



Speech by

Hon. R. SCHWARTEN

MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON

Hansard 15 April 1999

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Ms A. Torrens

Hon. R. E. SCHWARTEN (Rockhampton— ALP) (Minister for Public Works and Minister for Housing) (9.52 a.m.), by leave: Yesterday in this House, the member for Whitsunday asked me a question which alleged that the Department of Housing had broken the law in disposing of property and papers of a tenant and he asked that I apologise for such actions. The tenant in question, Alexandria Rose Torrens, occupied premises at 41 Sycamore Street, Inala on 28 January 1997. Her tenancy account was satisfactory until 24 July 1998, when a notice to remedy breach was issued for rent arrears.

A notice to leave was issued on 8 September 1998. Further notices were issued, with the final notice to leave sent on 2 March this year. At that time the last recorded rental payment was on 20 January 1999. The notice to leave was due to expire on 16 March 1999. The Inala area office of the Department of Housing received a telephone call on 11 March from a nearby resident stating that the tenant in question had moved out of the house a few days earlier.

Officers made an external inspection of the premises and noted no broken windows or signs of forced entry. After gaining entry, staff saw that the house was in an appalling state—clothes and rubbish scattered throughout, dog droppings on the floors and on beds, and an infestation of fleas. Staff considered the property in that state to be a health hazard—and I am sure all honourable members would agree—and declared it abandoned. Cleaning and changing of locks on the property occurred after 18 March, which incidentally was the expiry date for the notice to leave. This is in accordance with procedures for dealing with abandoned properties.

On Friday, 26 March, Ms Torrens rang the department to inquire about her personal belongings and stated that she was now staying with her mother. She was advised that the property had been declared vacant and questioned about the state of her house and rental account. She claimed to have left the house in a clean state and had not had time to pay her rent. She also asked staff to send her a bill for the cleaning and she would pay it off in instalments. Ms Torrens has since advised that she will seek compensation for the goods disposed of in the cleaning of the property.

I am advised that the state of the house when departmental officers gained entry was such that it posed a significant health hazard. I am also advised that Department of Housing staff have previously been advised by police not to attempt to retrieve individual personal items in such cases because of the risk of infection and, in some other cases—not this one—needle-stick injuries.

To address the claims made by the member for Whitsunday in a question yesterday, I point out that the so-called 'facts' of this matter are vastly different to those he presented. No, the Department of Housing has not acted unlawfully. No, I will not apologise to anyone who leaves public housing in such a filthy state. If the member wants to take up the cause of such people, that is a matter for him.

I stated quite clearly when I became Minister for Housing that tenants had to comply with three simple rules: pay their rent, be a good neighbour and look after their property. It is a pity that about 2% of public housing tenants fail to meet these simple requirements, but I will not allow their actions to cast a shadow over the 98% of people who do. I now table for the information of all members photographs that attest to the state of the house.
