



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR BARAMBAH

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ELECTRONIC MAIL

Mrs PRATT (Barambah—IND) (11.50 a.m.): Electoral fraud and corruption have of late been of major concern to all political parties in Queensland, members of this Parliament and, most importantly, the media. As everyone is aware, the Federal Government has begun an investigation into electoral fraud as claimed by jailed former Labor candidate Karen Ehrmann. There is no member of Parliament, no political party figure and no constituent who has not questioned the political propriety of elections and wondered how this issue of fraud and misrepresentation can be resolved, hopefully delivering honest Government to the people. To that end I would like to bring to the Parliament's attention a situation which could lend itself to another form of corruption. I believe the situation I am about to relate was unintentional, but the House will see how dangerous the situation could be in the hands of the unscrupulous—those who would think nothing of using any questionable means to win an election.

On returning home on the Friday following the previous sittings of this Parliament I was met by a very agitated constituent who was concerned that I had not responded to his emails, which he had sent to my office while I was here in Parliament. I inform this Parliament that the emails were never received. This Parliament has, unwittingly perhaps, perpetrated against the people of my electorate one of the greatest betrayals of its people any Parliament can carry out. This Parliament has interfered with the transmission of email from a constituent to their parliamentary representative. How many more of my constituents have had their emails not reach their intended destination? The question has to be asked: how many members in this House have not received their constituents' email?

The particular individual I am speaking of is very prolific with his emails, and I dare say that many members of this House would be or have been the recipient of them. I also realise that many members would object to and oppose his beliefs and possibly the manner or the terminology that he may use. In saying that, I must admit that I have not received any correspondence from him which contain what would be termed offensive language.

When my office rang the IT section of this Parliament we asked not only whether it was possible to put a block on a constituent's email but also whether one had in fact been placed on any person's email to my office. It was confirmed that it had. As my office refused to divulge the name of the particular individual whom we believed had been blocked, the person at IT began to read a list of names, thereby indicating that there does exist an unknown number of email senders who have been blocked.

A block had been put on this individual's email because of complaints and, we are told, as a result of a request from other members of Parliament. I have no problem with any member of Parliament deciding for themselves what constitutes a nuisance email and subsequently having it blocked from being sent to them, but I do object to someone blocking my email.

In discussions with the IT section—it has been nothing but exceptional and efficient with any requests from my office for assistance—and other sources, I was told that it is customary for any message blocked to be returned to the sender. I will quote research forwarded to me. It states—

"... if an ISP was deliberately and maliciously blocking e-mail messages from reaching their intended recipient, it is unlikely that the ISP would return the message to the sender, thus alerting them to the block. It would be a more likely scenario that if an ISP was acting maliciously in withholding a person's e-mail, they simply would intercept it and fail to deliver it. The person who sent it would assume that it had reached its intended recipient as they would

not have a message from their own server saying it was undeliverable; while the intended recipient would be unaware that the message even existed without receiving further communication from the sender."

I have a copy of a statutory declaration signed by the sender stating that he did not have his email returned. Nor did I, the recipient, receive any notification. But I do not infer that any malicious intent exists in this instance.

I do not know about anyone else in this Chamber, but I would not accept the postman not delivering my letters, and I certainly do not accept or appreciate my email being blocked. I do not appreciate someone other than me deciding whom I can or cannot communicate with. Mostly, I do not appreciate and am offended on behalf of my constituents at their not being able to communicate with me through what is supposedly a private communication network. It is illegal to tamper with the mail and is therefore conceivably illegal to interfere with the private communication of email.

There may be, as I said before, many members of this House who do not want to receive this particular individual's emails—members who think he is radical; members who find what he has to say offensive—and there may be members of this House who have asked that his emails be blocked. That is their right—I do not dispute that—but I have not asked that these emails be blocked and I have not been asked if I want them blocked. They were blocked without my knowledge and without any consent.

When first elected to Parliament I had a private email address set up so that I was accessible to my constituents via any means they chose to use. As far as I can tell, I have had no trouble with it in any way, shape or form. Fairly recently it was suggested that I avail myself of email which came through Parliament. Although I had reservations about it at the time, I eventually went ahead. I was dubious about the security of my constituents' emails but was assured that only a couple of people would be involved and that email was more secure through Parliament than through one of the providers that has hundreds of staff.

I no longer believe that the worst kind of manipulation is not possible in this instance. Most members of this Parliament work extremely hard in their electorates and make themselves available by any and every means available. This service could be used by unscrupulous individuals to have many emails blocked, making MPs appear ignorant because they have not answered those messages. With winning margins becoming extremely narrow as people weary of the party process, sometimes fewer than 100 votes are the difference between winning and losing an election.

Mr Reeves: Eighty-three, actually.

Mrs PRATT: Exactly. A swing as small as 1% or 2% is enough to change Government, and the blocking of half a dozen emails per week over a couple of years or over the full parliamentary term could alter the course of voting in any marginal seat. This possibility is not too unbelievable.

I have spoken of my concerns with a member of the CJC, and it has been agreed that the likelihood of corruption by this method is a possibility. With the enormous effort and cost that many efforts to corrupt the system apparently take, it is not difficult to imagine that there exists a vulnerability with the current system regarding our emails for manipulation and corruption to occur. I will have my private email address reinstalled and will no longer rely solely on the parliamentary email. I suggest that every member of Parliament be aware that their emails are vulnerable. I ask that this Parliament ensures that in future no emails to members of Parliament will be blocked without their knowledge or their approval of such an action.
