



Speech by

Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE

MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

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GOVERNMENT TELEVISION ADVERTISING ON WORKCOVER PROPOSALS

Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE (Surfers Paradise—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (11.30 a.m.): While he was sitting over here throughout 1996 and 1997, and for half of 1998, the current Premier made great play of the fact that the coalition Government was spending money on public information campaigns. Honourable members will doubtless recall the thespian skill with which the member for Brisbane Central promoted himself as the protector of the public purse from the itchy fingers of Governments with a promotional story to tell. Even now the Premier would no doubt hold that his story was a successful one, albeit a nice bit of fiction. He would hold that he sold himself and the Labor Party as the repository not only of all wisdom but also of complete and wholesome propriety.

However, it has taken no time for the Premier's feet of clay to become obvious. He has authorised—or if he has not authorised, he has acquiesced in—a shonky television advertising campaign promoting changes to the WorkCover scheme that are at this stage merely proposals. They have not been before Parliament, they have not been debated and they certainly have not been passed into law. But the proposed changes are out there anyway, being touted as the product of a Government that cares about the people. They are out there at public expense, in a television campaign produced by a private contractor who, if the Premier is fair dinkum, he will confirm was exempted from going to tender. They are out there authorised—what a joke—by the Director-General of the Department of Employment, Training and Industrial Relations who has no statutory responsibility for WorkCover. As a statutory authority, it reports directly to the Minister. The director-general is, however, on the board of WorkCover. He is doing the Minister's political dirty work with a statutory authority. That is a conflict of interest, an assault on process and a shonky deal.

What is worse—and we are indebted to the Bottom Line in today's Courier-Mail for revealing the truth—is that the Premier knows that he is out of order here. He has the facts to tell him so, from the Federation of Australian Television Stations. The fact is that the advertisements do not meet the Premier's much heralded morality on these issues. The fact is that they are running as political advertisements because the Premier, who again proves to have promised much and delivered nothing, has not actually implemented his new standards. That leaves his political morality very much in question.

The Premier has been caught out. The self-proclaimed Mr Squeaky Clean of Queensland politics has been publicly revealed as having got down and got dirty. He has proved that all his high flown, high principled morality is just hot air. What a joke! What a blot on the landscape!

As Opposition Leader, the Premier who turned histrionics into an art form whenever he wanted to run his shonky line about corruption and ill-fitness for Government has done it himself. Today, the Premier refused to assure this House that no member of his Government had been engaged in electoral fraud. This is the Premier who gave the people a solemn undertaking of his and his party's unshakeable commitment to public probity. This is the Premier who, when he faces the facts, is living a lie.

The electors have a right to know why the public purse is paying for WorkCover political advertisements when the Premier gave a solemn undertaking that he would not make the public pay for political advertising. They have a right to know why the Premier, who said he would not have a bar of political advertising, believes the WorkCover advertisements should be running at all at this time.

The Premier knows that those advertisements offer no detailed or practical information, that their only purpose is to fool people into thinking that the Government is out there looking after them for political purposes. He knows that the WorkCover changes are at present only in the form of a proposal in one of the battalion of reports that this can't do Government has produced in its sad and sorry nine months in power—nine months and not a sign that they are about to give birth to any product of their own conception. The Premier knows that at this stage the advertisements are promoting only what is, at best, on the kindest possible assessment, an administrative proposal. In short, he knows—and he should admit it now—that he has been proved to possess feet of clay on his promises of probity.

This is the Premier who on 19 November 1997, as Leader of the Opposition, moved a motion in this place that sought to condemn me and the honourable member for Caloundra for, as he put it, wasting and mismanaging the public's money on political propaganda. I will not waste the House's time going over the polemics of the honourable member for Brisbane Central on that occasion, other than to say that the money the coalition Government was spending—and it was not \$6m; that was another of this acting Premier's thespian excursions—was at least being spent on telling people what had actually been done. The WorkCover advertisements now being screened purport to explain what the Government might do if the Parliament passes the legislation it has yet to see. The advertisements have been produced in the highest secrecy outside of the normal tendering arrangements for Government work. How much has all this cost the Queensland taxpayer? The Premier might at least come clean on that.

I remind honourable members of the discussion paper released by the polemically challenged Beattie Opposition before it became the can't do Beattie Government. This worthy little document laboured under the title A Return to Honest Government in Queensland. It contained what its promoters—the conniving wordsmiths opposite—said was a series of clear and detailed commitments on honesty and accountability. It promised that Labor would introduce a five-point code to guarantee that any Government advertising is carried out not for the benefit of the Government but for the benefit of the public. There is not actually a lot wrong with those rules, so far as they go, except on one score. They are capable of such wide interpretation that one could drive at least two of the can't do Premier's proposed half-measure Briztram trams through them. They are not designed to clear the way. They are designed to enable a Government that wants to say one thing and do something else altogether under cover of darkness and with plenty of room to manoeuvre. They are another Labor con trick.

This is the Premier who, as Opposition Leader, introduced a private member's Bill on 5 March 1998, the Government Publicity Control Bill, and in his second-reading speech repeated his mantra from the Fitzgerald report that there is no legitimate justification for taxpayers' money to be spent on politically motivated propaganda. The Bill proposed the creation of an all-party parliamentary committee to scrutinise Government publicity. It proposed to empower the committee to monitor and review spending by public authorities on Government publicity. It was the sort of warm, touchy-feely stuff for which the Labor Party is renowned and it was the sort of material we knew would be a long bet to see the light of day once Labor was back in a position to enjoy the plunder of the public purse that so characterises that party in office.

This Premier's hypocrisy stands revealed. The Premier, who has made an art form of his claims to political perfection, must explain to Queensland:

why he has arrogantly bypassed the people's House—the Legislature—and is wasting taxpayers' money on television advertising of proposed WorkCover changes that have yet to be seen by Parliament;

why the normal competitive tendering processes for Government work were not applied to the contracts for the WorkCover advertisements, and who were the favoured successful contractors;

why the WorkCover television advertisements are authorised by an officer of the Government who has no statutory authority where WorkCover is concerned;

on what basis the WorkCover advertisements were funded, from the budgets of which departments and why, if this is a legitimate public information campaign and not a political softening up, the work was performed in conditions of high secrecy; and finally

what level of support the Government has received from employer groups for either the proposed changes to the WorkCover Act or for the television commercials now promoting these proposed changes?

This is the Premier who, when he took over the Health portfolio during the moribund seven months of the third Goss Government, engaged in a shameless bout of self-promotion at public expense by mounting his infamous 100 days of listening. This is the Premier who carries on like a cracked record about everyone's accountability except his own. This is the Premier who promises the world and delivers a sucked lemon, and this is the can't do Premier who, in the context of the shonky WorkCover advertisements, is again playing Queenslanders for suckers.