



Speech by

**BRUCE DAVIDSON**

**MEMBER FOR NOOSA**

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Hansard 2 March 1999

**MINISTER FOR FAIR TRADING, OFFICE FIT-OUT**

**Mr DAVIDSON** (Noosa—LP) (12.11 p.m.): The Premier has not restored integrity to and public faith in the process of Government; he has removed them. It is typical of the Premier and his Government that they say one thing and do the opposite. "The debate tonight gives all members an opportunity to stand up for honesty and integrity without any excuses." So said Premier Beattie on 28 November 1996 when speaking to his own motion of censure against the then Minister for Police. He went on to say—

"We will set our standards high. We will have the highest possible standards. Not only will we have a written set of guidelines; all of my Ministers will understand that they have to abide by the same unwritten code of decency, ethics and morality to which the vast majority of decent, law-abiding Queenslanders subscribe. In other words, they will all be committed to doing the right thing."

How often in this House do words and promises come back to haunt the pompous declarations of Labor Governments, claiming for themselves the high moral ground on standards, ethics and decency in the name of all Queenslanders? How have they now come back to haunt the Premier in the form and performance of his Minister for Fair Trading? We all remember the promises made to Mr Wellington when he was being wooed by Premier Beattie. Under the heading of "Ministerial Responsibility", these were the promises—

"I concur with the probity you have placed on imposing stringent guidelines on ministerial financial arrangements, including ministerial travel, entertainment and office expenses.

I will insist on nothing less than complete probity in the way Ministers meet their obligations to the Government, the Parliament and the electorate and will put in place systems to achieve full and open disclosure of ministerial expenses to the Parliament on a regular basis."

Mr Beattie then went on to outline what the guidelines for these systems would be, including six-monthly reports to the Parliament on ministerial expenses, provided in a format that is readily understandable by the community. Has Mr Wellington, or anyone else for that matter, yet seen one of these six-monthly ministerial expense reports? The answer, of course, is that he has not, and neither has anyone else. If we had, the Minister for Fair Trading and her colleague the Minister for Public Works would not now be involved in a giant cover-up.

The Honourable Minister for Fair Trading has put herself and the Premier, as so aptly expressed by the Melba column in the Australian newspaper of 9 February, "in the poo right now". How has she found herself in this mire? It is through the simple convenience, if members will pardon the pun, of formulating an expenditure in excess of \$600,000 on the upgrading of her office, which includes the purchase of a \$93 toilet brush, and then having, at the most generous of comment, the unmitigated gall to tell the people of Queensland that she really had nothing to do with this state of affairs and that it really was the fault of departmental officers.

This simple excuse was then further compounded by the Premier when he accused some public servants of having a "sense of unreality" in this matter, as if these same public servants had instigated this refurbishment proposal. Was this what the Premier meant back in November 1996 when he said "we will set the highest possible standards"? A \$600,000 refit of the Minister's office certainly comes in highest possible standards bracket when it comes to dipping into the public purse.

The highest possible standards as expressed by the Premier and then followed by his Minister for Fair Trading come down to nothing more than passing the buck when the Minister tried to transfer the blame for this debacle onto senior bureaucrats by saying that she had only had brief discussions with departmental officers about the planned renovations. Does the Minister really expect this House and the people of Queensland, who, as the Premier had so eloquently said, expect the right thing to be done, to believe that she had seven different meetings with departmental officers and never once discussed the costs of what she proposed? Does she really expect this House to believe that during those seven different meetings the only reason she was in attendance was to hear from senior bureaucrats about the colour of the walls or the colour of the tiles proposed for this taj mahal and that she had no knowledge of the fundamental work being proposed, including specifically the final cost of such a project?

She had no knowledge of such a fine detail and no idea of the final cost of this expensive project? This from a Minister for Fair Trading who, as reported in the Courier Mail of 6 February, advised consumers that haggling over prices was part of a bargain hunter's armory! She said that, while many large department stores would match a cheaper price, consumers generally had a better chance of haggling in small shops. Despite her gratuitous advice to the average punter, there was no sign of any haggling in this matter—not even a care about the price, to quote her own statements to the press. What a convenient lapse of memory on seven different occasions! What an insult to the intelligence of every Queenslander!

Again, as if to reinforce her "not me" performance, in a letter to the editor of the Courier-Mail on 11 February she attempted to conceal her activities in this affair by involving the Director-General of the Department of Public Works, Mal Grierson. She informed the public at large in a memo provided to the media on Monday, 8 February by Mr Grierson that he attests to attending some—note the word "some"—meetings where discussion focused on a possible location for the newly formed department and the number of departmental staff that would be attached to the new director-general's office. One would naturally assume that this was the type of discussion a Director-General of Public Works would have, but if the Director-General of the Department of Public Works attended only some meetings—not the seven meetings that apparently took place—how can he attest to whatever was discussed at the meetings he did not attend? In a further comment in this letter, the Minister states—

"Further, two officers in charge of the design and refit said our meetings dealt with layout and space allocations...not bathroom fittings and their costs."

Really! There was never a query about the cost of this extravagance? As Minister responsible for the department having the work done, does she really mean that costs did not interest her, that she never once asked what all the mooted changes were going to cost the taxpayer? If this is what she expects us to believe, is it not an amazing exposition of a complete lack of management skills and acumen? But then, the Minister's background of management skills related to profit and loss and inevitable need to know about costs is not one that would engender confidence in her ability to manage any operation in a businesslike manner. As a final and parting comment in the letter she claims—

"The Opposition's obsessive claims that I priced and selected bathroom fittings speak volumes about its failure to challenge the substance of my policy work."

I suggest to the Minister that in her next letter to the editor she tells us all what that policy work actually entailed so that we might mount a challenge. Up to this moment, policy work from this Minister is virtually non-existent. But what is in existence is her repeated attempts to deflect responsibility for her actions in this matter. If this is how she proposes to run a department which requires all those whose activities come within its scope to practise the highest possible business ethics, then she is unfit to manage and control such a portfolio. And it would appear that not only her memory suffered severe amnesia in relation to this matter, but so did those non-existent management skills, so required at the highest standards to run a portfolio such as Fair Trading, when it comes to following instructions.

In a memorandum sent to Ministers by the Premier on 10 July 1998 titled "Ministerial offices", her boss—the Honourable the Premier—stated—

"If you have any plans in relation to location of your Ministerial office or on any expenditure related to out-fitting your office, I want to be advised in writing and will personally approve."

Let me repeat those words—

"... any expenditure related to out-fitting your office, I want to be advised in writing and will personally approve."

No doubt that was the written set of guidelines promised by Mr Beattie in November 1996.

Did Minister Spence alert the Premier in writing about the \$600,000 refit that she really cannot remember much about—as requested by the Premier's memo? Did the Premier personally approve this expenditure? It would appear that none of this occurred; that she forgot to tell the Premier about this

insignificant expenditure, because the outcome of these arrangements—to spend \$600,000—had caused the Premier to, as he stated in the Courier-Mail on 9 February, "adopt a razor gang approach to government." He said—

"I am going to make certain every Minister and every department keep their feet on the ground."

Surely that was an unnecessary statement, if his promises to Mr Wellington of accountability every six months had been in place.

Mr Beattie addressed a press conference, which also highlighted the probability of \$500,000 being spent in the Deputy Premier's office. "Let me tell you, the good times are over", Mr Beattie thundered. All this was after the memorandum of 10 July, which expressed the view of the Premier that—

"I realise that this is an additional burden, but believe in the circumstances it is an essential process."

An essential process? Obviously the Minister for Fair Trading does not think that memoranda to Ministers from "the Boss" and their contents apply to her. For if she did, there would have been a personal approval from the Premier—the essential process.

Time expired.

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