**[Taking legislation lightly](https://www.dawn.com/news/1673036/taking-legislation-lightly)**

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THE [events](https://www.dawn.com/news/1672028) in the Senate last week once again demonstrated that, with some notable exceptions, our honourable legislators, whether from the ruling party or the opposition, do not take their parliamentary duties within the legislature as seriously as they consider their work in constituencies where, in stark contrast, they devote extra effort and time to their constituents while dealing with their personal issues and attending weddings and funerals.

One must grant that our legislators spend far greater time in public service than their counterparts in the developed world but, sadly, performing their duties within the legislatures is not among their top priorities. One may attribute this imbalance to the harsh realities of our state of governance which makes constituents, especially the less educated and poor among them, dependent on their elected representatives for securing even their basic rights like getting a child admitted to school, securing a job, transferring from one place of work to another or even obtaining a CNIC. The voters, therefore, judge the performance of their legislators on the basis of what they can do to address their personal problems and not on their speeches and voting record within the legislatures.

How much importance our voters and constituents attach to business within the legislatures can be gauged by the fact that hardly anyone has demanded the voting record of our legislators. More than 90 per cent of the voting in our legislatures is done through a ‘voice vote’ which makes it impossible to know the exact number of votes for or against a motion, let alone the identity of legislators who supported or opposed a particular law.

Coupled with this is our culture which attaches supreme importance to the presence of our elected representatives at social gatherings especially weddings and funerals. Large constituencies comprising an average population of around 800,000 in each National Assembly constituency make the job of the legislators extremely onerous. Ask any legislator how much time he or she spends visiting the constituents for these social duties and you will feel like sympathising with these socially over-committed representatives.

The voting on the SBP bill last week reflected our politicians’ casual approach to lawmaking.

Last week’s Senate proceedings that culminated in the passage of the highly contentious State Bank of Pakistan (Amendment) Bill, 2022, despite the numerical superiority of the opposition in the House and the expression of its strong resolve to defeat the bill once again highlighted the casual approach of our legislators to business in parliament. There are also conspiracy theories floating around to explain the defeat of the opposition but it has been repeatedly demonstrated that primarily it is the casual approach of the legislators and the parliamentary parties which leads to such embarrassing situations for our parliamentarians.

Attendance, for example, is a perennial problem in almost all legislatures in Pakistan. Although the average attendance recorded and reported for each sitting of the National Assembly is over 60pc, the Assembly is found [lacking in quorum](https://www.dawn.com/news/1670032/lack-of-quorum-hits-national-assembly-again) almost on a daily basis, which indicates that the actual attendance in the House was less than 25pc when the quorum was pointed out.

Attendance proved to be the key issue for the opposition even on the day the State Bank law was carried in the Senate. Although overall attendance was a healthy 86pc, 12 senators including eight of them belonging to the opposition were absent on the day the crucial bill was tabled in the Upper House. Most shocking was the absence of the leader of the opposition who happened to be out of Islamabad attending a funeral of a party colleague.

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Attendance, especially during voting on a key piece of legislation, occasionally poses a challenge even in developed democracies. Party leaders usually manage the floor on such occasions by being physically present and visible in the House. The institution of the whip within each parliamentary party is another important factor to ensure that party legislators are present and voting according to the party guidelines. In the absence of the leader of the opposition, the role of the whip becomes even more critical. In this whole drama of voting on the State Bank bill, no mention was made in the media of a whip trying to marshal party legislators. It seems most of the parties, especially the PPP, do not even have a functional whip.

Voting on the bill on Jan 28 was not entirely unexpected. It is true that the Senate secretariat released the order of the day (agenda) late in the night and it might have prevented some senators from travelling from outside Islamabad to reach in time for the vote but it is legitimate to question the absence of so many opposition senators especially the leader of the opposition from Islamabad when it was expected that the government could table the bill in the Senate any time after it was [passed](https://www.dawn.com/news/1669331) by the National Assembly on Jan 13. The urgency on the part of the government to table and get the bill passed was obvious in view of the impending IMF board meeting before which the government had committed to have the law in place.

Perhaps the most embarrassing episode of the entire drama that day was the sudden disappearance of an opposition senator right before the voting on the bill. Earlier, both the treasury and the opposition had secured 43 votes each and the Senate chairman had used his casting vote in favour of the treasury to allow the finance minister to table the bill. This had made it abundantly clear that every single vote was critical. Despite this, the disappearance of an opposition senator at the time of voting on the passage of the bill was an extremely irresponsible act and needs to be called out. Consequently, the final tally on the bill was 43 in favour versus 42 against.

Is it too much to expect from our political parties, especially the ones in the opposition, to focus on their performance within the legislatures?

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*Published in Dawn, February 3rd, 2022*