



Speech by

Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE

MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

Hansard 19 August 1999

**COMMISSIONS OF INQUIRY (QUEENSLAND CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW COMMISSION)
REGULATION**

Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE (Surfers Paradise—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (11.45 a.m.): In seconding the disallowance motion moved by the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, I would just like to say at the outset that I believe it is unfortunate that much of the potentially good work that can be done by this commission of inquiry has effectively been tainted by the manner in which it has been established by this Government.

I think that we have to accept that to a great many Australians and a great many Queenslanders one of the most sensitive issues that we have to deal with is changes to how our country and our State is governed because people feel strongly and passionately about that. I think that, most of all, they want to know that their points of view will be heard; they want to know that they can participate in a debate that has not been loaded and that, at the end of the day, there will be an outcome that a majority of people will be satisfied with.

I think it is most unfortunate that, when the Government decided to embark on this particular course of action, it did not consult with the previous Government, particularly taking into account my reference when I was Premier to the Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee of the Parliament in respect of the consolidation of the Queensland Constitution. An enormous amount of work was done. I think it is fair to say that, during the period of the previous coalition Government, that work was tackled in a fair and bipartisan manner. I pay tribute to the members of the Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee who did the hard yards in terms of the consolidation of the Queensland Constitution, which was something that both sides of the House supported and wanted to see come about.

However, there was a change of Government and the reality is that—and I say this not in a disrespectful manner to the Attorney-General—the Labor Party does want to see changes to the way Australia is governed and, generally speaking, one will not find too many constitutional monarchists or advocates for the status quo in the Labor Party. But we also, I would hope, would see a Labor Party that would respect the fact that a great many Queenslanders share a contrary view.

I believe that the Attorney-General has let the team down, has let the Parliament down, by his failure to consult in respect of the proposed activities of the commission and his failure to consult with the Opposition in respect of the composition of the commission. I have to say that there are very worthy people on there. I also have to say that, if I was consulted, I would have privately expressed objections to a couple of people being on that commission. So instead of proceeding in a sensible, bipartisan manner, we have a commission that is now going about its work in a tainted way.

The other concern I have, which my colleague mentioned in moving the disallowance motion, is that it does seek to pre-empt the outcome of the 6 November referendum. My position is well known. I support the present system, but if a majority of Australians decide that they want to change the system in a majority of States by way of the referendum on 6 November, so be it. All of us then have an obligation to make sure that any changes made to the system work.

However, I do not think that will happen. I do not think the referendum will be successful and, therefore, I believe that by committing resources, money, secretariat, travel, entitlements and all the

rest that goes with the full-blown commission of inquiry, the Attorney-General has jumped the gun. What is the cost? What is the total cost of this exercise? I understand that there are staff allocated to the commission. I understand that there are certain other costs involved in respect of the administration of the commission.

It may well all be for naught. We have moved this motion today to express our disappointment that we were not consulted and to express our disappointment that in Labor's fervour and blind rush towards an Australian republic it would proceed to get ready changes to the Queensland Constitution that many Queenslanders find objectionable.

I refer to the fact that we do have entrenchment provisions in respect of the term of the Parliament, in respect of local government and in regard to the office of Governor. I believe that Queenslanders would want those entrenchment provisions protected. I do not think Queenslanders would want a situation whereby any Government, by way of a simple majority in this place, could extend its life in executive office from three years to four years. I think that power should rest with the people, not the politicians. Similarly, there are very proud commitments and entrenched provisions in regard to the office of Governor and local government.

This exercise has been flawed. It has come about because we have an Attorney-General and a Government that cannot wait to change the system, whether the people want the system changed or not. They are jumping the gun in respect of the 6 November referendum.

Significantly, we have a situation where, at very little cost to the taxpayers of Queensland, the Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee of this Parliament proceeded in a bipartisan and sensible manner in regard to the consolidation of the Queensland Constitution. I place on record my concern at reports that that committee looks like being in the same position as other committees of this Parliament in facing cutbacks in respect of its staffing and its resources.

It was agreed on both sides of this House that a strong parliamentary committee system was absolutely essential in terms of parliamentary reform. For the first time since the parliamentary committee system has been up and running in this State we have a determined campaign by the Executive to slash the budgets of the parliamentary committees, to reduce the number of research staff, to cut back on the resources available for members of the committee to travel, and to prevent those committees from having the same resources to do the job that existed under the previous coalition Government.

This attack on the resources of parliamentary committees by the Beattie Labor Government is an attack on the Parliament itself. But we are seeing the favoured sons being given the imprimatur in regard to a commission of inquiry—without consultation with the Parliament and without consultation with the Opposition. It is okay to have Jackie Huggins on a commission of inquiry reviewing the Queensland Constitution, but we have a Government that says that the resources made available to parliamentary committees to do their vital work, a direct consequence of the Fitzgerald reform process, can be gutted by a Premier who is becoming increasingly arrogant, egotistical and dictatorial.

We are concerned that this commission of inquiry pre-empts and undermines the status of the Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee at a time when the resources for that committee are being slashed. We are concerned that we were not consulted. We are concerned that this process seeks to give Labor a head start in terms of constitutional reform in Queensland, where under the previous coalition Government those at all sides of the table and both sides of the House were treated as equal players. This commission of inquiry, despite the well-meaning and capable people represented on it, will be going about its business without bipartisan support, because it has been tainted by this Labor Government and it has been tainted by this party political Labor Attorney-General.
