



Speech by

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CODE OF ETHICAL STANDARDS FOR MEMBERS

Statement of Fundamental Principles

Mr COPELAND (Cunningham—NPA) (12.16 p.m.): It is a great honour for me as a new member to speak in support of this Statement of Fundamental Principles. I guess new members come to this place with a bit of wide-eyed idealism. I know from listening to the other maiden speeches that all of us came here with the same aim of trying to move away from the cynicism and scepticism on the part of the wider community that surrounds politicians and politics. I have to say: it is a bit of a disappointment that I am the only new member listed to speak in this debate. Given the sentiments expressed by all of us in our maiden speeches, I think it would have been nice to hear contributions from other new members.

New members do come to this place knowing that there is a cynicism in the wider community about politics. I think it has definitely crossed the line of healthy scepticism and scrutiny to become a deep and dangerous cynicism about what we do. We certainly must try to do everything we can to address that. This Statement of Fundamental Principles certainly is a step in the right direction.

I concur with the comments of the member for Caloundra. This parliament is an incredibly complex place to come into, not only to become abreast of everything that happens here but also in relation to our responsibilities. I must thank all of the staff and the sitting members who helped the new members. I know that the member for Stafford, the member for Bulimba and the Speaker were all involved in our training sessions. I found that incredibly useful and it helped us on our way.

Mr Terry Sullivan: Mr Copeland, it was largely the parliamentary staff who put that program together.

Mr COPELAND: I agree with the member that it was the staff, and the staff have been excellent in helping us whenever we have needed assistance, not only during the training sessions.

We should be doing everything we can to address the cynicism of the community. Ninety-five per cent of the people representing electorates in this place are here for the right reasons. It is personal integrity that keeps us here and makes us abide by the sorts of measures we are trying to implement. If this statement can help us to make those aims public, then we should be promoting it.

Unfortunately, a couple always spoil the image by their conduct both in this parliament and outside it. The most public demonstration of what politics is all about, unfortunately, is question time. The nine-second grab in the TV headlines does not do any of us justice, because it really does not give an accurate picture of what happens.

Mr Beattie: I agree with that. I want a 30-minute grab.

Mr COPELAND: I do not think the rest of us could handle a 30-minute grab of you, Premier. The nine-second grab, the instantaneous way that we are beamed into people's lounge rooms really does not give an accurate picture of what we do or are about and is not good for any of us. We have to come to grips with that in the parliament to see how we can address the problem.

One of the things I have found disappointing since I have been here is contained in the first statement of these principles. That is the integrity of parliament and that is the most public thing that we are involved in. The conduct of government quite often generates robust debate—and it perhaps goes beyond robust debate—during question time and it is broadcast. We need to make sure that the process of government is properly followed so that we do not have to step over that line of robust debate.

If the processes are properly followed and if there is clear transparency in what we do, then we can avoid a lot of that negative publicity that is sometimes generated when we are pressing to get information from government and trying to ensure scrutiny of the government. For example, there is no

doubt that during question time ministers simply do not answer the question. In terms of relevance, in terms of answering the questions that are asked and in terms of giving the information that we as representatives of electorates are trying to ascertain, when that is not forthcoming that is when we see the standard of debate that sometimes goes beyond what we would all like to see. If those processes were properly followed and if those answers were properly given, we would be able to avoid an awful lot of that.

One of the most disappointing moments that I had as a wide-eyed and idealistic new member—and I was hoping for some leadership on this issue—occurred in I think in the second week of parliament sitting. It happened during a debate regarding extension offices in country areas, specifically dairy extension officers, which was an incredibly important issue for a lot of us in this House regardless of what side of politics we are on. The issue was the withdrawal of those extension officers from some areas in these difficult times. There was a question asked of the Primary Industries Minister who was unfortunately away on legitimate business and the Premier answered the question and simply—

Mr Palaszczuk: He answered it very well.

Mr COPELAND: I have to disagree with the minister. I do not think he answered it well; I think he turned it into a vaudeville act which was not only demeaning to the House but was also demeaning to the question that was asked. It was a very important question. Unfortunately the shadow minister was ejected on that occasion and that was as a direct result of the information that we were requesting not being provided.

If the question had been answered correctly and civilly rather than with the untruths and showmanship that was going on, we could have avoided all of that unpleasantness. Unfortunately, the incident did happen. Unfortunately, the shadow minister was ejected and unfortunately the PR spin that night related not to the fact that this question had not been answered but to the conduct of the parliament. That is the crux of the problem as far as I see it. We really need to be making sure that the conduct of the process of parliament does not allow us to open ourselves up to that sort of criticism.

We have certainly seen a couple of other issues that have highlighted the way that the processes are not being properly followed, which leads to our stepping beyond what is rightfully robust debate. We have seen it with the way the IR bill was conducted through the House and with the way the fisheries bill was conducted through this House in the last two sitting weeks.

It is very disappointing that we come in here with the legislation as presented; we are prepared to give it bipartisan support because we agree with the cooperation that is required among all members of the House to make sure that the process of government continues; the shadow minister delivers his speech to the second reading debate; and when he sits down a whole heap of amendments hit the table. Then we are criticised again because we have not conformed to what someone sees as an arbitrary standard.

Certainly much of the cynicism and much of the criticism that we get would be avoided if the proper respect was paid—the respect that must be given to the opposition, the respect that must be given to the entire House and the respect that must be given to the process of government. If we had been handed those amendments in time to consider them, in all likelihood we could have supported them. The fact is that they were dropped in our laps but we did not know whether that was as a result of bad government or bad administration or—as a new person coming in and asking just why did it happen—through some sinister motive.

There may not have been a sinister motive, but when we are sitting here and we see these things happen our minds start to tick over and think, 'Why on earth did it happen? There was not any reason for it to happen. There was not any reason to push it through the House but that happened anyway. There must be a sinister motive for it.' They are the sorts of things that we have to work through together to make sure that we do avoid that situation and so that we do not bring into question our processes and the reactions to those processes when they do not go according to plan.

Another practice that has been brought into question at times is the use of cabinet to prevent the public disclosure of documents. In terms of transparency of government and in terms of public interest, that can be easily abused. That is something that we have to keep an eye on.

All of these actions are nails in the coffin of proper process of government. Unfortunately, we have to make sure that the scrutiny is built in. Parliamentary process has to be observed; if it is observed and if it is transparent, we can avoid a lot of these problems.

The next step is the Speaker's role. I know that we are all conscious of the importance of the role the Speaker plays. Especially now, especially with the imbalance in the numbers, the Speaker must be impartial. The Speaker must step away from his party background and not be seen to be toeing the party line and to act as an independent Speaker. If we are to have the proper scrutiny of government, we must make sure that that happens.

We are all here to do the right thing, I have no doubt about that, but we must also be seen to be doing the right thing. We all work hard. We all work hard while we are here; we all work hard while we are away. However, we are seen by many not to be doing anything at all. Yesterday a letter to the editor of the Toowoomba *Chronicle* was absolutely scathing of politics and politicians. That sort of thing

is self-perpetuating. We have to make sure that we do try to address that, and we need to address it in a different way now that we do have instantaneous public scrutiny via the television.

A government member interjected.

Mr COPELAND: I will take that interjection. Something that we have seen, especially this week, is the fact that the opposition has been criticised for doing all sorts of things in the House. The sooner everyone here recognises that there is fault on both sides, the sooner we can come to some sort of agreement to overcome this problem. The sooner we stop blaming each other whilst ignoring our own problems, the sooner we will achieve a real result and a real resolution to what this statement of fundamental principles is trying to achieve.

That is probably a good point to finish on. If we can work together, if we do not lay blame on each other and if we do try to work on the standards on both sides of the House, then we can lift the status of parliamentarians outside of the parliament. That can only be a good thing in terms of making sure that the parliamentary process is respected, that people respect the democracy that we live in and respect the robust debate that we do sometimes participate in—and not only respect it but also value it and value the fact that that freedom of speech and freedom of debate is upholding and continuing the democracy that we all enjoy.
