



Speech by

Mr S. SANTORO

MEMBER FOR CLAYFIELD

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TRAINEESHIPS

Mr SANTORO (Clayfield—LP) (11.47 a.m.): On 3 March this year, the Minister for Employment, Training and Industrial Relations made a ministerial statement on the vital issue of unemployment. However, the bulk of the statement concerned traineeships and the alleged misdirection of public funds under the coalition on the provision of training for existing workers rather than those who were or are unemployed. The Minister cited the Maroochy Shire Council as an example of the type of employer who was at fault in applying for taxpayer funding for training of existing employees. He said that the council signed up 82 existing workers on traineeships, which had cost around \$322,000—money that the Minister said should have been spent on unemployed people on the Sunshine Coast and elsewhere to help them get a job.

The Minister was gracious enough to at least admit that the council was acting in accordance with the policy of the day. However, he left the impression that the council was wrong in applying for this funding and that the money should have been spent elsewhere. He gave the impression that the policy in force at the time, which was the coalition's, was misdirecting the public moneys and that the council should not have received a cent.

As a result of the freedom of information searches that I have completed, I can now present to the House the full picture of what actually occurred. I assure the House that it is not a pretty picture. The full picture highlights a deliberate attempt by the Minister's department and officers to entrap the council and set it up. It highlights the political misuse of public servants. It highlights the totally cynical way in which the Beattie Government operates, and it reveals that the Minister has—and originally I was going to say "deliberately misled the Parliament and the

Queensland people", but I hope that, in fact, it is the public servants who have misled the Minister and not the Minister deliberately misleading the Parliament.

On 25 November last year, Kelvin Spiller, chief executive officer of the Maroochy Shire Council, wrote to Bruce Duncan, area manager of the Department of Employment, Training and Industrial Relations, asking whether the council could apply for traineeship funding for staff, having been informed of the availability of such funding by departmental officers. In his letter he said—

"I can assure you that all the employees put forward for a Traineeship will be endeavouring to obtain a qualification at a level above their current work role and/or qualification. They do not include individuals who are studying for another higher qualification. A significant training component will be required to obtain the relevant competencies."

I table a copy of this letter.

In a letter dated 7 December, the assistant director of training for the Wide Bay/Sunshine Coast region, Greg Bell, responded, highlighting that the Minister had required changes to the department's traineeship policy which would be coming into effect from 1 January 1999. He informed the council—

"I understand that you have in place a plan for training and upskilling of your existing staff to enhance your operations and opportunities for these employees. While I commend you and your organisation for this initiative I confirm that the Traineeship System in Queensland is not intended for this purpose by the Government of the day."

The Department would prefer you did not proceed with any application to register a training agreement for existing employees."

I table a copy of this letter.

One would think that that would be the end of it. After all, the council had been given a none too subtle message not to proceed. The council was not the only organisation to receive this type of letter. Among others receiving this response was Betta Stores, the managing director of whom wrote to the Premier and Minister on 17 December. In his letter to the Minister he said—

"Our retailers are now receiving from your Department the most appalling letter

...

The letter endeavours to make retailers feel guilty for applying in good faith for traineeships as outlined in the attached extract

...

Even worse than this letter, are visits by your staff blatantly intimidating our retailers with threats of dismissal should they undertake traineeships.

What a wonderful start for this Government in gaining credibility especially from a largely rural based organisation such as ours. One wonders at the sincerity of your much valued policies to assist small business."

I table copies of these letters.

The Director-General of the Employment, Training and Industrial Relations Department apparently wrote back to Betta Stores claiming that the offensive letter was restricted to the Wide Bay region and was the result of an over-zealous reaction to a future policy change. In this letter he apologised, saying that the letter was being recalled and assured Betta Stores that the department would be accepting traineeships for existing workers where they complied with the then policy. I table a copy of that letter.

However, all was not well and this is where the whole matter becomes nothing short of a disgrace. In an email to Greg Bell of 2 December, it is pointed out that after departmental officers visited the council, "The CEO does not wish the matter to be raised at any ministerial level." In other words, the Maroochy Shire Council would drop the matter.

In an email dated 7 December from the same Greg Bell to Bruce Duncan, he points out that discussions were held at a regional directors meeting with the director-general, Bob Marshman, present. Mr Marshman allegedly wanted a statement or briefing on what the Maroochy Shire Council was doing. The email states—

"This was requested of Debbie Barsby for the purpose of publicising the

inappropriate use of Government funding and to again raise the issue with the Federal Government."

Ms Barsby is a senior regional bureaucrat with the department and this highlights Mr Marshman's attempt to set up the council. I table a copy of these documents.

The next sorry instalment in this saga is an email of 11 December from Ms Barsby referring to the 7 December request from Mr Marshman. She states—

"Greg Bell advised me that he has spoken to the Council CEO, explained the governments intentions and the Council is no longer going to apply for traineeships—therefore will not be accessing the subsidies."

The critical sentence then follows—

"Therefore, I believe that this would be an inappropriate body to write up."

I table a copy of that document.

Now we approach the most telling document of all. Bruce Duncan sent an email to Greg Bell on 23 December, stating—

"A couple of weeks back, there was determination at the top to hang Maroochy Shire Council if they wanted to proceed with 89 applications to be assessed under the 1998 policy.

I believe the DG, Greg, Debbie and others were involved in those considerations.

Following that, the letter of explanation, which is now considered offensive, was sent to the Council from the Area, and this effectively put an end to the matter.

As a result of yesterday's backflip, we are required to send the apologetic letter in circumstances where there has been no further contact. This apologetic letter reassures clients they will be considered under the 1998 policy.

I am totally confused now as to what is required. Please clarify the appropriate direction."

There is a handwritten notation on the side of this message dated 24 December which states, "Greg advised 8.50 on 24/12 to invite the Councils back in." I table that document as well as one which is not signed but is on departmental letterhead from the Maryborough office, which points out that the Maroochy Shire Council was contacted by departmental staff and told that it could proceed to register training under the then guidelines. This subsequently occurred.

It is all there. The evidence is crystal clear. The council was targeted from the beginning by the director-general. It was set up systematically. The council acted in good faith. Its chief executive officer was trying at every turn to obey the rules

and not rock the boat, but this Government needed a scapegoat. It stalked and set up the council. The council and its staff are victims of a disgraceful Beattie Labor Party vendetta.

Earlier this year the Minister came into this House to tip a bucket of muck all over the council. What for? For following the guidelines then in place, for accepting the advice of professional public servants and for wanting to advance the interests of its workers and its ratepayers. This Government has set the council up. It used its public servants for grubby political activity, and then the Minister came into the Chamber and attacked a local authority for following the procedures of the day and acting in good faith on the advice of his own department's officers. The Minister and his director-general have a lot of explaining to do, and the council deserves a total and without qualifications apology. This is an appalling incident and the Minister stands condemned. Clearly all local government authorities in this State should be very wary of dealing with the Director-General of the Department of Employment, Training and Industrial Relations, the department generally, the Minister and obviously the Government. This particular incident is a case of gross abuse of departmental processes and the Public Service for party political purposes in order to discredit the previous Government, which is now in Opposition. This has been done to satisfy party political agendas that should not matter in this place.
