



Speech by

Lawrence Springborg

MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS

Hansard Tuesday, 31 August 2004

ELECTRICITY SUPPLY, OPPOSITION BRIEFING

Mr SPRINGBORG (Southern Downs—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (11.30 a.m.): This morning in this place we have seen more flip-flopping from the government and more flip-flopping from the new Minister for Energy, particularly on the issue of briefings for non-government members in this place. Imagine our surprise when last Thursday the minister indicated at that stage that he would be happy to accede to the request from the opposition for a briefing—that is, he would be happy to accede to a request from the Nationals for a briefing where we had the chance to be briefed by the CEOs of Ergon and Energex and to ask questions of them. To his credit at that stage the minister, when asked if he would be doing the briefing, indicated, 'I won't do the briefing personally. I think that would be over the top.' What we have seen since that time is the Premier roll right over the top of the new Minister for Energy, because this whole saga of accountability, this whole saga of openness, this whole saga of disclosure from this government on the issue of who knew what and when they knew it and the status of the power industry in Queensland has been a very sorry saga.

It has been a saga of cover-up. It has been a saga of duplicity. It has been a saga of downright dishonesty and incomplete statements from those members opposite. That is what it has been. The government—I would use the term 'lied' but apparently we cannot say that in this place—has certainly been terribly dishonest in its whole approach to this issue. The Nationals raised this issue prior to the state election. We said that there is a very serious problem with the power industry in this state which needs to be disclosed. What did the Premier say at that stage? He said that there was no problem whatsoever. He said that everything was right, everything was hunky-dory and everything was being fixed. That line was being parroted by government MPs—backbench and frontbench members—right throughout Queensland. Whenever they were asked a question, they stood up and said, 'We've been assured by the minister that there is no problem whatsoever.' We know that there is a problem—there are a lot of problems—and the people of Queensland are now experiencing discomfort because of the mismanagement of this government. The people of this state are the ones who are having their quality of life and their lifestyle impacted upon because of this government.

Let us go back to what the Premier said over a month ago when we raised some issues with regard to the electricity industry in Queensland. He promised us a briefing. He promised the Nationals a briefing. We pursued him on that. We asked him, 'When can we have the briefing? When can we have that briefing?' Then he started to walk away from it. He started to back-pedal from that, and he has been back-peddalling ever since! He reneged on the commitment which he gave to the Nationals for the briefing. He said that we needed to be informed, and that we needed to be properly informed. Sure he thought we needed to be informed. When he realised the extent of the problems in the power industry and the extent of the meltdown in the power industry, he did not want to inform us and he reneged.

Then we were very surprised indeed—in actual fact, we were heartened—when the brand-new Minister for Energy in Queensland came out of the blocks and looked like a cleanskin. Well, he soon ended up smelling just like all of the other ministers. He failed on his first outing. He agreed first of all that we could have a briefing, and then he agreed that it would be over the top for him to provide us with that particular briefing. Yesterday when people were calling his office to find out about this briefing for the

Nationals, he turned around and said, 'There's not really going to be a briefing.' He himself was already back-peddalling. One could then imagine the surprise of everyone when the Premier was asked about the briefing and he said, 'There will be no briefing.' The media then reminded the Premier that Mr Mickel had promised a briefing, and the Premier stood there looking like a stunned mullet! Then he said, 'Well, okay. Maybe there'll be a briefing, but the minister is going to have to be there.' So we saw numerous positional changes yesterday afternoon by this government on this issue. The Premier then started to agree to the briefing as long as the minister was there. Then the Premier agreed to the CEOs being invited. So the briefing was going to be by the Premier and by the minister with the CEOs being invited—hardly what the Nationals had requested.

I table a copy of that memo from the Premier. I want to quote what it says. It states—

The Premier Peter Beattie and Energy Minister John Mickel extend an invitation to brief all non-Government MPs tomorrow ...

The energy briefing will be in the Conference Room ...

The CEOs of Energex and Ergon have been invited to attend.

Does that sound like a hastily put together briefing? It sounds like one to me from a government that did not know what it was doing. Yet last night this is what happened. Non-government members received a memo from the Premier stating—

Re: Confirming details for tomorrow's energy briefing.

Energy Minister John Mickel and I will brief all non-Government MPs tomorrow ... at State Parliament at 1.30 p.m.

The energy briefing will be in the Conference Room ...

The CEOs of Energex and Ergon will attend.

So they got them to attend the briefing which the Premier had organised, and I also table that memo for the information of all members of this place.

I also wish to table correspondence which I have had over the last week or two regarding this matter. First of all, I wrote to the minister on 26 August seeking his confirmation of the undertaking to brief us. In that letter I stated—

It would also be appreciated if you could organise for copies of submissions to the Independent Panel for Electrical Distribution from regional electricity councils to be made available to Shadow Cabinet along with those sections of minutes of meetings from Energex and Ergon pertaining to the payment of dividends and special dividends.

We will never get that until hell freezes over in this state, and that is why they are back-peddalling. I also table copies of letters that I sent yesterday afternoon following the Premier's confirmation of such a briefing to the CEOs of Energex and Ergon asking them to attend a briefing for the Nationals at the same time without the presence of the ministers. We called for a minister-free briefing so that there was an opportunity for us to really know what was going on. I also table my letter to the Premier of yesterday afternoon seeking details of this meeting and asking for an opportunity to be able to pursue this in a frank and fearless manner without those people being intimidated.

Make no mistake about it: this is intimidation. This is the use of standover tactics from Mr Beattie and his government. They have learnt from their past involvement in the union movement to use standover tactics and intimidation—that is, not letting people do anything in secret, not letting people do anything that is not being disclosed and not having secret ballots so they can sit there, intimidate and use standover tactics. One would have to be absolutely naive to believe that a briefing today by the Premier and Mr Mickel with the CEOs being invited, attending and maybe even answering some questions will mean they get any full, frank and fearless contributions from those people. It is intimidation. These are standover tactics being used by the Premier and by the minister.

I just simply say that if the Premier and the minister want to give us information about what is happening in the electricity industry in Queensland then they can come into this place and answer questions and disclose that information. Goodness me, we have been waiting long enough for that. In the time that this parliament has been sitting in the past two weeks, we have had nothing but obfuscation from them, we have had nothing but cover-ups, we have had nothing but diversions from them.

So we are going to get more of that today at the briefing. Why does the Premier want to be there? Why does the minister want to be there? They want to be sitting there listening to what is being said and taking notes. It is not about those people being open and being able to contribute what we need to know. They are under a constant cloud of intimidation because the Premier and the minister will be there taking notes and they will be ticking off 'former CEO', 'former CEO'. There is no way on earth that those people will be able to pass on any useful information whatsoever, because their bosses will be sitting in the room and they will be hanging off every word that those people will contribute.

This is nothing but a stunt. It is another backflip from Mr Beattie—or a turnover, or a 180-degree turn, or whatever members want to call it. It is not about exchanging information; it is about sanitising information. It is about deception and it is about cover-ups.