



Speech by

**PHIL REEVES**

**MEMBER FOR MANSFIELD**

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Hansard 26 October 1999

#### **RP DATA PTY LTD**

**Mr REEVES** (Mansfield—ALP) (11.40 a.m.): RP Data Pty Ltd's actions over the past few weeks have been nothing short of disgraceful. RP Data, an information services company, has been taking photos of every single house in Brisbane to use in a database. The plan is to do this Australiawide. Their actions put into question a number of factors. One is the credibility and ethics of the company in question. Another is the need for privacy legislation Australiawide to cover this obvious attack on people's individual privacy. The final factor is: when public authorities sell information, what restrictions do they have on how this information is used?

In relation to the first issue, one would hope that companies in the late nineties realise that clients are not prepared to accept unscrupulous and unethical behaviour. Obviously, RP Data has not woken up to this fact. For if it has nothing to hide, I ask it some simple questions. However, I am under no illusions that it will truthfully answer these questions, as it has failed to do so up to this point. The first question is: if the company believes that there is nothing wrong with what it is doing, why not ask householders for permission first? Why is it now saying that it is not taking photos for profit when this is a blatant exercise to add value to its commercially leased database? Why is it telling people now that it is doing this for historical reasons, or for the council, when this is just another untruth?

Why has RP Data failed to answer the media questions? Why did it make statements on 4QR on Thursday that people could ring and get their house photos taken off the database but, when people rang, it would not confirm or deny whether this would happen? The only reasonable answer that one can give to these questions is that the company obviously has something to hide and believes in achieving profits by using other people's property and taking individuals' privacy and rights away from them.

**Mr Musgrove:** Shame!

**Mr REEVES:** It is very shameful. I have received over 400 calls about this issue. This is an amazing response from the people within my electorate. It illustrates the concern and disgust amongst the general community in relation to this company's actions. But at this stage it does not appear to get the message. Some of those calls have indicated a concern about the way in which RP Data does business generally. In fact, some examples were given of intimidation and threats made to people who showed an interest in becoming a competitor in the same line of business as RP Data. If RP Data's actions on this particular issue are an example, one might believe that there may be some element of truth in these allegations. I call on Ray Catelan, managing director of RP Data, to immediately cease this process of taking photos of every house in the country. While Ray Catelan has, I believe, a chequered business career, I think that he should demonstrate some ethical standards here.

This issue also highlights the need for privacy legislation in Australia which regulates the handling and the accessing of personal information in the private sector. The Federal Government promised legislation in its first term and now it is saying that it is set to introduce that legislation before Christmas. However, I am not holding my breath.

The office of the Privacy Commissioner of Australia released, in January this year, the National Principles for the Fair Handling of Personal Information. It was an initiative to focus the attention of businesses and other private sector organisations on information privacy issues. The Federal Privacy Commissioner encouraged Australian businesses to take up and adopt the guidelines. I question

whether businesses actually knew of its existence. I doubt it. However, even if they did, it is a toothless tiger.

Time and time again—and RP Data is a prime example—without some teeth, companies will continue to access and use a person's private information for profit without regard to the privacy of the individual. What we need is legislation which covers these principles and sets hefty fines if a company chooses to disregard it. It is also vital that any privacy legislation covers not only personal information but also a person's image and property. Without doing so, when can we really ensure that a person's privacy is protected? This may have major consequences in the media, but so be it. Why should a person's photo or a photo of their private property be placed on a database—or in the media, for that matter—without their permission? Just ask Ray Martin about when someone tried to turn the tables on him.

The final issue is that we must ensure that when public authorities, including local, State and Federal Government departments and Government owned corporations, sell or give information to other parties, they should initiate a practice for how this is handled. This practice should include alerting the public to what kind of information is publicly available, whether it is at a cost or whether it is free. They should examine, if an individual or a business obtains this information, what they should be allowed to do with this information, including a restriction on what can or cannot be added or deleted to the personal information gained from public authorities—in other words, whether the information can be used for marketing purposes or, for example, if photos of houses can be added to property information gained from the councils or the State Government.

While it looks like the only alternative to ensure that people's privacy is maintained is to pass legislation and put stronger restrictions on publicly available information, it is a shame that this is the case. If companies would follow just a few simple ethical principles—and ones that are of a community standard—then such legislation would not be needed. Maybe it is not too late for RP Data to redress this shortcoming. I call on RP Data to cease forthwith this practice and to delete all photos previously taken. I am not confident that RP Data will do this, so I would encourage all members of this House to notify their electorates and get people to send letters asking for their photos not to be on the database. By getting as many people as possible to do this, we will ensure that RP Data's database will become worthless because of the gaps in its areas of coverage.

It is also vital to get the clients of RP Data—real estate agents, solicitors and valuers who access RP Data's services—to put commercial pressure on the company to cease this practice. The people of Queensland should ensure that these real estate agents, solicitors and valuers are informed of their feelings on this matter. I should add, however, that the majority of real estate agency owners to whom I have spoken cannot understand what RP Data is up to. Only one of them actually supported its actions, and I will let him justify his own views.

The actions of RP Data need to be stopped long term by legislation for privacy, but short term it will be people power. And if the community of the Mansfield electorate is an example, I will back the people. Ray Catelan of RP Data should apologise to the people of Brisbane and immediately stop these actions. Failure to do so will ensure that the community pressure will continue and that more questions about its business practices will be asked.

Today I also call on the Minister for Natural Resources to review the contract that RP Data has with his department and, in doing so, call into question the way in which the information provided is handled. RP Data continues not to answer the questions that have been asked by me and by others, especially those within the media. One would have to think that it has something to hide. It is my understanding that it has already done two-thirds of Brisbane. It is continuing to do areas in my electorate. Just yesterday, there was a feature on Brisbane Extra about RP Data photographing the Tingalpa region. It is my understanding that its plan is to go throughout the whole of Queensland and then on to other parts of Australia.

The concerns that have been expressed by me and others within my electorate are based on safety issues. How will people know whether they are goodies or baddies who are taking photos of their houses? The major concern is what will happen when the company links the photos with the database, which contains information such as who owns a property and for how much that property was sold. We do not know who could access this information. RP Data says that it screens its clients, but it has provided no evidence of how it does that.

As I said, I call on the Minister for Natural Resources to review the contract with RP Data, and I call on all members of this House to inform their electorates of what is occurring and try to stop this company by people power. I also call on the Federal Government to introduce privacy legislation for this country that covers these particular companies and stops their unscrupulous actions.

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