



Speech by

Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE

MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

Hansard 10 November 1999

LIQUOR AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE (Surfers Paradise—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (8.30 p.m.): What is proposed in this Bill is a minor—administrative—change to arrangements that have long been in place to protect the special and nationally honoured status of Anzac Day in our society. We do not, in this Bill, face anything that should necessarily be a matter of partisan argument. It is not an issue that—as the Government wants to pretend—should attract the whip. It is a matter of conscience. It is a matter of nurturing a tradition and a rite that Australians have long held dear.

It is not something that we on this side of the House would normally expect those opposite to have any difficulty with. But this Bill is before the House because the Government refused to consider acting as it should act in this instance—acting to defend those who are taking part in an act of reverence against those who, for whatever reason and at whatever instigation, seek to disrupt this great national occasion. It should not be an embarrassment to the Government that, in this instance, it has been looking the other way and pretending not to see a problem that requires attention. That has been its practice, anyway, since it came to power. It should be used to that by now.

The measure contained in this Bill would, if passed by the House—and I hope it will be—meet the requirement of the millions of ordinary, decent, good-mannered Australians that the Parliament will react with speed and energy to protect social norms and established tradition if that becomes necessary.

I believe that this action is necessary. It has been made so by incidents that have marred dawn services. It is not something that can be dismissed—as the member for Bundamba wants it to be dismissed—as an issue that would be addressed were it to be reported more widely. I am sure that the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Racing knows very well that—as with the number of cockroaches that might be seen skittering around the kitchen in the middle of the night—one cannot rely on reported incidents to gauge the extent of a law and order problem. With cockroaches, the rule of thumb is to multiply the number of sightings by 10 to arrive at a reasonable number for actual infestation of the area in which these pests have been seen. With incidents that disturb the peace in our human community, it might be argued that a similar computation is warranted.

How many of us here in this House tonight know of, have seen, or have even been the passing victims of inappropriate behaviour and yet not reported it to the authorities? I believe that most Australians are tolerant of the excesses and errors of others, particularly in the area of alcohol abuse. And that is fine—that is sensible, because no-one wants us to become a nation of sneaks or, worse, wowsers. But I also believe that most Australians—the overwhelming majority of Australians—would have no problem with an early curfew on Anzac Day eve. I am sure that if the Minister bothered to ask ordinary Australians about this, he would be drawn to the same conclusion. If he will not be drawn to this conclusion, he will be driven to it by public pressure.

The change is necessary because of disturbances to some Anzac Day dawn services by people who were recently patrons of nightclubs in the vicinity. That is not to say that the problems are extensive. It is to say this—that any problem of that nature with a dawn service on Anzac Day strikes at the very heart of this country's great national day.

The Bill proposes that on Anzac Day eve, nightclubs and other establishments must close at midnight instead of the 3 a.m. shutdown mandated by the present Act. In the light of certain recent elitist events that have fallen over because their promoters seem incapable of understanding the principle of the democratic majority, most people—and I emphasise the words "most people"—would see no problem with that. It is one day a year—for one day of the year.

I believe it would be instructive to honourable members to recall what the member for Gladstone said in this place on this issue on 11 March this year. The member for Gladstone said that she was proposing a reduction of approximately four hours' trading on a day when people were most likely to congregate in the early hours of the morning. In response, the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Racing made a gratuitous and, I venture to suggest, offensive remark that midnight closure on the eve of this one day of the year would make Queensland a laughing stock.

I would like to move on from that gratuitous remark by the Minister to another set of gratuitous insults recently reported in the Cairns Post newspaper. On Monday, the newspaper reported—under a headline that ran "Diggers' rum caught up in booze ban call"—that the State Government had warned RSL clubs that it could crack down on diggers who have a shot of rum with breakfast if the League pursued new Anzac Day legislation.

A person identified in the press as "Mr Gibbs' spokesman" is quoted as saying—

"If they want us to crack down on nightclubs and bars, we will have to look at our policy of turning a blind eye to Diggers drinking rum at 4.30 in the morning with their cornflakes."

Speaking about the "Gold Coast incident" which he claimed had sparked the coalition's call for new legislation and which he also asserted had been blown out of all proportion, this ministerial mouthpiece, speaking on behalf of the Government, went on—

"It was an isolated incident and there was no evidence the people who may have been responsible had even been to a nightclub. They could have been to a private party."

So there we have it!

The distilled wisdom of the Minister's office is that either there is not a problem or that—and we hear this from this failed embarrassment of a Government all the time—if there is, the blame can be laid at the feet of someone else. Anyone but the Government—the Beattie doctrine, alive and well in regard to everything that this Government cannot do, does not want to do or gets wrong.

Earlier today in this place the Minister used the privileges of the House to evade responsibility for material which emanates—whether authorised or not—from his office. He could not, or would not, face the issue squarely. He knows that his office—his spokesman—has got it wrong again, but he will not do anything to put that right. We are told that it was taken out of context. I do not see how one could take those remarks out of context. I say to the Minister: you are a Minister of the Crown, not a thug. When people express their wishes and their concern on this particular issue, they need to be treated with respect. That applies to all issues, but particularly on an issue as sacred to the heartbeat of Australia as Anzac Day.

Tonight I issue a challenge to the Minister. Can he tell the House, and the people of Queensland, whether the views ascribed to him by his paid mouthpiece in fact represent his views and the views of the Government. If they do, why? If they do not, why is he allowing his office to be used to threaten the RSL and its many branches and members throughout Queensland in his name?

I issue another challenge to the Minister's party colleagues—the member for Cairns, the member for Barron River, the member for Mulgrave and his ministerial colleague the member for Cook. I notice that they have been remarkably silent. They have been the Government's representatives in their electorates instead of being their electorates' representatives in the Government. The challenge to them is this: are they prepared to come out publicly and back their colleague the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Racing, whose own office and whose own paid mouthpiece is slinging off at a sacred day in this country's tradition and culture? Do they back the Minister? By their silence, we can only assume that they do. I am sure that the people in Cairns, in Barron River, in Mulgrave and in Cook will remember that.

If those members are not supporting the Minister—and they should not—then how will they explain their party colleague's views and the policies of their Government, which they supported in the caucus and which they are about to support in the Parliament? In particular, how will they explain them to Cairns RSL Sub-branch President, Merv Hains, who is disappointed that the Government will not support the sensible amendment to the Liquor Act that we are proposing in this Bill. Especially, how will those members explain those views and policies to their constituents in the Cairns region who, on all the evidence, are more likely to support a midnight closure without the Minister's threatened reprisals against ex-servicemen and women over the traditional tot of rum served with pride and an element of reverence on Anzac Day morning. To answer it in any way other than that, we should expect those who participate in or attend the dawn service to accept the risk that these solemn ceremonies might be

disturbed by drunken revellers, by people for whatever reason insensitive to the importance of the events being commemorated.

We on this side of the House do not say that the problem of public drunkenness is prevalent, but if it is deliberate it is offensive to the spirit of the Anzacs that Australians in their thousands commemorate with pride and reverence on 25 October each year. We simply say that, in a community such as ours—this Queensland, our Queensland—we can wear one more day of midnight closure for places of entertainment. As the honourable member for Gladstone has noted in this place, it is only a small amount of time. It is for a solemn occasion that we make this sacrifice, and such a small sacrifice it is. In fact, it is no sacrifice at all when one considers the sacrifice of those who landed at Gallipoli on that first fateful Anzac Day, the blood covenant that made our country a nation and is exemplified by the sacrifice of so many Australians in war in the years since then.

Mr Johnson: Our sacred day.

Mr BORBIDGE: As my colleague the member for Gregory interjects, it is our sacred day.

When this Bill was last awarded debating time in this House on 27 October, I was heartened to hear from the honourable member for Bundamba that, in relation to Anzac Day last year, the Government had a very close look at the activities on Anzac Day and that he and his colleague the Minister for Police made sure that there was a cooperative approach by both police and the licensing authorities. I thank him for that, and I thank him for that vigilance. However, I remind him that vigilance is but one part of sensible regulatory policy in terms of social controls that Queenslanders—free people in a free country—who wish to be free of disturbance and who certainly demand that their most sacred and solemn moments are free from interference willingly accept and, in this case, plainly demand. It has been said from one end of Queensland to the other—and I say to honourable members opposite that, if they do not believe me, they should open their ears—that one of the benefits of Federation is that a State has certain sovereign and legislative rights. Among the other things that the Anzacs fought to protect was that very basic freedom.

The member for Bundamba says—and I mentioned this earlier—that he does not want Queensland to be a laughing-stock. Let me say that, on that one, I am with him. However, he should talk to the "Not me" Premier or the "It's them" Deputy Premier about that and then, for good measure, have a sharp word with himself. They are the people who are so busily creating the image of Labor-ruled Queensland as the half-smart State. He knows that there is no evidence that a sensible amendment of Queensland law causes outbreaks of mirth either here at home or over the border. What is more, I know, and I am sure that the member for Bundamba knows—or if he does not, he should know—that ordinary, decent Queenslanders ignore the mirth of anyone who claims to have found something amusing in a community acting to protect a sacred right. Let them laugh if they wish. Let them laugh. It is they who have the problem.

Mr Sullivan: No-one's laughing. You stop lying. You're a liar.

Mr Healy: Another embarrassment for this Government.

Mr BORBIDGE: Another embarrassment for this Government and the embarrassment who is the Government Whip, who cries "liar" across the Chamber and who should know better, should open his ears. He should get around his electorate. What is the shame? What is the problem in supporting this Bill?

Tonight, I am saying that this Bill deserves to be passed. The measure that it would implement would disadvantage no-one. It would protect the solemn commemoration of the first Anzac Day that is enshrined in the dawn service.

Mr Healy: Very simple.

Mr BORBIDGE: It is simple. Why the argument? For heaven's sake, why are the members opposite siding with drunkards? Why are the members opposite siding with people who disrupt Anzac Day services? What about standing up for the core values of Queensland and the spirit that built this nation? No partisan position is threatened by this Bill. No partisan advantage is offered by its passage.

I appeal to the Government to allow a free vote among the Labor members of this House. If the Government is prepared to do that—and I make that request in this House tonight formally to the Premier—I will be the first to congratulate him. I will be the first to say, "Well done. You have done the right thing." Why is it that, in relation to something that is so fundamental to the spirit of Australia, to the great traditions of Australia, that we see the party machine, the party whip, being applied? If this legislation is passed, there is no embarrassment to the Government. People would applaud the Government. By passing this legislation, there is no threat to the Government. The Government is still here tomorrow. I know that many honourable members on the Government side of the House in their hearts know and support the intent of this Bill. They would love to vote for it.

Tonight, I say to the Premier: let them vote for it. Remove the party whip. Allow a conscience vote on this particular legislation. It in no way represents a threat to the Government. In fact, if the

Premier was permitted or agreed to make sure that there was a conscience vote on this particular issue, I think that there would be a large number of members on his side of the House who would welcome that and who would be relieved. If he is prepared to do that and if he does so, then I will be the first person to congratulate him and my colleague who introduced this Bill will be the second.

How many lessons of modern day politics do we need? Last weekend we saw it repeated. We saw it in the Victorian election. We have seen it at every test at the polls: people want their Governments to listen. People want their Governments to reflect their will. People want their Governments to govern for the majority. What is this Parliament going to do—govern for the majority or govern for a few nightclub owners who are making a few bucks on Anzac Day eve? Will it govern for the diggers? Will it govern for the returned servicemen and women or for a few of those irresponsible revellers who seek to disrupt this proud and sacred national day?

This is a test for the Parliament. This is a test for the good sense that I know is in the hearts of many Government members. To the Government members who are not participating in this debate, obviously because they have reservations themselves, I say, "Take it back to your caucus. Talk to your Premier. Allow a conscience vote on this particular issue." If ever such a vote was warranted in this Parliament, it is warranted on the private member's Bill that we are debating this evening.
