



Speech by

Lawrence Springborg

MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS

Hansard Wednesday, 19 May 2004

STANDING ORDER 70(II)

Mr SPRINGBORG (Southern Downs—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (5.27 p.m.): I move that—

Given the extraordinary abuse of this House by ministers who are continually refusing to answer questions, standing order No. 70(ii) be amended to clearly state that answers to questions by ministers and members must directly relate to and be directly relevant to the question asked.

Over the last few months we have been continually subjected to the spectacle of this increasingly arrogant government ignoring the standing orders of this parliament and treating not only the opposition but also the parliament and the media with contempt. We are seeing ministers over and over again going off on unbelievable flights of fancy as they seek to duck and dive and weave and dodge around the issues being brought to their attention by members of the opposition and by other members of this parliament.

We really have to ask the question: what does the government have to hide when there are 63 of them and there are so few numbers on this side of the parliament—15 members of the official opposition, the Liberal Party, One Nation and the Independents? What do they have to hide when they have such numbers in this parliament? Why do they treat this parliament with contempt? That is the question. It is because the blowtorch is getting very, very close to their belly and they are uncomfortable with being accountable. They are becoming more intoxicated on their huge majority. They are becoming intoxicated on the trappings and the power of office. They are treating this parliament with absolute contempt.

Standing Rules and Orders state—

General Rules for Answers

...

70. The following general rules shall apply to Answers:

- (i) In answering a Question a Minister or Member shall not Debate the subject to which it refers.
- (ii) An Answer shall be relevant to the Question.
- (iii) If, in the opinion of the Speaker, the Answer is too long, he may direct the Minister or the Member to cease speaking.

Of course, as we know, sessional orders now limit the time for those answers to three minutes.

The last real ruling on the issue of relevance that we had in this place came on 20 February 1991 when the Speaker of the day responded to a point of order that was raised by the then member for Burnett, Doug Slack. The member's point of order related to a question that was asked of the then Minister for Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs. Mr Slack rose and said this—

I rise to a point of order. My questions were quite clear. Does the Minister have sympathy for the claim of the Butchulla people with whom she has travelled to Fraser Island, as outlined in the submission? Does the submission reflect the Minister's well-known belief that Aborigines should hold inalienable title over other areas in Queensland? What the Minister is saying has no relevance to the question.

The Speaker then said—

Order! I am waiting for the Minister to get to the point of the question. She is setting the groundwork for it.

Mr Slack raised another similar point of order. At that stage the Speaker said—

I suggest to the Minister that she do not debate this matter and that her answer be relevant to the question. I have allowed her to set out the background to her answer, but I cannot allow her to debate the issue.

Another point of order was raised as the minister continued to go off the track. The Speaker again said—

Order! I cannot ask a Minister to answer a question in a particular way. The only recourse that I have is that Standing Orders set out that the answer must not debate the question and it must be relevant. I have allowed the Minister to set the scene for her answer. I suggest that she does not debate it. That is my ruling.

That was the ruling of Mr Speaker on 20 February 1991. It was clearly apparent that the Speaker at that time was concerned that ministers were abusing their position in relation to answering questions that were asked of them by members of the opposition in particular. Since that time, we have seen increasing contempt for that standing order by members of the government. I know that it has caused you, Mr Speaker, to reflect on this matter because on 4 April you said—and this is our own ruling—in response to a point of order—

The member would be aware of the standing order that ministers can answer questions how they please. The member will resume his seat.

I see an inconsistency with your ruling, Mr Speaker, of 4 April and Mr Speaker's ruling of 20 February 1991. In 1991 Mr Speaker tried to enforce the rule that a minister should not debate the question and that his or her answer must be relevant to the question that was asked.

A situation has evolved where ministers, led by the Premier, continuously skirt around their obligation of accountability to the parliament. They are obliged to be accountable to the parliament and at least attempt to answer questions. Some ministers in this place do attempt to answer questions, but some do not. The Premier is the worst offender and the member for Rockhampton is becoming a serial offender. Yesterday he stood in this place and talked about a goat on a rope for three minutes. He would not answer the question, yet this morning information relevant to that particular question was divulged in the newspaper. Quite frankly, that is a case of treating the parliament with contempt.

The Commonwealth parliament has similar standing orders. I draw the attention of the House to a couple of matters reported in federal parliamentary *Hansard*. On Tuesday, 17 February 2004 Mr Kelvin Thomson, who is a Labor or opposition member of parliament, rose and said—

Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The Prime Minister was asked whether he would reject political donations from tobacco companies. I ask you to draw him back to the question.

The Speaker asked the Prime Minister if he had finished and, when he said that he had not, the Speaker said—

I invite the Prime Minister to come back to the question of tobacco.

On 4 December 2003, in the federal parliament, Ms Gillard rose on a point of order regarding the Minister for Health and Aging. She said—

The Minister for Health and Ageing is consistently straying from the question and consistently not referring to people by their proper title. I ask you to correct him on that and bring him back to the question.

Following some discussion, the Speaker said—

Order! The minister will come to the question.

What I am saying is that, at the very least, we need a very clear and consistent ruling in this place. I would prefer that the motion that the opposition has brought before the parliament today be supported. There have been times when you, Mr Speaker, have made some quite direct rulings regarding the asking of questions in this place. We can debate the subjectivity of the latitude of those particular questions.

Mr Lucas interjected.

Mr SPRINGBORG: And he would be sitting the member down for irrelevance. That is what he would be doing.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! We are not having a debate across the chamber. Address the chair.

Mr SPRINGBORG: And he would be sitting the Premier down, through you, Mr Speaker—

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The member will address the chair.

Mr SPRINGBORG: I said 'Mr Speaker'. The Speaker would be sitting the Premier down for irrelevance as well.

We are seeing absolute contempt of this parliament exercised by ministers. That is why we believe that we should amend standing orders to ensure that they state that an answer must be directly relevant and directly related to the question. How else will we keep the government accountable?

Today in this place we saw another example of the Premier seeking to duck, dive, weave and carry on when he was asked a straight question about the opportunity and the obligations that he had to provide information to the opposition as an FOI applicant. We simply asked why his office told us that there were no documents relevant to particular matters raised about the conduct of the Attorney-General and Minister

for Justice. The office said that it had no documents. Only by the process of external review and appeal were we able to ascertain the fact that there were three documents, and then later we found out about another 24.

If we do not have the capacity to come into this place to keep the government accountable and at least try to get that information, how will the government be accountable? This government is not accountable and it has proven it with the cars issue and the hiding of documents relating to accident reports involving ministerial electorate cars which were not tabled by the Premier today. We simply heard more weasel words from the Premier. There was the Lockhart River affair where the minister ducked, dived and weaved. Minister Swarten does that all the time. It goes on and on and on and on and on. We have to exercise our legitimate right to the very end to catch the government out, as we did with FOI—

Time expired.