Parliamentary Committees

Many back bench Members of Parliament (those not holding senior offices such as a Minister) belong to parliamentary committees. Parliament appoints committees made up of Members to inquire into matters such as proposed new laws; social or legal issues; proposed government activities; and the budgets and expenditures of government departments. Some committees also deal with ongoing matters such as overseeing the work of a particular body (e.g., ICAC, the Independent Commission Against Corruption) or constantly reviewing road safety or government regulations.

The committees are given terms of reference stating the issues to be addressed. The committee considers these issues, and then calls for submissions, inviting interested people and organisations to put their views to the committee in writing. They then may hold public hearings, calling on people to appear before them to present their case and be questioned. Where the matters being investigated concern people or organisations beyond the capital city, committees will often hold hearings in other centres to make it easier for people to present evidence to them. Most of the people who appear before committees or make submissions are experts or represent particular groups or viewpoints in the community. In this way ideas and opinions from the community helps the committee and the Parliament to make decisions.

After considering all the evidence, the committee produces a report to Parliament which surveys the issues, summarises their investigation and makes a series of recommendations as to what action the government should take. The report is presented to the government in Parliament (tabled) and it is then up to the government as to which recommendations it will act on and which ones it will not.

Committees membership reflects the party numbers in the House, so government Members are normally in the majority in Lower House (Legislative Assembly) committees. In Upper House (Legislative Council), where a government rarely has a majority of Members, committees may have more “cross bench” Members (those who do not belong to the government or major opposition parties) and less government Members.

When a committee is inquiring into a controversial subject, the inquiry and the report may attract a lot of publicity, which in itself may make people more aware of the issues. Sometimes a committee is critical of a government’s activities, and the government may have to defend its actions or change them.

With the work of parliament and government becoming more complex, the importance, work and number of committees has increased over the years.

Types of Committees

Some Committees exist permanently or for long periods. These include:

- **Standing Committees**, which exist for the term of a parliament, but are usually renewed with each new parliament (for example the Road Safety or Social Issues Committees).
- **Statutory Committees**, which are established by an act of parliament (for example the Public Accounts or Regulation Review Committees).
- **Sessional Committees**, which are like standing committees but are concerned with matters internal to the Parliament such as printing, catering or the library.

Other committees are created by one or both of the Houses just to inquire into and report back on a particular matter, after which the Committee is disbanded. These include:

- **Select Committees**, which are appointed to investigate and report on a particular current issue such as crime or a controversial government project.
- **Legislative Committees**, which are set up to investigate or help develop a proposed law.

There are usually more Legislative Council than Legislative Assembly committees but each House has its own committees and there are also Joint Committees made up of members from both Houses.
Activity: Committees Role Play

Inquiry into the proposal to increase school hours.

ROLES AND ROLE CARDS
- Chair of Committees (1 role card)
- Three witnesses representing different community groups - answer questions (1 role card each)
  - Witness A - Department of Education
  - Witness B - represents teachers union
  - Witness C - parents’ organisation
- Three MLC committee members - ask witnesses questions (1 role card each)
- Committee Clerk - assists witnesses to make affirmation (1 role card + Affirmation Card)
- Audience (everybody else)

[The words on Role Cards in brackets are instructions - not words to be spoken]

Role Card: Committee Chair
I welcome the witnesses and members of the public to this hearing of the Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No 9. The terms of reference for this inquiry are that we inquire into and report on the effect of increasing school hours from the present hours to between 9.00am and 5.00pm and to make recommendations to the Government. Today the Committee will hear from representatives of groups with an interest in this issue.

I welcome the representative from the Department of Education. Please take a seat at the table. [Wait for witness to take seat and to make the affirmation]

What is your full name? [Witness states name]
Are you here to represent a particular organisation at today’s hearing? [Witness answers]
Would you like to make a statement to the committee on this proposal? [Witness makes statement]

Do any Committee Members have questions? [Member A asks question - Witness answers]

I thank the representative for attending today. You may return to your seat.

I would now like to welcome the representative from the Teacher’s Union. [Wait for witness to take seat and to make the affirmation]

What is your full name? [Witness states name]
Are you here to represent a particular organisation at today’s hearing? [Witness answers]
Would you like to make a statement to the committee on this proposal? [Witness presents views]

Do any Committee Members have questions? [Member B asks question - Witness answers]

I thank the representative of the Teacher’s Union for attending. You may return to your seat.

I now welcome the representative from the Parents’ Association. Please take a seat at the table. [Wait for witness to take seat and to make the affirmation]

What is your full name? [Witness states name]
Are you here to represent a particular organisation at today’s hearing? [Witness answers]
Would you like to make a statement to the committee on this proposal? [Witness presents views]

Do any Committee Members have questions? [Member C asks question - Witness answers]

I thank the representative for attending today. This hearing is now adjourned.
Role Card: Representative of the Department of Education

[You are the representative of the Department of Education and the Department is in favour of this idea. When invited by the Chair, take your seat at the table. The Clerk will hand you the Affirmation to read. Please read this aloud. Then answer the Chair’s questions. When the chair asks if you would like to make a statement on the proposal, begin as shown below - you will have to give your reasons for supporting the idea. There are some suggestions below.]

Thank you Mr/Madam Chair and Committee Members. Yes, I would like to make the following statement:

As you know the Department of Education has been considering this idea for some time. While we can see that there are some problems we can also see that there would be many advantages if we had longer school hours. For example:

[Give your reasons. You could use some of these ideas:
- it would make better use of expensive school buildings
- there is so much to learn but not enough time in the present school day
- children with working parents will not have to go home to empty houses or to expensive childcare if school times and work times are the same
- longer hours might mean there would be no need for homework

When you have finished thank the committee for giving you the opportunity to present your views.]

[Now you will be asked a question by a Committee Member. Try to think of a good answer. If it is about having school on Saturdays, try this one:

Most parents don’t work Saturdays. We think it would work better if normal school and work hours were much the same.]

Role Card: Representative of the Teachers’ Union

[You are the representative of the Teachers’ Union and the Union is not in favour of this idea. When invited by the Chair, take your seat at the table. The Clerk will hand you the Affirmation to read. Please read this aloud. Then answer the Chair’s questions. When the chair asks if you would like to make a statement on the proposal, begin as shown below - you will have to give your reasons for supporting the idea. There are some suggestions below.]

Yes, thank you Mr/Madam Chair and Committee Members, I wish to make the following statement. The Teacher’s Union is generally opposed to this idea because:

[Give your reasons. You could use some of these ideas:
- teachers are already too busy and stressed
- children just can’t work that long – they’d get too tired
- it would cost more because teachers would have to be paid more
- finishing the same time as other work would make peak hour traffic much worse and there would be a shortage of public transport

When you have finished thank the committee for giving you the opportunity to present your views.]

[Now you will be asked a question by a Committee Member. Try to think of a good answer. If it is about teachers working longer hours, try this one:

Teachers are not paid enough but they already work long hours. They should be paid properly for the hours they work now.

When the Chair thanks you, return to your seat]
Role Card: Representative of the Parents’ Association

[You are the representative of the Parents Association. The Association can see both good points and bad points to this idea. When invited by the Chair, take your seat at the table. The Clerk will hand you the Affirmation to read. Please read this aloud. Then answer the Chair’s questions. When the chair asks if you would like to make a statement on the proposal begin as shown below - you will have to give your reasons for supporting the idea. There are some suggestions below.]

Thank you Mr/Madam Chair and Committee Members. I would like to make the following statement: The Parents Association can see both good and bad points in this idea. Some good points are:

[Give your reasons - You could use some of these ideas:
   - we wouldn’t have to worry about where our children are between 3 and 5 o’clock
   - it would make better use of the schools and cut down vandalism]

But some bad points are:

[Give your reasons - You could use some of these ideas:
   - children would be tired and cranky
   - it would cost more which means more taxes or school fees]

When you have finished thank the committee for giving you the opportunity to present your views.

Longer hours would be safer while children are in school but we would be concerned about them coming home later during peak hour traffic, especially in winter when it is dark.

When the Chair thanks you, return to your seat.

Role Card: Committee Member A

[You are a Member of the Legislative Council who is on this Committee. You have listened to Witness A and now you want to ask a question. There is a suggestion below.]

Thank you Mr/Madam Chair and Committee Members. I would like to ask the Department of Education representative this question:

[Ask a question based on something she or he has said, such as the example below]

Has the Department thought of making the school week longer by having school on Saturdays?

Role Card: Committee Member B

[You are a Member of the Legislative Council who is on this Committee. You have listened to Witness B and now you want to ask a question. There is a suggestion below.]

Thank you Mr/Madam Chair and Committee Members. I would like to ask the Teachers’ Union representative this question:

[Ask a question based on something she or he has said, such as the example below]

Would teachers agree to work longer school hours if they were paid more?
Role Card: Committee Member C

[You are a Member of the Legislative Council who is on this Committee. You have listened to Witness C and now you want to ask a question. There is a suggestion below.]

Thank you Mr/Madam Chair and Committee Members. I would like to ask the Parents’ Association representative this question:

[Ask a question based on something she or he has said, such as the example below]

Would children be safer if school hours were longer?

Role Card: Committee Clerk

[You are not a Member of Parliament. You work for the Parliament and your job is to assist this Committee to do its work. You take the minutes of the meetings (no need to do it this time!). You will assist each Witness to their seat and will ask them to make an affirmation (that is to state that they will be telling the truth - this is like being sworn in in a courtroom)].

[When the Chair calls each Witness, you should leave your chair and lead them to the Witness Chair. You should then hand them the Affirmation Card and say:]

Please read the affirmation.

When the Witness has read the Affirmation, take the card back and return to your seat.

OATH

I swear that the evidence now about to be given by me shall be the truth, whole truth and nothing but the truth. So help me God.

The witness may choose to take an oath or to give an affirmation

AFFIRMATION

I solemnly, sincerely, and truly declare and affirm that the evidence now about to be given by me shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.