



Speech by

Dr DAVID WATSON

MEMBER FOR MOGGILL

Hansard 27 August 1998

FORDE INQUIRY; MR H. HEILPERN

Dr WATSON (Moggill—LP) (Leader of the Liberal Party) (6.10 p.m.): I second the motion moved by the honourable member for Indooroopilly. Let us be very clear about two points. Firstly, this is an important inquiry and one that the Opposition supports. We have the utmost faith in the integrity of the inquiry. Secondly, we do not support Mr Heilpern, because we believe he is clearly not a suitable person for this important inquiry.

The victims of alleged abuse in children's homes need to be heard. Justice needs to be done. We have no intention of protecting the guilty. We want the truth as much as members opposite do. We want the wrongs of the past to be righted. However, we believe that Mr Heilpern is not the right man to do that. This morning, when I asked the Premier whether the Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care had informed him of any potential problems with the appointment of Mr Heilpern, he made absolutely no attempt to answer my question. Earlier today, I was looking at the Hansard——

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The member cannot quote from today's Hansard.

Dr WATSON: Mr Speaker, I said I was looking at the Hansard. I did not quote it. When I looked at it, it reminded me of two things. Firstly, I asked a question and the Premier failed to answer it. During the ensuing commotion, I interjected and asked a second time whether he knew anything about the allegations. He said that, yes, he was going to get to it. However, at no stage did he answer the question. Yesterday, when I asked the Minister for Fair Trading, the Minister responsible for the statutory authority which had previously employed Mr Heilpern in Queensland, whether she had any knowledge of his background, the Minister said——

"I have little relevance as a Minister in the appointment of the commissioner to this particular inquiry."

Again, yesterday when the member for Merrimac asked the Attorney-General and Minister for Justice whether he knew anything about Mr Heilpern, he said——

"I am unaware of the allegations against that gentleman."

I believe him, because I believe that the Attorney-General is an honest man and would not in any way mislead this Parliament.

Ms Spence: What about me?

Dr WATSON: I believe the member is honest, too.

Ms Bligh: What about me?

Dr WATSON: I did not ask the member those questions.

What sort of shoddy selection process did the Minister apply to this appointment? Surely the Minister would have known that this inquiry was about a sensitive issue and that anyone appointed to it would come under intense scrutiny. Earlier today during question time the Minister said that we had to expect this inquiry to come under scrutiny because of the issues with which it would be dealing. During question time yesterday we heard the ridiculous assertion by the Minister that a rigorous approach to locating suitably qualified people had been undertaken. "Ridiculous" would have been a more suitable word than "rigorous". If we had applied any sorts of standards to the selection process, alarm bells would have been ringing immediately.

What input did the Attorney-General have into this Cabinet decision? Obviously none! What input did the office of the Minister for Fair Trading have into the Cabinet decision? Obviously none! Was the Premier asleep at the wheel when this appointment was made? Did he not recall that previously he had to rise to his feet and defend Mr Heilpern in this House against the serious allegations about him when he was running the QBSA? That should have set alarm bells ringing. The Premier should have recalled that. Perhaps the Premier likes rising to his feet to defend Mr Heilpern. Perhaps that is why the Government is appointing him. We cannot see any other reason for it.

A serious question has been raised in this whole affair. What sort of process does the Government have in place to make appointments such as this? Appointments to inquiries are very important. We welcome the appointment of Commissioner Forde and Assistant Commissioner Thomason. They are people of the highest repute. They can survive rigorous scrutiny. People appointed to important positions such as this have to be seen to be squeaky clean. A man who was director-general of a department—a department accused of the very things that he would be investigating in this inquiry—will not be seen to be squeaky clean. A man who presided over a department racked by controversy will not be seen to be squeaky clean. A man who has had serious allegations made against him in Parliament over the way in which he handled his last job in Queensland will not be seen to be squeaky clean.

The Minister has said that no serious allegations have been raised. If Labor does not think that what we have raised is serious, this State is in serious trouble. The Minister should move immediately to replace Mr Heilpern on this inquiry.

Time expired.
