



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS

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FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AMENDMENT BILL

Ms LEE LONG (Tablelands—ONP) (2.36 p.m.): When introducing the Freedom of Information Bill in 1991, the Goss Labor government expressed its pleasure at doing so. The object was to extend as far as possible the right of the community to have access to information held by Queensland government agencies and was recommended by the Electoral and Administrative Review Commission—EARC—and Mr Tony Fitzgerald in his well-known report. The EARC report states—

Freedom of information is the grist of government processes. The fairness of decisions and their accuracy, merit and accountability ultimately will depend on the effective participation of those who will be affected by the bill. Further, when access to information is denied its right to exercise control over government, FOI legislation is crucial if access to information is to be obtained, and thereby participation is to be achieved.

This was in line with Labor's desire to be seen as an open and accountable government and not one of secrecy, which creates a sense of suspicion. The Labor government wanted to be seen as an agent of its citizens, giving them free information in a smart, modern and democratic society. It believed in improving the rights of the average person in their dealings with government departments.

Freedom of information brings the benefits of greater awareness of the role different government agencies play. It increases participation by the public in the process of policy making and it also increases government efficiency. Freedom of information legislation enshrined and protected three basic principles of a free and democratic government—namely, openness, accountability and responsibility. In a free and democratic society the public interest is served by the promotion of open discussion on public affairs and enhancement of the accountability of government.

The public should be kept informed of the government's operations, including the rules and practices followed by the government in its dealings with members of the community. Members of the community should have access to information held by the government in relation to their personal affairs and they should be able to ensure that information of that kind is accurate, complete, up to date and not misleading.

I acknowledge that access to personal information is still on the free list. However, the term 'personal affairs' can be misleading and I believe that the difference between personal and non-personal affairs needs to be distinguished more clearly in this amendment. As I understand it, 'personal affairs' covers only such things as correct spelling, punctuation, address, et cetera—things that relate specifically to one's self. That information is free. However, members of the public will find it difficult to accept that they have to pay a \$20 per hour fee for information over and above that, that is, information concerning themselves, which includes work, business, or any other related issues. That will be considered non-personal, because it includes other parties. Thus it will cost \$20 per hour to access that information.

Surely, if charges have to be applied, some sort of sliding scale could be developed to ensure equitable access for ordinary citizens. We live in a society where information is power, and Queenslanders, whether they be rich or poor, are entitled to live in an information-rich society. I understand that the Council for Civil Liberties is appalled at these amendments, which will surely restrict information to ordinary Queenslanders, especially at a time when many are doing it tough financially.

A \$20 an hour search and document preparation fee in addition to the \$31 application fee has Premier Beattie being accused of blatant hypocrisy. I am also concerned that the documents can be wheeled into a cabinet room where they then become exempt from freedom of information regulations.

It is a farce and the public is not impressed. I am also concerned that the charging of hourly fees could be open to abuse by public servants. Many applicants will be placed in a far worse—if not impossible—position than they are in at present. Just because the Beattie government says that large corporations can afford to pay for freedom of information does not justify lumping ordinary citizens into the same basket. That fees may be waived on the grounds of financial hardship is very loose terminology and leaves one wondering what scrutiny one would have to go through to qualify. It seems to me that the Beattie government, which constantly reminds us how open and accountable it is, preaches democracy but does the opposite. I oppose the bill.
