



Speech by
Jeff Seeney

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

Hansard Wednesday, 21 February 2007

PARLIAMENT OF QUEENSLAND AMENDMENT BILL

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (7.40 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the consideration of the Parliament of Queensland Amendment Bill 2007. I do so somewhat reluctantly. I think it is unfortunate that this bill is before the House, but I understand the reasons that it is here, and I will go through some of those reasons as part of this contribution. However, at the beginning of my contribution I suggest that all of us need to be careful when we start making political issues out of the conditions, salaries and allowances that politicians receive. It is too easy to make cheap politics out of what politicians receive to do the job they have to do.

Those of us who serve in this chamber and in chambers like this around the country know only too well how difficult these jobs are. We know how difficult it is for all of us who serve in a representative role. We know the financial costs and the personal costs that are incurred, but we will never convince anybody else of that. We will never convince anybody in the general community of that. It is almost an Australian sport to pick on politicians. We all know that when we put our hands up for the job.

There is certainly an element in the general community who would have politicians work 24 hours a day for nothing, and they still would not be happy. These are not just members of the general public. People in some sections of the media can always get a run if they make an issue out of politicians' salaries, their allowances, conditions or whatever. It is just cheap politics.

All of us need to be careful when we start making political issues out of these sorts of things. None of us win when they become an issue. The people we represent do not win because it restricts our ability to do our jobs. In the 8½-odd years that I have been in this place I have always made a point in all of our discussions, strategy meetings and whatever of avoiding the temptation of playing cheap politics with this sort of thing. I hope that I can always avoid the temptation of playing that sort of cheap politics. I believe that it does not just belittle all of us; I believe that it lessens the ability of this parliament to serve the purpose that I am passionate about and that I believe is incredibly important to everybody in the community, even those who like to criticise us and find fault with what we receive and the allowances we get.

I know that there are very few people in this place who are not here at a financial cost; they could be earning more money in other places. I know that there are very few people here who do not use some of their own money to top up the allowances that they receive at different times. I know the personal costs that each of us incur.

However, let us look at the bill before the House. The bill before the House seeks to clarify the situation that exists in relation to the electorate allowances that we all get paid. It is here simply because this became an issue during the last election campaign. It is regrettable that it became an issue during the election campaign, but it did. In the overheated atmosphere of an election campaign it is understandable that the commitments were made by both the Premier and the Leader of the Opposition. They both made different commitments and expressed opinions about what should happen with this particular issue.

The issue arose because the election was called early. I have spoken about that before in this House, and I am not going to introduce that element into this debate. However, the election was called early. It has always been understood that these allowances were paid six months in advance. There has never been any suggestion up until then, and of which I am aware, that it was somehow a pro rata allowance; that it was a weekly or a monthly allowance. It was paid six months in advance.

I know in my particular situation, as in the situation of some of my colleagues, when I get that payment I actually use it to pay off an overdraft—an accumulated debt—from the previous six months because some months I spend more money than other months. It is not a constant expenditure. In the run-up to an election especially there are plenty of instances where that allowance would be spent in a way that did not reflect any sort of monthly or weekly or pro rata model.

However, this issue became an election issue. The Premier made a commitment that he would introduce this legislation into the House, so it is that legislation which is before us tonight. The Leader of the Opposition at the time and I agreed that there was an obligation on members who had not spent the money in the way that it was meant to be spent to repay it. It only became an issue because there was a disagreement about what the rules were. It is well to remember that the previous Speaker, the member for Mount Isa, initially ruled that there was no obligation on members to repay the money. That was the way he interpreted the rules at the time. If it had not been for the fact that there was an overheated atmosphere of an election campaign the matter would have ended there.

Of course, in an election campaign we all know what happens. The media pack loves to make an issue of these sorts of things. The media pack demanded answers from the Premier and they demanded answers from the Leader of the Opposition. In that election atmosphere those answers may not be what they would have been at some other time.

I acknowledge that the Premier made a commitment to introduce this legislation, and the Premier is carrying through with that commitment. At the time, the position that we took as the opposition was that each individual member should look at whether they had expended the money in a way that was appropriate and decide for themselves whether they should repay that money. The Leader of the Opposition asked the members on our side to do that. Some of them looked at the situation and decided that in all fairness the appropriate action was to repay some of that money. Other opposition members decided that in their situations they had expended amounts of money that meant they did not have anything to repay; they believed the money had been expended in an appropriate way.

However, one thing is certain: there was no obligation on any member at that stage to repay the money. It was universally seen as a six-monthly allowance, and it was to be spent at the behest of the member depending on their individual circumstances.

The legislation before the House tonight, unfortunately, retrospectively changes that situation. It retrospectively changes the rules. If the legislation before the House did not do that, I would be happy to support it. I would be happy to come in here and support a clarification of the rules from this point forward. I think that would be fair enough. We would all know then what the situation was and what the expectation was, and we could all abide by that.

But the fact that this legislation seeks to retrospectively change the situation and retrospectively apply to a number of members' obligations that were not previously there and that were understood to be different to what is now being applied means that I do not believe I can support this legislation. I believe that retrospective legislation at any time is unwarranted. Retrospective legislation at any time is incredibly difficult to justify. While that may open me up to some sort of an attack especially from the shallow end of the media and from those people who like to attack politicians for the allowances they receive, I can live with that. I can live with that, but I do not think this House should pass legislation that retrospectively changes the rules that we all have to abide by.

I will say this again for the purposes of clarity: if the government wants to change the rules tonight and make them apply from here forward, then I think that is a good idea. It is a good idea to clarify the situation and ensure that everybody understands it so we can all work with it. Whether we like that or not, it does not really matter; if the House passes this bill and makes that rule, we all have an obligation to abide by it.

For the record, I think it is a good idea. I think it is a good idea for that obligation to be put in place. But, for that obligation to work, we need to understand it at the beginning of the six-monthly period so we are aware of it and can manage the expenditure of those moneys accordingly. But that is not what this bill does. Therefore, I am certain it is not the fair thing and is not doing the right thing by any member of this House.

The Premier has come into the House. He was not here for my opening remarks, so I want to say to him, as I did at the beginning, that I am not going to debate this extensively and make a huge political opportunity out of this, even though there are a number of opportunities to do so in this bill. I have always

maintained and I will always maintain that, when we make a political issue out of our entitlements and the allowances and salaries that we receive, we all lose. All of us lose and the institution of parliament loses. It is just too easy for cheap politics to be made out of this sort of thing.

However, I do acknowledge the commitment that the Premier made during the election campaign. I also acknowledge and do not back away from the responses that were given by the Leader of the Opposition at the time that those members should be requested to consider repaying that money, but we will not support retrospective legislation that creates a legal obligation that did not exist at the time. As I said, it is regrettable in my view that this legislation is before the House. I acknowledge it is to honour that commitment, but let us do it, get it over with and get on with more pressing business.