



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR CAIRNS

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USE OF PLAIN ENGLISH IN GOVERNMENT CORRESPONDENCE

Ms BOYLE (Cairns—ALP) (5.13 p.m.): I offer my compliments to the member for Nicklin. He has touched on something that I suspect is close to the hearts of many thousands of Queenslanders. I offer him my unconditional support in pursuing this motion in the House tonight and also in achieving some real results in the State Government.

My commitment to the cause came during the election period, when I was asked for help by a lady named Betty, who was in her seventies. She had been recently bereaved and was on her own and was attempting to fill in what I recall to be a 14-page document in order to get some benefit from the Commonwealth Government to which she was entitled. She could not manage to fill out the 14 pages. She did not understand the questions. When I saw her, she was blushing and her hand was shaking with the embarrassment of not being able to complete the form. The embarrassment should not have been hers. The embarrassment should be upon all our heads—Commonwealth, State and local government personnel—for the indignities that we perpetrate with language upon the public whom we serve.

This is not a party political issue. I dare suggest to members on the opposite side of the House that we would all be heroes if we were to succeed in this enterprise of making Government correspondence, consultants' reports and other publications easily understood. Why are they not so? That is so for complex reasons. We speak in jargon, and members in this House are an example of that. From time to time in Government we deal with matters that are complex and hard to express in plain English. There has been such a move towards probity and accountability that we fill up documentation more and more to close the loopholes and, in doing so, lose sight of the point. And then there is habit, and I would even dare suggest for some public servants that they keep themselves in work by creating thick, long and sometimes deliberately obfuscatory documents.

One wag to whom I spoke this afternoon who was close to Treasury said, "But if this motion succeeds tonight, all correspondence and reports from Treasury will immediately cease." I suspect that he may well be correct. Perhaps we need to investigate the establishment of an anti-documentation ombudsman. Perhaps we need to place by the desks of all public servants in this fine State a catechism—a chant—that they could repeat before and during work along the lines of: "What exactly do you mean? Does this bit really have to be included? Shorter and simpler is better than longer." There are those who have been lured into believing that writing longer, thicker documents containing fancier verbiage will in some way impress on readers that it is a quality document. In fact, the opposite is true. It is those who can pass on the message politely and clearly to the point in plain English who should feel secure in their jobs with this Government. I look forward to the day when we can read in the performance indicators for all departments of this Government that there has been a reduction in sentences, syllables and the size of correspondence, reports and all other publications.
