



**Parliamentary Sitting Times
24 April 2007.**

Mrs PENFOLD (Flinders): The proposal to alter sittings times has supposedly been put forward as an indication of parliament being more family friendly, with earlier starts ostensibly to enable the day's sittings to finish earlier. The question is: more family friendly for whom? Certainly not country members. It would take us away from our families and electorates for longer periods. That, however, has not been taken into account, because the issue of family friendly is a smoke screen. The reduction in night sittings will just enable metropolitan members, who comprise the majority of members in the state Labor coalition government, to attend more functions and to hold more meetings in the evening.

They already see their families most evenings and mornings of sitting days. It is no coincidence that Labor is pushing this change in the lead up to the federal election later this year. On the other hand, Liberal members the majority of whom represent country electorates and who, in most cases, must stay overnight on sitting days will be kept away from their electorates, functions and meetings and their families, giving the lie to the purported notion that the change is for family reasons. The proposed change will have a great negative effect on country members of parliament and the way in which those members can service their often large, diverse electorates and also spend time with their families.

In my case, the changes will mean coming by plane to Adelaide on Monday afternoons, resulting in a cost to taxpayers for an extra night's overnight accommodation one fewer night and morning spent with family members and one fewer opportunity to get to constituent meetings in the electorate. It effectively cuts the time the member spends in the electorate working on electorate and constituent issues so that they can be brought to the attention of the appropriate authorities and the government. But Labor is not particularly concerned with those who live in rural and regional South Australia and the remote areas of our state as long as they keep working hard, paying their fees, charges, taxes and exporting the goods that provide much of the wealth of the state and do not make too much noise.

The changes also limit the time for committees, where members of parliament get briefings and information on bills which are coming before them and on which they will have to vote. These bills are often conceived by city people who may not even be aware of the different effects and difficulties they might cause in regional areas. One of the funniest examples that I remember was the occasion when I clarified the meaning of the word 'truck' where it appeared in a draft bill, which stated that trucks could not stand in streets any longer than 10 minutes. At the time it was harvest and hundreds of trucks of all shapes and sizes were lined up in towns across the state. It transpired that these were not at all what the drafter meant to attack. He or she had in mind what we in the country would call a delivery van or a delivery truck, not huge B-doubles and triples that frequent the streets in what I consider to be the real world. Once the implications were pointed out, the clause fortunately disappeared to be seen no more.

It is to Labor's advantage to limit scrutiny on its proposals so that, hopefully, it can push through decisions that may be disadvantageous to the state and to its people but invaluable to the unions, particularly, of which they are all members (often of more than one) but of which I understand about only 15 per cent of the general population belong. This is a reason for these changes a reason that Labor hopes people will not realise before it is too late and we, as opposition members, probably will not be able to stop.

Even a compromise to start at 1 p.m., which would not have been perfect but which would have helped country members, was totally ignored by this arrogant power hungry party. It makes the Legislative Council of even greater importance in ensuring that those who oppose Labor can be heard. Shortening the breaks for mealtimes may at first sound reasonable. However, these breaks are

opportunities for country members to meet with businesses, constituents and other people on matters relevant to their electorates or to attend briefings time they may otherwise have to spend away from their families and electorates on non sitting days.

Again, the changes impact negatively on members representing country electorates whose constituents are already disadvantaged in the political process because of the distances they must travel and the diversity of issues their members must cover. I give the example from my own experience. Recently, I flew to Adelaide on a Tuesday evening so that I could fly to the Beverley uranium mine to view the in situ leaching and environment and infrastructure issues that will have to be considered when mining begins in the Gawler Craton mineralisation that covers Eyre Peninsula. I then attended the Pay Dirt Uranium Conference on Thursday and Friday, leaving the conference early to catch a plane to Port Lincoln. My husband met me at the airport and took me straight up to Streaky Bay where I attended an evening meeting of local people to listen to their concerns and speak about the Eyre Peninsula's water issues. After staying overnight in Streaky Bay on Friday, we drove on to Ceduna the next day and were picked up by a local constituent. We then travelled to the Scotdesco Aboriginal community located the other side of Penong to discuss their water and numerous other issues.

Returning to Ceduna late on Saturday, we stayed overnight in Ceduna where I met with my personal assistant (who lives in Ceduna) to discuss the many more issues that are being faced by the people of the district. I returned home Sunday afternoon a drive of over four hours to do the washing, check the emails and collect the mail and the local papers to read in the evening.

Monday in my Port Lincoln office was taken up with writing an email to Scotdesco to confirm the visit and the undertakings made and to supply some of the information requested; getting out a press release on the uranium conference; doing some media; and preparing documentation for the next three days in parliament. By 7 a.m. on Tuesday morning, I had packed and left for the airport for an 8 a.m. flight while taking a call requesting an ABC interview, which I prepared on the plane and which was held in the car in front of Parliament House. I then attended a party meeting and, before parliament started for the day, I worked on one of my speeches for the week.

For some reason, after 1 000 kilometres of driving (which I shared with my long-suffering husband), numerous meetings covering dozens of issues and three aeroplane flights, I was just a little tired on Tuesday and felt somewhat irritated by the Attorney-General's ignorant sarcasm about the reading of my speech. I assure him and others that it was a much better 20-minute supply speech than I would have been able to give otherwise. In the last two weeks alone, I have travelled around 3 000 kilometres by road to visit and talk with constituents about power, water, roads and other issues affecting country people, arriving home late on Saturday. I understand that the member for Stuart travels about 100 000 kilometres per year.

When preparing this speech, I worked into the night to ensure that it was as good and as factual as I could make it, as I believe that it is my duty to my constituents to do so. While the Attorney travels around his tiny electorate on his bicycle to discuss issues with his constituents, every week my speeches are accessed by hundreds of people through my website. In the short month of February this year, I had a record number of over 29 950 hits on the website; in March, it was over 30 000. I have averaged over 25 000 hits every month for some years, so some people must think that I have something worthwhile to say presumably, many of them live in the 55 000 square kilometres of my electorate. No single radio, television or newspaper covers this region so, unlike the Attorney-General and other members opposite, I cannot go on talkback and be heard as easily as they can.

In his supply speech (which waffled and had a serious lack of substance, concentrating as it did on deriding the Liberal Party and country people), the member for Torrens suggested that my replacement will be 'someone over 60, a farmer, and someone who has no leadership aspirations at all.' I suggest that Labor is trying to ensure that this is the case by making parliament so inhospitable that many young, well-educated and ambitious young people would not consider standing, particularly anyone with a young family. I would not have done so had both my children not been at university in Adelaide and if my husband and I had not been successful in business. Indeed, it was because of our success that I have been able to afford to pay two additional staff to assist me, and my husband can take time off to help to drive thousands of kilometres every year. I also use my travel allowances to fly staff over to help me during sitting weeks. I have to keep work flowing through my offices in Port Lincoln and Ceduna, so I find it almost impossible to catch up when I fly home.

I have said enough on that issue, but I ask that the Labor government reconsider its decision and leave the sitting times as they are, because they are about as fair as they can be to all members of parliament, particularly those who cannot get to their home at night, sleep in their own bed and de-stress with their own family for days on end. Labor's contempt for rural and regional South Australia, along with all the people who live in the isolated areas of our state, is highlighted by the report and its recommendations.

One vote, one value is not a reality for us, and the current proposals would make it even worse. This is not democracy for country people. The government is using its position to ride roughshod over those whom it considers opponents and those who live outside

the city limits. It is giving preference to select groups and handicapping others by using its authority to manipulate parliament. The government, which comprises mainly city-based members, is attempting to change procedures for its own party and political benefit. The holding of the select committee was no more than window-dressing for consumption by a public that Labor holds in increasing contempt.

It is sobering to realise that this is the way that a Labor government would operate were its desire to abolish the Legislative Council ever to come to pass.

By putting a few non-Labor people on committees but keeping Labor representation to a majority, the government would be able to ignore any and all opposition to whatever proposals or actions it wanted to take.

This proposal is yet another step in destroying the democracy in which we now live, and shows considerable disrespect for country people. That is a concern which is not just mine alone but one which was expressed recently by a Zimbabwean immigrant friend, who commented on their concern about this government's disrespect, particularly for the judiciary, and likening it to what has happened in Zimbabwe.