



Speech by

Mr G. HEALY

MEMBER FOR TOOWOOMBA NORTH

Hansard 10 November 1998

PRIVATISATION OF TAB

Mr HEALY (Toowoomba North—NPA) (6 p.m.): I move—

"That, given the Resolution passed by this Parliament on 22 October which said, in part, '... given the importance of the racing industry of Queensland and particularly the implications of any changes to the TAB to the racing industry, that the issue of privatisation requires a full and informed debate as part of a formal legislative process', this House calls on the Government to immediately re-open negotiations with the Queensland racing industry on TAB privatisation and that a report be presented to the House by Wednesday, 18 November."

Today we have a Government that has lost the confidence of the racing industry in Queensland. We also have a Government and a Minister who have ignored a motion of this Parliament—a motion supported by both the Independent members, the member for Gladstone and the member for Nicklin.

Privatisation of the Queensland TAB has been on the agenda for well over 12 months. The former coalition Government and then Minister, Russell Cooper, spearheaded the drive after the racing industry itself chose privatisation as the way forward. The coalition did not buckle. Instead, we sat down to long and exhaustive discussions about how privatisation could be achieved. We put in place strategies and time frames to ensure that the industry would benefit and we ensured that no Queenslanders would lose out. However, the change of Government undid those efforts.

Last week, in what could only be described as the greatest about-face in political history, the Government scrapped the proposed privatisation of the TAB. This decision sent shock waves across the entire private sector as the industry realised that this Government lacked the independence from the union movement to address real financial and job-creation issues. The Minister and the Premier buckled and all the outstanding work of the former Borbidge Government collapsed around them.

Why did the privatisation collapse? Was it because the proposal was suddenly non-viable? No, not at all. The issue collapsed because the Minister and the Premier ran scared. Only two weeks ago the Premier put his leadership on the line. He came out publicly and beat his chest, proclaiming that privatisation was the way to go. The Premier said that he would take the issue to the Labor Party's conference and, alongside his Minister, he would fight to get the conference to endorse privatisation. What a hero! I was impressed, the industry applauded and the media applauded. However, as each day went by, the rat smelt worse. The Premier began to realise that he did not actually have the support that he needed. He was a leader without the numbers in his own party. When the sudden resignation of the member for Mulgrave was broadcast across Queensland, the Premier suddenly felt very queasy. He realised that his leadership would be exposed right in the middle of a by-election campaign. He realised that he could not sway the conference. He also realised that he did not have the leadership that was required of a Premier of Queensland who would put the interests of the State and the racing industry ahead of petty party politics.

There is one very fundamental difference between the State coalition and the minority Beattie Government. The State coalition's policy towards the privatisation of the TAB was to say to the industry, "You tell us what you want and we will sit down and facilitate that goal." In contrast, the ALP's policy has been to say to the industry, "It does not matter what you want. We will allow an ALP conference, in

the main comprised of people who know nothing whatsoever about the racing industry, to decide your future." The ALP has been prepared to put the racing industry last.

Only two weeks ago, when Parliament was in session, I moved a motion calling for Parliament to endorse the privatisation of the TAB. That seemed like a logical motion, because the Premier and his Minister had already said that they would support it. The State coalition moved the motion, confident that it would send a strong signal to the community that we had at last struck an issue where bipartisan political support would be offered to secure the future of Queensland's racing industry. One can imagine how shocked we in the Opposition were when the minority Government started to back-pedal at the speed of light. Members opposite were ducking and weaving everywhere. Suddenly, amendments were being moved and every conceivable reason to procrastinate was being offered.

Either way—and this is important—on 22 October this House passed a motion which said that the privatisation of the TAB was an issue that required a full and informed debate as part of a formal legislative process. Not only did the Government support the motion; the Minister for Racing himself seconded the amendment. Tonight's motion basically calls on this scaredy-cat Government to honour that resolution. Tonight's motion says that we are still expecting this issue to be debated as part of the legislative process. Tonight's motion honours exactly what members opposite supported in this House on 22 October. Even more importantly, it honours the motion supported by the members for Gladstone and Nicklin.

Last week the Government snubbed this House. Despite a resolution which basically said that the Parliament would decide on the privatisation of the TAB as part of the proper legislative process—that is to say, by way of legislation—the Government made a unilateral decision to dump the whole process and the concept. It did that despite a specific resolution of this House that the Parliament would decide.

The Government seems to have made a bad habit out of blaming other people for its failures, but nobody is falling for this little charade. The editorial in this morning's Courier-Mail hit the nail on the head. The Courier-Mail can see that the Minister is walking away from his responsibilities. It can see that the upcoming by-election in Mulgrave is going to expose the very simple fact that the Premier of this State does not carry the weight within his own party to bring forward legislation that Queensland needs on this issue. This morning's editorial quite rightly stated—

"Racing Minister Bob Gibbs should not sit by and allow the privatisation of the Queensland TAB to stall over a dispute about the benefits for industry codes.

...

Mr Gibbs should not adopt a Pontius Pilot stance; he is the Minister and it is his job to solve problems. Party politics should not be put before industry and state interests."

The Courier-Mail could not have summed it up better.

The decision to axe privatisation has nothing whatsoever to do with the mythical claims of this Government that the racing industry was asking for too much. Earlier this morning the Premier struggled to justify the Government's position, claiming that the Macquarie Bank was asking for a \$2m success fee, which the Premier claimed should not be foisted onto the taxpayer. The Premier tried to claim that this fee made the whole privatisation non-viable. However, later in this debate we will prove how inaccurate were the statements that the Premier made this morning. What the Premier forgot to say about that deal, including the fee, was that it was very similar to that which was signed off in Victoria and New South Wales when the Macquarie Bank successfully facilitated the privatisation of the respective TABs in those States. Apparently, the deal was fine for the New South Wales and Victorian Governments, which are now reaping enormous rewards from privatised TABs, but it was not okay for the Queensland Government.

Tonight's motion is about ensuring that the debate on the privatisation of the TAB is dealt with properly. On the one hand, the Minister and the Premier have said that privatisation is the only way to go if we are to guarantee the future of the racing industry's three codes in Queensland, yet after the threat of one by-election the Minister and the Government now believe that the whole issue can simply be dumped. That sort of callous and politically motivated attitude has not won any respect from the industry. Today the Government's reputation is mud around the racetracks of Queensland and the media headlines have summed up the public's contempt for it.

The Minister said that the industry wants privatisation and he said that it would create jobs. That is why it is essential that the Minister be forced back to the negotiating table. We cannot sacrifice jobs and an entire industry as part of some archaic sacrificial ceremony to the union movement. This is an important issue that deserves a proper debate. Last month when I moved the motion to support privatisation, both Independent members voted to support an amendment which said that the issue required a full debate as part of the legislative process. The Minister for Racing seconded that amendment. However, last week he said, "There is no deal and I will not bring anything forward to this

House for debate. I have made the decision." When choosing whether to support this motion tonight, I ask the members for Nicklin and Gladstone to think very carefully about this issue. Tonight's motion sends the Minister back to the negotiating table. It provides him with an opportunity to report back to Parliament before the Christmas recess.

Time expired.
