



Speech by

JEFF SEENEY

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

Hansard 4 December 2002

TERRORISM [COMMONWEALTH POWERS] BILL

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (9.07 p.m.): As shadow minister for police, I feel that I have a clear obligation to make a contribution to this debate. I certainly would endorse the remarks that have been made by previous speakers on behalf of the opposition that we are only too pleased to lend our support to the passage of this legislation through the House tonight. I am sure that every member in this parliament would agree that this is necessary legislation and that it is necessary that this House consider and pass it tonight, as it obviously will. I also believe that every member in this House would wish that it were not so. Every member in this House would wish that this House did not have to consider a subject such as this. Unfortunately, it is the reality of the age in which we live that the issue of terrorism and how we respond to it as a society is something that if not dominates our thinking certainly is a factor in everything that we do. All of our institutions need to now look at the way in which they operate and the way in which we conduct our lives against the background of a world where terrorism is a very real and a very important consideration.

People say that the world changed on September 11, but that summation is probably too simplistic. I think on September 11 the potential for terrorist attacks became a reality. The potential for terrorism that was there before September 11 suddenly became very real when we all witnessed those horrendous attacks, as was made possible by the technology of satellite television.

I was actually here in the parliamentary annexe that night and flicking idly through the television channels, as one does late at night. I could not believe the first images that I saw from New York when that attack was launched. As did a lot of other people all around the world, in all sorts of different communities and in all sorts of different cultures, I spent the next eight or 10 hours transfixed by the images that were beamed from New York to every place in the world. For every society in the world, that attack brought home the enormity of the threat of terrorism. Terrorism is not restricted to a particular place or a particular country; it is something everybody has to deal with, at all levels in public administration. This piece of legislation we consider tonight is just one small part of an appropriate reaction by this Queensland parliament.

If September 11 changed the way we saw and thought about terrorism, the attacks on Bali a little over 12 months later did so even more. The attacks on Bali were so much closer to home. They involved a large number of Australians. They had probably a bigger impact on the Australian community—on all of us—than the events of September 11. A few minutes after my wife and I heard the news item about Bali on the Sunday morning we had a phone call from our teenage daughter, who was in Europe. It was a very frightening time. Even though Europe is a long way from Bali, I guess it was the natural reaction of a parent to immediately want our daughter to be home, yet that was impossible. We had an enormous sensation of vulnerability that I think our whole country has experienced since the attacks in Bali and New York. It is that feeling of vulnerability that we have to respond to.

The object of terrorism is to create fear. That is the purpose of the attacks. It is very difficult to understand how the type of mass murder that is involved in these attacks can advance any cause. It is very difficult for me and I guess most people in the world to understand how the mind-set of a person can lead them to the conclusion that this type of horrendous mass murder can advance their particular cause. It does make us all feel vulnerable. It makes us all fear those types of attacks. We have to deal with that vulnerability and with the potential for that sense of fear.

That is what this legislation is about. It is one small part of a response to that feeling of vulnerability and fear that has been engendered in our community. To that extent, unfortunately, the terrorists have succeeded. We all have a responsibility to ensure terrorists are not allowed to succeed, to put in place a sufficient response to ensure that that sense of fear and that feeling of vulnerability is dealt with. As much as we are able to, we need to make the people in our communities feel safe, even in a world where this type of terrorist attack is unfortunately a reality.

The Premier raised the issue of hand guns. What is being proposed does concern me somewhat. Most members of the House would remember the response to the terrible tragedy of Port Arthur. The firearms legislation was changed in response to that. I sat here tonight listening to the Premier speak quite rightly about the dangers of judging people and setting one group of people against another and assuming that somehow people are a threat. In this case he was talking about people of particular ethnic origins. That made me think about the way so many people responded after the terrible tragedy at Port Arthur. That is pretty much what happened to gun owners after Port Arthur.

There were people who were prepared to vilify all gun owners after the tragedy of Port Arthur. Whether or not it was intentional, every gun owner that I know—they are all responsible gun owners and responsible people—suddenly felt as though they were the criminals. I think it is that feeling of vilification, that feeling that gun owners are guilty, that has been the root cause of a lot of the anger about and aggressive response towards the new gun laws. That has been felt by a large number of people not just in my electorate. There are probably more gun owners per head of population in my electorate than in some of the urban electorates.

The comments the Premier made tonight are very valid. I do not want to see that type of vilification repeated in relation to hand gun owners in the current debate. There are some very responsible people who own hand guns and they own them for a very particular reason. They should not be the subject of vilification and they should not be made to feel guilty simply because of the actions of one lunatic in Melbourne. Unfortunately, that is what happened after Port Arthur. Whether or not it was intentional or we realised it at the time, that is what happened in relation to firearms owners.

I urge caution to everyone engaged in the current debate about the future of hand gun laws. I urge caution in the way we approach the legislative changes that are envisaged in response to that incident in Melbourne. Let us direct those legislative changes at the criminals. Let us make the criminals who own hand guns, often illegally, feel threatened, not the responsible people. Let us not direct that legislative change unduly at the responsible gun owners. Let us make sure we put an end to the illegal use and illegal importation of hand guns. Hopefully we can reduce the amount of hand gun crime and reduce the number of times we have to deal with the type of tragedy we saw in Melbourne.

Mr Malone: It is so easy to attack registered gun owners.

Mr SEENEY: As the member for Mirani says, registered owners of hand guns are an easy target. When we are emotive and angry, we lash out at the easy targets. That is what the Premier was talking about when he spoke of being careful not to lash out at people of ethnic origin in the case of terrorism. It is something of a natural response to lash out at what we see as an easy target that is representative of the problem that has engendered the emotive response in the first place. The member for Mirani is exactly right.

The other point I would like to make is that this heightened awareness, this response that we all have to make towards this issue of terrorism, is going to cost us as a community. It is going to cost us in terms of physical resources, it is going to cost us in terms of convenience and perhaps it is going to cost us in terms of civil liberties. But I think it is a cost that we are going to have to bear. I cannot see how those costs are not going to be incurred if we are going to properly address this issue of terrorism, if we are going to properly address the feeling of vulnerability and fear that I spoke about earlier. In that regard, the government has a very clear responsibility.

I am pleased that the Minister for Police is present in the House, because he has a particular responsibility. Already the Queensland Police Service is underresourced. If the world changed for all of us on September 11 with terrorism becoming a reality, then for those people in the Queensland Police Service—as in police services probably all over the world—the world changed in a much greater way. In this war on terrorism, they are very much the front-line soldiers. Those people who don the police uniform every day and go to work have suddenly been transformed from policemen in our suburban communities to being the front-line soldiers in this war on terrorism. The government has a responsibility to make sure that the police are properly resourced. They are as much in the front line now in this war against terrorism as are the SAS in the role that they play in places such as Afghanistan.

Mr Springborg: Probably even more.

Mr SEENEY: Exactly. Every police officer who puts on their blue uniform and goes to work is a front-line soldier in this war on terrorism.

Mr English: And the plain clothes police.

Mr SEENEY: Exactly, the plain clothes police as well. Those people are now the front-line soldiers. They are the people who will be first response troops in the event of any sort of terrorist attack. The very least that the government can do and the very least that the Police Minister can do is ensure that those police are properly resourced.

We do not need to get into a political argument about this. We need to ensure that it happens. That is going to cost us more. There will have to be an increase in the resources that are available to those people, because they cannot take on this role and continue to play the role that they have been playing up until now with the same level of resourcing in terms of both money and physical resources. Those police officers have to be properly resourced in terms of physical resources, in terms of training and support, so that they can deal with the type of incidents that we all hope will never happen.

For the rest of us, the cost is going to be one of convenience. I have seen people do a dummy spit—for want of a better word—because they had to take off their shoes at the airport to get through the metal detector. At times people are very intolerant. For all of us there is a cost in regard to convenience in this world of heightened security.

Mr Springborg: We take our liberties and freedoms for granted.

Mr SEENEY: We absolutely take those things for granted. I think there is no better example of that than to compare the way in which we approach security here to the way in which security is approached in Europe and Asia. Earlier this year my wife and I travelled to Europe. The thing that was most noticeable as soon as we got off the plane was the difference in security—not just at the airports but everywhere. People in those countries have come to grips with increased security and have learned to accept it a lot earlier than we have. They are the sorts of things that we are going to have to learn to accept as part and parcel of life in a post September 11 world. It is a small price for us as individuals to pay. But we in this parliament have a responsibility to ensure that the people who have the major role to play are properly resourced. I look forward to the day that the Minister for Police can come into this House and tell us about the additional budget that he has made available to the Police Service to enable them to address this terrorism threat.

Mr Terry Sullivan interjected.

Mr SEENEY: The past four budgets were about domestic policing issues. We could argue about whether the budgetary increases over the past four years were sufficient to address the growing needs of domestic policing. But there now has to be a significant allocation of resources just to address this issue of how we respond to terrorism. Without wanting to get into a political argument about it—because I do not think it is a political issue—there has to be a realisation that if the government has to alter its budgetary priorities, then so be it, because the Police Service has to have the physical resources and the training and the support to be able to handle the type of incident that we hope never happens.

I think that the shadow minister for emergency services would agree that that issue applies not only to the police but also to emergency services. Similarly, the people in that department have to have access to resources and training. The shadow minister for health would also agree that the same is true for the Health Department.

I say to the member for Stafford that I acknowledge that that increase is going to place a burden on a government that is trying to run a budget. That would be the case whether we were in government or the Labor Party were in government. That is something that we have to deal with not just as a parliament but as a whole community, because it is a cost that we all have to pay. We all wish that we did not have to incur that cost. We all wish that it did not happen—that we could use every bit of the resources that are available to us to address domestic policing issues or domestic health issues. But there has to be a realisation that there is going to be a cost on all of us, there is going to be a rearrangement of priorities to address the type of incident that we hope will never happen. Perhaps we could avoid such an incident occurring if we allocate sufficient resources to the people who are our front-line troops. Unfortunately, that is the Queensland Police Service. In terms of response, it is people such as the ambulance and the fire officers who work in the Emergency Services Department and the people who work in the health system. Those officers have a response role. The police are the front-line troops in terms of avoidance.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, all of us wish that this legislation was not necessary. Regrettably, it is necessary. Regrettably, it is one small step in addressing our response to the horrific events that occurred in New York and Bali. Hopefully, it can be successful in ensuring that they are not repeated and certainly not repeated in Australia.