



Speech by

STUART COPELAND

MEMBER FOR CUNNINGHAM

Hansard 30 May 2001

RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS OFFENCES BILL

Mr COPELAND (Cunningham—NPA) (11.33 p.m.): I rise to support the Racial and Religious Offences Bill introduced into this parliament by the member for Southern Downs.

Government members interjected.

Mr COPELAND: To paraphrase that king of righteous indignation, the Premier: the members opposite can be rude. They can interfere with what we are trying to say. Hypocrisy is shown by the Premier when he stands up and talks about non-government members in this House interjecting, being rude and not listening, yet those opposite are not giving us a fair go to say what we want to say tonight.

I rise to speak in support of this bill, and I welcome the opportunity to speak to it. It is a shame that it has been brought in so late and it is a shame that it was brought into the parliament so quickly. I have to disagree with the Leader of the House—

Government members interjected.

Mr COPELAND: The members opposite can be rude and can interject, but we will continue to fight this issue.

Government members interjected.

Mr COPELAND: Isn't it incredible that those opposite are the first to cast stones but they live in the biggest glass houses?

It is a shame that the debate of this legislation was dropped on us at very short notice. The Leader of the House said we were given 30 minutes notice that we were going to debate this bill. That is incorrect, because we were given approximately 15 minutes notice. Notwithstanding that, I welcome the opportunity to speak in favour of this bill. Following the passing of the Anti-Discrimination Amendment Bill today, the debating of this legislation is timely because it is in direct contrast with many issues we raised today.

Government members interjected.

Mr COPELAND: They continue to interject. It is incredible that they love to cast stones.

This legislation endeavours to impose punishment on people who commit actual crimes. Today the opposition spoke at length about the problems it had with the legislation debated in the House this morning regarding infringements on freedom of speech and on the difficulties in interpreting what may or may not be offensive. The member for Bulimba spoke in the debate and raised a whole range of things that he did not consider to be offensive whereas someone else may have found those things offensive. Therein lies the problem with the legislation that we debated earlier.

The legislation, as introduced by the member for Southern Downs, quite clearly tries to punish definite acts of crime. Earlier the Attorney-General and Minister for Justice, in speaking to this legislation, said how difficult it was to prove motives in actual crimes. Of course it is difficult. Therein lies one of the rationales for introducing this legislation. We are trying to punish actual crime. If it is difficult to prove the motives in actual crime, how difficult is it to prove motives in something someone may have thought someone else said or did or posted or broadcast?

The crux of this legislation is to punish severely those crimes committed on the basis of race or religious hatred. All members of this House believe that those crimes that occur are absolutely disgusting. All of us recognise that we must fight this with everything we possibly can, but we must also recognise that we should not infringe on freedom of speech. It is a right that we take for granted. It is a right that we have fought for many years to defend. It is a right that is gradually, with every encroachment and every extra piece of legislation, being taken away from us.

I do not agree with what people say in many cases and I do not agree that we should promote racial or religious hatred. Of course we should not, but we must recognise that we live in a free and democratic society and we must recognise that people have the right to say those things in this society. We must try to do everything we can to make clear that that is not acceptable in our society, but we must not introduce an arbitrary restriction, as the legislation debated this morning did, that is open to all sorts of interpretation and all sorts of grey areas as to what someone may or may not find offensive.

Regardless of the mirth this legislation has been greeted with by members opposite, it is serious legislation trying to address a serious problem. As the member for Southern Downs said, it closely resembles legislation currently in existence in Western Australia. It introduced its legislation for similar reasons to those given for the introduction of this private member's bill. As the member for Southern Downs said in his second reading speech, this bill is designed to protect the rights and liberties of innocent individuals whilst punishing those who commit crimes based on the race or religion of those whom the crimes are committed against. That is what we are here for. This legislation seeks to increase penalties so that we can punish real crimes that can be proved and not unsubstantiated allegations.

Instead of trying to judge thoughts or freedom of speech issues, this bill sets out to punish actual deeds. It does not impinge on or erode the right of freedom of speech, which we in this country quite rightly value. We should continue to value that right. As the Leader of the Opposition said earlier, freedom of speech is a great thing we have in this country. It is one of our great strengths and is one of the things that is most attractive to people from right around the world. We should not underestimate how valuable that is and we should not underestimate how hard the fight will be to continue to promote the right of freedom of speech.

I place on record again my personal commitment to the values of multiculturalism—the value of people who have come from other countries and the contribution they make to Australia. We are all immigrants, the whole lot of us. We may have come here last week, we may have come here last year or we may have come here 100 or 200 years ago. There is no difference at all in terms of when we came here, and we all must recognise that everyone has a right to be here and everyone has a valuable contribution to make to our society. I believe that we do recognise that. I certainly do on a personal level. I also believe that we should be protecting the rights of our people—freedom of speech, democracy and the egalitarian society that we enjoy and that is so highly valued right around the world.

I have travelled to and lived in a lot of different countries. There is not a country on earth that can boast the proud record we can. No other country can boast a society as strong and egalitarian as ours. We do have equality. Yes, we have problems. There is no argument about that. Yes, we do have people who should not be doing some of the things they do. Notwithstanding that, we can hold our heads up high. We must defend the rights on which our society is built. It may hurt us on occasion, but there will be people who will say things that offend us—there is no doubt about that—and we must defend their right to say them.

This is an important bill. I am very pleased to speak in support of it. It seeks to punish actual crimes, not some thought, word or deed by the thought police. It sets extra penalties. As the Attorney-General said, those motives are very difficult to prove, but just how difficult will it be to prove an offence when no actual crime has been committed? That is a very good question we should all ask ourselves.

I commend this bill to the House. I hope that members opposite will not treat debate on this bill as simply another little game. They think they can bring it on and be smart and try and catch us out. That is not the point of bringing this bill on for debate. We will continue to fight. We will continue to debate this bill, and other bills if this happens again.

It is a demonstration of the absolute arrogance of this government that it has brought the debate on in this way. Time was allocated in the sessional orders. Those were abandoned, but the debate was later brought on with 15 minutes notice. That is all right. The government has done that. That will simply reinforce in the minds of the Queensland public just how arrogant this government has become in such a short a time. It will be a very long three years if this arrogance continues to grow.
