



Speech by

Lawrence Springborg

MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS

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FREEDOM OF INFORMATION; DEPARTMENT OF PRIMARY INDUSTRIES; IPSWICH MOTORWAY

Mr SPRINGBORG (Southern Downs—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (11.30 a.m.): This morning in parliament we again saw the spectacle of the Premier squirming, ducking, weaving and diving on the issue of accountability and the abuse of freedom of information in this state. The mere fact that he had to come in here by way of extensive explanation during a ministerial statement to seek to justify his and his cabinet's personal abuse of the freedom of information laws and cabinet exemption goes to show that the blowtorch is going very close to touching the soft underbelly of his government with regard to its lack of accountability.

Nobody argues that there should not be reasonable cabinet exemptions from the freedom of information laws. Nobody argues against that whatsoever. Nobody argues against the Westminster principle that ministers should be able to debate matters without having other external considerations, but the Westminster system and freedom of information laws in no way mean and in no way explicitly say that the government should abuse cabinet exemptions to hide embarrassing documents. That is what is happening under Mr Beattie and his government. When matters become very embarrassing, this government's response is to bundle those documents together and take them into cabinet even if those matters at the most liberal interpretation are peripheral to any cabinet decision or any matters being discussed by cabinet.

We have seen this with motor vehicle accident reports: four ministerial motor vehicles and four ministerial electorate vehicles. We have seen it in the last couple of days with transition-to-government documents. We saw it in the last term with matters relating to Lang Park and the Goodwill Bridge. The hallmark of a government is its capacity to withstand reasonable criticism, not to be so arrogant and drunk on its own power and huge parliamentary majority as this government is to the extent that it must take those matters to cabinet to hide them from public scrutiny for some 30 years.

Again this morning Mr Beattie, the Premier of Queensland, was squirming and wriggling on the hook when he was asked a question about keeping his commitment of 13 July 1998 about transition-to-government documents. Mr Beattie on 13 July 1998 in a letter to his ministers said this—

... most transition-to-government documents, to be examined at today's Cabinet meeting, will not be protected from freedom of information searches.

He went on to say—

... documents would only be exempted if they were of a personal nature or deemed to be commercial-in-confidence.

He admitted his stance had the potential to cause his Government embarrassment but said he was committed to the principle.

Is it not amazing the principles that Mr Beattie had when he had a margin of none and the principles that he has when he has a margin of some 30-odd members in this parliament? His principles have gone out the window. It is up to Mr Beattie to come in here and to explain to this parliament how many of those transition-to-government documents which I recently sought were matters of commercial-in-confidence or personal in nature which would deem them under his own rules of 13 July 1998 to be exempted. I would

say very, very few of those matters would have been personal and even fewer of them would have been commercial-in-confidence. The reason they were taken to cabinet was that they showed some embarrassment to this government.

Mr Beattie has conveniently forgotten, and did not expressly answer in this place this morning, why that directive which he gave in 1998 to his ministers has been absolutely forgotten about and repudiated now. At no stage did he indicate that. He went into some sort of waffle about Westminster conventions and all those sorts of things which stood when he became the Premier in July 1998. Nevertheless, he said that there would be certain procedures and practices put in place. The Peter Beattie of July 1998 is totally different to the unaccountable Peter Beattie of May 2004, and it is amazing the difference a huge majority makes.

Other issues raised in this place this morning included the Department of Primary Industries and this government's administration of that department. What would Mr Latham and his primary industries spokesman, Gavan O'Connor, do for the plight of primary producers in Queensland? The Minister for Primary Industries was unable to stand up in this place and repudiate the gross and outrageous attacks on very good schemes which exist to assist primary producers in Australia to build up their farms and become more viable. He refused to repudiate his own federal colleague's attacks on FarmBis.

Mr Johnson interjected.

Mr SPRINGBORG: He refused to repudiate his own federal colleague's attacks on the sugar package which was recently brought down by the federal government which provides long-term solutions for the future of the sugar industry. As the member for Gregory said, he did not repudiate it; he supported it. What about the cuts to ABARE? ABARE is something which is recognised by all sides of politics as providing very good strategic direction to primary producers and the resources sector in Australia. Once again, he refused to repudiate his federal colleague's attack on ABARE.

Mr Horan: The diesel fuel rebate.

Mr SPRINGBORG: The diesel fuel rebate, as the shadow spokesman for primary industries has said, is an important and entrenched part of the way the off-road economy operates in Australia—again under attack by the federal Labor government; supported by the Beattie Labor government and its Primary Industries Minister in this parliament. What does this Primary Industries Minister actually do? Has he ever stood up for primary producers? Not that I have seen. He has presided over further and more cuts to the Department of Primary Industries. As the member for Gregory knows, you cannot even get a stock inspector at Alpha.

Mr Johnson: He calls himself the farmer's friend!

Mr SPRINGBORG: There has been a winding back of those vital extension services to primary producers in this state, and he has the audacity to call himself the farmer's friend.

We heard more about the Ipswich Motorway in this place this morning. I travel along the Ipswich Motorway, as many members do, because for me it is how I come to Brisbane. We all know that is becoming more and more congested regardless of which way you travel on it depending upon the time of day. I note the Minister for Transport this morning when asked about this on radio said, 'What we should do is six-lane it like the Gold Coast Motorway.' The last time I travelled the Gold Coast motorway most of it was eight lanes, certainly from Beenleigh to Southport. I do not know what the Minister for Transport—the person charged with the strategic development of our roads infrastructure in Queensland—actually does when he drives down that motorway. Maybe he cannot count to eight, but I can count to eight and most of my colleagues can.

The fact is that the minister has embarrassed himself. Even if the Ipswich Motorway were six lanes, that accident this morning would have made it six lanes of congested traffic because there are some other issues that need to be looked at. Unlike the Gold Coast motorway, there are service roads where people can easily slip off and go around particular accidents and for local people as well. That luxury would not exist under the proposal of the Labor Party. We have an extraordinary development at Springfield to the south, and we need to be looking at other options to address what will happen if that road closes down—whether it be service lanes or developing a more extensive road network to the south. Those issues were not canvassed by the minister this morning.

I note that yesterday with great fanfare the Premier talked about 100 days of achievements in the third Beattie government. I really cannot think of any achievements of the third Beattie Labor government, other than 100 days of inaction, secrecy and cover-ups. I have outlined 50 of them here in a document entitled *100 days of inaction, 100 days of secrecy and 100 days of cover-ups and only another 996 to go*. All Mr Beattie has been doing in the last 100 days is taking embarrassing documents to cabinet and refusing to be involved in particular issues which are very important to the community in Queensland. We have already heard in this place that the ambulance tax is set to rise. Once again we have got crime victims being misled by government cover-ups regarding the John Tonge Centre, and the shambles over taxpayer-funded cars, just to mention a couple.

There has been no royal commission as promised by the Premier into the extraordinary price rises and discrepancies in fuel right across Queensland. What about an agreement with local government which has been broken where this government, due to its own mismanagement of the industrial relations system and failure to negotiate with valuers, has actually made local government pay for valuations in the order of \$10 million which they have not even had done and are not going to have done? Again, more failure from this government. I table that for the benefit of all members of this place.