



Speech by

**Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE**

**MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE**

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Hansard 5 September 2000

**ELECTORAL FRAUD; MS K. EHLMANN**

**Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE** (Surfers Paradise—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (11.30 a.m.): The House has heard some interesting admissions from the Premier today in regard to the allegations of electoral corruption engulfing his Government. He has told the Parliament that he changed the rules, but he changed the rules only after the event—after the election and after he had campaigned for the convicted electoral rorter, who was the Labor Party candidate for Thuringowa. Yet we see from him today the Sergeant Schultz defence: he saw nothing, he heard nothing, he knows nothing. The Premier who involves himself in everything, the man who is the compulsive meddler in everything that his party and his Government does, expects us to believe that he knows nothing.

The reality is that we saw action from the Labor Party only after the Australian Federal Police were breathing down their necks, and the changes to the party rules took place only after the 1998 election. The fact is that these allegations now engulfing this Government are more serious than allegations that led to the Fitzgerald commission of inquiry. Queensland State elections may have been rorted by Labor. Federal elections may have been rorted by Labor. Local government elections may have been rorted by Labor. The electoral system of this country may have been fundamentally, repeatedly, systematically and corruptly rorted by this Labor Party—by this Labor Government.

That is the real issue in the electoral corruption scandal that now dogs the Labor Party and the State of Queensland. It is a point that needs to be made and made starkly, because there is a suggestion that what has been going on in Townsville in the Labor Party is simply about internal party politics, a bit of internal hanky-panky that does not really mean much to people outside the party in that city. People who hold that attitude could not be more wrong. The fact is that, however much it may be taken for granted by most of us, a safe and secure electoral system is one of the absolute cornerstones of our democracy. If we do not have an honest electoral system, we do not have a true democracy. We do not and cannot have honest Government if we have a rorted electoral system. We are basically one step away from a banana republic because, taken to its logical conclusion, the people who will win Government in those circumstances are going to be the people who are simply the best rorters. The courts have recognised that. They know that that is the issue.

In sentencing Shane Foster, Karen Ehrmann's accomplice, in Townsville on 22 counts of electoral fraud last year, then District Court Chief Judge Shanahan said—

"Most of us go through our day to day life without giving any thought to the purity of the Australian electoral rolls, but upon mature reflection it is essential as far as the community is concerned that we have clean electoral rolls, there are no forgeries lurking about undetected."

Earlier he said—

"Shane John Foster, you have pleaded guilty to 22 very serious offences. They involved tampering with the Australian electoral rolls. They strike at the system of electoral rolls which is part of our democratic tradition. Conduct like this can undermine public confidence in our electoral roll system."

A similar judgment on the seriousness of this sort of behaviour was made by the current chief judge of the court, Judge Wolfe, when she sentenced Karen Ehrmann last month. She said—

"The crimes you committed affect the confidence of the citizens of Australia in their democratic process. It cannot be put too highly. You, at the end of the day, had interfered with the integrity of the electoral roll. The integrity of the electoral roll is sacrosanct."

Honourable members have only to briefly examine what it was that occurred in Townsville to understand why the judges were so concerned about the behaviour of Foster and Ehrmann. The forgeries they engaged in were in two forms. In one format they totally forged enrolment forms that were to be presented to the Electoral Commission. In other words, the person whose name appeared on the enrolment form, while a real person, had no idea that they were being registered on the electoral roll in the manner that Foster and Ehrmann intended.

The second category was of people who had some degree of knowledge of, or complicity with or of undue trust in either Foster or Ehrmann by filling out part of the enrolment form but leaving the address and perhaps other details blank—but crucially the address. More often than not the address that was then dishonestly inserted into the enrolment application was a post office box in the name of either Foster or Ehrmann. Picking up the mail from the Electoral Commission when the perpetrators had sent in false information was then quite easily done by going to the post office box or boxes and accepting the mail as if they were the person to whom it was addressed and, thus, Ehrmann and Foster had control over how those people voted.

The intent of this operation was to help candidates for preselection in either local government elections in Townsville or in Townsville-based State seats. But, of course, once the roll is rorted, it is rorted for whatever purpose the rorter wants. If there is a false name on a roll in an electorate, then they have a vote under their control. They can vote them early; they can vote them often. There is now evidence that this has occurred.

Judge Ambrose of the Supreme Court sitting as the Court of Disputed Returns found that there were seven cases of multiple voting or voting by imposters on behalf of others in the 1995 State election in the seat of Mundingburra, the seat that gave government to the Goss Government. Terry Gillman, the man beaten for preselection by Karen Ehrmann and her rorted votes in 1996 for preselection in Thuringowa, has publicly stated the obvious: some of the ghosts developed to help Ehrmann in internal party ballots could have been the source of rorted votes in the State election. Jim Bunnell, the husband of the Deputy Mayor of Townsville, has publicly made a similar observation. We have now had allegations of similar rorting of the rolls in relation to the Federal seat of Herbert.

The initial intended use of these votes is bad enough. This was not a bit of internal party hanky-panky because it involved the corruption of the Australian electoral rolls. Even if none of the ghosts developed by Kehoe, Foster, Ehrmann and others that may have been created elsewhere never voted illegally, the fact is that the corruption of the electoral roll for whatever purpose made that possible.

The other issue here is just how far up the chain in the Labor Party this activity or, at the very least, complicity in or knowledge of this activity goes. Ms Ehrmann alleged that this sort of behaviour has been chronic conduct by the AWU faction for years right around the State. The returning officer for the preselection that led to the charges against Ms Ehrmann was a long-time employee in the office of the Deputy Premier, who also heads the AWU faction in this House. The Premier himself says he took action on this issue immediately he learnt of the allegations. He knew of the allegations in 1996. His immediate action took two and a half years—after the election.

**Mr BEATTIE:** I rise to a point of order. That is untrue. The reforms involving changes to the rules of the party took place in 1997, 1998 and 1999. I seek for it to be withdrawn.

**Mr BORBIDGE:** He took it to the Labor Party State conference after the election. He knew about it.

**Mr BEATTIE:** I rise to a point of order. That is untrue. The reforms started in 1997, 1998 and 1999. I seek it to be withdrawn.

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Mr Fouras): Order! I ask you to withdraw.

**Mr BORBIDGE:** I accept the Premier's reassurance that it took him three years to fix it. He said 1997, 1998 and 1999.

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Order! I ask you to withdraw.

**Mr BORBIDGE:** I withdraw, but I am withdrawing by saying that I accept the Premier's assurance, admitted now in this House, that it took him three years to fix it. He was telling people he fixed it immediately. He has just told the Parliament it took him three years—three years to finalise the reforms of his corrupt, rorting political party.

**Mr BEATTIE:** I rise to a point of order. I indicated that the reform process took place in 1997, 1998 and 1999. It covered a wide range of matters, the matters that I dealt with. I moved as quickly and as precisely as possible. I ask for those comments to be withdrawn. He is misleading the House.

**Mr BORBIDGE:** It took three years to fix it.