



Speech by

Hon. ANNA BLIGH

MEMBER FOR SOUTH BRISBANE

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FREEDOM OF INFORMATION; SECRET STATE

Hon. A. M. BLIGH (South Brisbane—ALP) (Minister for Education) (6.20 p.m.): Tonight the coalition is right about one thing. It is right when it asserts that, in a healthy democracy, one needs accountability mechanisms, and checks and balances. You need those checks and balances on the bureaucracy, on the agencies of government and on the parliament itself. What the coalition fails to mention is that in the state of Queensland almost every check and balance that we have in our system has been an initiative of a Labor government. Coalition members come in here snivelling, with their hands on their hearts, proclaiming their undying love for accountability. Where is the evidence of it?

In our system, what are some of the mechanisms that protect us against bureaucratic excesses and poor decision making? On issues related to the Judicial Review Act, the FOI Act itself and the provisions of the Public Service Act that ensure merit appointments and equal employment opportunity, where was the coalition? Every single one of those initiatives was put in place by a Labor government. Where was the coalition's undying love for accountability throughout the 1980s when every other government in the country brought in freedom of information acts? The Commonwealth brought in the Commonwealth Freedom of Information Act in 1982. The National Party in Queensland had seven years to bring in such an act and it refused.

Mr Johnson: We are talking about since Fitzgerald.

Ms BLIGH: I am sure that the member would much rather do that. Let us talk about that.

What are some of the mechanisms that we rely on to put checks and balances into the parliament? First of all, there is the parliamentary committee system. Who in Queensland will forget the National Party's view of parliamentary committees? So desperate were they to avoid the scrutiny of a Public Accounts Committee that they split the coalition in 1983. As was the case in every other parliament in the country, in order to avoid the scrutiny of an all-party committee they were prepared to split with the Liberals. They did not repair the coalition for another six or seven years.

Mr Foley: How is the coalition going now?

Ms BLIGH: I have to say that the coalition does not seem to be as healthy as it might be. All other parliamentary committees were an initiative of the Goss Labor government. The Opposition Leader has complained about estimates committee questions. When could ministers first be questioned by estimates committees? That occurred under the Goss Labor government, and it has been maintained under this Labor government.

The Premier has talked about question time. It is important for the people who are new to this place to understand that, prior to the election of the Beattie government in 1998, there was no check or balance in question time that required ministers to restrict their answers to a reasonable time. Therefore, a government seeking to avoid scrutiny simply made sure that a minister got onto his feet and talked for 10 or more minutes. In that way, only three, four or five questions could be asked.

Mr Horan interjected.

Mr Beattie: You were the worst.

Ms BLIGH: I concur with the Premier's view that the current Leader of the Opposition was the worst. I understand from a staff member that on one occasion he gave a 14-minute answer. One does

not need to do much maths to work out that that does not allow for many questions to be asked. Santo Santoro gave a 10-minute answer, and so on.

Where did the pecuniary interests register come from, which required parliamentarians to disclose their interests? Who put that in place? A Labor government. What about some of the watchdogs that we rely on? This coalition is made up of a number of people who, for two years under the Borbidge government, devoted their time almost completely to bringing down the one watchdog that was in place at the time, the Criminal Justice Commission. Their government came undone because of its absolute obsession with bringing down the CJC. It spent millions of public dollars on the Connolly-Ryan inquiry, which was subsequently found to be biased by the Supreme Court. For the entire time that they were in government, they were obsessed with getting rid of the CJC. Now they come in here professing to be its champion.

This afternoon we have heard a bit about the Information Commissioner. Because of the accountability measures that were put in place by this government and previous Labor governments, the Information Commissioner can make comment with impunity. Can any member remember what happened in Queensland to public servants who raised concerns?

A government member: : They got sacked.

Ms BLIGH: Yes, they were sacked. That is what happens in a closed society. That is what happens in a secret state. People in Queensland know what it is like to live in a secret state. They lived in such a state throughout the sixties, the seventies and the eighties. When a Labor government came into power in the nineties, that was the end of secrecy in Queensland. I am proud of our record. It stands for itself. The record of those opposite is one of shame and disgrace.
