



Speech by

Hon. Robert Swarten

MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON

Hansard Tuesday, 28 February 2006

MEMBERS' ETHICS AND PARLIAMENTARY PRIVILEGES COMMITTEE, MEMBERS' ENTITLEMENTS

Hon. RE SCHWARTEN (Rockhampton—ALP) (Minister for Public Works, Housing and Racing) (2.40 pm): I second the motion moved by the Premier. The little bit of an exchange we have had has been interesting because one of the realities of being a member of parliament is that there is no award that covers us. I take what the member for Toowoomba South said. In my view, he is entitled to have time with his family. He is entitled to have a holiday, and he is entitled to get leave from this parliament to do so.

Mr Beattie: Hear, hear! No argument with that.

Mr SCHWARTEN: There is no beef about that from me whatsoever.

Mr Beattie: And none from me either.

Mr SCHWARTEN: One of the things that brings this parliament to a standstill is the absolute hypocrisy that we hear from those opposite. This was started by the member for Callide, who suggested that we should make members of parliament report absences of more than two days. I do not know about the rest of the members of this parliament, but I can say, without any fear of contradiction, that I have not had a family holiday since I have been in this parliament. My family has travelled overseas without me. I regret that, to tell members the truth, because my kids are now of an age where they do not really want to travel with me. That was my personal decision. I have never had more than about four or five consecutive days off since I have been in this parliament, except when I have been sick. That is a matter for me. That does not mean everybody else should do that. However, I know that every single member of this parliament, regardless of their politics, has to answer to their electorate, and I can answer to my electorate. What this motion does—a motion which has been brought on by the National Party—

Mr Hobbs: You brought this motion on.

Mr SCHWARTEN: The opposition started the debate. I did not interject once on any of them, and I do not expect them to do it to me either. The reality is that this was brought about by the member for Callide's decision to play petty politics at the expense of Mr Poole. Mr Poole had provided the Premier with a reason for his absence. His health was such that he was not able to get back here. His family circumstances were such that he had to travel overseas. I would not like to have been in his position. If the members opposite want to chuck rocks at him then they can do so, but be told this: any of them put in the position that the member for Gaven has found himself in would probably act the same way. What would they do if their wife was living in a foreign country and she said that she was not going to move back to this country? What would they do if they got crook?

Mr Quinn: I'd resign.

Mr SCHWARTEN: I heard the interjection, 'I would resign.' This is the holier-than-thou sort of attitude that we have.

Mr Beattie: So Joan Sheldon should have resigned?

Mr SCHWARTEN: So Joan Sheldon should have resigned, as should a whole host of other people. The reality is very, very simple. Members of parliament ought to be trusted by their electorates, and when they are not trusted by their electorates there is an election to get rid of them. It is as simple as that. The electorate does not tolerate people who bludge on the electorate. It is as simple as that. We have that accountability every three years.

We now find ourselves referring to a committee of this parliament yet another set of guidelines to guide members of parliament. I do not need that set of guidelines because I know exactly what I should do. I do not believe that any member of this parliament should have to have those guidelines, either, because they all should know what they have to do.

Be that as it may, we have a motion that takes us down that path. My beef with it is simply this. Our system has been based on the Westminster system. Up until the 1930s, if someone became a minister in the British system they had to go and recontest their seat. That is what happened. Most people do not even know that. Do we want to go back to that sort of system, too? That was the accountability of becoming a minister: they had to go back and ask the electorate if they could become a minister. We can go back to those sorts of systems, if people want, and they think that that is going to make a difference, but bear in mind that members of parliament in Britain were not paid then. They had to go and get another job, so they only ever had a part-time job in parliament. This is a full-time job.

I know some members opposite spend a bit of time ploughing their crops et cetera. That, as I say, is a matter for them and a matter for their electorate. If a member's electorate is prepared to put up with them being absent from their electorate to do that work, that is up to the electorate, and I make no criticism of that. The electorates have to work that out themselves. If it is good enough for the member's electors, so be it. I am not going to be the one to tell them that that is the case.

The fact is that I do not have any business interests or run anything else because I do not have time to do it. I have a busy electorate. I know that applies to everybody I speak to and speak for on this side of parliament. The member for Cook is nodding his head. I do not know how, in the name of fortune, he would ever be able to hold another job with the huge electorate that he has and the huge responsibilities that he has. Jim Pearce is in a similar position. The bottom line is that this is shabby politics.