



Speech by

**Dr DAVID WATSON**

**MEMBER FOR MOGGILL**

---

Hansard 14 November 2000

### FUEL PRICES

**Dr WATSON** (Moggill—LP) (Leader of the Liberal Party) (10.37 a.m.): I formally second the amendment to the motion moved by the Leader of the Opposition. I thank the Premier for giving me the opportunity to speak to this issue, because it is an important issue facing all Queenslanders and all other Australians.

The Premier quoted correctly today's Courier-Mail in which I expressed concern for the families and the businesses in Queensland and the rest of Australia in regard to rising fuel prices. There is absolutely no question that the people of Australia have been hurt by rising fuel prices. No-one on this side of the House, whether they be in the Liberal Party or the National Party, walks away from that. We understand that. That issue comes to us in our electorate offices, through parties and from talking to people. There is no question about that.

The Premier wants to make something of the Liberal Party's support for the motion last night. He ought to know the Standing Rules and Orders of this Parliament. He ought to understand that if we do not call for a division, then we are supporting the motion before the House. That is what the Liberal Party did. If we do not call for a division on this motion today, it means that we support the motion before the House. It is as simple as that.

**Mr Beattie:** Where were you last night— hiding under the bed?

**Dr WATSON:** I do not believe that I have spoken to any 6 o'clock motion that the members opposite have moved, just as they generally do not speak to our motions. That is an irrelevant issue.

The Leader of the Opposition has issued a challenge to Government members. We understand the Standing Orders and how this Parliament works. We want to see the Government standing up for Queensland not only in terms of what is going on with the Federal Government but also Queensland issues. We want to see the Government supporting an amended motion to include things such as a commitment to the fuel subsidy.

**Mr Horan:** This could give Queensland motorists five times the amount that you're trying to get out of the Federal Government. Look at the price differential—10c instead of 2c

**Dr WATSON:** That is exactly right. The issue is whether or not the Government will support this. I sat in this place while the Premier argued that, if the Commonwealth did not have a royal commission into the issue of fuel prices, he would. Where is that promise now? We moved the motion in the Parliament? What did the Premier do? He squibbed and walked away from it. He argues that he is concerned for the people of Queensland, but when it comes down to his area of responsibility and what he can do about it, he walks away and does not have a royal commission—he does not have anything. He set up a spurious Petrol Price Watch Committee under the member for Woodridge.

**Mr Springborg:** An expert rorter.

**Dr WATSON:** That is right. He ought to be able to find rorting; he has had enough practice at it. But, of course, he did not find any in the ALP. The Leader of the Opposition spoke about the card that the member for Woodridge passed around. He referred back to the time when the member put out that spurious card on the privatisation of hospitals. I looked across at the member for Sunnybank, the

Minister for Emergency Services, who got up in this place and said, "Hang on. Not me. I didn't put it out." He said, "I wasn't going to get caught up in the AWU rorts."

**Mr Borbidge:** Was it authorised?

**Dr WATSON:** If it was authorised, we would not be able to tell that from looking at it.

The member for Sunnybank, the Minister for Emergency Services, indicated that he would stand by his principles and would not have anything to do with that. He argued that that was one of the reasons he was here. He knew that the member for Woodridge, as Labor Party State Secretary, did not have any principles on that issue. He is a member of the AWU faction; what else would we expect?

But let us talk about the position on fuel. Earlier this year, the Premier started to move on his 8.354c a litre fuel tax. Do honourable members remember that? I suspect it was not just his idea; the Treasurer, who seconded it, also had a hand in that fantastic debacle. He came in here expecting Queenslanders to be treated like mugs. He came in here and said that he was going to get rid of the fuel subsidy and reduce registration. Queenslanders saw through him then just as they will see through this.

Do members remember the headline "Beattie rethink on fuel change"? Do they remember what generated that? It was a cynical exercise on the part of the Premier and Treasurer to try to remove the fuel subsidy from Queenslanders and to increase the price of fuel to Queenslanders by 8.354c a litre. He was going to rip them off and put a small subsidy on registration. That is the issue. He attempted to rip the fuel subsidy off Queenslanders and mollify them through a cut to registration. That was his approach. He was found out. He was trying to treat Queenslanders like mugs, and they saw through him, just as they are seeing through everything else he does.

We saw the necessity for that when the Treasurer brought down the Budget. We knew what the Premier was trying to do. The only reason the Budget was in surplus was that he borrowed money. That was the reason he had a cash surplus; he was borrowing money. When the full financial statements came down, we saw how he was running this State into the ground, because he was increasing the costs of operating this Government on a day-to-day basis. He is doing exactly the same thing as Goss, his predecessor, did. He was running the same sorts of programs being run now. Slowly but surely he is grinding this State into deficit. That is what he is doing. He sought to remove the 8.354c subsidy simply because he was trying to cover up his bad management. When that did not work, what happened? The Treasurer presented a Budget in this place that would see borrowings of \$2 billion this year—far more than has been borrowed over the past six—

**Mr Foley:** Ducking and weaving.

**Dr WATSON:** I am not ducking and weaving. The member is the one ducking and weaving.

**Honourable members** interjected.

**Mr SPEAKER:** Order! The House will come to order. We cannot hear the honourable member.

**Dr WATSON:** There are \$2 billion in borrowings this year, rising from \$533m, I think it was, two years ago—rising because of his mismanagement. That is what the attempted removal of the 8.354c was all about. He did not get the fuel tax that he wanted so what did he do? He raided the electricity corporations.

**Mr Springborg:** Ports.

**Dr WATSON:** Yes, I am coming to that. He took 95.39% of their after-tax profits. That is what he did. Not satisfied with raiding the electricity corporations, he started to raid the ports. But he still was not satisfied. Having raided the ports and the electricity industry, what else did he do in that Budget? This is something that was not discussed. He put a tax on beer.

**Mr SPEAKER:** Order! Could we return to the subject of fuel?

**Dr WATSON:** This is all about fuel prices.

**Mr SPEAKER:** Order! No.

**Dr WATSON:** Mr Speaker, just bear with me; you will understand why.

What did he do? He then put a tax on beer of 1c a can or a bit more. What was his excuse when he was caught out? He said, "We're going to use that to subsidise fuel prices." His excuse was, "We put a tax on beer and we're using it to subsidise fuel."

**Mr BEATTIE:** I rise to a point of order. Mr Speaker, I draw your attention to the Standing Orders on relevance. Next he will be on about Christmas. When is he going to talk about petrol?

**Mr SPEAKER:** Order! There is no point of order.

**Dr WATSON:** I just did. I just said that after he abandoned his fuel tax—I think this is about petrol—he decided to raid beer. All beer drinkers in Queensland are now having to pay for his failed subsidy program. That is what is happening. Following his changes to the fuel subsidy, I have not heard him say, "I will give the cent a litre back to the beer drinkers." He has collected that. Government

members are a bunch of hypocrites. Not only did he do something about fuel and beer; he also tried to sneak through an increase in electricity prices. Do honourable members remember that?

**Mr Seeney:** Three per cent.

**Dr WATSON:** It was 3%. It was timed to go up on 1 July. Do honourable members remember that? This is from the open, honest and accountable Government.

**Mr Borbidge:** They are going to blame the GST.

**Dr WATSON:** They are going to blame the GST. They were going to impose a 3% price increase on every energy user in this State to pay for it.

**Mr McGrady** interjected.

**Dr WATSON:** This is all part of the GST; the Minister got it right. The Government was trying to do these things under the guise of the GST. Government members love to come into this place and attack the Federal Government over the GST and demonise the GST. But they are taking advantage of it. They are going to take the money from the GST revenue and use the introduction of the GST on 1 July as an excuse for raising prices for no other reason than increasing revenue. I understand the issue with the electricity industry. The Government has given them 3% extra simply because it knows that its policies over the past couple of years of ripping out the dividends has left them short of cash for maintenance and so on. That is what this is all about.

I notice that the Premier took a point of order earlier about relevance. I did not see anyone worrying about relevance when he talked about One Nation. I did not see anyone taking a point of order on that. This is a wide-ranging debate under the rules set down by both the Premier and the Treasurer. The member opposite raised issues which were, at the most, tangential to the issue of fuel prices. We have already challenged the Premier to have a royal commission into what can be done in relation to this issue.

What we are seeing today is a cynical exercise on the part of the Government to try to divert attention away from the issue that is plaguing this Government. Everyone knows the issue that is plaguing this Government is the fact that a number of members on the other side of the House are potentially facing jail, jail, jail. This is the latest diversion.

**Mr Borbidge** interjected.

**Dr WATSON:** As the Leader of the Opposition says, one fifth of the Government has been named at the inquiry.

**Mr SPEAKER:** Order! We will resume debating the motion on fuel prices.

**Dr WATSON:** The Premier is not willing to get up and support—

**Mr SPEAKER:** Order! The member will get back to the motion.

**Mr Springborg:** The Treasurer was on GST compliance.

**Dr WATSON:** That is exactly right. The Treasurer does not know what he is talking about.

It is interesting that the Premier and the Government are obviously running scared. They have adopted a mechanism to try to avoid question time today, and I guess they have succeeded. If they were not worried about it, they could have moved this motion after question time.

**Mr Hamill:** It's too important.

**Dr WATSON:** It's too important— yeah, right! It is another diversion, and the Treasurer knows it.

I want a guarantee from the Premier that we are going to come back in December. Are we coming back in December—yes or no? Are we going to have that sitting week in December—yes or no?

**Mr Beattie:** What's that got to do with petrol?

**Dr WATSON:** No Parliament in December? This Government is running scared. I ask the Leader of the House: are we having that sitting week in December?

**Mr Mackenroth:** If we had a lot of work to do, we wouldn't be doing this debate.

**Dr WATSON:** So we are not going to have that week. Not only are the members opposite running away from question time now—running scared; they are running away from the Parliament next week. Is that what they are doing? Is Parliament going to sit in December?

**Mr Beattie:** If we have business, we sit. If we haven't got business, we don't sit.

**Dr WATSON:** So we are having that week, are we? Can the Leader of the House guarantee that?

**Mr Borbidge:** The Minister for Local Government is going overseas on Friday. He should just give it away.

**Dr WATSON:** We will see whether we do sit that week.

My understanding is that the members opposite are running scared: they are running away from question time, they are running away from the Parliament. That is the reality. We understand that. The Premier is the one who has the problem. He is the one who cannot get a vote of confidence. They are all his members who have been named before the Shepherdson inquiry. He is running scared, and he ought to be running scared. I noticed that the Treasurer spoke earlier about business confidence.

**Mr Hamill:** Do you know where it's going?

**Dr WATSON:** Yes, it is going down. If we look at the latest poll survey by the QCCI, what do we see? We see that, for the past year, most Queensland businesses surveyed by the QCCI blamed the fall in business confidence in Queensland on State Government policy. In the last month it was negative 12%. I am glad to see that someone has a copy.

**Mr Hamill** interjected.

**Dr WATSON:** I did not need to have a copy; I remember it because it struck me as significant. I have been watching the negative influence of State Government policies on business confidence in Queensland for the past two years.

Last month business confidence was at negative 12%. It has blown out from negative 6%, or something. When I talk to people in the business community I realise that no-one has any confidence in the State Government's policies. They have no confidence in the members opposite because they are the ones who have been increasing payroll tax; they are the ones who have increased the cost of workers compensation; they are the ones who are allowing workers compensation fraud by failing to prosecuting people; they are the ones who have allowed prosecutions for workers compensation fraud to fall by 60%. If they talk to the business community, the members opposite will discover all of this. They are the ones who have changed the industrial relations policy in this State. It is their policies that are causing significant problems in Queensland. So much for the arguments that the Treasurer puts forward! The latest evidence suggests that it is this State Government's policies that are causing significant problems here in Queensland.

**Mr Foley:** What are you going to do?

**Dr WATSON:** The Attorney-General keeps asking that question. I have stated quite clearly that the Liberal Party supported the motion last night. There was no need for a division. The Liberal Party will support—

**Mr Hamill:** That's not what you said in the paper.

**Dr WATSON:** We supported it by definition, and we will be supporting this amended motion that is before the House today. The critical issue is: what are Government members going to do about this amendment? That is the critical thing. There is no problem with respect to—

**Mr Hamill:** So you've got a position now?

**Dr WATSON:** I have always had a position.

**Mr Foley:** Tell us.

**Dr WATSON:** The position of the Liberal Party last night was quite clear. We supported that motion, and we will support the amended motion today. The question is: will members opposite support our amendment? No, they will not, because they do not have the strength of their own convictions. They are gutless when it comes to doing anything about it.

The Liberal Party will be supporting the amended motion. The original motion states—

"That the Queensland Parliament, recognising the extreme pressure on Queensland families and small businesses by the continual escalation of petrol prices, requests the Prime Minister, John Howard, and his Government to immediately give a commitment to Queenslanders that they will not further increase the fuel excise in February 2001."

The amendment moved by the Leader of the Opposition states—

"After '2001' insert the following—

1. and calls for a royal commission into anomalies in petrol pricing in Queensland;
2. reaffirms support for the fuel subsidy scheme implemented by the previous coalition Government beyond the next election; and
3. calls on this Government to reverse its policy of penalising farmers and businesses who are bulk end users.'"

The last part of the amendment to the motion calls on the Government to reverse its present policy on penalising farmers and businesses who are bulk end users. Let me remind the House why bulk end users have a problem. Bulk end users have a problem because in the Senate the Labor Party and the Democrats are blocking the passing of that amendment. The coalition went to the election with a promise that the fuel excise on diesel would be taken over by the Commonwealth and that the

reduction would be passed on to all diesel users, whether they be on farm, off farm, bulk end users or whatever. What is the problem? The problem is that the Labor Party and the Democrats stopped that going through. If those opposite want to do something about diesel prices for bulk end users, they should tell their Labor Party colleagues in the Senate to allow amendments to pass. They should talk to Labor Party senators and get them to agree to an amendment to ensure that all diesel users get the full amount of the excise reduction. That is a reasonable position.

**Mr Springborg:** That's what's proposed.

**Dr WATSON:** Yes, we proposed it. The Labor Party rejected it. When it is given the opportunity to do something, it fails every time. It is all talk. It tried to get rid of the fuel subsidy in Queensland and believes that a fuel tax in Queensland should be imposed. However, that proposal failed because of the outcry from the public.

**Mr Borbidge:** It had the TV ads done.

**Dr WATSON:** Yes. How much did that add up to? Some \$400,000 of taxpayers' money was wasted. If those opposite want to take action in relation to diesel, they should get Labor senators to agree to pass the amendment. The Labor Party is the problem on this issue. If it had agreed with it to begin with, then bulk end diesel users would not have a problem. I have made it clear that the Liberal Party will be supporting the amended motion before the House.

**Mr Borbidge:** Will they be supporting the amendment?

**Dr WATSON:** Yes, will those opposite be supporting the amendment? Will they establish a royal commission into the anomalies of petrol prices in Queensland?

**Opposition members:** No!

**Dr WATSON:** Will those opposite do that? Can we get a commitment from those opposite? How many members opposite will support that?

**Mr Horan:** At the end of the day, they couldn't find 60 tankers a day.

**Dr WATSON:** That is exactly right. They said that 60 tankers a day were going south.

**Mr Seeney:** They couldn't prosecute one.

**Dr WATSON:** How many prosecutions have been made?

**Mr Seeney:** None—ever.

**Dr WATSON:** Yes, none. Where is the evidence of the rort? Those opposite make assertions, but they never back them up. But where are the prosecutions? What have they done? We support the Government's establishing a royal commission. This motion calls on the Government to establish a royal commission. Those opposite are squirming at the prospect of a royal commission. Where is it? The motion also calls on the Government to reaffirm its support for the fuel subsidy scheme implemented by the previous coalition beyond the next election? Will it do that? No! It has no evidence whatsoever of the rorts it has alleged.

**An Opposition member:** They want to abolish the scheme.

**Dr WATSON:** Yes, they want to abolish the scheme. Those opposite came up with a harebrained scheme to get rid of the subsidy and replace it with cheaper registration. Will they support that or not?

**Mr Beattie:** David, we just love you, mate.

**An Opposition member:** Plastic Pete.

**Dr WATSON:** Plastic Pete; that is what the Premier is. The amendment also calls on the Government to reverse its present policy of penalising farmers and businesses who are bulk end users? Will it do that? What kind of commitment will it make?

**Mr Beattie:** The Deputy Premier will have an appropriate statement about the amendment in a minute. It's all sorted out. Don't you worry about that.

**Dr WATSON:** It is all sorted out; that is very good. We will be interested to hear what the response is.

**Mr Beattie:** Do you want more time?

**Dr WATSON:** I will take as long as the Premier wants. Those opposite are the ones who brought this debate on. They obviously want to run away from question time. They are the joke. They are the ones running away from Parliament. I will go through the whole process again, no problem. I can go back over all the concerns we have with the Government's position and the things it has done over the past 12 months to wiggle and worm its way out.

**Mr Beattie:** Poor old David, all those marginal seats.

**Dr WATSON:** Mate, you are the one who is in trouble on this, and you know it.

**Mr Beattie** interjected.

**Dr WATSON:** I am fine; the Premier can relax.

**Mr Beattie** interjected.

**Dr WATSON:** We are still waiting for the Premier's personal commitment on these aspects. Will this House meet in December? I am waiting for his personal commitment on that, too. Will we meet in December?

**Mr Beattie:** Petrol prices, petrol prices, petrol prices.

**Dr WATSON:** The only thing that is relevant over there is jail, jail, jail. That is why the House will not come back in December, because those opposite do not know what is going to happen in the next two weeks of the Shepherdson inquiry. We know that is why the Government does not want to come back in December.

**Mr Beattie:** What are you doing about it?

**Dr WATSON:** The member opposite will have a hard time pressing that argument from jail, jail, jail. I would like to see members opposite in jail arguing about fuel prices. That would make a great poster: members opposite arguing about fuel prices from jail, jail, jail. This motion today is nothing but a diversion.

---