer rather than two, but no officer at all. I refer to a circumstance in my office over the course of last week. One research officer went overseas on a pre-planned holiday. Fortunately that immediately predated the advice from Mr Peter Conran. I was provided with relief staff for that officer. But during the two weeks that she was overseas, my electorate officer's mother passed away and, obviously, she needed urgent leave. Had I not had the relief person for the officer who had gone overseas, this would have resulted in either my office being closed or my having to get a volunteer person or someone else after I had come to some sort of financial arrangement. I cannot believe that the advice from Peter Conran came out on one day and applied forthwith. I understand that a little bit of latitude is being given for arrangements that were already put in place. Clearly, I am grateful that that occurred. This is obviously an unacceptable situation. As the Speaker has conceded, under the law he is the employer; he has responsibility for electorate officers' occupational health and safety. There are hazards. I am not confident that the Premier or Peter Conran will resolve this. If it is not resolved in the very near future, will the Speaker undertake an investigation as to the safety and welfare of officers so that he can properly make a case and assure himself of his vulnerabilities and liabilities as the employer of electorate and research officers?

The SPEAKER: The member raised two different things. One of them relates to there being no staff at all. If there are no staff, there are no occupational health and safety issues. The member's point is well taken.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: There is no service to the electorate.

The SPEAKER: Exactly. There are two different points. There is the point the member made. We had a meeting at which the member explained it to us and it has been highlighted that there can be anomalous situations. The occupational health and safety aspects were brought up in the meeting. There are panic buttons in the offices. There are certain ways of securing the offices. The point has been raised. I will continue to raise it and I will endeavour to bring this matter to a head this week. It is no good to let it run on week in, week out. It was brought up last week and it will be brought up again this week. Hopefully if it is not resolved, I will again meet with the President and we will look at other ways of trying to deal with it.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: I refer to page 53 of the *Budget Statements* and the heading "Spending Changes" and to the second last line item, "Superannuation Guarantee Increase". The allocation is going up something like four times between 2014 and 2015–16 and six times between 2013–14 and 2016–17. I notice on the same page that there is a reduction in the full-time equivalent ceiling. Can someone explain what the superannuation guarantee increase is all about and to whom it applies?

The SPEAKER: The superannuation guarantee increase reflects increases in the superannuation rate to 9.5 per cent in 2012–13, 9.5 per cent in 2013–14, 10 per cent in 2014–15 and 10.5 per cent in 2015–16.

Ms E.L. Ozich: That is correct. The numbers were calculated by Treasury.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: I understand that this is to take into account the increases in superannuation as it goes up. Will there be fewer staff in that period? Are staff numbers being reduced or will they remain the same?

[9.15 am]

Chairman; Mr Mark McGowan; Speaker;; Mr David Templeman; Speaker; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Mr John McGrath; Ms Andrea Mitchell

Ms E.L. Ozich: Staff numbers in the Assembly have been reduced by four staff who have been transferred to the Parliamentary Services Department.

Mr M. McGOWAN: I do not have anything more on that point.

I refer to the “Asset Investment Program” at the top of page 61. There always appears to be work going on around the building. Can the Speaker give some advice as to what the nature of the current work is, what work is expected to be coming up, and what additions or additional infrastructure is expected to be put in place using the infrastructure component of the budget?

The SPEAKER: Which line item is the Leader of the Opposition talking about?

Mr M. McGOWAN: At the top of page 61. There is “Infrastructure and Equipment”, “Buildings, Refurbishments and Upgrades”, and “Capital Appropriation”.

The SPEAKER: Leader of the Opposition, \$1 million is listed in the 2013–14 “Estimated Expenditure” on page 61. The funds have not been exactly allocated yet; we are waiting for the costings of some proposed works. We are looking at the replacement of the ageing air conditioning systems throughout Parliament House and a major stonework restoration and window replacement on the western facade facing Harvest Terrace. Other projects that may be undertaken include further IT and equipment infrastructure renewal; refurbishment work in the catering area that deals with the carpeting in the dining room, the passages outside the dining room and the Members Bar and the Strangers Bar, and the re-covering of the furniture in both the Members Bar and the Strangers Bar, which the member will notice is starting to look pretty shabby. We are looking at a lot of work to be done, but we are busy getting costings and moving forward on it.

Ms A.R. MITCHELL: I refer to “Spending Changes” on pages 53 and 58, and the last item, “Transfer of the Education Unit to Parliamentary Services”. Does this change have any effect on the service that the education unit team is providing, and has there been any concern about that?

The SPEAKER: There is no change in services that are provided—the same staff are there. The \$300 000 allocation for staff for the education unit was transferred to Parliamentary Services, and a structure has been put in place whereby the President, myself, the head of the education unit and representatives of the Council and the Assembly meet together to run the education office in a way that seems to be equitable throughout.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: My question is further to the question the Leader of the Opposition asked about the details on page 61 of budget paper No 2, under “Works in Progress”. The estimated total cost is \$11.931 million and so far the estimated expenditure in the just completed financial year was \$1.931 million, and then there is \$1 million listed for each of the out years. Is that the money for the air conditioning and other replacements that the Speaker was just talking about or is that something else? Why is that spread out over such a long period?

The SPEAKER: Is the member talking about the \$1 million and then in the out years the \$1 million going forward?

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: That is right.

The SPEAKER: I think that is an estimate of the money that we will get in future years to do the capital upgrade of the building. As the member knows, the building is old and there is constant maintenance work that goes on—it is like painting the Sydney Harbour Bridge. The works that are listed here would start in 2013–14 and be part of that \$1 million.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: Further, the Speaker has referred to things such as the air conditioning upgrade and those requirements. I assume the Speaker has some kind of quotation for the total amount of money that would need to be spent on the air conditioning. I also want to inquire about the relative cost effectiveness of that, because generally, when new systems are put in, they are more economical in terms of electricity usage and can reduce the current cost. Is that something that has been considered?

The SPEAKER: At the present time, all I can tell the member about the air conditioning is that the plan is to do air conditioning in this corridor along here, because apparently the air conditioning was installed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Of course it will be state-of-the-art air conditioning. I will hand over to Mr Bremner as to whether we have done any costings on electricity usage going down. I do not think we would be able to measure it now. The plan is to do a lot of the work over the Christmas break because then there is time to actually do it, because it can be messy work. Perhaps Mr Bremner can confirm that?

Mr R. Bremner: Thanks, Mr Speaker. The replacement program for air conditioning extends over a prospective 10-year period because of the amount of money involved—in the order of \$7.5 million to \$8 million. They are the estimates that we have at this stage, but we will not actually know until we specify each stage and get tenders back. We are also restricted because of the fact that we have only winter and summer recesses, and once every

four years we have a longer than usual summer recess with the pre-election period. We are somewhat limited and constrained in our capacity to actually do work and the amount of disruption that members and staff can have occurring around the place. As far as the sustainability aspects of replacing the air conditioning, one of our prime considerations in replacing the air conditioners is to get the most sustainable system possible. So, we ensure that the specifications that we do in concert with Building Management and Works will achieve the most sustainable, cost-effective and energy-efficient air conditioning systems that we can throughout the building.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I refer to “Average Cost per Member” in the table “Efficiency Indicators” included in “Services and Key Efficiency Indicators” on page 60 of budget paper No 2. Is the Speaker able to provide—it may be in the form of supplementary information—what is the average cost per day for Parliament when it is sitting? I ask that question because we had the farcical situation after the election this year when Parliament came back earlier than I think we all believed it should have. We had three weeks of sittings during which the government moved that a certain number of bills were urgent simply to keep us here. I would like to know what the cost is per day for the Parliament to sit so I can then calculate what it cost the taxpayer for the three weeks that we should not have been here this year.

The SPEAKER: The last time any figures were done on this was in 2008–09, when it was estimated that the cost over and above the normal operating costs on a daily basis on a sitting week would be \$37 000 per week. We can take that on notice —

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Is that per chamber or for the total Parliament?

The SPEAKER: It is for the joint houses—\$37 000 per week. But we can take it as supplementary information if the member wishes —

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Yes.

The SPEAKER: Can the member for Mandurah tell me exactly what he wants?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Yesterday was a non-sitting day, today—let us forget estimates. We come back on 10 September—that is a sitting day. I would like to know what it costs per day on a sitting day for Parliament to sit the average number of hours.

The SPEAKER: Both houses?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Both houses—and if the Speaker could provide that by way of supplementary information updated to 2013—so, additional costs.

The SPEAKER: So it is basically the staffing costs to open the place on a sitting day as against a non-sitting day?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Absolutely; and could the Speaker please make sure that those figures are updated from the estimation in 2008. I assume that would also include allowances that are paid to country members.

The SPEAKER: Does the member want the members’ allowances costs as well, over and above the staffing cost?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Yes, that is a cost for taxpayers for Parliament to sit.

The SPEAKER: That is fine; that clarifies it. It is the difference in the staffing cost between a sitting and a non-sitting day and the extra cost of members’ allowances that are paid on a sitting day. Is that in order?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: The Speaker quoted the figures for 2008–09—we would obviously like those updated.

[Supplementary Information No A1.]

The SPEAKER: Member for Mandurah, the figure that I gave for 2008–09 did not include any members’ allowances; it was just the staffing costs. That will be superfluous once we get the new figures.

Mr M. McGOWAN: Back then, it was \$37 000 a week?

The SPEAKER: Yes—\$37 000 for both houses, but it did not include any members’ allowances.

The appropriation was recommended.