



Speech by

Fiona Simpson

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APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL AND APPROPRIATION BILL: ESTIMATES COMMITTEE C

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (3.01 pm): In rising to speak on the Estimates Committee C report, I also wish to acknowledge the staff who assisted us in this process. In speaking to the report and particularly to the statements of reservations that have been lodged by members of the National-Liberal coalition, I want to note that the estimates process should be a very important process with the opportunity to scrutinise the detail of the budget, to scrutinise how well the government is applying the taxpayers' funds and to scrutinise whether or not there is validity in the government's statements about the outcomes it is achieving and how those funds are being spent.

It is timely that in speaking to the Estimates Committee C report today, and particularly the State Development, Employment and Industrial Relations section of these estimates, we also have the opportunity to reflect upon the Auditor-General's report about the problem there has been with performance measures in annual statements and ministerial portfolio statements—the budget papers—and the fact that they do not correlate. A number of departments have been warned about issues to do with how they have assessed their stated outcomes of how money has been spent, yet those departments continue to defy the concerns of the Auditor-General.

Today the Auditor-General's report was raised with the Deputy Premier and she tried to brush it off and make out that it was nothing new and that the government would look at the report's findings. This is a damning report because the concern is that if the performance measures—those measures by which government departments are saying that they are achieving outcomes for the public with the application of public funds—are really unreliable and have no credibility, no consistency and no framework for really assessing their validity, then the whole process of estimates is very questionable.

The Auditor-General's report is a damning report and I am concerned that it also raises the issue of potential breaches of the law. It raises the issue of the financial standards laws and the fact that departments are supposed to uphold these laws with the application of state funds and how they are used. We have just been through an estimates process where we have seen once again inadequate performance measurement standards and changed measurement standards across a number of portfolios. We have seen the state development minister refuse to answer basic questions about how this department was making claims about certain levels of investment or how this department was actually applying funds of grants.

My concern is this. It is one thing for the political masters and ministers who come into this process to defy the parliamentary committee and refuse to answer questions; it is another concern if public servants at the senior level of government do not meet the requirements of the law in how these financial standards are applied when reporting on the performance measures and the expenditure of government. I am most concerned that we saw the situation today where the Deputy Premier basically defended breaches of the law in regard to how these financial standards are applied. That sends a message to senior bureaucrats that that is okay, and I do not believe that that is okay. I do not believe that it is okay for the parliament or the people to accept that standard.

If the public sector breach the financial standards law and are not pulled into line, they become politicised. We do not want a politicised Public Service. Unfortunately, if these financial standards are not applied and there is no action taken and departments are not pulled into line and made to obey the law, the public servants will just be toeing the line of their political masters. We must have an independent public sector. We must have performance standards and financial standards that meet the letter of the law and the spirit of the law.

Fortunately, we have an Auditor-General who undertook his statutory responsibilities to report to this parliament, but unfortunately we have not seen a situation where those who have been in breach of the law in regard to the reporting of how that money is being spent have been pulled into line to comply with the law. We must have an independent public sector that complies with the letter of the law and undertakes to uphold the recommendations of the Auditor-General. For this government to say that it is not important I think is damnable. People need to know that when their money is spent on their behalf it is done so legally and that the letter of the financial law is being met. People need to know that this government will not just say that it is okay for breaches of the law to continue and that it is business as usual.

Time expired.