



Speech by

Mr N. ROBERTS

MEMBER FOR NUDGE

Hansard 29 November 2001

RACING AND BETTING AMENDMENT BILL [No. 2]

Mr NEIL ROBERTS (Nudgee—ALP) (6.26 p.m.): I support the bill. The minister has had a difficult job in bringing this bill to the parliament, but I believe that the model brought forward will adequately address the needs of the industry and carry it forward into the future. There are a lot of competing interests and demands in the racing industry. As I will elaborate further, the proposed model will do two things: it will enable us to put in place quite quickly a body which will manage the transition from the QPC to the new body and it will also give industry participants an opportunity over the next 18 months to have their say on the issues in terms of how the new company limited by guarantee will operate.

One of the issues, of course, that drove this agenda for change is that the current Queensland Principal Club as the peak control body for thoroughbred racing in Queensland has, whether they be real or perceived, a number of conflicts of interest. The QPC, when making decisions in the interests of the entire thoroughbred racing industry, was often confronted with agendas more attuned to the interests of particular clubs. There is a need in the industry, given the dramatic changes that have taken place in recent years, for a commercial focus that looks strategically at the needs of the industry as a whole. Those conflicts of interest, whether perceived or real in many people's minds—I think in some cases they were quite real—needed to be addressed, and the model that the minister has come up with will go a long way to addressing that.

We should admit that the QPC itself also had a difficult job. Over the last few years it has been endeavouring to manage the affairs of the industry in a period of major change. There was the privatisation of the TAB. Of course, the industry also faces increasing competition and challenges from other sectors, namely, gambling—particularly the wagering sector—and the entertainment industry not just through clubs but as a whole. So, the commercial focus and strategic thinking required to position the industry in that sort of climate is quite critical. We need a body which can act independently of individual interests within the industry to drive that agenda of change and to take the industry forward. Knowing many people at senior levels within the racing industry, I am confident that those people exist and am sure that the selection panel choosing the interim control body will have a difficult job, because there are a lot of people with a tremendous amount of talent who have a lot of contributions to make to the industry.

As members would be aware—and I do not want to detract from the seriousness of this bill—I do have a personal interest in and a love of the racing industry. Many, many years ago I held an owner-trainer's licence in Brisbane and on the Darling Downs. I have ridden track work in Brisbane, Warwick, Toowoomba and Randwick.

Mr Johnson: You'd be a taller jockey than Jack Thompson then!

Mr NEIL ROBERTS: I have made the claim to be the tallest elected politician in the country, and I would also make the claim of being the tallest track work rider ever to ride track work in this country, as well.

Mrs Edmond: Your feet would be dragging on the ground.

Mr NEIL ROBERTS: No. Those members who know riding styles would understand that it is not the length of your legs which determines how far they are off the ground.

Getting back to the bill—the tensions in the industry have been increasing in recent years with issues such as the negotiation of Sky Channel agreements and litigation between TAB Queensland Limited and various clubs. There have also been media reports of breaches of the Racing and Betting Act by club committees. Threats of clubs facing deregistration need to be addressed by a strong and independent board. In the current environment it is difficult for the government to effectively engage the industry in the process of reforming the governance structure for the thoroughbred code. There is an urgent need for the government to respond by first stabilising the industry and then engaging industry stakeholders in the process of reforming the governance structure of a peak body for the thoroughbred code.

As I outlined generally before, there will be a two-stage process that will be implemented. The first stage will involve those changes necessary to quickly put in place a board that is free from the conflicts of interest which have caused some difficulty to date. I want to reiterate that in relation to those conflicts of interest and the way in which the QPC has been operating, I do not necessarily put that down to the individuals on the current QPC. There are a lot of fine individuals on that board who have made and will make a significant contribution to the industry. I believe that a lot of the difficulties that were encountered were more in relation to the structure itself, which did not enable the proper decision-making processes to take place. We need to put in place a board that is free from those conflicts and which can assist the government in addressing the important issues that are impacting on the industry, as I have outlined.

Necessary urgent amendments will be made to the Racing and Betting Act 1980 to change the composition of the QPC board to remove conflicts of interest and to ensure a skills-based board. In the first stage, the new board will be the Queensland Thoroughbred Racing Board. It will be a statutory authority. The name of the QPC will be changed to the Queensland Thoroughbred Racing Board. As this board will not be a new entity, the need to transfer assets, liabilities and staff from the QPC to the QTRB will be avoided.

The QTRB will be comprised of five non-executive independent members who will be identified by a process conducted by an independent professional executive recruitment company. The recruitment company will independently assess nominations and short-list those candidates who are the best qualified and have a diversity of skills and experience. The recruitment company may actively recruit applicants and will be required to conduct a state-wide advertising campaign for a period of at least three weeks. The company will independently assess the nominations and identify candidates who are the best qualified having regard to the needs of the regional and metropolitan interests of the industry and the need to have a diversity of skills and experience on the board.

The recruitment company will provide the details of short-listed candidates to a selection panel who will select the five members of the board of the QTRB. The three-person selection panel will consist of one person nominated by the five regional racing associations—who must not be a committee member of a TAB Queensland club—one person nominated by all TAB Queensland clubs and one person nominated by the Minister for Racing. In order to eliminate potential conflicts of interest from the QTRB, a member of the board cannot be a current member of a club, regional association or industry association committee.

This important reform agenda of the racing industry needs to have the support of industry participants. Stage 2 of the reform process will involve the board of the QTRB investigating and making recommendations to the minister within 18 months after the appointment on the establishment of a company limited by guarantee that will become the control body for thoroughbred racing.

In the lead-up to this debate tonight, I have had a number of people whom I know within the industry contact me expressing some concerns about the current model. People were wishing to have representation on the selection panel, et cetera, and an opportunity to have more input into this initial stage. But I support the minister's model here. There was a need to urgently put in place a board which could manage the transition process. It is important for industry participants to acknowledge that, over the next 18 months, they will have the opportunity to make those representations or have input into what they believe the governing body of the industry should look like in 18 months time. So I believe that a lot of the issues and concerns that may have been raised with various members—and through the minister's office—about representation on selection panels and so on can be addressed over the next 18 months.

Mr Pearce: Will track riders, jockeys and all those other people get representation?

Mr NEIL ROBERTS: I am certainly not pushing that track work riders such as myself get representation, but certainly people in the industry may wish to pursue those matters.

Mr Hobbs: You were a jockey, weren't you?

Mr NEIL ROBERTS: No, I was never a jockey, I was a track work rider. It is important to make the distinction.

This is an important bill. In common with many of the speakers who will follow me and those who have gone before, I have a great love of the industry and a respect for the people who are involved in it. We do believe that the industry has the capacity to work through this important period of change and come up with a control body that will be in the best interests of the industry and will pursue the agenda that will carry our great Queensland racing industry forward into the future. I commend the bill to the House.
