



Speech by

Fiona Simpson

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

Hansard Tuesday, 17 August 2004

ELECTRICITY SUPPLY

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (5.09 p.m.): I thought that we were in the Queensland parliament, but after listening to Premier Beattie and the Deputy Premier plus two former Labor electricity ministers, it seems that we are in never-never land where the government is never, never responsible, where there is never, never a crisis—particularly in the electricity industry, according to Tony McGrady—and where people should never, never ask what went wrong. Peter Beattie may think that he is the Peter Pan of politics and that he does not have to grow up and take responsibility, but the great storyteller is losing his touch and is not even remotely believable.

I note that Premier Beattie is not in the parliament at this moment. It is an insult for him to move this motion about the electricity industry in which he asks the parliament to pat him on the back for promising to fix what he broke. How arrogant can he get! Premier Beattie and his banter of useless Labor ministers say, 'Don't ask how the electricity crisis occurred. It just happened.' Hand on heart they say that what happened is not important to them, as long as they fix the problem. I ask them: how do they fix something in the long run if they do not know why it went wrong? How do they stop it happening again? When a train runs off the tracks we ask: what went wrong? Why did it go wrong? We do not just fix the train and ignore the fundamental flaws that caused the train wreck. No, not in Queensland under a Labor government.

But it gets worse. I listened to the contribution of Tony McGrady, a former Minister for Energy. Apparently, he still does not think that there is an electricity crisis. He said in this parliament that it is not a crisis; it is a problem. Is it any wonder that the brains trust of the Beattie government—this Beattie government cabinet—has allowed the electricity infrastructure to run down to this extent? After six and a half years of government, they wreck the electricity distribution network and then say, 'Don't ask us how it happened. It just did.' Then they say, 'We're not after scapegoats.' That is because they are implicated. They refuse to make heads roll for the electricity crisis, because some of those heads just might speak from the political grave.

For ages when there were power blackouts and load shedding, the ministers blamed acts of God, storms or cars hitting power poles. Now we know that when they stood up in this place and publicly made those claims, they were not telling the truth. This report shows that those claims were not honest, that in the majority of instances the outages were, in fact, due to a lack of maintenance and upgrading of the system. This is a cover-up and when anybody says, 'Don't ask us how it happened,' we know that there is more to be told. That is why this issue will not go away. The government will not fix the problems in the long term until the systemic flaws are addressed.

But the people who are paying the price for this government's ineptitude are all of those people who, through their homes or through their businesses, are experiencing blackouts. Every time the power goes out, they should remember that the Beattie government pulled the plug due to its incompetence. Every time the power has gone out on the Sunshine Coast—and we have raised concerns about some areas where the power goes off continually and there seems to be no apparent reason for that as there have been no storms—the ministers have always come back and said, 'It was because of this or that,' but it was never to do with maintenance. We now know that they were not telling the truth. There have been areas where time and time again certain businesses have suffered power outages.

Who is on the list for the power shedding when power shedding takes place is a very interesting question. The government says that hospitals and certain critical areas will be protected. Sure, we understand that, and that is right. But certain localities constantly bear the brunt of a lot of these outages. So there is more to be told as to the way in which the government manages the mess. Some people carry more of that burden upon their businesses and their lifestyles. The other day I was talking to one Sunshine Coast businessperson who told me that, due to the constant outages, they had ended up buying an electricity generator. That person could not afford to have so many staff not able to do their jobs because of a failure in the system.

The Premier says that he is accountable. He talks about being accountable, but he does not demonstrate it terribly well. Previously, I heard one of the former ministers blaming the opposition for not revealing the extent of the electricity problem before the election. He obviously has not been reading *Hansard* or reading the press releases that we have released publicly. For some time we have been warning about the level of the take of government dividends—special dividends over and above the normal dividends—out of the electricity industry. Furthermore, in terms of getting information out of government owned corporations, I remind that minister and any members of the public to look at this government's track record when it comes to freedom of information. They would find that, obviously, in terms of government owned corporations, the provisions of FOI exempt certain matters because they are commercial-in-confidence. But we relied upon the shareholding minister to honestly tell the parliament when he or she was asked about the state of the electricity grid and they lied. They did not tell the truth in that fundamental place where it is their responsibility to tell the truth as the responsible minister.

I turn to areas where there were not exemptions or fewer exemptions under freedom of information and we could ask for information from departments. In those cases, when the state opposition—the National Party—went after documentation from the department as to who knew what and where, out of 256 documents 111 were blanked out and 65 were partially blanked out. Yes, Mr Beattie is accountable. When we went after the documentation from his government about the electricity issue to find out what went wrong and who knew it—the chain of responsibility that it does not want to own up to—we received blank pages. But still Mr Beattie says, 'Don't ask us what went wrong.'

I turn to some of those telltale signs. As I said before, the government does not want to own up as to who is responsible, it does not want to own up to the systemic failures and why the system became so bad because of the number of Labor mates involved and the fact that the government has taken \$2 billion worth of dividends out of the government owned power corporations. The government stacked the board with Labor cronies and now, just like Sergeant Schultz, it knows nothing. The government may think that it is funny, but those businesses on the Sunshine Coast and people throughout all of Queensland who will be left in the dark during another blackout owing to this Beattie government's incompetence will not be laughing. They will be saying, 'Blame Beattie,' because the Beattie government is responsible for ensuring that the current infrastructure is looked after and that future infrastructure needs are met.

Infrastructure is a government responsibility, and it is mainly a state government responsibility. Electricity is completely a state government responsibility. Electricity is fundamentally important to people's daily lifestyles or in terms of running their businesses. People cannot live without a well-maintained, secure, competent, consistent electrical industry. It is incredible that, after six years of this government, it does not want to ask how the system went wrong. It is still trying to deflect blame. Yet when we look at the way in which the government has structured its infrastructure spending in this state, there is a telling story. In the last coalition budget, which was delivered six years ago, 28 per cent was spent on state infrastructure. After six years of Labor, only 20 per cent of its budget is spent on state infrastructure. We have seen that the infrastructure in a number of industries and in a number of critical areas has been run down and continues to drop. We have seen that occur in terms of the provision of water infrastructure, transport infrastructure, and the road networks. We also see it in terms of the electricity industry.

It is time that this government did not just say that it is accountable. It has to act accountably and take some real responsibility, because it will not fix the problem by saying, 'Don't ask,' because we know what occurred. We know you cannot rip \$2 billion worth of special dividends of up to 95 per cent out of this electricity industry. You cannot make entities take out loans against borrowings on their assets to pay off special dividends in a way that has never been experienced with government owned corporations before and then say that it is not the government's responsibility when there has been a failure to invest in that basic infrastructure.

I support the National Party's amendment, and I condemn the government for wanting to congratulate itself for creating a crisis. Shame on all of these Labor Party members who are willing to be sycophantic to this government and fail to face up to their responsibility for what has occurred under the indecent majority that this government has—this government that still does not want to be held to account.