

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Proposal to Travel - Motion

HON KIM CHANCE (Agricultural - Leader of the House) [10.27 am]: I move -

That this House recommends that expenditure for the purposes set out in the report of the Environment and Public Affairs Committee relating to its inquiry into the gene technology Bills should not exceed \$80 000.

HON NORMAN MOORE (Mining and Pastoral - Leader of the Opposition) [10.28 am]: I am aware of some of the negotiations in respect of this motion, but I am not at all pleased with the outcome. I do not propose to vote against the motion, or anything like that, or even seek to amend it, but this is the first time I can recall in recent times when the House has put some sort of limit on the amount that a committee can spend.

The report itself recommends a certain number of dollars and this motion refers to a significant reduction in that expenditure. If it transpires that there is insufficient money in the Legislative Council budget for this committee to travel in the way in which it seeks to travel, then it is time that the Legislative Council budget was increased. If it is a job worth doing the necessary funds must be made available to do it properly, or the job will be done in half-measures. I understand the problems with the Legislative Council budget. I am aware of some of the changes and circumstances surrounding the employment of staff that have had cost implications for the Legislative Council budget. It is a bit mean and penny-pinching to set a limit on this committee's expenditure that will require the committee to curtail a number of its activities. I hope the Government recognises that committee travel is an important element of its work and that it provides the funds necessary for that work to be done. It is not good enough for the Government to say that it supports the committee doing these things and it is a good thing that they are being done, but then to say that the committee can have only half the money required. I do not have in front of me the travel figures for all ministers over the past couple of years, but from the knowledge I have of travel by government agencies, \$80 000 is chickenfeed. This committee consists of seven members and it is appropriate and proper that those seven members should all be part of the study involved.

I make those points for the record. I would not want a situation to occur in future in which a committee puts forward a proposal that is accepted and then it is told there is insufficient money to do that work but it can have half or two-thirds of the money, whatever the case may be. It is incumbent upon the Government to make sure that the Legislative Council has the funds that are necessary for its committees to do the job for which they have been appointed.

HON MURRAY CRIDDLE (Agricultural) [10.31 am]: I am very disappointed in this motion suggesting a limitation on funding for the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs. I hope we receive a clear understanding of how this motion came about. I have not been privy to the discussions that may have happened behind closed doors, but this goes right to the heart of the committee system in the upper House. If committees are to do their jobs they must have the necessary information available to them before they make recommendations. In this case the committee will be making recommendations that will be absolutely vital to Western Australia and to Australia in the world scene. We should not be putting a restriction on a committee that is inquiring into something as important as this. We are an export nation and we rely very heavily on our exports. I understand that the House has accepted the recommendations and it is proposed to then implement some sort of limitation. The motion states -

That this House recommends that expenditure for the purposes set out in the report of the Environment and Public Affairs Committee relating to its inquiry into the gene technology Bills should not exceed \$80 000.

We have just noted the committee's recommendations, which indicate that substantially more money is required. It is essential that we properly fund the operations of these committees. The upper House should have sufficient funding to conduct these inquiries. The role of committees in the upper House is to review legislation and in this case to inquire into the gene technology Bills through the system that has been put in place, and it is now proposed to put a restriction on that system. I have grave concerns about that. I do not agree that there should be any restrictions, bearing in mind that we have already noted the committee's report.

HON JIM SCOTT (South Metropolitan) [10.35 am]: I agree with Hon Norman Moore's sentiments. Members and the general community accept that more and more of the work of this House will be done through committees. Indeed, there has been a progression towards that over time. The committee system has been rationalised to save money; therefore, there are fewer committees. There is no doubt that if several committees had needed to travel to obtain information on important issues, the money would not be available for them to do that. Limits have been placed on the ability of this House to properly investigate matters it wants to investigate. In this case, as the Leader of the House said, for the next 100 years the issue of genetically modified organisms is

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probably one of the most important to face agriculture in this State and its marketing. Therefore, we must think carefully about the priorities we set for this House and the expenditure that is provided to Legislative Council committees. At some stage, we should examine this issue to find out how the House will be able to do its job properly in the future in the light of its funding being gradually reduced in the areas that enable it to conduct its business.

HON JOHN FISCHER (Mining and Pastoral) [10.37 am]: I reiterate some of the comments of the previous speakers with regard to this matter. I am greatly concerned about limiting this inquiry into genetically modified foods. As has already been stated, the effects of GMO foods will continue well and truly into the next century. Without doubt it is one of the most important aspects of agriculture that we, as a body, will ever inquire into. I have a strong belief that if we limit where information can be sourced from, our job might not be done properly. I am concerned about this GM Bill. I looked at this committee's itinerary and, frankly, I am concerned that it does not have the time to travel to a country in the southern hemisphere that has a farming industry comparable with our own. I would like this committee to visit Argentina. Argentina's agriculture trade will increase when the country rids itself of some of its problems with foot and mouth disease and other agricultural problems that currently cause its products to be quarantined. Its agricultural industry has embraced GMOs as much as anywhere else in the world. It is essential that, as a body, we are able to get the correct information and see the results of implementing GMO technology in other countries. That will ensure that our Western Australian farmers can remain at the forefront of their industry.

I completely agree with the Leader of the House that in time these debates no doubt will become a lot more intense. It is essential that this committee is provided with the background information that is so important for it to make the correct decisions about something that will affect one of our most important export earners. I am extremely disappointed that it is considered necessary to reduce the cost of this trip by an estimated \$60 000. I believe that \$60 000 will pale into insignificance given the importance of this report, which, when we discuss this matter in the future, will provide us with a first-hand record of what is happening in other countries. I take on board what the Leader of the Opposition said about countries like Zambia. The world is in a situation in which it will need feeding and, whether this House decides to allow or disallow GMOs, it is absolutely essential that it make every effort possible to ensure that it is working on the correct information. We need information not merely from theorists, but also from people working at the coalface in other parts of the world.

HON BILL STRETCH (South West) [10.41 am]: In my 20 years in Parliament I have never seen such a blatant attack on the committee system of Parliament, or on this House. I cannot remember a committee of either House being told by motion the limit of its spending. There have been plenty of warnings that we cannot spend unlimited amounts on committees, and we have been told to be careful, but I have never heard of a motion that established a limit. Hon Murray Criddle wisely pointed out the impact the GMO debate will have on agricultural industries in Western Australia. Previous speakers on the motion said that the whole public debate was very fluid at this stage, and that there is an urgent need for definitive information on the direction world agriculture is likely to take.

The decision of the other place to set up a committee system parallel to that of the Legislative Council has had some effect on the outcome today. It concerns me greatly, and I would like to know whether any other select or standing committee has had similar limitations placed directly on it by a motion of the Parliament. It is outrageous, and treats elected members of the House like kindergarten kids who are told that they have only 20c to spend at the tuckshop. Everybody recognises that accountability is essential, but to treat people travelling overseas on behalf of this Parliament in such a way is despicable and a blatant attack on the independent role of this House. This is a House of Review that has been strongly built around a system of select and standing committees. I am horrified. This is my last term in the Parliament, and I do not anticipate going on any more trips, so I can say objectively that if an Executive Government interferes in such a way with the proper operations of the Parliament, the Parliament, and through it the people of Western Australia, will lose. They will be denied the input of committee members who have spoken face to face with members in other countries in their own environment.

Much has been said about obtaining information through the Internet or by telephone, but in my experience, there is no substitute for sitting down and talking things through with people who work with similar problems. People will say things in a person-to-person conversation that they would never put on the Internet or in writing. It is the ethos of personal communication, which really can take place only in such a committee environment. I think most members have participated in committees and know what I am talking about. The committee that investigated DNA technology travelled to Europe and presented arguably one of the best reports that has ever been put forward by any Parliament on that subject, with some able leadership from staff and members. That report illustrated only too well the value of talking to people face to face. Those people said things that they would not put on paper. Committee members spoke to representatives of the Federal Bureau of Investigation,

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Scotland Yard and the West German police. They were very wary about putting their information on a hard record. In such situations people suggest approaches that they might not want attributed to them.

The impact of the gene technology debate over the next 25 years is of such importance that it is quite absurd for somebody, who is probably not in this House, to limit the committee's funds for undertaking travel to investigate a subject of such immense importance. I am horrified, and I hope that the Leader of the House will reconsider exactly what this simple motion will do to the structure of Parliament, for not only this committee but also future committees. If we want this Parliament to have a major input in the future, we should not go down this path. Why the Government is doing it, I do not know. I understand that the Legislative Council has a limited budget. That has been the fault of Governments over the years, not just this Government. The look on the face of the Leader of the House indicates that there may have been a previous occasion on which such a motion has been moved.

Hon Kim Chance: Every time.

Hon BILL STRETCH: I have never seen a motion -

Hon Kim Chance: You are now seeing it in the House because we are an accountable Government. It has always happened outside the Parliament.

Hon BILL STRETCH: Mary had a little lamb, too.

Hon Kim Chance: I have been a committee chairman who has been through that process.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon BILL STRETCH: I understand that, but I have not seen a motion pass through this House of Parliament limiting -

Hon Kim Chance: Now we do it in the open, rather than at the committee stage. That is the whole process.

Hon BILL STRETCH: I think the system is abhorrent, and if we cannot talk these issues through -

Hon Kim Chance: But you are complaining about an accountability process.

Hon BILL STRETCH: The Leader of the House can talk me down if he likes.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon BILL STRETCH: The Leader of the House is making the point that in the past, these matters were discussed between the participants - the proponents and the opponents. It is the proper way to do things. However, I have never seen this House pass a motion that states that this is the committee's pocket money allowance and that is it. For goodness sake, whoever is driving this motion needs to start treating members of Parliament like elected representatives of the people and not like kids with an allowance to go to the tuckshop. I totally oppose this motion.

Statement by President

The PRESIDENT: Before I give Hon Louise Pratt the call, a member previously asked for the motion to be read. The Chamber has so far noted the report of the committee. A specific recommendation is before us. The motion as moved by the Leader of the House is that this House recommends that expenditure for the purposes set out in the report of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs relating to its inquiry into the gene technology Bills should not exceed \$80 000. I remind members that the alternate recommendation that appears in the committee report is very similar; that is, the committee recommends that the Legislative Council give its approval to the committee to seek funds from the Clerk for the purpose of undertaking the travel set out in this report. Both recommendations are contingent on and provide for an approach to the budget office, which is the Clerk. In the past there has been a definite figure in the motion to adopt a committee report. That requires the committee to approach the Clerk to discuss the budget. It has never been our practice for a committee to come to this House with a figure, without first discussing it with the budget office. I must say that I am not aware of any discussions with the budget office about any amount being sought. However, the committee has not specified a definite amount in its recommendations. This House has previously approved a specific amount, but that followed discussion with the budget office. We have a choice. We can define a specific amount or leave it to a further general discussion. There is a range of options.

Points of Order

Hon BARRY HOUSE: Mr President, with respect, I think you mentioned that the report had been noted.

The PRESIDENT: Yes.

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Hon BARRY HOUSE: The Committee has passed two motions. One is that the report be noted, and the second is that the report be adopted.

The PRESIDENT: No. The sole motion was that the report be noted.

Hon BARRY HOUSE: I stand corrected, Mr President, but my recollection of the prior proceedings was that two motions were moved: first, that the report be noted, followed by debate; and, second, that the report be adopted, without debate. I ask you to rule, Mr President, that the motion that has been moved by the Leader of the House is out of order because it is inconsistent with a previous ruling of the House.

President's Ruling

The PRESIDENT: There is no point of order. The motion was that the report be noted. That was then reported by the Chairman of Committees to me, and that report was adopted. No recommendation from the committee was adopted. What was adopted was a report indicating that the Committee of the Whole had noted the report. The adoption of that report had no separate function other than receiving the notation from the Committee of the Whole. However, obviously it is open to the House to consider this substantive motion now, and members may adopt it or amend it.

Hon PETER FOSS: To achieve the situation of which Hon Barry House spoke, could a motion have been moved in Committee that the report be adopted and that then reported to the House and adopted?

The PRESIDENT: Yes, it could have been, but it was not.

Debate Resumed

HON LOUISE PRATT (East Metropolitan) [10.52 am]: The matters for consideration by the committee are indeed weighty matters, and they are of great concern to the State. Notwithstanding that, it is important that the committee undertake its work within an appropriate budget, and that budget is subject to the available resources of the House. I know that the committee has had some discussions about how it could minimise the costs associated with this trip and make it as efficient as possible. Irrespective of the outcome of this motion, I am confident that the committee will be able to continue to discuss those issues to minimise the associated costs.

Hon Derrick Tomlinson: Did those discussions follow from some negotiations elsewhere about the cost of the trip?

Hon LOUISE PRATT: Yes, that is right. However, it relates to the situation that was outlined by the President. It is usual for a committee to speak to appropriate officers in the House to ascertain what resources are available for such travel. This committee did not do that before it noted that its requested budget was \$130 000. It has been reported to me by the Clerk that that was a break from the protocol that we should have followed as a committee, and that is consistent with what the President has said. Irrespective of the outcome of this motion, I hope that every member of the committee will seek appropriate ways to minimise the cost of this trip because it is our responsibility in all our duties as members of Parliament to minimise the cost of our work to the taxpayers of this State.

HON DERRICK TOMLINSON (East Metropolitan) [10.55 am]: I am very comfortable with a committee of the House having to account in advance for its itinerary and afterwards for its expenditure. It is absolutely essential that there be full transparency when a decision of the House is made to spend public moneys. I have, therefore, no argument against the proposition of the Leader of the House that these matters be debated in advance. I find it much more preferable to do that than to experience what the Joint Standing Committee on the Anti-Corruption Commission experienced when it had approval to travel. Its budget was approved by the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly and then members of the committee on the government side were advised by the Premier against travelling. A decision of the other House, which had gone through all the procedures that you outlined, Mr President, was countermanded by the advice of the Executive. I much prefer either House - the Parliament - to be in charge of its own functioning; for that reason I am quite comfortable that this matter be given a proper airing within the Chamber.

However, I have two reservations. I looked at the estimated costings presented in the report. We have available to us the full details of the cost of travel, accommodation, incidentals, transportation and a float, which come to a total of \$140 880. This motion now seeks a ceiling of \$80 000 for expenditure. What is the rationale for that \$80 000? There is a rationale for the travel but simply a ceiling for expenditure. I want to know what the committee proposes. In its report it proposes visiting four Canadian provinces. In those four Canadian provinces it will meet, principally at universities, and discuss the issues with grain producing organisations, regulators of genetically modified organisms and research institutions. In Washington in the United States it appears that the committee will deal mainly with GMO regulators; however, it will focus on production, research and regulation. In Japan the committee proposes to meet with consumer representatives, the retail association,

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the consumer cooperative, the Jasco cooperative, the Kobe cooperative and so on. That is a very balanced proposal. The committee will examine production and regulation on one hand and consumption on the other. I would have thought that Western Australia, as a major primary producer and food exporter, would consult with and understand not merely the processes of production and development of genetically modified organisms or grains but also the reservations of the consumer in one of our major markets. Both the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the House gave the example of -

Hon Kim Chance: A field corn in Zambia, Africa.

Hon DERRICK TOMLINSON: Not the field corn in Africa. I was not thinking of oesophageal cancer. I was thinking of genetically modified maize being locked up in warehouses in Zambia and -

Hon Kim Chance: Zimbabwe.

Hon DERRICK TOMLINSON: Yes, Zimbabwe. That very issue must be teased out. If I were a member of the committee I would want to visit those places, although I do not think we have markets there. Perhaps the committee can visit the Middle East because, as the Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries will well know because he led a delegation there, Australia is vigorously pursuing markets in the Middle East. Is there any resistance to genetically modified organisms there?

Hon Kim Chance: Some.

Hon DERRICK TOMLINSON: Why is the committee not pursuing that? I sincerely hope that rather than concentrate on travelling to one continent based on a budget of \$80 000, the committee might be able to examine the balance of production and consumption. I suggest that the Leader of the House withdraw his motion, allow the committee to meet the officers responsible for the budget and determine a balanced budget that will allow examination of those two components that are of considerable significance to Western Australia.

HON KIM CHANCE (Agricultural - Leader of the House) [11.01 am]: I intend to seek leave to withdraw the motion I have moved and to move that recommendation 1 of the report of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs be adopted.

I have noted the views expressed, and I particularly thank Hon Derrick Tomlinson for his views. Although I do not necessarily agree with the views that have been expressed, they have influenced me to take the action I propose.

Hon Murray Criddle: What views don't you agree with? Do you agree that committees -

Hon KIM CHANCE: I have noted all that and I have been convinced by the arguments of members opposite. Hon Murray Criddle should not now sway me.

Hon Murray Criddle: The committee system is very important to the future of this House.

Hon KIM CHANCE: Absolutely. I do not have a problem with that. I have a problem with the view expressed by Hon Bill Stretch. I was quite alarmed and surprised by it. I have been a member of committees for most of the time that I have been a member of Parliament and for a while I was chairman of a committee that travelled internationally. Every committee on which I have sat that has faced this situation has worked its way through the budgetary impact of its request in fine detail down to the cap on overnight accommodation, for example, in various parts of the United Kingdom. The committee of which I was chairman established a price cap in London that was different from the price cap at Sheffield or Newcastle. Committees have always faced limitations regarding travel. As the Leader of the Opposition noted, the budgetary process is examined more openly in Parliament these days. However, I have noted members' views that they no longer want that process to continue; they want it done by the committees during their budgetary consideration and to present a proposal to the House without a firm figure.

As I said, I will seek leave to withdraw my motion and I foreshadow that I will move for the adoption of recommendation 1, which reads -

The Committee recommends that the Legislative Council give its approval to the Committee to seek funds from the Clerk for the purpose of undertaking the travel set out in this report.

I will move to adopt that recommendation if I am given leave to withdraw my original motion. The Japanese component of the proposed tour imposes much of the cost. Hon Derrick Tomlinson has accurately identified the purpose of the Japanese component of the tour, which is to get some sense of the feelings of consumers and marketers about the impact of GMOs. That is one of the most important parts of the committee's work. Regarding the commonwealth-state interrelation and GMOs, the Commonwealth has primary responsibility for the two crucial areas of health and the environment. The State's discretionary powers are principally concerned

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with marketing. The view of such an important market as Japan will provide very useful input to the committee. I have told committee members that I will endeavour to bring market information to them in Perth from at least three market areas: China, Japan and Taiwan. Yesterday, I spoke to officers from the international trading desk at the Department of Agriculture to begin to put that process in place. I hope that, by the end of January, I will be able to provide a list of international markets whose representatives will come to Perth and speak to the committee. Initially it will be from that trading bloc, and hopefully, from Europe, although I am somewhat less certain about that. The Government has started to put alternatives in place. It will provide for a broader range of advice than would have been gained from Japan only.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

Motion

On motion without notice by Hon Kim Chance (Leader of the House), resolved -

That the House adopt recommendation No 1 of the fifth report of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs in relation to the Gene Technology Bill 2001 and the Gene Technology Amendment Bill 2001.