



Speech by

BILL FELDMAN

MEMBER FOR CABOOLTURE

Hansard 19 October 2000

FUEL SUBSIDY AMENDMENT BILL

Mr FELDMAN (Caboolture—CCAQ) (10 p.m.): The previous contribution was about as effective as the member's visit to Maryborough the other week.

I rise today to condemn the Beattie Labor Government's latest irrational foray into the world of fuel pricing. It seems like it was only a few weeks ago that the Premier was prancing around the State shouting about how fuel companies were ripping off the State by pocketing the fuel subsidy money. The Premier's answer to the nonexistent problem back then was a harebrained scheme to replace the existing fuel subsidy arrangement with a subsidy on motor vehicle registrations in Queensland of some \$150. The scheme was pretty obviously thought out late one night in the Strangers Bar, perhaps as he and the Treasurer laughed about the net bet affair. They had to be talking about gambling, because the Treasurer lost, because he had to take this second-rate attempt to swindle the public of Queensland back and sell it to the Cabinet. There can be no other explanation for such stupidity or shortsightedness.

The scheme was doomed to failure and it was unfair in the extreme. Somebody who drove their car only rarely was set to make a profit, while someone who relied heavily on their motor vehicle for their livelihood was going to be hit hard in the back pocket. People who used fuel for recreation, such as the boaties, were going to miss out entirely. I even had a TPI pensioner who paid only some \$45 for his registration came up to me wondering if he was going to get that extra \$105 back in his pocket. What a harebrained rip-off scheme that was going to be! And for what purpose was this issue of fuel raised? It was to allow a media tart to try to divert the attention away from the issues that are really threatening to drive his Government under. But a rort is a rort is a rort, be it electoral or fuel. It was a bit like the old shell game. Everyone is sitting there watching the shells go round and round and when all the shells are picked up there will not be 8.3c to find.

The only way that this Government will survive is if it manages to sufficiently restrict certain legal proceedings so that the true facts are not known. The Premier should know better than to prance around because he is just not built for it; he quickly fell from grace when he did. It turns out that every reputable motoring industry organisation in the State disagreed with him as well, and his claims were patently false. In other words, he was lying or his staff who advised him were incompetent.

The eventual backdown was a sight to behold. The trouble is now we have this piece of legislation here to debate and not the other legislation. The Premier tried to put on a brave face, but all he succeeded in doing was to teach Queenslanders that if they stick together they can still force an out-of-touch Government to back down, at least on some issues. I will bet there were some red faces and sore behinds in the Premier's department that week.

Mr Cooper: A credit to the people. They did well.

Mr FELDMAN: They certainly did. That is the history of what brought about this piece of irrational legislation into this House—just a bit of history about an incompetent Government doing incompetent things.

All of these words that I have heard used describe the Premier as a slow learner, and he has been a slow learner. One would have thought that he would have learnt from that fuel fiasco that the Queensland public would not cop this sort of ineptitude a second time, but apparently he has not,

because here we go again. We are definitely on the roundabout again. The Premier is off on another quixotic mission, only instead of windmills the Premier tilts at fuel companies. They must be laughing their heads off at this ineffectual Premier.

As we all know, the current situation came to pass when the Federal Government came to the rescue of the other States and imposed a Federal tax to replace various State taxes that had been ruled invalid. The upshot is that Queensland now effectively has a fuel tax that is paid to the Federal Government by the fuel companies, given back to the State Government which then gives it back by way of subsidy to the fuel companies. While it would be better to have no tax in the first place, this system seems to be making the best of a bad situation. Three cheques are written, the loop is completed, and the money is back to where it started from and everybody is happy—well, almost everybody. Certainly not our courageous Premier. Our Premier is not happy because he had his nose rubbed in it and he did not like it—and he did not like it at all!

Our Premier, with a little help from Mr Net Bet, has come up with a very ingenious little plan to stop those big bad fuel companies from rorting the system. These are the same fuel companies that the RACQ and similar organisations found were not—I repeat were not—rorting the system. According to the RACQ, the fuel companies have been handing back the subsidy, just as they were supposed to. We cannot ask for more than that. Well, our Premier can. He is not satisfied with the fuel companies handing back the subsidy so he will make every single service station in Queensland take over the responsibility for the fuel subsidy scheme.

According to Part 3 of this Bill, a licensed retailer is required to keep records of those fuel sales. The records must include the following details for each and every sale of fuel: the price charged and the basis for calculating the price of every sale, the address, the date of the sale, the type of fuel and the quantity sold. Many small fuel retailers in this State do not have computerised bowlers. This degree of record keeping is onerous in the extreme for everyone, but many times more so for the people who will have to keep manual records to comply with this legislation. For all this effort and responsibility they get what—the princely sum of 0.046c a litre and a one-off payment of \$200! It sounds a lot like the Treasurer was really reading the GST manuscript when he imposed this Bill, and he wants to sit here and dictate and talk to us about not liking the GST. This is another GST script imposed by this inept Treasurer.

For many small operators, this will amount to only \$10 to \$15 a week—a pretty poor effort for all that extra work. It is not much of an incentive for them to do the Government's dirty work, is it? The Minister probably feels like Santa Claus, but from where the fuel retailers sit he certainly looks like Scrooge. Woe betide any retailer who gets it wrong. The commissioner has the power under this legislation to immediately suspend a retailer's licence for a period of 14 days without that retailer being given the right to be heard before the suspension takes place.

As the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee rightly points out, it can be argued that the lack of opportunity to make representation denies the licensee natural justice. Can anyone imagine what the impost of a 14-day suspension on a small retail service station operator would be—considering he, of course, is in the minority in Queensland; most service stations are company owned.

Mr Johnson: Turnover. The ones with the big turnover, they may survive, but the little turnover fellows with family businesses won't.

Mr FELDMAN: Correct. The big company stores will survive, the little fellow will be squeezed out, and then every station will be owned by the multinational companies again and the money will just go straight back to them at the bowler.

Mr Johnson interjected.

Mr FELDMAN: It certainly will; that is right. This is a Government that is supposed to be standing up for the battlers and the small businesspeople who are battling out there, doing their best. The Government says, "Oh, the GST has put a bit of impost on them", but what are they doing? They are sticking it to them again. This Government that is supposed to stand up for the little person is sticking it to them again.

Dr Prenzler: Small businesses are the biggest employers.

Mr FELDMAN: As the member for Lockyer says, small businesses are the biggest employers. These big service stations are owned and operated by the very multinational companies that this legislation is supposed to be bringing to justice. It is very obvious that such a suspension will have a very significant effect upon a licensee's financial position and may in fact bankrupt him. That is the little fellow again—bankrupted again by this Government. So instead of dealing with a handful of fuel companies, the Treasurer will now set up a large bureaucracy to police an amended scheme that did not need changing in the first place.

What we have here is change for the sake of change. This sounds as if someone is trying to hide something. I suppose there is little difference between incompetence and trying to hide

something. It is a case of playing the shell game with the public of Queensland. Perhaps the Premier is hoping that this scheme will provide some level of diversion away from other events that must be occupying his time of late. We have seen staff going down to the inquiry. Maybe Shepherdson would be better advised to have a look at this rort rather than the other one.

The other red herring that the Premier has been waving around for some time is the story that subsidised Queensland fuel is being trucked over the border to New South Wales and sold into markets that do not have the same subsidy arrangement. If this is so, where is the proof? There must be some proof. It is not enough to say that something like this is happening on a large scale without, at the very least, providing some substantial evidence to back up the claim. There is no evidence to back up the claim.

The Premier and the Treasurer are asking this Parliament and the people of Queensland to take them at face value on this issue. They are asking us to trust Mr Net Bet and the leader of the greatest bunch of rorters that has ever set foot in any Parliament. That is a mighty big ask. If this large scale cross-border transport of fuel is a reality, we want some evidence.

Just for a moment we will assume that the Premier and the Treasurer are not misleading us on this issue. The answer to the problem is quite simple. Stop cross-border trade by a simple method of policing. All fuel transport vehicles are registered and licensed for that specific purpose. Every time a semitrailer takes on a load of fuel from a depot it must be recorded for the purpose of payment. Provided these vehicles are required to carry a logbook that records pick-ups and deliveries, with time, date and mileage, it would seem to be a very simple exercise to prosecute anybody found illegally transporting fuel across the border.

But, no, we are out there destroying trucking firms by the dozen as a result of this legislation. There are only a relatively small number of locations where semitrailers can obtain loads of fuel. There are also very limited numbers of routes that they can take to cross the border. For a lot less money and a lot less heartache for Queensland fuel retailers, this Government can address any problem with the current subsidy system. Throw in some serious fines for the big players, if they actually exist, and the problem is solved.

However, through all this debate I still hear the voice of the old age pensioner who came into my office when all of this hoo-ha started. I still hear him saying, "How do we know we are going to get the rebate, anyway?" The rebate is about 8.3c and the cost of fuel at Caboolture is rocketing between 77c per litre and 91c per litre. That is a difference of 14c a litre. It is very easy to hide 8c in there. I am sure it will be hidden in the rise and the fall. No-one knows. It is the old shell game again. Pick up the shell; where is the 8.3c? It is not under the shell I picked up. The public of Queensland is duded again.

Together with other Queenslanders, I struggle to understand how petrol can have such floating prices. If one can still afford a tank of fuel, one soon finds out the impact of price rises. Perhaps we are lucky in this House because we have a fuel card. Perhaps we do not have to worry too much about it. However, I worry when I fill up my private car. It costs an extra \$10 to fill up my car. I, like most people, thought I would never see the day when a tank of fuel would cost me \$50.

Mr Dalgleish: How much do you take?

Mr FELDMAN: Sixty litres. That is not much. When I mention filling a tank for \$50, I am really talking about yesterday. We are talking about the past here. My fear is that we are heading towards the \$100 a tank scenario. That is not a very palatable thought.

My question to the Premier is asked on behalf of the poor old Caboolture battler who came into my office. It seems that the only people standing up for the battlers these days are the members of the City Country Alliance. I ask the Premier: does this mean that the cost of petrol will not arise above 83c a litre? If we take 91c and subtract the subsidy of 8c, does that mean that the price of petrol will not rise above 83c per litre? I will bet it does not. But, oh boy, I am waiting for the answer to see exactly what is going to happen by way of fluctuating petrol prices.

I know that it is the old shell game and I know that I am going to be ripped off again by those prices. The price rises can be easily hidden, and no-one will know.

Mr Dalgleish: The member for Woodridge was going to guarantee that the savings will be passed on, but I don't hear it coming out of him.

Mr FELDMAN: That is correct. That was the promise that was made at Maryborough by the member for Woodridge. He promised that the 8.3c would come straight off the price. He was going to guarantee it. It is easy to guarantee things outside; it is a different matter to come in here and guarantee things. The people can be snowed outside this Parliament. I say to the member for Woodridge: you can fool some of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time. All of the people are not fooled by this atrocious piece of legislation.

I have not even mentioned the off-road users of diesel. Even in the mish-mash of the subsidy debacle, the GST and the excise price, they are still 1.2c to 1.5c a litre worse off. In my electorate I have three major extractive industries and they use between 1 million and 1.5 million litres of diesel a year. When an operator loses 1.2c to 1.5c a litre, we are talking in the vicinity of \$20,000 to \$30,000 a year that the company will be worse off. In my area, that has an effect on employment. This Government is supposed to be concerned with employment. Because those companies are going to be \$30,000 a year worse off, that means they might have to cut staff numbers. Instead of someone being employed, someone is going to get the DCM—"Don't come Monday". That will occur because this Government has placed that impost on industry.

These days, every business is struggling. They are hanging on by their fingernails. They will not employ somebody else because this jobs, jobs, jobs Government has eroded that prospect out of their minds with this fuel rebate debacle. Because of that one issue, in this one sector of the industry some three to five jobs will not be created in my area.

Mr Dalglish: What about the blue-collar worker apprentices? They are not going to have their wages.

Mr FELDMAN: That is correct. These people will not be able to afford to put on an apprentice. That is another reality of this jobs, jobs, jobs Government. The shame of this is that the Treasurer failed the off-road users of diesel in this State when he was securing the GST component. He arranged to get his bag of money in Canberra. As usual, he was not briefed well enough and he exposed a very hardworking sector of Queensland business to this very unreasonable burden.

This is just the shell game being played on the people of Queensland. They are not going to receive any of the 8.3c. This Government knows it. The Treasurer knows it. The Government is snowing the people who count. When the people realise that they have been snowed they will not put this Government back into office because they do not like being ripped off. They do not like being rorted. All this Government does is rort. The people do not like frauds or rorters. That is exactly what we are getting from this Government.

My final comment is that this Government will pay for this legislation because the people will realise that they are not going to get the 8.3c. That 8.3c is not going to be saved. As the member for Hervey Bay said, the Government is taking it from the multinationals and giving it straight back to them. Guess what: they will not give it to the public of Queensland and the Premier knows it.
