

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS DURING QUESTION TIME

Points of Order

Hon TOM STEPHENS: During the past couple of days, the President has pointed out that ministers have the opportunity, with the leave of the House, to make ministerial statements. Two ministerial statements were made today in the guise of answers to questions without notice. One was a document, subsequently tabled by Hon Derrick Tomlinson, that was effectively a ministerial statement that he could have read to the House if he chose. The other was in response to the last question asked of the Leader of the House. He read what was effectively a ministerial statement before closing down question time. As the presiding officer, you, Mr President, have already asked ministers to avoid making ministerial statements during the limited time for questions, especially when they embellish the statement in a way that is not relevant to their portfolio. I am speaking of Hon Peter Foss, who has no responsibility for the area to which the ministerial statement related, but took up an extended period of question time commenting on it.

My point of order is that ministers should comply, with the encouragement of the Chair, with the spirit of the standing orders, or the Standing Orders Committee should ensure that ministerial statements of this sort do not proceed in the future.

The PRESIDENT: That is not a point of order; however, I will get a copy of the member's comments from Hansard. If I deem it necessary, I will provide the House with a response. However, I want to carefully read what the Leader of the Opposition has just said to see that there is no inconsistency between what he has said today and his actions in the past, because if that were to be the case it would seem to be a somewhat hypocritical act. That is something I will need to consider.

Did Hon Derrick Tomlinson have a point of order?

Hon DERRICK TOMLINSON: No, Mr President, I await your decision and I will reserve my comments until that stage.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: I have a further point of order. I encourage the presiding officer to respond to the issue as it was put - that it is simply the task of the presiding officer to look at the obligations of this House and to deal with the issue on its merits as it was put as a point of order. That is all I ask of the Chair.

The PRESIDENT: I will take the additional comments by the Leader of the Opposition into account, but I hope that the House understands that the standing orders are written in a manner that allows the presiding officer discretion in some areas to manage the House in an efficient and effective way. It also requires members to act in good faith when they are in the House dealing with matters before the House. I say no more at this stage. If the Leader of the Opposition was tempting me to get involved in some personal slanging match or altercation with him, he will be bitterly disappointed. I will apply the standing orders, and I will apply them in a proper manner and then, if necessary, I will seek the support of the House in respect of the application of those standing orders.

Does the Leader of the House have a point of order?

Hon N.F. MOORE: Standing orders provide that the duration of questions without notice is determined by the Leader of the House. For many, many years in this House there was no time limit.

Hon Norm Kelly: This is not a point of order.

Hon N.F. MOORE: I am still on the point raised by the Leader of the Opposition. A decision was made by a former leader, namely, Hon Joe Berinson, that he would make the duration of question time 30 minutes, and that has become the norm in this House since then. The Leader of the Opposition should be aware that members ask questions and sometimes the answers are long. Whether or not they think the answer is a ministerial statement is beside the point; that is a matter of opinion. I have often made the decision when long answers are given and sometimes long questions are asked to extend question time beyond 30 minutes. I extended question time today by three or four minutes. I did not go any further because time was wasted today by people taking silly points of order requesting members to table papers.

The PRESIDENT: Members might turn to Standing Order No 139(c), which states -

The Leader of the House may terminate oral questions without notice on any sitting day by requesting the President to proceed to the next item of business.

I think that is reasonably well understood. I assume the Leader of the House is just reminding the House of incidents in the past that have led to precedents that are now followed in the House.