

STANDING ORDERS – 12th February 2008

Mrs VALE (Hughes) (12:52 AM) —I take this opportunity, Madam Deputy Speaker Burke, to congratulate you on your elevation to the deputy speakership. I wish you every success and satisfaction. This motion puts six proposals to the House while, at the same time, suggesting that these reforms to the **standing orders** actually allow greater accountability and scrutiny. These proposals suggest more sitting days but will actually create days without question time, without divisions or quorums, with no divisions or quorums during private members' business; extra days without a session for matters of public importance; and, finally, an increase in the number of hours that parliament sits each week. If such proposals actually did increase the accountability and scrutiny of government, none of us on this side of the House would have anything much about which we could complain. But they do no such thing. Indeed, they do exactly the opposite.

Those of us who have worked with the Labor Party over many years and who have come to know its use of illusion and artifice should not be amazed that these changes to the **standing orders** would result in less scrutiny, less accountability and less transparency for the people of Australia. These traditional procedures of this House go to the heart of parliamentary democracy, and to parliamentary accountability and scrutiny of our democracy. They are what parliament is all about. If a sitting parliament does not include a question time, a session for matters of public importance or dispenses with the requirement to hold divisions or form quorums, we do not need to open parliament that day. We could just hold a meeting in a committee room, because there is no way that we as the people's opposition can hold the government accountable without those fundamental parliamentary mechanisms. And, as a matter of fact, the Leader of the House well knows why the Main Committee was established in the first place. Even the member for Grayndler—as he then was—in a question to the then Speaker on 8 February 2007, a little over a year ago, actually said:

But, Mr Speaker, *House of Representatives Practice* is very clear. It says on page 527 that the accountability of the government is demonstrated most clearly and publicly at question time when for a period on most sitting days questions without notice are put to ministers.

For the benefit of my constituents, I would actually like to refer to the *Practice*, which is not often read in this place, just so they are aware of the particular page to which the now Leader of the House referred. This is what the *Practice* says:

One of the more important functions of the House is its critical review function. This includes scrutiny of the Executive Government, bringing to light issues and perceived deficiencies or problems, ventilating grievances, exposing, and thereby preventing the Government from exercising, arbitrary power, and pressing the Government to take remedial or other action. Questions are a vital element in this function.

It is fundamental in the concept of responsible government that the Executive Government be accountable to the House. The capacity of the House of Representatives to call the Government to account depends, in large measure, on its knowledge and understanding of the Government's policies and activities. Questions without notice and on notice (questions in writing) play an important part in this quest for information.

The accountability of the Government is demonstrated most clearly and publicly at Question Time when, for a period (currently usually over an hour) on most sitting days, questions without notice are put to Ministers. The importance of Question Time is demonstrated by the fact that at no other time in a normal sitting day is the House so well attended. Question Time is usually an occasion of special interest not only to Members themselves but to the news media, the radio and television broadcast audience and visitors to the public galleries.

It is obvious that question time—and this is in the quote referred to by the Leader of the House himself—is a critical review function of this House. Further, the then member for Griffith, the current Prime Minister, as the Leader of the Opposition, said in this place on 29 May 2007, when lecturing on accountability:

The reason this censure motion has been moved goes to the heart of accountability in this parliament.

And on 20 September 2007, he said:

The bare minimum level of accountability is to have, in fact, an answer to these questions.

Those of us who have worked with Labor over many years have come to learn of their deliberate use of symbolism without substance. We have come to know the chest-thumping without real action, and we have come to know of the rhetoric, empty of purpose or strategies for meaningful delivery. The people of Australia will also come to only believe what Labor do, not what they say.

We often hear many a Labor member wax misty-eyed about the light on the hill. Indeed, Madam Deputy Speaker, you actually reflected on this particular image in your speech today in the House. What many of us here in this place have come to know is that, when it suits its purpose, Labor can catch the unwary in a show of blinding glare, of useless political razzle-dazzle. We have seen it before. Labor does symbolism better than the *Da Vinci Code*, visual effects better than Hollywood and packaging and presentation better than Harrods.

When we see any statements by Labor purporting to bestow a greater largesse, a better bounty or, in this case, more sitting days promoted as greater parliamentary accountability and scrutiny, then alarm bells ring and we know we must take a closer look at that proposal. A closer look at section 39 of the Constitution, which provides for quorums in parliament, raises legal questions as to whether or not quorums can be abolished on a sitting day. The government actually says that it has legal advice on this issue but refuses to show it to us. I would like my constituents to actually note that.

These proposals have not been clearly thought out. Indeed, these proposals are a fraud, another political Labor razzle-dazzle, pretending to do one thing but delivering another, pretending to create an extra day of parliamentary accountability and scrutiny. They will do exactly the opposite. The critical review function of this House, one of its most important functions in our parliamentary democracy, will be denied to the Australian people for those extra sitting days. Indeed, what the Australian people will actually get is a Prime Minister and his executive who will enjoy an RDO on each of those extra 14 Fridays allocated as sitting days. We can believe the flippant comments made by the new member for Leichhardt that he plans to shoot through on Fridays. What a sham! How can the people of Australia be convinced that this government values the privilege that it has so recently been granted by the people of Australia? This government is not serious about greater accountability to the people of Australia; it is only pretending that it is. This is a cynical exercise. While I have no objection to working in this House on Fridays instead of working in my electorate, I reject the government's proposals because they will effectively undermine the critical review functions of this House.