



Speech by

Mrs J. SHELDON

MEMBER FOR CALOUNDRA

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CODE OF ETHICAL STANDARDS FOR MEMBERS

Statement of Fundamental Principles

Mrs SHELDON (Caloundra—Lib) (12.02 p.m.): On rising today to speak to this motion to adopt the fundamental ethical principles, I note that the proposed code of ethical standards was tabled in September last year by the previous Members' Ethics and Parliamentary Privileges Committee following a very detailed inquiry. Much has been said of the ethical standards of members of parliament. There are many good members in here from the major political parties and Independents who work very hard for their electorates day and night and whose weekends are often taken up by electorate commitments. If members have portfolio responsibilities, that is an additional burden on their time and that of their family. These members stand by good, strong ethics, yet unfortunately they often get tarred in the general sense with the odd few members of parliament who do not live up to the standards that this place rightly demands.

Too often our wonderful institutions of parliament are derided. They are not looked upon with the dignity that they deserve. After all, everyone in Australia lives by rules that have been made in local councils, in state houses of parliament and in our federal parliament. However, our parliaments are very important; they provide a noble profession for men and women to follow, and I am delighted that more women are entering the profession. We have to ingrain in people, especially young people, an acceptance of the importance of parliament and the worth of many parliamentarians. Those who are not worthy should not stay in parliament. They should not be preselected by their parties. The community needs to know the standards employed in this place and elsewhere.

As I said, there are very few members who have brought our parliaments into disrepute. Unfortunately, as many of my colleagues on both sides of the House would know, politicians are not regarded highly by the general public at the moment. We must look to ourselves as to why that is a problem in the community and instil in our schools the importance of parliamentary institutions. Obviously, as members of parliament we have to demonstrate those qualities as well, or no-one will believe us. On that basis, the code of ethical standards was contemplated and worked on very hard by committees in this House.

Before I turn to the standards in particular, I acknowledge those members of the previous Members' Ethics and Parliamentary Privileges Committee who are not here to speak today and those who are no longer members of the current Members' Ethics and Parliamentary Privileges Committee. I am still a member of the committee and am delighted to be so. A lot of hard work was done by members of the previous committee. I particularly mention the member for Logan, John Mickel, who as the chairman of that committee worked very hard. I know how hard he worked because I was the deputy chair. The committee interviewed members of other parliaments to see what standards they were adopting. While I was overseas in a private capacity, I also undertook to speak to the House of Commons and the French Senate and Assembly to see what international parliaments had put in place and how they were coping with the problem of ethical standards and codes of conduct. The committee also sought the views of members of parliament in New Zealand. The information gleaned was valuable in putting together our code of ethical standards, and I am delighted that the Premier has brought this motion to the House and hope it will be accepted.

Other members of that committee were the member for Mount Ommaney, Julie Attwood, who is currently the chair of the committee; the member for Mansfield, Phil Reeves; the member for Southern

Downs, Lawrence Springborg, who has been a member of the committee in the last two parliaments—which is where this all began—and, therefore, has a very detailed knowledge of what is contained in the code of ethical standards; and the member for Tablelands. Following the resignation of the member for Tablelands, the member for Maryborough became a member of the committee.

There has been input into the motion from the Labor Party, the Liberal Party, the National Party and the Independents. That demonstrates the breadth of representation that members of this House put into the code of ethical standards. It is a comprehensive and very educative document. I also place on record my thanks to the secretariat staff, who worked very hard. We could not have done our job without their support and help. They were very knowledgeable, detailed in their information, and they helped us to put our thoughts together to contribute to the code.

The Statement of Fundamental Principles now before the House is the focal point of the proposed code. The Statement of Fundamental Principles, as has been mentioned, comprises six principles which underpin a member's unique representative role in this House. These principles provide a framework for members to better understand their duties and obligations as members of parliament. When I first became a member of parliament nearly 11 years ago in a by-election for the seat of Landsborough, there was no education for new members. When I first came here, the budget was due to be delivered; and I was handed various shadow portfolios to which I had to speak in relation to the budget. It was very difficult, because at that stage I would get out of the lift and not know where I was, let alone understand the standard of ethical principles applied to this House. New members now have a much better educative procedure; and because of the information provided, they are kept up to date with their responsibilities.

Mr Terry Sullivan: It's probably a lot better system now, isn't it?

Mrs SHELDON: It is a much better system now. I do not see how members can be expected to fulfil conditions of which they are ignorant. One has to know what their responsibilities are if they are to be expected to fulfil them. Because new members are unaware that such things have to be done, they are often not done.

The principles provide a framework for members to better understand their duties and obligations as members of this House. The proposed code seeks to clearly present relevant information in one document concerning members' obligations and to provide assistance to members in their roles as elected representatives. In particular, the proposed code will ensure that the elected representatives of this state are aware of, understand and are able to resolve ethical dilemmas when they arise. As an example, under the proposed code members are required to resolve any conflicts of interest in the public interest, and that is important. We must not be seen to be representing our own personal interests. It is a part of these standards that if an issue in which a member has a personal interest arises, that member must declare that interest in the House.

The code has great potential to assist members of the Assembly in the exercise of their public duties. With the adoption of this code, members of the Queensland parliament will become the most accountable elected representatives in Australia. I can say with full knowledge that this is the most comprehensive code of any parliament in Australia. Let no-one say to any member here, 'You do not have a decent code of conduct or ethical standards.' It is the most comprehensive. It is the most arduous for members to comply with. We are proud that we have brought this code to this House.

The Queensland register of members' interests, an important component of the code, is certainly the most stringent of any Australian parliament. All new members would have had to fill out a form relating to their pecuniary interests and detail exactly what they have to enable full and open public scrutiny. Recommendations of the previous committee, if they are adopted by this House, will enhance these accountability measures. This Statement of Fundamental Principles is merely one component of the proposed code.

It is pleasing to see that the government has responded positively to this and other components of the proposed code, because various parts of this code have been around this House now for many years and have not been adopted. The final product, submitted by the committee during the last parliament, really honed the principles. I think it is a very comprehensive document. Certainly, the Premier has given notice of a motion to adopt other recommendations of that previous committee, contained in the code of ethical standards and the report.

I know there have been a number of comments from people outside the parliament involved in ethics issues in our community. One of these is Noel Preston. He has spoken at length about the need for a code of ethical principles for our parliamentarians. We now have this code. It is comprehensive. I would like to see a similar code adopted in the community for corporations, for people in business, for people in positions of public interest in the community. It is important that we are all accountable—not just politicians—to the community at large, in whose interests we act. Members of the community should be able to look at an issue and see that people have acted accordingly. I support the adoption of this Statement of Fundamental Principles, and I commend it to the House.