

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

Questions to be asked of Government Ministers - Motion

MR R.F. JOHNSON (Hillarys) [2.35 pm]: I move without notice -

That so much of standing orders be suspended as is necessary to allow non-government members to ask up to five questions of government ministers.

The reason I move this motion to suspend standing orders is that question time has been ruled finished but members on this side have still some questions to ask.

Point of Order

Mr R.C. KUCERA: Mr Speaker, may I refer you to Standing Order No 112 covering when a motion of dissent should be taken? It would appear that the manager of opposition business is dissenting from your ruling on question time. This motion is totally out of order, quite frankly.

The SPEAKER: My understanding is that the motion is for the suspension of standing orders and does not fall into the category of a dissent motion.

Debate Resumed

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: Thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker. I would never dissent from your ruling unless there was very good reason to do so. I would not canvass your ruling and have never done so in the 11 years I have been in this Parliament.

Opposition members need to keep the Premier and government ministers accountable. We must have the opportunity to be able to ask them questions so that the public of Western Australia can receive what they hope will be honest and open answers. We do not always experience that in question time. One can argue that it is up to ministers whether they answer questions honestly or truthfully or whether their answer is completely irrelevant. I have put a simple motion before the House today. Opposition members have an absolute duty to the people of Western Australia to try to keep the Premier and his ministers honest and open. When we ask a question, we would like an honest and open answer. What we do not want is a dorothy dixer from a government member and then the Premier or a minister going off at a tangent and attacking members on this side of the House in a way that is completely irrelevant to the question asked.

Dr G.I. Gallop: You denied me the right to speak.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: I did not do that at all. The Premier and his ministers can get up at any stage they wish and make a statement. They have that facility, but opposition members do not have the opportunity of doing so. We normally have only the opportunity of asking questions without notice or questions on notice. We have some genuine questions we want to ask. We have no intention of abusing the situation.

Dr G.I. Gallop: Support the Speaker.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: I do support the Speaker, and the Speaker knows I support him. I do not support the sorts of tactics that the Premier gets up to in this House. That is why the Premier has forced me to move this motion on behalf of all members on this side of the House. We want to ask the Premier and his ministers questions, but his behaviour today has not allowed us to do that. We must take this step of moving for the suspension of standing orders. We did not want to do it and we would have been quite happy to get on with the business of the House, but we need to ask questions and have them answered by government ministers. I hope that in the interests of openness, accountability, honesty and integrity, the Premier will support this motion.

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members!

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: If the Premier refuses to support this motion to suspend standing orders so that we can ask some questions of him and his ministers -

Dr G.I. Gallop: The Speaker made the decision.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: Members can move to suspend standing orders at any time to do anything that they want to.

Dr G.I. Gallop: The Speaker made the decision.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: The Speaker made the decision to cut off questions without notice because of the behaviour in this House. I accept that.

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Dr G.I. Gallop: You denied me the right to speak.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: God said unto them: come unto me with clean hands. The Premier needs to do that. If the Premier refuses to support this motion so that we can ask him questions, it goes to the fact that he is not prepared to be open and accountable. The Premier should think about it. Members of the Press are in the gallery or their offices watching this debate. They will want to see whether the Premier is prepared to be open and accountable. If the Premier does not support this motion to allow for five serious questions to be asked from this side of the House - five is all we have - it will go to the heart of the Premier's credibility about his statements about being the most open and accountable Premier that this State has ever seen. It will make an absolute untruth of that statement. He needs to think very carefully before he decides to gag this debate or vote against the motion.

MR M.W. TRENORDEN (Avon - Leader of the National Party) [2.40 pm]: Historically, long before my time as a member of this place, Sir Charles Court introduced the process in which government members could ask questions. Traditionally, under the Westminster system, it is the Opposition's right to ask questions in the pursuit of issues. That is the purpose of question time. I agree with the member for Hillarys that a few moments ago the Chamber was very rowdy. However, the Premier's inclination to decide what he wanted to do during question time caused its cessation. Nobody else participated in that process other than the Premier.

Several members interjected

The SPEAKER: Order, members!

Mr M.W. TRENORDEN: It is wrong for the Premier to be able to interrupt question time because he has a petulant nature. It is not a reasonable proposition for this House. If Government members do not want to ask questions; they do not have to ask questions. The National Party is allowed to ask three questions a week and we seek our right to do that.

MR E.S. RIPPER (Belmont - Treasurer) [2.42 pm]: The Opposition cannot be allowed to succeed with this motion. The Government will absolutely reject this example of further poor behaviour by the Opposition. If the Opposition wants to ask questions in this place, it must be prepared to allow the answers to be given. Earlier today, members of the Opposition displayed absolutely disgraceful parliamentary behaviour. The man responsible for that appalling behaviour is none other than the Leader of the Opposition who, by his nasty cantankerous behaviour in this place, sets the standard for all the members opposite. He demonstrates how they should behave in this House, and that behaviour has caused you, Mr Speaker, to have no alternative but to abandon question time. If we were to pass this suspension motion moved by the Opposition we would be undermining your authority, Mr Speaker. The Parliament would be effectively thumbing its nose at and putting two fingers up to the Chair. It would be saying that you might have called off question time but now the House will suspend standing orders to allow question time to proceed again.

We on this side of the House respect your authority, Mr Speaker. If you abandon question time because of poor behaviour on the other side of the House, we will not allow them to escape the consequences of their lack of respect for you, Mr Speaker, and parliamentary standards. That is what this motion seeks to do. It amounts to the person behaving badly saying that he should not be punished; he should be given a let-out. Perhaps if opposition members had shown more respect for parliamentary procedures, conventions and traditions in the past, as first offenders, they could be let off. However, they are not first offenders. They come in here day in, day out and make unparliamentary interjections sotto voce across the Chamber - sledging, sledging, sledging. That is the way they carry on at question time. We all know that the member for Nedlands is one of the very worst offenders. She has no respect for parliamentary standards and shows no courtesy. She is just a constant irritant to proper behaviour and proper parliamentary standards. I wonder why opposition members feel that they can dish it out but they cannot take it. They think they can come into this Chamber and say anything they like but, when they are faced with a speaker from the government benches who dares to criticise them and make a negative remark about them, the glass jaws are paraded.

Ms S.E. Walker interjected.

Mr E.S. RIPPER: I will not take the member for Nedland's interjections or listen to her. She bumbles on but she is a person of absolutely no consequence in this place and we do not need to pay any attention to her whatsoever.

I will ask a very pertinent question. Why can members of the Opposition not bear to have the Premier read a poem entitled *The Hollow Men*? What did they fear? The Premier had not even started to read the poem and they were calling "irrelevant". The fact is, it was not a question of irrelevance, it was a question of too much and too painful a relevance for the Opposition. It was too good a description of their position in politics.

An opposition member: Are you going to gag this debate?

Mr E.S. RIPPER: Too right we are going to gag this debate. We will not have misbehaviour compounded by further misbehaviour or disruption of the proper business of this House. We will gag this debate with bells and

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whistles and great enthusiasm. We do not accept that the rabble opposite, with four different positions so far on electricity reform, should be allowed to disrupt the proper procedures in this House or bring this place into disrepute, especially not in front of a former Prime Minister of this country. We do not accept that members opposite should be allowed to get away with that by having question time restored and the further procedures of the House disrupted as a result of moving a suspension motion. Quite frankly, we on this side are angry that that lot over there should seek to deny the Premier his democratic, parliamentary right to answer a question. They shouted down the Premier and, like rabble, refused to hear him. We do not believe that is proper parliamentary behaviour. Interjections, cutting remarks here or there and witty rejoinders are fine; they are all part of parliamentary exchange. However, it is not part of proper parliamentary behaviour to shout down and drown out the remarks of a member who has the call from the Chair.

The Premier was acting in accordance with your rulings, Mr Speaker. If he had been acting contrary to your rulings I am sure you would have sat him down but you did not. Contrary to all democratic and parliamentary conventions, members opposite behaved disgracefully by shouting him down and denying him his right to speak. Naturally, Mr Speaker, you abandoned question time as a result. That is not unheard of. Your predecessors have done the same thing in similar circumstances, and now opposition members want their question time back. We will not allow them to eat their cake and have it too. When members opposite do not respect the conventions of this place and the rights of other members, there are consequences and we will not let them escape those consequences.

The motion is a further example of the Opposition's attitude towards parliamentary standards. The Leader of the Opposition needs to take responsibility for what happens on the other side. He obviously does not have the capacity or the character to exercise the leadership required. He cannot allow his troops to behave as they behaved today without bearing a very significant political responsibility. If he wants to say to the community that he is the leader of a mob -

Mrs M.H. Roberts: They have given the member for Nedlands a yellow card so they are taking some action.

Mr E.S. RIPPER: Unfortunately, yellow cards do not last for the duration of the match!

If the Leader of the Opposition does not bring his members under some control in these instances, he is saying that he leads a mob. The Leader of the Opposition is saying to the community that he does not have the character, integrity, strength or respect in his own ranks to introduce a modicum of discipline and respect for parliamentary standards and civilised behaviour in this place.

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members!

Mr E.S. RIPPER: This motion is a further appalling example of repeated bad behaviour from the Opposition and will be absolutely rejected by government members.

MR J.H.D. DAY (Darling Range) [2.50 pm]: What absolute arrogance from this Labor Government. What does it remind all Western Australians and me of? Brian Burke and David Parker all over again. I was not in Parliament then, but in those days I took a very close interest in what happened in this Parliament. As one of many Western Australians who was absolutely outraged by the corrupt behaviour of the then Burke Government, I am now outraged by the activities and actions of this Government.

The Labor Party went to the 2001 election with a policy of accountability. I do not have the policy with me, but I have read it and it certainly referred to openness and accountability. If this Premier and Deputy Premier believe in those words, they will agree to question time operating today so that the opposition parties and other members of Parliament can question the Premier and ministers about their activities and keep them accountable. If they do not agree to pass this motion, this Premier, Deputy Premier and Labor Party will effectively close down Parliament and deny the Opposition the right to use its powers, to act responsibly and to question the Government about its activities.

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members! The arguments at the back of the Chamber outweigh the speaker. The member for Darling Range.

Mr J.H.D. DAY: The cause of the problem that arose today was an abuse of question time by the Premier. I do not say that lightly. If the Premier wants to stand and read a poem because he believes it is of such importance, he can do so at the appropriate time in a ministerial statement. What does a poem by T.S. Eliot have to do with the Royal Flying Doctor Service? Absolutely nothing. We have seen absolute arrogance and an abuse of Parliament by this Premier and the Labor Party in this State.

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The Opposition has a responsibility, on behalf of the people of Western Australia, to question this Government about matters such as electricity reform; the chaos in the health system in Western Australia; the chaos in the government school system in Western Australia and teachers going on strike; the spending problems that the Government has with the railway to Mandurah; and a whole lot of other issues. This Government is running scared. It is obvious that it does not want to be questioned or held accountable for its activities. If this Government votes against the motion moved by the Opposition, it will be saying to the people of Western Australia that it will not tell them the truth, that it will not be open and accountable as it promised and that it is an arrogant and conceited Government. Mr Speaker, this motion should be supported.

Question to be Put

Ms M.M. QUIRK: I move -

That the question be now put.

Question put and a division taken with the following result -

Ayes (28)

Mr P.W. Andrews	Mr S.R. Hill	Ms S.M. McHale	Ms J.A. Radisich
Mr J.J.M. Bowler	Mr J.N. Hyde	Mr A.D. McRae	Mr E.S. Ripper
Mr C.M. Brown	Mr R.C. Kucera	Mr N.R. Marlborough	Mrs M.H. Roberts
Mr J.B. D'Orazio	Mr F.M. Logan	Mrs C.A. Martin	Mr D.A. Templeman
Dr J.M. Edwards	Ms A.J. MacTiernan	Mr M.P. Murray	Mr P.B. Watson
Dr G.I. Gallop	Mr J.A. McGinty	Mr A.P. O'Gorman	Mr M.P. Whitely
Mrs D.J. Guise	Mr M. McGowan	Mr J.R. Quigley	Ms M.M. Quirk (<i>Teller</i>)

Noes (21)

Mr R.A. Ainsworth	Mr J.P.D. Edwards	Mr B.K. Masters	Ms S.E. Walker
Mr C.J. Barnett	Mr B.J. Grylls	Mr P.D. Omodei	Dr J.M. Woollard
Mr M.J. Birney	Ms K. Hodson-Thomas	Mr P.G. Pandal	Mr J.L. Bradshaw (<i>Teller</i>)
Dr E. Constable	Mr M.G. House	Mr R.N. Sweetman	
Mr J.H.D. Day	Mr R.F. Johnson	Mr M.W. Trenorden	
Mrs C.L. Edwardes	Mr W.J. McNee	Mr T.K. Waldron	

Pairs

Mr J.C. Kobelke	Mr D.F. Barron-Sullivan
Mr A.J. Dean	Mr M.F. Board
Mr A.J. Carpenter	Mr A.D. Marshall

Question thus passed.

Motion Resumed

Question put and a division taken with the following result -

Extract from *Hansard*
[ASSEMBLY - Wednesday, 19 November 2003]
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Mr Rob Johnson; Mr Bob Kucera; Speaker; Mr Max Trenorden; Mr Eric Ripper; Mr John Day; Ms Margaret Quirk

Ayes (21)

Mr R.A. Ainsworth	Mr J.P.D. Edwards	Mr B.K. Masters	Ms S.E. Walker
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Mr M.J. Birney	Ms K. Hodson-Thomas	Mr P.G. Pandal	Mr J.L. Bradshaw (<i>Teller</i>)
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Pairs

Mr D.F. Barron-Sullivan	Mr J.C. Kobelke
Mr M.F. Board	Mr A.J. Dean
Mr A.D. Marshall	Mr A.J. Carpenter

Question thus negatived.