



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
of the NORTHERN TERRITORY

OPPOSITION and CROSSBENCH MEMBERS

7 June 2017

Dear Northern Territory Public Servants,

Thank you for your hard work in preparing for this year's Estimates Committee hearings.

Some of us have personal experience as public servants over many years. We are all well aware of the enormous amount of preparation that takes place at all levels of the public service to ensure that Estimates is an open and transparent process, which informs both politicians and the public about the important work that is being undertaken by government in the name of all Territorians.

As you may be aware, the government has made a number of unilateral decisions concerning the way Estimates will take place this year. This has caused both the Opposition and Independent Members of Parliament to question the integrity of these hearings.

The singular purpose of Estimates is to add to the openness and transparency of government by allowing Members of Parliament to scrutinise the budget that has been prepared by the government of the day. In order for that scrutiny to be meaningful, the time allotted for Estimates must be adequate to provide for a thorough examination of the budget with Ministers and other witnesses present. However, changes to the Estimates process that both halve the traditionally allotted hours for budget inquiries to 30 (as opposed to 60 in past years) and dictate to the Opposition and Independents the time allotted for each witness is unacceptable. In our collective view 30 hours of scrutiny of annual reports after the Budget is passed is not a legitimate substitute.

Unfortunately, this is not the first time that the government has taken steps to decrease transparency in public policy. Changes were made to the way in which question time was conducted in the Parliament, including restricting the ability of the Opposition or Independents to ask two consecutive questions of one Minister. Similarly, in anticipation of Estimates, the Opposition submitted a number of written questions to Ministers on 31 March 2017, only to be informed those questions would not be responded to within 30 days, as required by Parliament. Further, the Opposition was informed that the written questions could not be answered prior to the budget being handed down, which is simply not true. While seemingly not overly troubling, each of these incidents had the effect of restricting open access to information concerning the elected government.

Given the limitations placed on transparency by the government, culminating in the extraordinary restrictions placed on the 2017 Estimates process, the Opposition and Independents have made a joint decision to step aside from this year's Estimates hearings.

This decision has not been taken lightly and does not, in any way, reflect upon the immense respect that we have for the efforts of public servants to prepare for the hearings.

Indeed, this decision is intended to ensure that the efforts of public servants in contributing to the openness of government are fully realised in the form of a full and fair Estimates process.

In place of participating in the Estimates hearings, the Opposition and some Independent Members intend to submit a number of written questions to Ministers that will cover the subjects that would have been discussed at these hearings. We understand that this will place an additional burden on the public service to prepare written responses to questions that could have been answered orally.

Nonetheless, we will take care to ensure that the written questions that are prepared are concise and limited in number in order to minimise the impact that this will have on each of your individual workloads. We will also work with the government to ensure that, if the questions cannot be responded to within the 30 day period required by Parliament, a reasonable time for responses is negotiated. We expect that the responses to the vast majority of the written questions will be on topics that will already have been addressed in the course of Estimates preparation. We have called on the government to reinstate the 60 hours as agreed by their own Select Committee on Opening Parliament to the People. If they were to do so, we would fully participate.

It is unfortunate that circumstances have necessitated this course of action, but we strongly believe that ensuring the integrity and transparency of Estimates into the future is paramount. We remain open to continuing discussions with the government to remedy this situation, but at this point in time both the Opposition and Independents believe that it is in the best interests of all Territorians to stand up for a meaningful and open Estimates process.

Again, we would like to personally thank you for the work that you do each day in order to make the Territory the best place in Australia to live, work and thrive.

Together we will continue to make the Territory even greater.

Yours sincerely,

GARY HIGGINS MLA
Leader of the Opposition

LIA FINOCCHIARO MLA
Deputy Leader of the Opposition

THE HON. KEZIA PURICK MLA
Member for Goyder

ROBYN LAMBLEY MLA
Member for Araluen

TERRY MILLS MLA
Member for Blain

GERRY WOOD MLA
Member for Nelson