



Speech by

Mr T. SULLIVAN

MEMBER FOR CHERMSIDE

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USE OF PLAIN ENGLISH IN GOVERNMENT CORRESPONDENCE

Mr SULLIVAN (ChermSIDE—ALP) (5.05 p.m.): I rise to second the motion. I believe that words are sometimes used to control the flow of information, resulting in the creation of an in group and an out group. With the control of information comes the control of decision making, and people feel as if they have been left alienated from the process of which they are supposed to be a part. That can build a false aura of expertise around a particular subject, simply because of the language that is used.

We have probably all taken a child to the doctor, who looked at the child and said, "Give me a sample, please", and the kid looked at the doctor and said, "Pardon?" The doctor said, "Pass water so I can test it" and the kid still looked at him. Then mum looked down and said, "Pee in the bottle." One uses words that can be understood. One does not have to use technical terms if they are not needed.

Of course, there are times when we may have to use specific terminology, such as with the names of chemical substances, technical processes, a particular strand of botany or a mechanical process that has a specific and limited meaning within the context of that particular range of work. In that case, it is understandable that a technical term may be used as a shorthand way of communicating within the work force. However, what the member for Nicklin has outlined has been experienced by all members in this House. We write to departmental officers on behalf of constituents, whether they be businesspeople such as the member for Nicklin referred to or constituents who want to know what is happening with things such as roads, schools, or Department of Housing complexes in their area. We expect a reply from the Minister, through the department—as we all know, those replies are written by departmental officers—and that reply should be written in a way that is easily read and understood by the person who asked the question.

I know that people within the same work force will often speak in shorthand. In my teaching days, a couple of us were having a discussion and we were using capital letters to describe much of what we were doing. Somebody looked at me and said, "I wish I could talk in capital letters!" He took the micky out of us for speaking in shorthand, which was actually gobbledygook that would have been incomprehensible to someone who was not part of the in group. If one is with one's work mates who all have access to the same information, that is reasonable. If one is presenting a scientific or technical paper to a research conference, one would expect to use language that is not able to be understood by the general public. We are not talking about those cases. We are talking about departments of the State Government that deal with ordinary Queenslanders, small business, big business—whoever. They have a right to be heard and understood.

Also, it is common for five or six words to be used instead of one or two. I hate to say it, but members in this Chamber are probably as guilty of that as are Government departments, and I see Hansard heads nodding. While members of this House have to be careful of that, so do Government departments, which have the time to plan their responses. Care should be taken to ensure that those responses are comprehensible to the reader.

Recently I was reading a brochure that was designed by consultants and was supposed to be used for community consultation purposes. It explained what was happening with a particular road network. It was written in engineering jargon that would have been incomprehensible to the vast majority of people who were to read it. We all want to know what is what; we all want to be able to call a spade a spade; we want things to be couched in straightforward and simple terms so that we can understand them. I support the motion.