

USE OF VIDEOCONFERENCING BY LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEES

Motion

MR J.C. KOBELKE (Nollamara - Leader of the House) [11.00 am]: I move -

That until 31 December 2004, the following order be adopted -

- (1) That Standing Order No. 259 be amended by inserting after sub-order (1) the following new sub-order -
 - (2) Committee members using a video-conferencing facility will be counted as present for the purpose of a quorum.
- (2) That Standing Order No. 267 be amended -
 - (a) by inserting after sub-order (2) the following -
 - (3) A video-conference facility may be used by a committee to examine a witness.”; and
 - (b) by inserting after sub-order (1) the following -
 - (2) A video-conferencing facility will not be used by a committee to take in camera evidence.

The Deputy Speaker presented a Procedure and Privileges Committee report on the use of videoconferencing to this House last Thursday. Following careful consideration, the Procedure and Privileges Committee has proposed that the use of videoconferencing by the committees of the Legislative Assembly be authorised by standing orders, as proposed by this motion.

I will briefly recap the major outcomes of the Procedure and Privileges Committee report. The committee has recommended that videoconferencing should be used only by exception and not as standard practice. In relation to quorums, the committee has recommended that committee members using videoconferencing from a remote location as a method of attending a deliberative meeting or hearing should be counted as part of that committee’s quorum. Audio conference links without video should not be used for committee deliberative meetings and hearings. The committee does not support the use of videoconferencing for taking in camera evidence. I do not know whether a pun was intended! The committee recommends that taking evidence from witnesses outside Western Australia should proceed only after appropriate warnings regarding parliamentary privilege and defamation are provided in writing to the witnesses by post, facsimile or e-mail. The committee has also recommended that steps be taken to achieve a uniform approach by Australian Parliaments to defamation and parliamentary privilege when parliamentary committees use videoconferencing for committee deliberative meetings and hearings.

The motion before the House will enable a trial of videoconferencing by committees to be undertaken until 31 December 2004. If the House adopts the motion today, committees may be in a position to use videoconferencing during the winter recess if they so require. In addition, if the motion is carried, the Procedure and Privileges Committee has also recommended that general guidelines relating to the use of videoconferencing be included in the Speaker’s procedural rules relating to committee evidence and witnesses. On behalf of the Government, I take this opportunity to formally respond to recommendation No 6, which relates to the use of videoconferencing during Estimates Committees. The committee has strongly recommended that videoconferencing during the budget Estimates Committee process should be used only in exceptional circumstances. The Government supports that recommendation. The committee is to be congratulated for its proactive and cooperative approach in looking at ways to improve and modernise the procedures of this House and the committee system. I commend the motion to the House.

MR R.F. JOHNSON (Hillarys) [11.03 am]: All members fully understand that videoconferencing is the way forward. It is used by many organisations. It will be unique for this Parliament; it will be a first for parliamentary committees of this Parliament to use videoconferencing. I take some comfort in the knowledge that it will be used in exceptional circumstances and not as a general rule for every committee meeting. The first meeting of any committee should not be done by videoconference; it should be done with the physical presence of members in Parliament House. After the initial meeting, there is no problem that we can foresee in having members use videoconferencing. Western Australia is very large geographically and members are often spread far and wide. It would be appropriate as a way to save money to have members of committees use videoconferencing. I am not quite sure how it is proposed to set up videoconferencing. Videoconferencing is very different to teleconferencing. Will videoconferencing facilities be established in major centres in Western Australia that members will have to attend?

Mr J.C. Kobelke: The network is already there. It will use the existing network.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: It must be the network set up by Contract and Management Services. That is good. I take the point that if evidence is taken in camera, it should not be done by videoconferencing because that would be inappropriate. Some unauthorised people could be in a position to see and hear the evidence given. It is very important that confidential information be taken in camera.

Regarding the budget Estimates Committee, I take comfort that videoconferencing will be used only in exceptional circumstances and not as a general rule. The problem with videoconferencing, like teleconferencing, is that it tends to make people somewhat lazy.

[Quorum formed.]

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: The Opposition supports the motion. It is comforting that there is a time limit of December next year. It is also a trial. That is very important. I have one area of concern. The cost of the service should be reviewed to determine whether it is good value for taxpayers' money or whether it is more cost-effective to have committee meetings held in the confines of Parliament House. If it is found that the costs are extreme, this House will have to determine whether to make videoconferencing permanent. I use teleconferencing in an organisation with which I am involved. I contact co-directors of a children's charity in Western Australia and the eastern States. It is far cheaper to have board meetings with teleconferencing; we cannot afford videoconferencing. We use videoconferencing only once every few years because it is more expensive than teleconferencing. I will take great interest in the costs of the trial of using these facilities. Teleconferencing and videoconferencing is the way of the future with the organisation in which I am involved and many other organisations. It saves people travelling possibly hundreds or thousands of kilometres to take part in what might only be a two-hour meeting. One has to weigh up the costs to the Parliament and members taking part in the videoconferencing. I am very happy to see the trial put in place. The Opposition takes comfort that a sunset clause is in place for December 2004 so the system can be re-evaluated. Obviously, the Procedure and Privileges Committee will look at that aspect. As a member of this Parliament, I will probably ask questions of the Speaker about the costs involved, not necessarily in the next budget estimates hearings but perhaps in the budget estimates hearings after that. I presume that the costs will be separate and will not be rolled into the overall costs of Parliament. If that is not the case, I ask that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, take that request to the Speaker so that we can see the precise costs. I do not want those costs to be lost in the overall costs of Parliament. How the money has been spent, the total number of hours used and the total number of committees that used the facility must be identified, so that we can determine whether it is cost-effective or whether it is an extravagance that the Parliament should not pursue further after this trial period. The Opposition is happy to agree to the motion of the Leader of the House. We will take great interest in the trial and see how it proceeds.

Question put and passed.