



Speech by

CHRIS CUMMINS

MEMBER FOR KAWANA

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PARLIAMENT OF QUEENSLAND AMENDMENT BILL

Mr CUMMINS (Kawana—ALP) (3.20 p.m.): I rise to speak on the Parliament of Queensland Amendment Bill 2003. As we realise, this bill is a necessary part of arrangements being progressed by the Beattie government to enable proceedings conducted in this chamber, the chamber of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland, to be broadcast live on the Internet. Our state government is committed to improving the community's access to parliament. Our community will have a greater ability to assess the performance of its elected officials. The education sector will also benefit from the service, which offers students a new way of learning about the workings of parliament.

Sunshine Coast residents are rightly concerned about the performance of some Sunshine Coast elected officials. Sadly, we live in an era in which community respect for public office-holders—parliamentarians—is at a very low level indeed. Every MP in every parliament—in fact, every elected official—has a duty to work to rebuild public confidence. Our much-loved democracy depends on it.

Last week we saw another reason the community's respect is so low—a high-profile politician disgracefully misbehaving in public and then demanding special treatment when he was advised by Qantas personnel that his behaviour was far from acceptable. The federal member for Fisher, Mr Peter Slipper, made national headlines for all the wrong reasons, yet again. Peter Slipper was unceremoniously ejected from a Qantas flight at the remote centre of Gove in the Northern Territory because his drunken behaviour on the first stage of the flight offended both cabin crew and passengers alike. Mr Slipper and his personal assistant ended up needing to specially charter an aircraft out of Gove after being forced to stay overnight at the Gove Walkabout Lodge.

Qantas, Australia's world-respected national airline, refused to carry this federal parliamentary secretary any further. The decision to remove this drunken and unruly passenger was made by cabin and flight crew. On Channel 9 national news last week, a number of passengers were interviewed about the flight. They outlined Mr Slipper's inappropriate behaviour, calling it extremely childish and a nuisance to passengers and crew alike. They said that he was clearly affected by strong drink. The member for Fisher, instead of doing the honourable thing, resorted to the refuge of cowards. He blamed the hardworking crew for overreacting, describing the flight attendants' treatment as entirely unreasonable. According to the *Sunshine Coast Daily*, which rightly gave the matter front-page attention, Mr Slipper said that he felt enormously short-changed by the whole experience and that he was relatively innocent. That then also makes him, obviously, relatively guilty.

Mr Slipper denied that he was drunk, claiming that he was suffering dental problems and was on pain-killers. If this is so, then why was he drinking, which he has admitted to doing? How bad and shameful was his behaviour to be removed from an aircraft in one of the most remote parts of Australia? We are told that no charges have been laid against the federal member, even though the Qantas crew took the extreme step of off-loading him from a flight at a remote territory airport, knowing full well that he would need to stay overnight. Mr Slipper needs to clarify who will be paying for the overnight accommodation, the cost of which was incurred due to his need to sleep off this drunken binge.

The Prime Minister should be advised that Sunshine Coast residents do not believe that the Australian taxpayer should have to pay unnecessarily to accommodate drunken federal parliamentary secretaries and personal assistants because of their inability to act in a manner befitting their position

when travelling on Australia's national airline. I am continually approached by Sunshine Coast residents clearly enunciating their disapproval of Mr Slipper's highly inappropriate behaviour. There are already jokes circulating in our community about this issue—a sad reflection indeed.

In a very worrying time, when our nation is at war, our residents look for leadership. Clearly that is something this federal parliamentary secretary lacks. Due to well-documented terrorist attacks, Australia's airlines have taken a tough line with unruly behaviour on aircraft, and rightly so. Passengers who have made threats or misbehaved inexcusably because they were clearly drunk have been off-loaded and charged with criminal offences. There is no doubt that Mr Slipper has been given favoured treatment—something that further undermines the standing of all public office-holders.

This is not a one-off transgression by the member for Fisher, who holds the office of Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Finance and Administration. Mr Slipper used to be an Ansett passenger. Qantas has obviously benefited from the collapse of Ansett, but gaining Mr Slipper as a passenger has been a definite setback. No-one wants this drunken airline hoon. It is well known that Mr Slipper used to argue with Ansett cabin crew, to the embarrassment of all of his colleagues. On one occasion he complained that the wine was being served in a wine glass which did not have a stem. Yet Mr Slipper had the hide to say in the *Sunshine Coast Daily* that he was probably one of the most popular customers flown by Qantas. Both his colleagues and opponents alike go to extreme lengths to avoid being seated beside or near him on flights to and from Canberra or in fact anywhere in Australia. That obviously reflects his personality and popularity.

The member for Fisher has an elevated view of his status and importance. When he was given the position of parliamentary secretary some years ago he forced the authorities to replace, at great expense, the sign on his electorate office so that the title 'honourable' could be added to it. Again at further expense to the taxpayer, it has since been removed. It was also widely reported that Mr Slipper rejected a brand new taxpayer funded luxury car purchased for his use. He rejected it because it did not have leather seats, even though the car had been ordered to his specifications.

Mr Slipper's colleagues in Canberra agree, and so do the hardworking Qantas cabin crew and counter staff, who have to put up with his weekly tantrums and demands for special treatment, that Mr Slipper's behaviour is highly inappropriate and unacceptable. Australia's Prime Minister needs to act, to show leadership, to show that drunken behaviour by this non-apologetic federal member is not acceptable. The Prime Minister should act in the interests of the long-suffering voters of Fisher and all elected members of parliament and demote the member for Fisher from the middle benches to the backbenches, where I am sure his colleagues will make him feel even more uncomfortable. Mr Peter Slipper should also publicly apologise to the Qantas flight crew, cabin crew and passengers for making a complete drunken nuisance of himself. In the interests of all elected office-holders, he needs to lift his game.

The bill before us is proof that the Beattie state Labor government is working to improve the democratic process and allow our constituents to access sound and vision of the state government. The Prime Minister of Australia should show his government's intention to improve the standards of federal elected members. I commend the bill to the House.