



Speech by

Dr DAVID WATSON

MEMBER FOR MOGGILL

Hansard 24 August 2000

APPROPRIATION BILL, ESTIMATES COMMITTEE E

Dr WATSON (Moggill—LP) (Leader of the Liberal Party) (11.47 a.m.): It gives me pleasure to enter the debate on the report of Estimates Committee E. I would like to join with other members in thanking the committee staff, the staff of Hansard and other parliamentary attendants for their support during the Estimates committee process.

I should start at the same place that the Leader of the Opposition left off when he was talking about the payment of performance bonuses to directors-general. It seems to me that one of the things that was obvious throughout the entire Estimates process was that the individual Ministers refused to answer the question, even though it was a legitimate question, about what was contained in the line item on employee salaries and expenses with respect to their director-general. They all put it off to the Premier and said that he would answer the question. The point that came through quite clearly was that, despite the numerous questions to the Premier on that subject, there was a complete refusal to answer and to give any details on it. I think that treats the Estimates process with contempt and it treats this Parliament with contempt. If the Premier is going to be the responsible Minister on that particular issue, then he has a duty to disclose that information.

It goes further, of course. The Auditor-General, in his submissions to the committee, made two very interesting points. One was that the budget that he has received from this Government is insufficient to properly plan his auditing processes. The Government said that it will reconsider that budget at the half-yearly review, but the fact is that the Auditor-General must be in a position in which he is able to plan his audit program. If he is not given sufficient money, then he has an inability to properly plan a complete audit process.

The second thing that the Auditor-General disclosed was the vast number of S70 contracts that obviously have come about under this Government. On 14 August I wrote to the Auditor-General with respect to that issue after I examined a report on the review of the senior public servant appointment process. I was taken by the quote in that report from the Acting Public Service Commissioner, who stated—

"If it is considered that more detailed information is required, it might be appropriate to list the numbers of contracts approved with estimated total remuneration values of contracts rather than specifying individual names and associated remuneration."

Although I think that that particular comment by the Acting Public Service Commissioner does not go far enough, it would in fact be a significant improvement on the information that the Premier has been willing to give so far. It will be interesting to see whether or not, in the responses in the future, the Department of the Premier and Cabinet takes that up.

More importantly, through the whole Budget process—and this came out quite clearly in the Estimates process—there is no guarantee at all of any accuracy of the figures in the Budget papers. I referred a number of times in the Estimates committee hearings to problems that had occurred with revisions to the figures that were in previous Budget papers. I particularly referred to the 1998-99 actual figures contained in last year's Budget versus the actual figures contained in this year's Budget. When we look at the actual figures—and these are supposed to be at the end of the audit process—one year down the track we find that the actual figures for 1998-99 in last year's Budget papers are in many cases significantly different from the actual figures in this year's Budget papers.

I raised that issue with the Treasurer at the time. I have also since then raised it with the Auditor-General, because I think it is in the public interest that we know exactly how accurate the Budget papers we are receiving are. On 11 August I wrote to the Auditor-General requesting that after he completes his audit process he consider giving to Parliament a table or some other form that compares the actual figures contained in the departmental reports with those reported in the Budget papers and that he comment upon the accuracy of the figures therein. The Auditor-General has recently replied to my request by saying that he will be pleased to give further consideration to that particular concern after the finalisation of the audits for the 1999-2000 financial year.

This is an important issue. If we cannot trust the figures in the Budget papers, if we cannot trust what comes before this Parliament, nothing else is relevant. Nothing else will follow if the figures are basically wrong.
