

Housing debate forces cancellation of Parliament's Question Time UPDATED

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There'll be no chance for Opposition MPs to put questions to ministers in Parliament's debating chamber today.

Question Time, which is officially called Questions for Oral Answer, has been cancelled because the Government wants to rush through housing legislation.

The Bill will allow the Crown to re-purpose confiscated land, without offering it back to the original owner.

It means land acquired under the Public Works Act for a motorway or school can then be used for a private property development.

Parliament entered urgency on Wednesday morning, and it will continue through the afternoon.

Leader of the House Gerry Brownlee offered to keep Question Time and continue urgency afterwards, but it was ruled out of order by Committee chairman Trevor Mallard.

Mr Brownlee says it was Labour who voted down a proposal to keep Question Time, but that's rejected by Labour's chief whip Chris Hipkins.

"We certainly didn't block Question Time. Gerry Brownlee was doing a stunt and being a dork," says Mr Hipkins.

The bill extends the legislation that allows special housing areas (SHA) to be created by another two years.

Without it, the powers lapse on September 16 and there still some Auckland SHAs that have to be set up.

The delay in finalising them has been caused by the city's new Unitary Plan, because they have to be fitted into its zoning rules.

Building and Housing Minister Nick Smith is in charge of the bill, and says if the SHAs aren't put in place thousands of homes won't be built.

SHAs allow fast-track consenting processes so that development can go ahead much more quickly.

The bill also ensures that when publicly-owned land is used for housing development, the government doesn't first have to offer it back to its original owners at market prices.

Dr Smith says that was always the intent of the Housing Act but its provisions aren't explicit, and all he's doing is clarifying the law.

Opposition parties argued it was a fundamental change to property rights and shouldn't be dealt with under urgency.

They're also using the debate to launch attacks on the government's housing policy.

Another provision in the bill will make developers holding land in SHAs put in consent applications for houses within 12 months of buying it.

That's to curb "land banking" when developers hold on to it and wait for prices to rise before they do anything with it.

The last time a Question Time was cancelled was around eight years ago.

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