



Speech by

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FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr HORAN (Toowoomba South—NPA) (2.30 p.m.): When I walked in and heard the member for Southport speaking I thought I was here for the wrong bill. Obviously it is still the Freedom of Information Amendment Bill. It is a very important bill. I wish the previous speaker, the member for Noosa, had been here in the early nineties to hear the Labor Party talk with the philosophical approach it took to freedom of information and how important it was. That was the post-Fitzgerald era where endeavours were made to bring in systems of freedom of information so that there would be a new era of accountability and honesty. Taxpayers would be able to see where their money was going, what was happening to their money; people would be able to see what happened to their own personal files with regards to the health system and other various departments.

What we are seeing here is a blatant misuse of the freedom of information powers. The major excuse that has been put forward by the members of the government is in relation to the confidentiality of agreements. Governments make decisions about funds that go to certain places and we are supposed to know where that money is going. Grants are going to various organisations in the welfare sector that run, for example, care of children, in-home care, hospital care, community care and so on. They are all organisations with big operations, chief executive officers, administrative staff, nurses who drive around in cars looking after people and providing particular community services. Those organisations are in competition because they compete against each other for federal or state government grants. Under this parliament the minister makes announcements in relation to who is getting what money and what it is for. It might be Lifeline that is getting a certain amount of money for counselling to do with gambling or drought relief or helping young people in need, it might be Blue Care that is getting money for in-home respite care and it might be St Vincent de Paul getting a certain amount for in-home respite care and so on. All of those organisations are in some form of competition, all doing good works, and in all cases the amounts of the grants to different organisations are trumpeted by the government.

What we are talking about is the amount—one or two years ago it was \$64 million—of taxpayers' money that is going out in grants to companies to either increase their operation in Queensland, expand their business or, in a few limited cases, to start business here. In all cases, probably without exception, these companies are in opposition to and competition with someone else in Queensland. It might be a grant to a bank. There are quite a number of banks listed in the second reading speech by the Premier. There is a list of the organisations being provided with grants. Some of those banks in that list are so large they could probably buy and sell Queensland. It might be a grant to a bank. That is obviously going to give it a leg-up against some of our building societies, smaller banks and financial institutions. The government has made the decision to give that company that particular amount of money. There is no reason why the taxpayers of Queensland should not know how much money was given to an organisation, what it was for and what performance guidelines were set for that particular organisation in return for being given possibly millions of dollars or hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of money for free.

The people of Queensland have first of all to make a judgment whether it is right to put \$64 million into expanding major multinational operations that could buy and sell Queensland or smaller Queensland companies that want to expand or get into the export industry, or should that money be going to roads,

hospitals, care of children, emergency services or some other form of the global government budget. People have to be able to first of all make a decision about whether it is right to put that amount of money into helping business operate or would it be better off to have the coathanger of infrastructure support in the state: provide the roads, ports and rail lines so business can do it by themselves. This infrastructure will make the carrying out of business easier and more efficient and will be one of the great attractions of Queensland. It might well be that the money would be better off spent providing the basic core business of government in education, health, law and order and those sorts of things and allow business to develop on its own merits.

Although these grants are given out, 99 per cent of the businesses in Queensland do their expansion and growth on their own merits and their own money with no government money. Just a handful of companies are picked to receive these grants. Compare the list of businesses that receive those grants to the thousands of businesses in Queensland that do grow their business, do employ more people, do contribute something to our towns, cities and state. They do it off their own bat. They either go to the bank and borrow money or they get increased shareholder moneys but they do it and do not need government assistance. Other organisations do get this additional leg-up. Shouldn't the taxpaying public of Queensland know who receives the money, what the amount of money received was, what performance standards were set and what the government of the day expects for the giving out of this money when their competitors get nothing and do it out of their own pockets and their own bank account?

All members on this side of the House recognise the importance of confidentiality during the period of negotiations. Most of these companies have gone out and said what they are going to do; it is no big secret. So shouldn't we know? Shouldn't we know how much was given to Virgin—how much was given in payroll tax deductions; how much has been given to Macquarie Bank and the other banks and companies who might be involved in manufacturing or concrete works? Shouldn't we know? What is the big secret? If a company is receiving half a million dollars and that company is going to expand its manufacturing plant and says to the government it will employ another 20 people, what is wrong with that? Does the government think it is suddenly going to be bankrupt because its opposition knows it is expanding its shed, employing another 20 people and is going to produce a particular product? Everyone would know that anyway. If it is a company that is publicising what it is doing, it will be out there marketing and talking in the local newspapers about how it is going to expand.

We have got this great secrecy that has persisted for up to 30 years and the hypocrisy of the whole thing has been that the Premier has come out under pressure, because the pressure has been building about the secrecy of this government. Why on earth can't it tell the people of Queensland what it is doing with \$64 million of Queenslanders' money instead of this con trick, saying 'We are going to do it in eight years.' I am amazed at how some sections of the media seem to have fallen for this, thinking that it is some great gift. No-one is going to worry about what was given eight years ago. We are here now in this parliament and we want to know what is happening to the budget now. Why are we short of money for education, health or police? Should we be spending this money now? What is the return we are going to get now? We want to know now what it is going to do. The term of eight years is just a smart alec delaying tactic. It might as well be 20 or 30 years for all the benefit that eight years will be. It is an absolute con job. It is a con job to cover over once again, with all the spin that accompanies the Beattie Labor government, the fact that it is not prepared to be a modern, accountable government in telling the people what it is doing with the \$64 million a year of free money given out to some companies sometimes at the expense of other companies. Other companies do not have that free leg-up; they have to do it themselves.

It is about having freedom of information that is meaningful. Shouldn't the people of Queensland know what the money is being given for? Shouldn't the people of Queensland know what other assistance is being provided? Is it roads? Is it dredging of a port or a river? Is it a reduction in payroll tax over a period of time? Is it assistance from a government department in putting together business plans or otherwise? Shouldn't the taxpayers know and shouldn't competitors know what they are up against? The competitors are the ones that are contributing to state taxation as well and part of their taxation is going to the companies that have these free grants. To any ordinary Queenslander this would seem a pretty straightforward argument that is being put up today by the National Party opposition that their money is being put forward.

A limited number of companies get this privileged assistance. Others do not get it. Queenslanders would like to know whether they are getting value for their money. They would like to know whether it is fair. I am sure many other Queensland companies would like to know whether it is fair and whether they are being disadvantaged because other companies are getting these free grants or payroll tax holidays and they are not.

We would all be able to make a better judgment if we had the information. We still might not agree. We might disagree with how much is being given. We might think it should go to other departments instead of State Development or go towards the provision of infrastructure instead of grants to companies. But at least we would know what was happening. At least we could stand up and say, 'Why on earth would you give a million dollars to such and such a company when there are Queensland born and bred competitors

who are getting zilch—nothing.' We could argue those issues, but we would have the information. It is all hidden in darkness.

Despite whatever philosophical attitudes Labor members of this House have towards freedom of information, I assume they will all run along holding the coat-tails of the Premier and vote for this bill. Those opposite should bear in mind that what they are voting for is secrecy. What they are voting for is keeping important information that should be available to the members and businesses of their electorates away from them for eight years. It will not matter in eight years time. A lot of those members opposite will not be here. Things will have moved on. We will be in government and fixing things up then.

Government members interjected.

Mr HORAN: I am keeping you all awake. They know in their hearts that in eight years time this will not count for anything. It is just a sop to try to get the media off the back of the Premier for closing up shop and not providing any information.

This bill is a chance for the Labor Party members of this parliament to be able to show that they do have a fair dinkum attitude towards freedom of information. If they voted against this bill it would show that they are not prepared to pull the shutters down and hide these important facts from their constituents and from the people of Queensland. If the Labor Party continues to support this bill it is an absolute disgrace and it will demonstrate to the people of Queensland that the government's attitude to freedom of information is to use it when it is of political advantage. When it is about fair dinkum honesty and fair dinkum accountability those opposite could not care less and will cover it up.

The big question is: why does the government want to cover this information up? If there is no commercial reason for hiding the information once the deal has been done and things are settled, why is it trying to hide it? What is it frightened of? Is it frightened of the thousands of businesses in Queensland that get nothing? Is it frightened of all the people who will see that Queensland businesses are disadvantaged by interstate businesses? What is it frightened of?

Ms Nolan: Not you.

Mr HORAN: If you are frightened of nothing, as the member for Ipswich says, why does the government not open the books and let the people see what it is spending \$64 million of Queenslanders' money on a year and see the payroll deductions and the infrastructure that is being provided by various departments? Let us see what it is. Let the people make an honest judgment. At the moment it is hidden away. It is a disgrace to the principles of freedom of information that one such important aspect of information is blatantly hidden by the Beattie government. It could not care less.