



Speech by

Dr LESLEY CLARK

MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

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USE OF PLAIN ENGLISH IN GOVERNMENT CORRESPONDENCE

Dr CLARK (Barron River—ALP) (5.09 p.m.):

"Whosoever shall gild or silver or shall with any wash or materials capable of producing the color or appearance of gold or of silver or by any means whatsoever wash case over or color any coin whatsoever resembling or apparently intended to resemble or pass for any of the Queen's current gold or silver coin or shall gild or silver or shall with any wash or materials capable of producing the color or appearance of gold or of silver ..."

I have read only the first four lines of an extract from the Criminal Law (Coining) Act of 1865. For the information of honourable members, I point out that that Act did not contain one full stop. However, even back then it appears that the legislators knew something about plain English; appearing beside the legislation was the notation—

"Coloring counterfeit coin or any pieces of metal with intent to make them pass for gold or silver coin."

So that explains what the first paragraph meant. Further on, beside the lines of gobbledygook that followed, there is the following notation—

"Coloring or altering genuine coin with intent to make it pass for a higher coin."

Even though their legislation was in gobbledygook, they recognised the need to explain it. That was in 1865. Let us try another one—

"A person having dealings with a person who has acquired, or purports to have acquired, title to property from an incorporated church entity (whether directly or indirectly) is entitled to make the assumptions mentioned in subsection (3) and, in a proceeding about the dealings, any assertion by the entity or the second person that the matters the first person is entitled to assume were not correct must be disregarded."

Unfortunately, I do not have an explanation for this one. This extract was from the Roman Catholic Church (Incorporation of Church Entities) Act 1994.

I was hoping to demonstrate to the House that we have improved our standards of legislative drafting. However, we still have some way to go. Yes, there has been an improvement. For example, I regard the Child Protection Bill, which we debated today, as a very good example of plain English legislation. The member for Nicklin raised this issue in respect of correspondence in particular, not Bills. The types of people drafting our Bills are often the same types of people writing the letters about which the honourable member spoke. We have to recognise that today we are in the world of experts, whether it be in information technology, education, health, business or wherever else. The people working in those fields every day develop a vocabulary specific to their area; they just do not realise that. They do not appreciate that they are speaking in jargon and that it is not language that is accessible; that it is the type of language that excludes people, alienates them, discourages them from participating and, yes, gets them mad. And the member for Nicklin gave an example of one such constituent.

Even worse than the use of jargon is the use of acronyms that we see so much of today. I do not have the time to reel off a half a dozen or more of them, but we could all think of examples without

too much trouble. Once again, we could be forgiven for thinking that people are talking in code. It is not acceptable that our bureaucrats—our public servants—use this alienating and mystifying language. There is no excuse.

If we want to have an inclusive society and an accessible Government, we must improve and we must endeavour to speak, as this motion suggests, in plain English. I hope that message is received by those responsible. I have great pleasure in supporting the motion.
