



Speech by

JEFF SEENEY

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

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DRAFT CODE OF CONDUCT FOR ELECTION CANDIDATES

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (6.06 p.m.): I rise to support the amendment that was moved by the Leader of the Opposition, the member for Southern Downs. I remind the House of the significant difference that that amendment makes to the original motion that was moved by the Premier. That amendment seeks to bind not only candidates to the code of conduct that the Premier is putting forward but also their agents or their political parties that endorse them if they are so endorsed by a political party.

It is interesting to note that the original code of conduct that was put forward by the Premier expressly rules that out. It states—

The code applies to all candidates for state elections (independents and candidates endorsed by parties).

Then it goes on to define a 'candidate' as we would expect it to define a candidate. But then it states—

The Code binds candidates personally, and not their agents.

When I first heard the Premier read that I wondered—and I have wondered ever since—that, if there was to be any seriousness about this motion, if this was to be anything more than just another stunt, why on earth would we expressly rule out someone acting on our behalf? How can we be serious with all the fine-sounding rhetoric that we have heard in this debate if we then expressly rule out the inclusion of our agent as a member of parliament—having someone do the dirty work on our behalf?

Of course, it provides the perfect out for the traditional Labor dirty tricks to continue. There is no political party in Australia's history that has a more well-deserved reputation for dirty tricks than the Australian Labor Party. I have been in politics for 20 years and I have seen all of those dirty tricks in one form or another from the statewide campaigns right down to the grassroots campaigns. I have seen the dirty tricks at polling booths, I have seen the dirty tricks at scrutineering time. The Australian Labor Party would be the institution in Australian politics that has the best reputation for dirty tricks and continually reinvents to create new dirty tricks.

Mr Springborg: They believe in true democracy. Even the dead vote.

Mr SEENEY: That is right. The dead vote. Everyone out in the electorate jokes about it. They know about the types of things that are inherent in the Labor Party and have been for generations—the dead voting, people on vacant allotments voting, nonexistent people voting and scrutineers filling in ballot papers for people who cannot do it and do not know what they are doing.

Mr Springborg: Peter even wrote about it in his book.

Mr SEENEY: That is exactly right. As far back as when the Premier fancied himself as something of an author, he included it in the book that he wrote. The notion that anything is fair at election time is so institutionalised in the Labor Party that the Premier was blatant enough to write about it in his book. It makes a complete mockery of the fine-sounding rhetoric we have heard here tonight. When we listen to that rhetoric we think, 'Is this really the Australian Labor Party? How is it going to function under this sort of code of conduct?'

Mr Springborg interjected.

Mr SEENEY: Half of its operatives would have nothing left to do because half of its operatives specialise in dirty tricks. The Premier has very cleverly put into the code of conduct a specific clause which excuses those people from any obligation that might be felt by anybody else who reads it. Not only does he not specifically include them; he specifically rules them out. He says, 'It does not apply to you guys, the dirty tricks specialists. This just applies to me. I will stand up, put my hand on my heart and say, "I'm oh-so wonderful and I'm everybody's mate." But it doesn't apply to the dirty tricks department. You guys go off and continue to run the sort of election campaigns you have run for the last 20 or 30 years.' That makes a mockery of the whole thing and it just demonstrates how insincere and false this whole thing really is.

This code is a great aspirational statement. It is something that I think we should all aspire to. In a perfect world, the Labor Party would be able to aspire to it, too. In fact, in a perfect world the Labor Party would not only aspire to it but also achieve it. If it could achieve it the world would be a better place and Queensland politics would be a better place. Unfortunately, Mr Speaker, I think you and I will be waiting a heck of a long time before we see that perfect world come about. Mr Speaker, you have been around polling booths and election campaigns for a long time, as I have. We have seen how all of these fine aspirations survive in the heat of an election campaign—when the battle is joined, so to speak. All of these aspirations disappear into nothingness in the heightened tensions and the heightened emotions of an election campaign.

There are a couple of good examples that the House needs to be reminded of. I was reading the code as I was waiting for my turn to speak. I got down to the section about how election candidates should conduct themselves. It states—

Candidates conduct should be fair and reasonable. This requires that a candidate will:

...

- (b) Refrain from knowingly acting dishonestly in making representations about the claims of other candidates for election.

For some strange reason I was reminded of the now Treasurer, Mr Mackenroth, during the last election campaign and his famous 'spendometer'. He grossly dishonestly represented the costings of the coalition initiatives during the campaign. Every couple of days he came out with this spendometer that somehow gave the impression that the initiatives that we had had costed—they were costed by the state's leading accounting firms—would send the state broke.

I imagine that most members in the House would remember the illustration of the thermometer and the red ink rising up the thermometer until it exploded out the top in some grossly inaccurate representation of the fact that the initiatives we had had costed by the state's leading accounting firms would somehow blow the state budget to pieces and mean that Queensland would be broke forever. How much more dishonest can we get than that?

Mr Springborg: When he knew full well that he was sending the state broke!

Mr SEENEY: Exactly. He knew full well what the state's real financial position was. He knew full well that the figures he had produced had no credibility. The times have shown them to have no credibility. He knew full well that that was the case, but he was prepared to play that dirty trick in the election campaign. To a very real extent he got away with it. Do members know why he got away with it? He got away with it because all of the information was not made available to the general public.

I believe that one of the most important things that makes a democracy function is the free flow of proper, accurate information so that voters know the full story. If the people who vote for candidates know the full story at election time, they will make their own judgments. That is the nature of democracy. This type of silly motherhood statement and meaningless rhetoric do not make any difference at all if the voters out there in the electorate know the full story. If they are in possession of all of the accurate information, they can make judgments for themselves. They can impose their own codes on people who stand for public office. And so they should, because the imposition of a code by the people who vote is the only meaningful thing that will ensure people act in an honest and ethical way.

The problem, of course, is that quite often in election campaigns it is very difficult to get information circulated. I believe quite honestly that the media have an enormous responsibility to ensure democracies function properly. They have an enormous responsibility to make sure information is imparted to people so that they are properly informed. People can make whatever decision they like—that is the nature of democracy—so long as they make that decision while they are in possession of all of the accurate and reliable information. Then the people who go into polling booths once every three years in our case can impose their own code of conduct upon people who stand for public office. That is much more important than this sort of meaningless rhetoric.

This parliament has a major role to play in ensuring that information is available to the people who cast votes. The process we go through here when this parliament meets is an essential part of that. Unfortunately, talking about this sort of meaningless rhetoric means that we have less time to talk

about the things that are probably a lot more important to the people who will vote at the next state election. In a very real sense I think that is by deliberate intent.

I think it is by deliberate intent that so many of these types of stunts take up so much time in this parliament and take up so much of the attention and the focus of the media that has a responsibility to ensure that information about what happens here flows out into the electorate. As a result, the really important issues do not get the airing and the consideration that they should. That is something that I have seen happen more and more in the years I have been a member of parliament. More and more we end up in frivolous debates on nonsensical issues that do not have much relationship to the things that have a major impact on people in the community.

If the Premier and the government wanted to make this parliament work better we would be spending more time focusing on the issues that matter and there would be more opportunities to examine the issues that matter to the people in the electorate. I do not believe that this type of meaningless rhetoric is one of those issues.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The honourable member is being very repetitious now. Could we get on to some new issues?

Mr Springborg: He is making some excellent points.

Mr SPEAKER: No, he is not making points; he is being repetitious. If you have any further points to bring out, would you bring them out? It would be much more interesting to the people in the gallery, I am sure.

Mr SEENEY: Thank you for the advice, Mr Speaker. I thought I had 20 minutes.

A government member: No, only if it is relevant.

Mr SEENEY: Well, that would have ruled out 14 minutes of the Premier's speech, I would suggest.

The member for Southern Downs has moved a series of amendments which seek to address a number of those issues that I have spoken about, particularly in respect to allowing agents to act on behalf of candidates. I think the way that the government approaches the amendments that have been put forward in good faith by the Leader of the Opposition, the member for Southern Downs, will be a real test as to how serious it is about this code of conduct that it has brought into the House tonight.

It is also appropriate that I make some comments about the issue I raised in a question to the Premier this morning about the opportunities for retiring ministers to profit from their office in the final days of their term and ask why those things have not also been covered by this code. I took it from what the Premier said that there must have been an emergency cabinet meeting at lunchtime to rectify that—to somehow adjust the code of conduct in the Ministerial Handbook to cover those issues. I wonder why he did not tell us that when he was asked the questions.

It is pretty obvious, as the member for Southern Downs said, that the Premier was caught out. He realised full well that that glaring omission made a mockery of the motion. It was a glaring omission and he knew that he was going to be in lots of trouble if he came in here tonight. He would have had to have accepted the amendment he knew we were going to move to correct that. So the Premier had an emergency cabinet meeting of one and adjusted the Ministerial Handbook to cover up—

Mr Beattie interjected.

Mr SEENEY: Well, why did the Premier not inform us about it when he answered the question this morning?

Mr Beattie: As always, I wanted the complete response.

Mr SEENEY: I could see by the expression on the Premier's face when he answered the question—

Mr SPEAKER: Order! We will resume the debate on the motion.

Mr SEENEY: I commend the amendments that the member for Southern Downs has moved in the House. They will certainly add to the code of conduct that has been put forward by the Premier. I only hope that this code of conduct will become a reality in election campaigns. To quote the member for Rockhampton, I think feathers will grow on frogs before that happens.