



Speech by

Mr M. HORAN

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Hansard 16 October 2001

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

Mr HORAN (Toowoomba South—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (11.30 a.m.): Today I want to speak about the way in which Queensland is becoming a secret, arrogant state. The government of this state is obsessed with controlling information and keeping information to itself. It has lost all the principles of open and accountable government that should apply to a modern government in this day and age.

The Fitzgerald inquiry and the subsequent report dealt at some length with the issue of government secrecy. Section 3.2.2 on page 126 of the Fitzgerald report states—

A government can deliberately obscure the processes of public administration and hide or disguise its motives. If not discovered there are no constraints on the exercise of political power.

The rejection of constraints is likely to add to the power of the Government and its leaders, and perhaps lead to an increased tendency to misuse power.

...

The ultimate check on public maladministration is public opinion, which can only be truly effective if there are structures and systems designed to ensure that it is properly informed. A Government can use its control of Parliament and public administration to manipulate, exploit and misinform the community, or to hide matters from it. Structures and systems designed for the purpose of keeping the public informed must therefore be allowed to operate as intended.

Secrecy and propaganda are impediments to accountability, which is a prerequisite for the proper functioning of the political process. Worse, they are the hallmarks of a diversion of power from the Parliament.

We are seeing from the Beattie Labor government secrecy and a control of information. As the Fitzgerald report states, they are the hallmarks of a diversion of power from the parliament. We are seeing example after example of this government trying to cover up every piece of information it possibly can so that it can continue in its arrogant way with its huge majority in this place of 66. It wants to do what it likes without what it regards as the nuisance of the opposition, the media or non-government parties doing what they are entitled to do—probe, check and find out what is happening so that the government is held accountable to the taxpayers of this state.

Queensland has been down this path. We have dealt with the costly Fitzgerald inquiry and report, which resulted in the National Party government implementing accountability measures lock, stock and barrel. Through the 1990s, Queensland governments moved on to introduce freedom of information legislation and implement other systems so that we can now say to the public of Queensland—or we should be able to—that we have an accountable, open and honest government. If people want to check things, if the opposition and non-government parties want to undertake their responsibilities and check things, or if the media or other independent research organisations want to find out the reasons for decisions, there are reasonable ways in which that can be done so that the taxpayers of this state can be provided with those answers.

However, again and again we see examples of the government doing its best to hide every piece of information it possibly can despite the FOI legislation. Also today we saw clear evidence that the government is very comfortable with being a control freak. The supposedly independent Stamp Duty Commissioner has been gagged by the Treasurer's henchmen. He has not been able to speak out about the whys and wherefores of the decisions that were made in relation to Cheryl Kernot.

In the meantime, the rest of us face being sluggish with an accountability tax, which will be introduced into this parliament in proposed legislation. That entails people being charged \$20 per hour

for work undertaken in relation to FOI applications on top of the original FOI application fee of \$31. If the government is going to take this proposal to the nth degree, that could mean also that the government might find allegations of official misconduct made to the CJC a nuisance that costs money, for which someone has to pay. Are we going to have an accountability tax on complaints that are made to the CJC? Are we going to have an accountability tax put on those people who make inquiries of the Ombudsman—inquiries that take considerable time and effort of the staff and cost money?

When FOI legislation was introduced, it was always going to be the government's responsibility to provide information. That legislation is one of the cornerstones of open, honest and accountable government—a modern style of government that deals with a public that wants to be informed. In that way, the government provides that information and then has the courage to argue its case as to why a decision was made, based on facts made available to people who have sought the information.

Mr Terry Sullivan interjected.

Mr HORAN: I hear the member for Chermside yelling out. He is quite happy to support this accountability tax that will be imposed on the opposition and non-government parties. This tax will mean that the government does not want organisations, on behalf of the people of Queensland, to try to find out why decisions were made and whether they were made correctly, honestly, and without any coercion. The member would like to gag those organisations. He would like to put handcuffs on opposition members. He knows that the opposition has to work within a tight budget and, owing to this accountability tax, may not be able to afford to make genuine inquiries on behalf of people.

The government is not trying to gag only the opposition; it is trying to gag democracy. The state of Queensland is entering a new dark age. We thought that we had moved into enlightened times, with FOI being the cornerstone of government and information being freely available to all. However, FOI is now going to be a privilege for the wealthy who can afford it. When organisations or individuals make applications for information that is not related to them personally they will have to pay this tax. So FOI will be a privilege. We have entered a new era: an accountability tax on information that is only within the reach of multimillionaires.

As I said, this tax will restrict the level of investigation and research that the opposition can undertake on behalf of the people, because we have a limited budget. It also sets a dangerous precedent. If the government places this tax on FOI, as it becomes more cash strapped—and we know it lost \$820 million from its operating budget last year—it will look at the CJC and say, 'Maybe we should be charging a complaints fee. Maybe we should charge \$20 an hour for the research undertaken.'

Mr Terry Sullivan: Come on!

Mr HORAN: It is exactly the same principle. This is about the members opposite being frightened. They are control freaks. That is the way in which the ALP has always operated. It wants to control information. It is not game to debate decisions openly.

Also today legislation will be introduced into this parliament relating to the Ombudsman. I will be interested to see whether that legislation will enable the government to gain control over the Ombudsman, who should be absolutely independent.

This government has a control-freak mentality. Just the other day the government announced that it was going to take the independent research facility from the Criminal Justice Commission and place it into the Premier's Department so that the government will have control of it. Can members imagine the government announcing that it has research on the dreadful way in which the government is handling drugs misuse, housebreakings or anything like that? Of course they cannot! It will be a cover-up.

Some of the FOI applications that we have made relate to the Families Department, the State Development Department, the Health Department, the footbridge fiasco, the Lang Park stadium and the Virgin deal. All of those issues, which are important to the public, have been wheeled into the cabinet so that the government does not have to give us important information. The government will now add to its arsenal another weapon: money. It will wheel what it can into cabinet and what it cannot wheel into cabinet it will put a charge on. Therefore, if we make an application it might cost us \$1,000 or \$500 or \$1,500—

Time expired.
