



Speech by

Mr G. HEALY

MEMBER FOR TOOWOOMBA NORTH

Hansard 3 March 1999

MINISTER FOR RACING

Mr HEALY (Toowoomba North—NPA) (6.11 p.m.): I move—

"That this House condemns the Minister for Racing over his reluctance to consult with key racing industry groups on the future of the industry, which has resulted in the industry itself having lost confidence in the Minister."

It is with a great deal of sadness that I have to move this motion tonight. Never before in the history of Queensland racing has the racing industry itself been so deflated, so demoralised, so lost and so left out of decisions which affect its future. Never before have we had a racing industry that had its entire future sacrificed as some form of primitive offering to appease the union movement. And never before have we seen the racing industry's future so prostituted— prostituted to try to disguise the very real fact that neither the Premier nor his Racing Minister have the leadership to command majority support at an ALP conference.

This can't do Beattie Labor Government's handling of the racing industry has been shoddy, to say the least. The industry has not been consulted. And on the very rare occasion that it has been able to get the ear of the Minister, it has been dumped. In the eight months that the Beattie Government has been in power, there has only been one ray of hope for the racing industry in Queensland, and that ray of hope was both the Premier's professed commitment and the Racing Minister's professed commitment to the privatisation of the Queensland TAB. But that ray of hope has long since dimmed. This Government's policies and the lack of consultation have now left a very dark stain right across the racing industry.

In the beginning, the Racing Minister had assured the racing industry of his personal support for privatisation and in the beginning the Premier had shown courage and leadership by endorsing his Minister. But in the end that leadership and that courage evaporated, and evaporated very, very quickly.

When confronted with the challenge of selling the message on the floor of an ALP conference, both the Premier and his Minister ducked for cover and buckled. They were not even prepared to fight for the racing industry on the floor of an ALP conference. Instead, they dumped the whole issue and orchestrated a very grubby and very misleading smear campaign in the media.

The Premier and his Minister claimed that they dumped the decision to privatise the TAB because the industry was being too greedy. That triggered the alarm bells about just how low relations between the State Government and the racing industry had plummeted. This in itself should have triggered the alarm bells about just how far the Government was prepared to go, how far it was prepared to smear in order to cover its own incompetence.

That alarm bell has been ringing loud and clear at racetracks right throughout Queensland. I have been travelling around this State—from the north to the western borders—talking to race club committees and to industry people who are concerned about their futures. The racing industry has not been quiet in its disgruntlement. Even as recently as two weeks ago the Queensland Principal Club, the key industry body of the thoroughbred racing industry and a significant player in the racing industry, told the Courier-Mail that it would have preferred to have been consulted by the State Government before it decided to raid \$5m from the Racing Development Fund to purchase the Deagon training centre.

In fact, the QPC's own racing calendar in January again raised very serious concerns about this Government's failure to consult. In the report from the chairman of the QPC in that racing calendar edition were at least 20 questions on the future of the industry which the Minister for Racing has failed to answer. They were not insignificant questions; they were fundamental questions such as who will own the TAB if the Beattie Labor Government falls short of privatisation, decides to go with corporatisation and stays there, and whether a corporatised TAB will be required to pay dividends to the State. Another fairly fundamental question was: who will have responsibility for determining which capital projects are pursued within racing? The answer to all of these questions is nothing more than a great big question mark.

Again the question could be asked: why do we need to go down the path of corporatisation at this particular time? Why do we need to do it at all? Why not try to convince Treasury to reduce turnover tax in the short term while the Minister continues to negotiate with the unions, as he has said publicly he would? I believe he is still confident that he can get privatisation through. Why not some relief to the industry that will enable value adding to the Queensland TAB?

The only information the racing industry believes is that some sort of submission will go to Cabinet and the racing industry will then simply be told what its future is. Such is the length to which this Government will go to make sure that the racing industry is not consulted in any way whatsoever. That is one of the great tragedies about the management style of this can't do Beattie Labor Government.

The racing industry is not some two-bit player in this State's economy. It is estimated that the racing industry contributes upwards of \$300m towards Queensland's gross domestic product. It is also estimated that it is responsible for the generation of upwards of 14,000 full-time jobs. Both the Premier and the Racing Minister could do very well to take the advice of racing industry experts and racing industry analysts. Indeed, they should read what some of the commentators are saying. An article I have here states—

"The racing industry is clamouring for change. In a state where the last two state elections have been closely fought contests, the racing vote has the power to change the government at the next state election."

The article also states—

"The industry ... is at a severe disadvantage compared to its competitors in other states ... and also compared to the competing forms of gambling such as casinos."

It goes on—

"Returns to the industry lag shamefully ... with a consequent loss of jobs, while big new investors have already put their cards on the table by setting up operations in other states ..."

In the very same article racing enthusiasts were asked to judge for themselves whether they thought the Government was prepared to act and save the industry. Was this article referring to Queensland? No. It was written in May 1997 about the future of racing in New South Wales. It is from an article in the Bloodhorse Review titled Does the Carr Labor Government have the answers for NSW racing? The New South Wales Carr Government said yes.

I should point out: the Labor State Government did act. It privatised the TAB, just as the racing industry itself had requested. Unlike the nervous nellys in the Queensland Labor Party, the New South Wales Government had the guts to do what was needed for racing—and it did so with a coalition parliamentary team that also knew what was needed for racing. The New South Wales racing industry is now reaping the rewards and it is taking jobs away from the Queensland industry. The New South Wales industry is now attracting horses, trainers and jockeys from Queensland. They are being lured by higher prize money which the privatised TAB has been able to offer.

Let me also refer to this article which records an interview that was done on radio with Premier Bob Carr and Alan Jones. It also contains an interesting quote from a short transcript of part of the John Laws program in 1997. Let me tell members what John Laws said back then to Bob Carr. He said—

"The racing industry provides a lot of jobs throughout the State, carries a lot of political clout around election time. And I mean one good kick from one old nag would knock this government in the state of New South Wales over anyway.

You get the entire racing industry against you, Bob Carr, you're gone!"

That was a prophetic quote from John Laws.

So what did Bob Carr do? Bob Carr talked to the industry. Bob Carr got TAB privatisation. Where were the Janice Mayes and the ASU? Where was the union movement then? Why did the union movement agree to New South Wales TAB privatisation in a Carr Labor Government, and yet they cannot do it in Queensland? Because this is a can't do Beattie Labor Government and a can't do Racing Minister!

The Beattie Government stands condemned. The drive towards privatisation of the TAB was not something of the former Borbidge Government's making. It was a response to a direct request from people in the racing industry. They wanted the change. They wanted to take that direction. As far as the State Opposition is concerned, our policy is very simple. It has not changed. This is a clear message to the racing industry in Queensland: the coalition supports you. That is what we said when we were in Government: the coalition supports you. That is the message to the industry from the Opposition.

Time expired.
