



Speech by

VAUGHAN JOHNSON

MEMBER FOR GREGORY

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FUEL PRICES

Mr JOHNSON (Gregory—NPA) (12.42 p.m.): What a charade we have just seen from the Minister for Emergency Services. The Minister grandstanded in the House this afternoon. People on the Labor Party's backbenches must be squirming in their seats, thinking, "What a poor excuse we have for an Emergency Services Minister." There are some very good people there.

I know that the Leader of the Liberal Party is not presently in the Chamber, but it was absolutely appalling to hear the character assassination by the Minister because of his size or some other characteristic. We are all different people, but we all have qualities. I say to the Minister for Emergency Services, as he gutlessly walks out of the Chamber, that he should show some understanding of other people. I just cannot believe what happened.

We are considering the motion moved earlier today by the Premier. We are also considering the amendment moved by the Leader of the Opposition, and the amendment moved by the Deputy Premier to that amendment. The one thing that we have to consider is the motion that was moved by the honourable member for Gladstone yesterday and which was debated in the House last evening. That motion received the total support of every member of the Queensland Parliament. Not one member voted against the motion. All honourable members agreed that the Federal Government must freeze the excise increase in February 2001.

Today we are dealing with the same issue on which we all agree. Members opposite have contributed to this debate and have asked, "Where does the Liberal Party stand? Where does the National Party stand?" We stand for a royal commission so that we can see how we can address this issue and assist motorists, the manufacturing industry, transport operators, farmers, miners, the fishing industry—the whole bit. The Government's attitude indicates a cover-up. The Government wanted to dispense with question time so that the Shepherdson inquiry would not be mentioned in the House. This would allow the Government to cover up the bad behaviour of some members opposite.

I will touch on a couple of issues which have been raised by members opposite today and by the Deputy Premier and Minister for State Development and Minister for Trade yesterday. Yesterday the Minister criticised the Deputy Prime Minister, John Anderson, for his \$1 billion road infrastructure package. If the Deputy Premier is going to criticise that package, he is a damn hypocrite. I say very sincerely that that is exactly what he is.

I have here a media release issued by the Premier of Queensland, the Honourable Peter Beattie, on 28 August 2000. The headline of the press release is "Feds should devote fuel excise windfall to Qld roads". Did honourable members opposite hear that? I will repeat it: "Feds should devote fuel excise windfall to Qld roads". The first paragraph of the media release states—

"The Queensland Government is calling on the Federal Government to devote a large portion of its windfall from fuel excise on improving key parts of Queensland's road infrastructure.

"It should also forgo the next increase in fuel excise which will be driven up by the GST and is due in February," said Premier Peter Beattie today."

The first part of that media release concerns more funding for Queensland roads. The Deputy Premier criticised the Federal Government's package. The Transport Minister also criticised the

package. It will mean more dollars for Queensland roads. The money has already gone and cannot be returned to motorists. However, this is a fair way of compensating motorists. The package will address the problem of the downturn in road infrastructure that we have seen in this State over the past few years.

When I became Minister for Transport in 1996, I was told by some very prominent people in the Department of Main Roads that during the Bjelke-Petersen regime Queensland was building and maintaining 800 kilometres of roads per year—building new roads and upgrading existing roads. Under the Goss Labor administration that figure dropped to 200 kilometres a year. That was a State disgrace. Whilst I was Minister for a little over two years the coalition Government managed to increase the figure to some 400 kilometres a year. At the same time, we increased Main Roads funding by \$250m a year and built the Pacific Motorway. The motorway has been completed and is a wonderful example of infrastructure and engineering design. I give credit to the people who built it.

The Minister for Transport and the Deputy Premier say that the money is not available to be devoted to road infrastructure. The coalition Government found the necessary \$750m to build the motorway. The construction of that motorway was of paramount importance. That money was new money. The Labor Party is now in Government and the Main Roads Department budget has decreased. The money for road infrastructure is not there. The funding for the RIP has decreased. A lot of the funding for road infrastructure is Federal funding and in many instances that funding has already been spent.

Those opposite do not have the honesty and integrity to stand up and say, "That is a Federal component. This is a State component." John Anderson announced the infrastructure package on Monday, but those opposite will not give credit where credit is due; they criticise for the sake of criticising. The Government has adopted a negative approach. I say to the people of Queensland that the Opposition will be highlighting this matter at the next election. I refer to one part of the press release that the Premier released. It states—

"It has only been the increasing contribution of the State and local governments that has meant that the overall level of funding for roads in Queensland has not fallen in the last few years."

The only reason why that has happened is that the National/Liberal coalition Government added that component to road funding in this State while we were in Government for those two and a bit years. The press release states further—

"As well as widening, rebuilding and realigning roads, it will be necessary to upgrade some bridges if roads are to carry higher mass limits."

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Fouras): Order! Can I ask the member to relate—

Mr JOHNSON: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am relating it. I will come back—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: You have five minutes.

Mr JOHNSON: Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker. Just give me a bit of a go. I am telling the real truth here; you will get only the truth from me.

We are talking about money that comes out of fuel excise that goes back into roads. We are talking about the high cost of fuel in Queensland and in other States of Australia which is subjecting us to increased costs in other areas. The Government is saying that the money should be going back to roads. The money is going back to roads. But the members opposite have been critical. I think that is very poor statesmanship, or whatever they want to call it. I think the Government should be saying to the Deputy Prime Minister, "Yes, this is a very good thing." Can we be positive? Can we be progressive and go to the Prime Minister and say, "Listen Prime Minister, listen Deputy Prime Minister, this is how we see it. Can't we work through it together?" The Premier and the Deputy Premier have never done that.

All the Premier wants to do is come in here and boost his own ego and promote himself. He is a one-man band. He does not even give his Ministers a go.

Mr Palaszczuk: Fair go, Vaughan.

Mr JOHNSON: No. The Minister for Primary Industries is one Minister who does not get a go. We saw what happened with the dairy industry, of which the Minister for Primary Industries is the custodian. We saw the same thing happen in relation to many other industries in this State.

I call this document a blame document because of the poor economic management of the former Transport Minister, who is now the Treasurer. The Treasurer and this Government have now put the impost on the many service stations around this State to collect the 8.354c a litre and to return that to the appropriate authorities. I have to say that that is just another impediment to the cash flow of their businesses and a further impediment to their operations. It will push their overdrafts through the roof. There would not be too many businesses anywhere in the country that do not have some sort of overdraft facility these days. This impost is certainly a further impediment to those businesses.

Another thing that the members opposite have to be aware of is the policy on which they came to Government, that is, the 5% unemployment target. The increase in fuel prices will certainly lead to an increase in the unemployment rate. When costs go up, the Government has to find ways of addressing that.

Mr Palaszczuk: What is the National Party policy on fuel prices?

Mr JOHNSON: The National Party policy is this: we will hold a royal commission to analyse and evaluate the situation in this State. The Government is in the driver's seat, yet it has done nothing whatsoever about it. All the Government has done is pass the buck. It has blamed the cross-border haulers. The Treasurer even named one of those haulers in this House, and he named the wrong person and the wrong company. That was a serious blow to the commercial integrity of some of these operators, and most of them are very good operators.

I said in this House last night that, at this very moment out in my electorate in the far-western town of Bedourie, unleaded petrol is \$1.16 a litre and diesel is \$1.25 a litre. If the people of Brisbane were subjected to those sorts of fuel costs, they would go stark raving mad; they would go off their heads. The only time that this Government said anything about fuel prices was when they started to rise up around 85c or 90c a litre and then climb up to close to \$1 a litre. That cost then started to bite residential people in urban Brisbane, the Gold Coast, the Sunshine Coast and the south-east corner. For years people in rural, regional and remote Queensland have been subject to high fuel prices. It is something that we have always had to contend with.

However, we now have a situation that is out of control. That is why the member for Gladstone moved that motion yesterday about fuel prices. I am very proud that I supported that motion and spoke to it. It was about getting the Federal Government to freeze the excise come the CPI review in February 2001.

Today, the Transport Minister stood in this Chamber and talked about the impost of rising petrol prices on public transport and how they are leading to increased taxi fares. Rising petrol prices are not applicable only to those operators. I point out that it was this Government that reduced the subsidy to school bus operators. That shows how hypocritical some members opposite are.

It is all very well for the members opposite to stand up in this place and try to regain some of the credibility that they have lost in their electorates because of the innuendo about them at the Shepherdson inquiry. I say to those members opposite that this issue should not be made into a political football. This is a social issue and a business issue and it has to be addressed by honest, fair dinkum men and women who represent the 89 electorates in Queensland in this Parliament. Today, the Government has a perfect opportunity to take advantage of a situation and show leadership. The Premier can demonstrate that leadership by announcing the holding of a royal commission into the anomalies and problems that exist in relation to fuel prices in Queensland.

This morning, the Leader of the Opposition stated in this House that the price of unleaded fuel in the area heading towards the Gold Coast—I think it was Beenleigh—was 76.9c a litre. Out at Bedourie it is \$1.16 a litre. That is certainly a huge difference. It is an impost on people in rural areas. Again, this issue affects the pastoral industry, the mining industry and all of the other industries for which the Minister for Primary Industries is the custodian.

Many people do not realise that our primary industries keep this State viable and enable us to maintain the quality of life to which we have become accustomed. Again and again and again, primary industries create jobs for people who live on the eastern seaboard—whether that be the south-east corner or the northern coastal strip. A minority of people in regional and rural Queensland provide those jobs—in the electorates of Callide, Hinchinbrook and on the Darling Downs, a part of which is represented by the honourable member for Toowoomba South. However, that does not mean to say that we are going to disenfranchise the city or metropolitan electorates throughout the length and breadth of Queensland. Those people, too, have a right to cheaper fuel—to be able to go about their business, whether that be driving the family car, operating a local business, going to and from work, taking the kids to football, to school or whatever. Those people, too, have a God-given right to enjoy cheaper fuel prices.

Today, I call on the Beattie Labor Government to show leadership and to show some vision. It should forget about the politics. It should show some guts and determination to hold its own royal commission in this State to find out the real cause of the anomalies in petrol prices. If somebody is touching somebody else, let us hear about it. At the moment, the member for Woodridge is conducting a petrol price watch inquiry around the State on behalf of the Premier. We would like to know the findings of those inquiries. He and the other members of that committee must be hearing about anomalies as they progress around the State. I hear about them every day. I have to say again that to deliver fuel to places such as Cunnamulla from Brisbane can be done for just under 5c a litre, but the people out there are paying \$1.04 a litre or \$1.05 a litre for it. That price differential cannot be substantiated.

If we continue debating this issue in this Chamber without agreeing to some genuine ways of addressing these anomalies, we are not being fair dinkum to the 89 electorates that we represent in this State. I again I call on the Premier to show some leadership today and immediately announce a royal commission into fuel pricing in Queensland.
