**Discussion document on displaying placards and bringing objects into the House, and virtual backgrounds**

1. **INTRODUCTION**

In March 2022, objections were raised to a member holding up a placard while delivering his Member’s Statement in the House. The matter was referred to and discussed in the Chief Whips’ Forum on 30 March 2022, where it was agreed that in the absence of guidelines from the Rules Committee, placards should not be displayed in the House until the Rules Committee had developed guidelines on the matter. At the meeting, it was also noted that the guidelines should also apply to members on the virtual platform.

An important function of members in the House is to engage each other in debate and to do so in accordance with the Rules of the Assembly. Every member, when given a speaking opportunity, is entitled to be heard without disruption or interruption by other members. When participating in debates, members have an opportunity to raise matters that they view as important, and voice their concerns or disagreements on a wide range of issues. This right or privilege to be heard is one that the presiding officer is duty-bound to enforce at all times.

In terms of the Constitution, the Assembly is a national forum for public consideration of issues and while debates can sometimes be robust, the Assembly by its nature has to conform to certain standards and decorum matters to ensure smooth proceedings. Matters of public importance are discussed and debated in the Assembly and, as public representatives, members should not be distracted from performing their constitutional duties. Displaying placards in the House to protest on a matter(s), for example, has the potential to distract members from performing their work. Thus, the Assembly should not be used as a platform for members to protest by displaying placards or other objects, but rather as a platform for discussion and debate. There have been instances where the Chair has had to rule in respect of the displaying of objects and items including party insignia. Such displays have always been discouraged and, in some instances, ruled out of order when they directly resulted in a disruption of proceedings.

If members, including members of the public, were allowed to embark on protests using placards or by bringing other objects or articles into the House, it could disrupt the proceedings and impede members from exercising their right and privilege to be heard and to be listened to, by not only members but also their constituents. Displaying placards in the House could also be challenging for presiding officers to manage the proceedings and may jeopardise the smooth functioning of the House.

In the circumstances, and in the absence of clear guidelines on the matter, the following two options are proposed for consideration by the Subcommittee on Review of Assembly Rules:

1. **OPTION 1:**

A member may not display placards, objects or articles in the Chamber regardless of whether it relates to the member’s speech or the business of the House, as a debate is about a verbal exchange of views.

1. **OPTION 2: GUIDELINES FOR DISPLAYING PLACARDS AND BRINGING OBJECTS INTO THE CHAMBER**
	1. Non-threatening objects that can be used as a weapon are prohibited from the Chamber.
	2. A member may bring non-threatening objects into the Chamber in order to refer to it during his or her speech, subject to the Rules and these Guidelines. Non-threatening objects include placards, posters, etc.
	3. A member must refrain from bringing objects into the Chamber that are not related to the business of the House or the member’s speech.
	4. Members are discouraged from bringing items or objects into the Chamber that may disturb or infringe the rights of other members, or that may deflect the attention of the House from its business, or that may cause offense or that is not befitting the dignity and decorum of the House.
	5. The House should not be used as a platform for protests using placards, objects or articles of whatever kind, as it is a forum for debate.
	6. Protests or showing solidarity for a particular cause by wearing a particular item of clothing or colour may be allowed in certain circumstances, provided that such act:
		1. does not infringe on members’ rights to be heard;
		2. does not directly result in a disruption of proceedings;
		3. does not deflect the attention of the House from its business;
		4. does not cause offense; and/or
		5. is befitting the dignity and decorum of the House.
	7. The Guidelines on displaying placards and other objects shall also apply to members on the virtual platform.
2. **GUIDELINES FOR MEMBERS’ BACKGROUNDS ON THE VIRTUAL PLATFORM**
3. In terms of the rules for virtual sittings of the House as adopted by the Assembly on 9 June 2020, the current rules on order in public meetings and order in debate shall apply in a virtual meeting where relevant.
4. Members on the virtual platform are therefore required to conduct themselves as if they were physically present in the House.
5. Members’ backgrounds on the virtual platform either should be blurred out or should display the parliamentary buildings.
6. Party symbols or insignia of whatever kind may not be used as virtual backgrounds or displayed in any way.
7. Members of the Executive on the virtual platform should refrain from displaying departmental emblems or banners as their backgrounds when they account to the Assembly. Their backgrounds on the virtual platform either should be blurred out or should display the parliamentary buildings, as a way of having uniformity among members.
8. The presiding officers on the virtual platform may display a parliamentary flag or symbol as their background as they represent the authority of the House and should be distinguished from other members.

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