



Speech by

Dr DAVID WATSON

MEMBER FOR MOGGILL

Hansard 16 September 1998

MR SPEAKER'S RULING

Motion of Dissent

Dr WATSON (Moggill—LP) (Leader of the Liberal Party) (8.59 p.m.): I rise to support the motion moved by the Leader of the Opposition and supported by the Deputy Leader of the Opposition. I rarely rise in a debate such as this. The last time was when the member for Ashgrove was in the chair in 1991. Rising and supporting a motion of dissent from the Speaker's ruling is not something that I do lightly.

Mr Palaszcuk interjected.

Dr WATSON: I did not move that against the member in 1993 at all. This is a serious motion. It involves not simply what happened on that day but also the standards in this place. In some respects I am disappointed because, as I look around the Chamber, I do not see the member for Nicklin here, the member who said that he wanted to see the standards raised in this place. He wanted so much for those standards to be raised that he stipulated it in a letter of agreement between himself and the Premier in relation to his support of the Government. One would have thought that the first time such a motion was moved the member for Nicklin, whose primary concern is the raising of parliamentary standards, ought to have been here to listen to the debate; he might have learnt something.

I have listened to what the Premier and the Deputy Premier have said. They started to debate the original issue raised in the question asked by the Premier. They did not debate whether or not the motion of dissent was appropriate but whether or not the answer to the question asked on 27 August was appropriate. That is not the issue. What was central to the question, what were the motives of the Opposition at that time and what the Premier was trying to do are not relevant to this debate on the motion of dissent.

There are three issues that ought to be considered in this motion. The first relates to the interpretation of the Standing Orders. I will return to that in a moment. The second issue is the standards of behaviour that are acceptable in this place. The third issue that ought to be addressed is respect for each and every member of this place in our interactions on a day-to-day basis. Let me address the first question. Was it an appropriate interpretation of the Standing Orders by the Speaker? In a narrow sense, it was totally incorrect. We can turn to Hansard of 27 August. I will quote it precisely. The Premier said—

"I repeat what I said yesterday: your behaviour"—

and the Hansard record shows a break through the use of a dash. The Leader of the Opposition was right, because at the time, the Premier, in his usual way, waved his two fingers and said "your behaviour". Then he realised that "your behaviour" was not what he had wanted to say. As the Deputy Leader of the Opposition said, he had got his foot on the sticky paper. He then gestured broadly and said—

"... the Opposition's behaviour here is supporting the child molesters and the abusers."

The Leader of the Opposition took a point of order. He requested the Speaker to rule that the Premier should withdraw the comments. The Speaker said—

"Order! He said 'the Opposition's' behaviour. There is no point of order."

In fact, that is incorrect, because the first statement was "your behaviour". In a strictly technical sense, the Speaker was incorrect. I am not arguing that he was directly incorrect. I would not suggest that, because a lot of things were going on at that time; however, in a strict sense, what the Speaker said was technically incorrect. In a sense, that is the narrow, technical interpretation of what this motion of dissent is about.

In a broader sense, the question is: was the behaviour of the Premier on that particular day acceptable in today's climate? I recall that, when I was in the Federal Parliament, the then Treasurer and later Prime Minister had as his favourite word "scumbag". He repeated it time and time again. Simply because he may not have used it in terms of a particular individual at a particular time—although he tended to do that from time to time—the whole issue of the word "scumbag" and the litany of other things that he said was not about his behaviour towards a particular individual; it was about his behaviour in the Parliament towards all members of the Opposition. I am sure that in the privacy of the caucus room he referred to some of his own colleagues in the same fashion. Is that acceptable behaviour? Is it acceptable to come into this place and accuse people, either individually or as a group, of protecting child molesters and child abusers? Is that the kind of behaviour that we expect? Is that the kind of rhetoric that we say is an acceptable standard in this place? I would suggest to honourable members that it is not.

Mr Elder: How many times did you call us a liar when you were in Government?

Dr WATSON: I do not believe that I ever called the member a liar. I have not called any member a liar. Honourable members can check the Hansard record to find out about my behaviour. They can check Hansard to see whether I have ever said anything like that.

The question has to be asked: is that acceptable behaviour? Is it acceptable to call people child molesters and child abusers and then try to hide it by saying, "No, it was the Opposition", and using broad gestures across the Chamber? That is the question that has to be answered. That is clearly unacceptable behaviour. That ought to be pressed home in this case.

Thirdly, this debate is really about respect. During the last election there was a lot of talk that politicians had lost the respect of the people. We all need to try to work very hard to win back that respect. How can we expect people to respect us if we do not first respect one another? I find it ironic that, in a letter to Mr Wellington, the member for Nicklin, outlining the terms of the agreement for the member for Nicklin to support the Beattie Government, the Premier said—

"Independent members deserve to be treated with courtesy and respect."

Surely all members of this House deserve to be treated with courtesy and respect. All members of this House, from the Premier down, ought to be concerned with raising the standards in this place. It is a convention in this place, as has been pointed out by others in other debates, to call members "honourable". It is important for all of us to earn that title. As honourable members, we earn that title of "honourable" by behaving in an honourable fashion. We do that firstly by respecting one another. We use rhetoric that is appropriate to the circumstances. When we address one another, we should address one another in a civil and appropriate fashion. The first step towards earning and restoring respect in this place is to respect one another. I will end with a quote from Shakespeare. I saw the Attorney-General and Minister for Justice——

Mr Hamill: As long as it's not Lady Macbeth.

Dr WATSON: No, it is from King Lear. I studied King Lear in Senior. King Lear said—

"Mend your speech a little,

Lest it may mar your fortunes."

Each and every one of us can learn something from that. That is what this debate is about. Even if the motion is lost tonight, I hope that it will be the beginning of a higher standard of behaviour on the part of all of us, including the Premier and everyone else on the other side of the Parliament.
