



Speech by

Hon. J. FOURAS

MEMBER FOR ASHGROVE

Hansard 25 May 1999

MEMBERS' AND RELATED PERSONS' REGISTERS OF INTERESTS

Hon. J. FOURAS (Ashgrove—ALP) (3.51 p.m.): I am pleased to second the motion moved by the Leader of the House. I was a member of the Members' Ethics and Parliamentary Privileges Committee which reported on 2 October 1996. There has been some criticism about the delay in bringing this matter forward. Between October 1996 and the fall of the Borbidge Government there was no attempt to implement these changes. As a member of the Members' Ethics and Parliamentary Privileges Committee I am aware that the coalition members of the committee were widely criticised in the joint party room for their support of the amended register, and particularly for supporting the recommendation that family trusts be transparent. Such transparency is vital as a demonstration of accountability and openness.

It is a tradition of the Westminster system that there be declaration of direct pecuniary interests. It is not easy to define "direct pecuniary interest" but, simply put, it means any direct financial benefit accruing to the member. The 1996 report of the Members' Ethics and Parliamentary Privileges Committee recommended amendments to the Members' interests register. These amendments underlined the principle that transparency is the best safeguard against conflict of interest. Members of Parliament should maintain a high standard of propriety in discharging their parliamentary duties, firstly as legislators and, secondly, as part of the effective scrutiny of Government.

Dr Noel Preston, in a submission to the Members' Ethics and Parliamentary Privileges Committee's review of the Register of Members' Interests, said this—

"The exercise of public life in an ethical way requires adherence to the principle of transparency, demonstrating accountability and openness."

Dr Preston went on to say in his submission that it was vital that the public should have—

"the confidence that all Members of Parliament exercise their role openly and honestly and do not hide or fail to declare relevant interests from public knowledge."

Dr Preston also said that conflicts of interest are inevitable in public life and that they emerge broadly out of the potential conflict between public duty and private interest.

The Register of Members' Interests that the Parliament will institute by agreeing to this motion is the best of any Parliament in Australia. It is the most open and transparent register of any Parliament in Australia. The media is wrong in criticising the Beattie Government for attempting to water down the recommendations of the 1996 report by the Members' Ethics and Parliamentary Privileges Committee. Of the committee's 21 recommendations, 18 have been adopted in their entirety. Of the other three recommendations, one dealt with a change to Standing Order 158. That matter has just been dealt with in general notice of motion No. 1. That matter related to members voting on matters in which they have a direct pecuniary interest. That Standing Order has now been replaced by that applying in the House of Representatives. I believe this is a much more workable alternative and I can understand why both sides of the Chamber preferred it, without debate.

A separate Register of Members' Interests will not be established. The Premier argued that Ministers have to comply with the Register of Members' Interests, so why should they have to comply with a second register? Ministers are required to declare any gift of a value in excess of \$100. In that regard, the register is much tougher on Ministers than it is on members.

The issue that people have been discussing is sponsored travel and sponsored accommodation. The Leader of the House has fully dealt with this matter. The guidelines are now tougher. We now have a definition of "sponsored travel" and the purpose and source of the travel now have to be revealed. This will lead to transparency in these matters.

I believe the Courier-Mail was correct when it said that the 1996 provision was super tough and provided super tough guidelines. The Beattie Government has now imposed these super tough guidelines on all members of this House.

There has been some debate in the media about the removal of the requirement to declare football admission tickets, attendance at corporate boxes and meals at local service clubs. We have seen massive changes with regard to accountability in the recent report tabled in the House. It is a shame that we now see criticism for the removal of the duty of members to declare football tickets, attendance at corporate boxes and meals at local service clubs. Surely members of Parliament have better things to do with their time than recording such events. These are trivial matters.

On the issue of sponsored travel, it was reported in the media that members of Parliament would be able to accept trips to the Olympic Games without having to tell their electorates. This matter has now been laid to rest. Some members of the media and some members of the public are somewhat envious of members of Parliament. They do not seem to realise that members of Parliament have a seven-day-a-week job and are called out at all times of the day or night.

Surely, if a member of Parliament is given a cup of tea or a meal at some social club the public does not need to know whether the member paid for it or not. I believe most members contribute more than they receive, by virtue of buying raffle tickets and making contributions to different organisations.

As I said earlier, we now have clearer definitions of sponsored travel and accommodation. We are now required to report the source and purpose of the travel. I think the best aspect of these recommendations concerns the disclosure of interests by members of Parliament. A member could be a shareholder or have a controlling interest in the company. In that case the member has to declare the name of the company. Where the shareholding constitutes a controlling interest in the company, the member has to declare the name of the company. Members also have to declare shareholdings in any other companies. Where shareholdings or interests are held in a private company, the fact of the investment has to be disclosed but the value of the investment need not be disclosed. We are not having a wealth register here.

Similarly, the same conditions apply in relation to business trusts or family trusts, or a nominee company. So I think that in approving these provisions, and I am confident that the Parliament will, we have very tough guidelines and absolute clarity and openness. I think that we should take a pat on the back and say, "We understand that there is always the possibility of conflict between public duty and private interests, but at least now people can take note of the possibility of that and make sure that it does not create unethical behaviour in our Parliament." I commend this motion to the House.
