

*Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations — Seventy-seventh Report —
“2017–18 Budget Cycle—Part 2: Annual Report Hearings” — Motion*

Resumed from 21 August on the following motion moved by Hon Alanna Clohesy (Parliamentary Secretary) —

That the report be noted.

The CHAIR: I will give Hon Diane Evers the call to continue her remarks.

Hon DIANE EVERS: I am happy to allow this one to be adjourned until the next sitting of the Committee of the Whole. I was under the impression that it would not continue today.

The CHAIR: Hon Alanna Clohesy, do you wish to move to adjourn it?

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: I do not think so.

The CHAIR: We could just note it.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: Does the member wish to say something?

Hon Nick Goiran: Yes.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: After consultation, as is my nature, I will make a brief contribution to this report and hope that it may be postponed in the very near future. I point out that this report has been canvassed thoroughly and I am very pleased about that. I point out two important features. First, I point out the different process that the committee undertook with a themed approach to the annual report hearings and the estimates inquiry into the budget. These annual report hearings considered the issues of key performance indicators. A great deal of information has been examined quite thoroughly in this report and in this chamber when we have considered the report. It yielded some very useful information and I encourage members to consider the upcoming annual report hearings that are scheduled, as the chamber has been informed, from 11 November. The committee has recommended that annual report hearings be undertaken for that whole week, inasmuch as that is possible. Members will note that at the beginning of each sitting day, most of the papers being tabled right now are agency annual reports. Most, if not all, of those agency annual reports will be tabled by 30 September—for those that are required to be under the Financial Management Act. That is 90 days after the end of the financial year. I encourage members to consider each annual report of agencies in which they are interested and to make recommendations to the committee for agencies to be called for the forthcoming annual report hearings starting on 11 November.

Members will have also received from the committee, via email, a procedures manual for the conduct of the annual report hearings. That procedure manual outlines the dates by which members need to have informed the committee which agencies they want as part of the annual report hearings, the dates by which members can submit questions to agencies in advance of the annual report hearings, the dates by which those answers will be returned, and the dates that members have to submit their questions after the hearings.

This report is about the previous year's annual reports hearings, which is nearly 12 months ago, so it is interesting to keep considering this report. As this report details, the process that we are undertaking this year with the annual report hearings is the same process that we undertook last year. This report, the seventy-seventh report, outlines in detail the process that we are undertaking for annual report hearings this year. The range of issues that were considered in the annual report hearings appear at appendix 1 of the seventy-seventh report. Members might also find that that is useful information in preparation for consideration of the current annual reports.

With that, I think it is fitting that we consider postponing debate on this report, given that we are about to enter the next year's annual report hearings, but I am aware that an honourable member wants to continue to contribute on this report. I encourage the honourable member to make his contribution and advise that I may then move that consideration of this report be postponed.

The CHAIR: I think through the effluxion of time, the motion will lapse in only a few minutes anyway. But I give the call to Hon Nick Goiran, with that point in mind, on the question that the report be noted.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: This is an important report by the estimates committee and I thank it for it. I had one opportunity on 21 August to make some brief remarks on matters that arose from the annual report hearings into two agencies, Education and Communities. I did not get to finish what I had to say at that time due to time elapsing. But as it so happens, earlier this afternoon we dealt with exactly the matters that were not covered during those report hearings, between Education and Communities. That was the genesis of the motion I moved this afternoon, so there is no need for me to revisit that which was already looked at earlier this afternoon.

I want to look at the annual report hearing that took place and the sequence of events with the Department of Health. I can understand why the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health would like me to be brief and move on, because what has transpired in the interaction between the Department of Health and the Department of Communities is most unsatisfactory. I draw to members' attention that in the lead-up to the hearings I asked a question prior to hearings to the Department of Communities. It was not a very complicated question. I simply asked how many

negative notices were issued to employees in the Department of Health. This revolved around the issue of working with children check cards. It is the responsibility of a unit within the Department of Communities to handle that and to issue negative notices. It was clear from the annual report that was tabled by the Department of Communities that 166 negative notices were issued. My question was how many of those negative notices were issued to employees in the Department of Health. The answer from the Department of Communities was that three negative notices were issued to the Department of Health. Would members believe that when I asked the same question of the Department of Health in the lead-in to the hearings—during the reporting period, how many working with children check negative notices were issued to employees of the Department of Health—the Department of Health said zero? How could the Department of Communities say it had issued three negative notices to the Department of Health and the Department of Health say it had not received any? That was a problem leading in to the annual report hearings. These questions were asked in the lead-up to the hearings. Of course, I wanted to interrogate that issue during the hearings, which took place on 14 November 2018. I asked some questions of Hon Sue Ellery, who was the representative minister for the Department of Communities. I drew to her attention that in response to question 3 prior to the hearing, the Department of Communities said that it had issued three negative notices to the Department of Health but that the Department of Health had said to me that it had received zero. Those members who want to look at the transcript are welcome to do so, but it will probably surprise no-one that no explanation was able to be provided at the hearing whatsoever. The question was taken as supplementary information C6 at the order of the Chair of the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations. The response that then came back in supplementary information C6 from the Department of Communities includes the following information. In effect, the question was: please explain why the Department of Communities provided information that the Department of Health received three negative notices and the Department of Health advised that it had received nil? The answer, in part, states that the difference was —

... attributable to whether the employee was employed by the nominated employer at the time of issuing the negative notice.

It goes on to say —

On this basis, the information provided by the Departments of Communities and the Department of Health is correct.

Does it not give us great confidence when one department says that it sent three negative notices to the Department of Health and that what it is telling us is correct, and when the Department of Health can say that it received no negative notices, and when, according to the government, that is all fine and the information provided by both departments is correct?

Hon Michael Mischin: It sounds like Hon Peter Collier's experience with getting two answers from the Premier that are inconsistent and yet both are correct!

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Yes, apparently indeed! I know that we are going back to the end of last year here, but that is the report that we are considering before the chamber now—the outcome of last year's annual report hearings. Thank goodness we have these annual report hearings. I encourage the committee to continue to hold them because they continue to expose the approach taken by this government of providing blatantly inconsistent answers and then defending itself by saying that they are correct. What would be an appropriate response by a government in this situation? It is not the fault of the parliamentary secretary or the Leader of the House. They are simply providing the answers that are provided by their departments. But somebody has to take responsibility and say that it is not satisfactory for one department to tell a committee of the Parliament that it issued three negative notices and for the other department to say that there were none. That is irreconcilable. Somebody in government has to take responsibility for that and go back to the estimates committee and say that they acknowledge that this is a problem, it is unsatisfactory and that they are taking remedial action. But that is not the approach taken by this government—far from it. Its answer is, "On this basis, the information provided is correct." How can we, as members, have any confidence in any of the answers provided to us on any matter, if, according to this government—in the world, the language and the mathematics of this government—three equals zero? How are we reasonably supposed to operate in this place?

Hon Michael Mischin interjected.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Indeed! That is an excellent example from the shadow Attorney General. If the government were to say in an annual report hearing that it has created three jobs, does three equal zero? Does that mean that every time the government boasts about how many jobs it has created, the number is actually zero? All numbers articulated by this government equal zero. Is that the outcome? That is obviously ridiculous, and that is the point. If a government finds itself in the awkward situation of having a ridiculous set of answers, a responsible government with good leadership and good governance would say, "Let's fix this." It would not try to defend itself by saying, "On this basis, the information provided is correct." What rubbish! Three negative notices were issued by the Department of Communities to the Department of Health. It is irreconcilable for the Department of Health to say

that it received zero notices. It is worse when it is then exposed in a hearing with a very senior member opposite, Hon Sue Ellery, in charge at that hearing on behalf of the government. It was brought to the attention of the most senior member in government opposite and taken on notice—fair enough. Anyone would take that question on notice because it is ridiculous: “How can three equal zero? I need to get to the bottom of this.” But then for the response to come back as supplementary information in an attempt to defend the answer is ridiculous.

Consideration of report adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.

Progress reported and leave granted to sit again, pursuant to standing orders.