

**PROCEDURE AND PRIVILEGES COMMITTEE**

*Fourth Report — “Report on the Sitting Times of the Legislative Assembly” — Tabling*

**MR M.W. SUTHERLAND (Mount Lawley — Deputy Speaker)** [10.36 am]: I present for tabling the fourth report of the Procedure and Privileges Committee of the Thirty-eighth Parliament, entitled “Report on the Sitting Times of the Legislative Assembly”.

[See paper 1196.]

**Mr M.W. SUTHERLAND:** On 9 June 2009, an Independent member of the Legislative Assembly, Dr Janet Woollard, gave notice that at the next sitting of the house she would move —

- (1) That the following terms of reference be referred to the Procedure and Privileges Committee for its investigation and report to the house —
  - (a) the sitting hours of the house be reviewed to ensure the house sits more appropriate business hours; and
  - (b) recommendations be made to amend the standing orders for days and times of meeting of the Assembly.
- (2) That the committee report to the Legislative Assembly by 13 August 2009.

The motion was not formally moved, but the matters raised were aired in debate in the Legislative Assembly on Wednesday, 10 June 2009. Despite the lack of formal referral from the house, the Procedure and Privileges Committee elected to investigate the matter at its own instigation. On 22 June 2009 individual committee members were authorised to seek input from individual members of Parliament to inform the committee of their views. I now refer to the matters arising —

**Matters arising**

The Committee considered that the rationale behind the present sitting hours includes:

- the requirement to balance the sittings of the House with other parliamentary and related duties, such as attendance in committee, Cabinet and party meetings;
- Members’ ability to attend to their electorate duties; and
- the need to provide hours and days equitable for regional Members.

At present the parliamentary working week broadly comprises: Monday, cabinet; Tuesday morning, party meetings; Tuesday 2.00 pm to 10.00 pm, parliamentary sitting; Wednesday morning, committee meetings; Wednesday 12 noon to 7.00 pm, parliamentary sitting; Thursday 9.00 am to 5.00 pm parliamentary sitting; and Friday, electorate duties.

In addition to these considerations, the committee had only received two letters supporting a change in sitting hours—one from Dr Janet Woollard and the other from Ms Adele Carles—but there was no other significant negative feedback on current hours.

The committee noted the sitting times of other jurisdictions, but also noted that the size and population distribution of Western Australia means that the Legislative Assembly’s needs are unique and not easily comparable with other states and territories. That being said, the committee did not consider that the Assembly’s sitting times varied significantly from other jurisdictions.

The committee was also of the view that the current schedule is an improvement on the sitting hours in previous times, when extremely late sitting nights on Tuesdays and Wednesdays was commonplace.

The committee recommends that the sitting times of the Legislative Assembly remain unchanged.

**MR M. McGOWAN (Rockingham)** [10.39 am]: I rise to add a few comments to the report tabled by the member for Mount Lawley. This report came about as a consequence of an address by the member for Alfred Cove. Indeed, she spoke to me on a couple of occasions about this matter. The committee met and examined the sitting hours of the house. It has been a perennial issue. The committee met to examine the hours in other states and federally, and to determine an appropriate level of sitting.

I endorse what the member for Mount Lawley has said about the sitting hours. It is not easy to come up with the right balance, and I understand the arguments put by the member for Alfred Cove that sitting hours might not be particularly family friendly. We need to remember that this year we are sitting for 17 or 18 weeks. The sitting

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week is three days. When we multiply that out, it works out that we meet as a Parliament somewhere between 50 to 60 days a year.

I think additional sitting weeks are a significant issue, and I would support the introduction of additional parliamentary sitting weeks to get through legislation and adequately debate things, as the member for Armadale has attempted to bring forward. However, I do not think that the number of days and hours we sit during sitting weeks is as significant an issue as some other members might think. We have received some feedback from the member for Alfred Cove, and the member for Fremantle raised issues to do with family-friendly hours. As I outlined to members, Parliament sits for somewhere between 50 to 60 days a year, and there are 365 days in the year. That is not an inordinate number of days when there are only 17 or 18 sitting weeks.

Perhaps, having been here for 13 years and having been in the position of minister and shadow minister, I have a greater appreciation of responsibilities additional to just coming to Parliament and serving my electorate. When one has the responsibility of being a minister, it involves a cabinet meeting on Mondays and additional responsibilities outside Parliament on Fridays and on weekends. When one is a shadow minister, it is a similar arrangement, although not as intense. There are meetings on Mondays and frequently there are portfolio responsibilities on Fridays. If we were to include an additional sitting day, it would remove a day of essential administration work for both the government and the opposition; the administration work of running the state, so to speak, and of attempting to provide an alternative government and to win the hearts and minds of the people of Western Australia. That requires a lot of effort outside this building. I think that the three-day arrangement is best for the administration of the state for both government and opposition.

The second point is that Western Australia is a big state. When we compare Western Australia with Victoria, Tasmania or New South Wales, we see that it is a very different arrangement. People can, within an hour, travel to the capital cities of Tasmania, New South Wales or Victoria from any part of those states; in many cases, substantially less than an hour. Western Australia is three times the size of New South Wales. Some members have a long, long way to travel and a long, long way to get home at the end of a parliamentary sitting week. I think I probably travel the furthest on a daily basis of anyone in this house, perhaps with the exception of the member for Mandurah, who is not at all disgruntled about travelling from Mandurah! I left home this morning at 6.40 and arrived here at 8.10. It often takes a long time to get here, but it is not unmanageable. However, for country members who want to get back on a Thursday evening to participate in the events of their electorate on a Friday, it is very important that the current sitting arrangements and hours remain in place.

I consulted widely inside the caucus and spoke to a number of members. Country members were particularly very keen for the existing arrangements to remain in place. It is important for metropolitan members, who perhaps do not have to endure the same extensive travel and time constraints, to listen to what our country colleagues are saying about sitting hours.

Another point I want to make, to which the member for Mount Lawley alluded, is that the hours have improved over the years. When I first arrived in Parliament in 1996—my first sittings were in early 1997—there was a period of 10 straight sitting weeks. At that time, I thought it was great fun; I thought it was fantastic. I have changed my views about that! We had 10 sitting weeks because the upper house changed in May 1997, and the then Court government wanted to get some legislation through before the upper house changed over and the government lost the balance of power in the upper house. It was roughly 10 weeks or 12 weeks of sitting. We then sat until 11 o'clock on Tuesday nights; it was very late, and Wednesday nights may have been even later. We also often sat beyond those times. The sitting hours are now easy in comparison with the hours back then when I first arrived. They are much more manageable.

The committee considered the idea of perhaps cutting out the lunch break on Thursday and commencing at 10.00 on Thursday morning, or perhaps starting at 11.00 on Wednesday morning and finishing at 6.00 on Wednesday evening; there were also a few little things at the edges. However, when we balance it out, there are often committee meetings on Wednesday morning, which makes things difficult. That left the Thursday arrangement; we could have started an hour later and not stopped for the lunch break at 1.00 pm. On balance, I did not care that much, but I thought that the current arrangement is okay and that a lot of members like to do a few things during their lunch break. Some members, because of our lifestyle, like to do a bit of exercise or have a community group visit from their electorate. To eradicate the lunch hour on Thursdays might have made things more difficult.

I know that the member for Alfred Cove and perhaps the member for Fremantle will not be happy with this outcome, but I consulted widely within the ALP caucus, and the response was universal. I do not recall anyone suggesting anything different to what we are doing. I think Liberal Party members consulted their colleagues, and I am sure that the National Party is in agreement that it does not suit Parliament to change the hours as suggested by the member for Alfred Cove. I appreciate the fact that her motives are genuine; I do not want her to take this decision badly or to think that she has been insulted. I understand that the member for Fremantle has a

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young family and that the hours are not easy for her. I also have a young family—three children aged six, four and four months. Other members also have young families; in fact, there is a baby boom going on in this place at the moment. I think that says something about going into opposition! I think the member for Mandurah, on ceasing his ministerial duties, found that he had other pursuits! We understand that members have young families, and I appreciate the difficulties involved, but whatever we do, there will be downsides, which is why the committee left things as they are.

**MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah)** [10.48 am]: Madam Acting Speaker, I seek leave to speak to the report.

Leave granted.

**Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN**: I will be very brief; I am not normally brief in this place!

I would like to make some very brief comments about the report that has been handed down by the Deputy Speaker. I want to congratulate the member for Alfred Cove; I think it is important that we actually get an opportunity to look at practices in this place from time to time. I also congratulate her for bringing forward the issue of sitting times and the impact of them on members and members' families. We also need to remember the impact that the sitting hours have on parliamentary staff. The staff who ensure that Parliament functions appropriately, of course, are also required to be at Parliament House during sitting hours.

The member for Alfred Cove's motion and documents she prepared for consideration by the Procedure and Privileges Committee included the sitting times for various other state and territory Parliaments in Australia. It was very interesting to see those sitting times, and they were an important part of the considerations of the committee. I am a non-metropolitan member, as I always like to remind people, but it is important to remind metropolitan members that regional members have to return to their electorates after sitting finishes on Thursdays. Members for Albany and Geraldton, and, I am sure, some members of the National Party, need to catch flights on Thursday evening to enable them to have a productive Friday in their electorate. From my reading of the airline schedules, quite often the time available to get away from this place and to the airport is fairly tight. I think the flights of the members for Albany and Geraldton leave around 6.00 pm, or a bit later.

**Mr I.C. Blayney**: I have to go back to my electorate on Friday morning.

**Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN**: the member for Geraldton has to go back on Friday morning. We should always consider those sorts of issues.

Whilst metropolitan members can be at their electorate office very early on Friday mornings to commence their busy schedule, if regional members are not able to get back to Albany, Geraldton, Mandurah, Bunbury et cetera that evening, they have to catch the morning flight, and by the time they get to their town it is midmorning and they have lost that time.

I am pleased that the committee, chaired by the Deputy Speaker, considered the member for Alfred Cove's motion and I am pleased that the wishes of non-metropolitan members have been acknowledged in its decision. That does not mean, of course, that we cannot revisit this issue in the future. I think it is important and appropriate that we continue to consider these sorts of issues from time to time so that we have the interests of members at heart. I know the member for Fremantle, the member for Alfred Cove and others have specific concerns and issues, and I think they are valid and appropriate, but in this case, given that we have regional members, we need to ensure that the status quo continues.