



Speech by

JEFF SEENEY

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

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APPROPRIATION BILLS—ESTIMATES COMMITTEE E

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (3.51 p.m.): Over the past two days, much has been said in the debate on the estimates reports in this House about the worth of the estimates process. I agree that, if it is conducted properly, the estimates process can be invaluable. Regrettably, in the case of this estimates committee, we saw a good example of how the estimates process can become an absolute farce. The estimates process in the case of this particular committee became a farce because of the attitude of the government members who chose to try to protect ministers from legitimate questioning about legitimate controversial subjects of the day.

They did that by two mechanisms. One was to restrict the use of questions on notice and to limit the time in which non-government members had to consider the information that was obtained using questions on notice. But secondly, and most disappointingly, they did it on the morning of the hearing by trying to restrict the time that was available for questioning ministers on what they knew were the controversial areas.

This is the only estimates committee hearing that I am aware of in the whole history of the process where particular areas within a department were allocated blocks of time which the non-government members had to use whether they liked it or not. We were allocated a block of time for the government owned corporation SunWater and we had to ask questions for that period whether we wanted to or not simply because everybody knew that the controversial part of that portfolio lay in another area and the intent of the government committee was to protect the minister, who was certainly vulnerable to questioning in that particular area.

We then saw the reason why the minister needed to be protected when we reached the point at which we could ask questions about that particular area, because the falseness and the misinformation that the government had been peddling around the state and promoting in press releases since the release of the budget became apparent. There has been a lot of news generated by the government's so-called \$75 million worth of compensation that is being used to justify the package that they are negotiating with the federal government. Immediately after the budget was introduced into this House by the Treasurer, the minister put out a press release hailing this \$75 million as one of the highlights of the budget from his department's point of view. He claimed it as a great success.

When we got to the estimates process and I sought to identify within the budget documents where that \$75 million was, we found out that there was no money there at all. That \$75 million was just more dishonesty and more misleading information that was designed to dupe and deceive people who were concerned about the impact of the package that was being negotiated by the state and federal governments. Despite the best efforts of the minister's departmental staff to point to figures within the budget to try to protect the minister—and I kept asking, 'Where is it? Show me the figure? Show me the line. Show me the figure'—all we could do was get an indication that a portion of the department's ordinary budget was somehow being claimed as the first contribution in that \$75 million. In that respect, the estimates committee was a success in highlighting the government's dishonesty and deceitfulness.

The minister, his spin doctors and his media minders have been wriggling and squirming ever since. They have been putting out all sorts of letters to the editor and media articles trying to get out of it. But the fact remains, and it is in the records of that estimates committee hearing, that there is no money in the budget. This was an example of gross deceit. If the estimates committee hearing achieved one thing, it was to expose that.

But we could have exposed a lot more of those types of dishonesties had we been given an opportunity, had we been given the time, had we not been restricted deliberately by government members who sought to ensure that the process was not allowed to proceed as it should and then compounded that farce by sitting there and reading prepared questions and the minister reading prepared answers. What a farce! I often wonder what the bureaucrats and the public think of that sort of ridiculous deceit—to see government members sitting there reading a question and then the minister reading the answer and then the government member reading another question and the minister reading another answer. What an absolute farce!

Time expired.