



Speech by

RACHEL NOLAN

MEMBER FOR IPSWICH

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FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AMENDMENT BILL

Ms NOLAN (Ipswich—ALP) (5.24 p.m.): I rise to speak in support of the bill and also to correct the record. There really has been a little bit of—one could kindly say—exaggeration in the media and among the opposition about the effect that this will have on accountability and openness of government in Queensland.

FOI is certainly at the heart of government—I would say equally—for two reasons. Firstly, it provides individuals with information that the government holds about them and allows government decision-making processes to become more open. Secondly, it fundamentally makes the government accountable. I think the shift from having a situation in which there is no FOI to the introduction of FOI represents a fundamental philosophical shift about how government works. I think that in Queensland it has dramatically improved the openness, the accountability and the quality of our decision-making processes.

These changes are fairly minor and will not affect the majority of applicants. I support the changes because they place some value on FOI and they place responsibility to pay firmly on those who can. There have been times, as we know, when media outlets have sought extensive searches and have not bothered to even collect them. I think that is quite a serious abuse of the FOI process and of the time of public servants, which really should be dedicated to providing services to Queenslanders.

We come, though, to the issue of the opposition and the question of whether they should have to pay for FOI. During the last sitting week, when the opposition asked a question specifically about this issue, I thought that they looked tremendously self-serving. The members opposite asked whether they would be affected and they acted in their own interests rather than in the community's interests. I really thought that, in asking a question that related solely to themselves, the members opposite looked like children stamping their feet and saying, 'What about me?'

I believe that the question of whether or not the opposition should pay is a valid one. After all, the opposition do have a legitimate role to play in ensuring government accountability. But, ultimately, does the question of whether the opposition should pay really matter? As long as the opposition is sufficiently resourced it is a bit of a moot point, because the money does a circuit from the Premier's Department through the opposition and then into whichever government department the opposition is applying to for FOI. The only point I would make is that, if government is going to charge the opposition for FOI, it must be committed to properly funding the opposition. I believe that this government is appropriately committed. I would say, though, that over time that commitment must continue.

In this debate the members of the National Party sought to present themselves as the defenders of freedom of information and the protectors of all of our liberties. What hypocritical garbage! Let us look at the National Party's record on FOI. In their 32 years of government they failed to introduce FOI legislation, despite the fact that it was introduced in the Commonwealth in 1982 and was progressively introduced in the other states after that. While they talk about openness now, they made no moves to open up the FOI regime when they were in government between 1996 and 1998. So for all of the National Party's moralising, they have never, ever once made a positive change to FOI in Queensland.

I am a fervent supporter of FOI, possibly because I am probably one of the few people here who has worked in opposition in a jurisdiction that does not have any FOI legislation, as I did in the

Northern Territory under the fairly shady CLP government. The frustration of existing in opposition when you cannot get your hands on any information is enormous. The absence of FOI or unworkable FOI allows shady deals to flourish, just as they did here under the National Party government and in the Northern Territory under the CLP.

These amendments do not change the workability of FOI. They do bring us into line with other jurisdictions. On the issue of costs, I believe it is important that community organisations seeking non-personal information should have easy access to FOI. For instance, if the Jacaranda Street community group in Ipswich wanted to make an FOI application to the Ipswich City Council to find out what the council's plans were for their street, there should not be particular impediments in their way. So I would ask the government and other affected bodies such as councils to generously apply the financial hardship provisions when it comes to community organisations.

The bill also includes widened provisions for departments to knock back voluminous applications and provisions that allow applicants and government to negotiate applications to better define what a person is looking for and hence save the department time and the person involved unnecessary costs. The introduction of negotiation is a big step forward, but I believe it can go further. FOI would be made more accessible and less administrative for everyone if discussion of what the applicant wants was entrenched in the process. I often feel that in government we write too much but communicate too little. We can go a long way towards improving the workability of FOI if we entrench those processes of actually talking to people about what it is they are after. These changes to the FOI Act are not revolutionary. They are true to the objects of accountability and openness and are sensible rather than secretive. I commend the bill to the House.
