



Speech by
Jeff Seeney

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

Hansard Wednesday, 22 August 2007

MOTION: SESSIONAL ORDERS

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (11.47 am): What an incredible address by the Premier. A number of times he talked about being honest, but he was not honest from start to finish. He did not say one honest word in his whole address.

This motion is about denying the opposition the opportunity to address the House when it is fully assembled. The House is fully assembled for two hours every morning and this motion is about denying the opposition a chance to address the House in those two hours.

Under this proposal, every morning the government will have one hour to put its propaganda to the House. We will have to sit here and listen to that, as if we were in a lecture theatre. The government is trying to deny the opposition two minutes to respond. It will have an hour and it is trying to deny us two minutes, and that has been the situation for some time now. The opposition has been granted two minutes and the only person who has the opportunity to make a private member's statement is the opposition leader. He is allocated two minutes to respond to the government's hour-long dialogue.

It never used to be like that. That position has been arrived at as the government has consistently shut down the opposition's opportunities. If we look back at the records of this parliament, the government's time finished at 10.10 am. There was then a 20-minute block each day for three days for the opposition and other non-government members and government backbenchers to respond, which equated to 60 minutes. There was an hour-long block for members on this side of the House and government backbenchers to make private members' statements.

Over a period of time the current government has pushed that back to a situation where over the last few months the opposition leader has only had two minutes a day to address the House when it is fully assembled—six minutes a week to respond to the three hours a week that the government takes. Now the government wants to take that away from us. I suppose I should take that as some sort of a compliment. Have my private member's statements been so devastating that the government wants to shut me down? Have my two minutes of rebuttal been so devastating that they cannot sit and listen anymore? Ministers get an hour to come in here and read ministerial statements that some bureaucrat up in George Street writes for them, and some ministers even struggle to do that. They struggle for 58 minutes through these ministerial statements that they clearly do not understand. I get two minutes to respond and they want to take that away from me, not just me personally but they want to take that away from the Leader of the Opposition.

It really is an indication of the lack of courage and the lack of self-confidence that the member for Rockhampton and the Premier have in their own performance. If their performance was at all satisfactory, they would be prepared to sit there and listen to the opposition leader for two minutes a day. In reality it should be 20 minutes a day. The government has reduced what used to be 20 minutes a day to two minutes a day. Now it wants to take away those two minutes a day.

The Premier made a great play of the fact that this new proposal would give opportunities to other members and to Independents in the House. They are opportunities that those members always had under the previous protocols of this House. If ministerial statements were to be curtailed at 10.10 am, members

on this side of the House, including the Independents, would get an opportunity every day, and so they should. There should be that 20-minute opportunity every day in this House, as there was for many years under previous governments and previous Speakers. That 20 minutes allowed members on this side of the House, non-government members, and government backbenchers to make private members' statements. To suggest that somehow or other anybody who is not a member of the government is better off under this new proposal is blatantly wrong and blatantly dishonest. The Premier's tedious repetition of that claim does nothing to make it any more honest or any more credible.

There is no doubt that this is about shutting down and curtailing the opposition. There is no doubt that this is about protecting the government from the scrutiny that should be the right and proper function of this place. That is what this place should be about. I have spoken about this a number of times in a number of debates in this House. I personally feel very strongly about the importance of this parliament and the functions that it has in our democratic system. Through a number of initiatives this government has sought to wind back and curtail the functions of this parliament.

Irrespective of who sits where, irrespective of whether it is me, the Labor government or whoever it is in this parliament at whatever time, the parliament has a function in our democracy. The key function of the parliament is the necessity to subject the government to the scrutiny and challenge of the opposition every day. That is as important now as it ever has been. The government has to subject itself to that scrutiny. If a government has confidence in its performance and has confidence in its capabilities, and if ministers are competent, then they should be able to withstand that scrutiny. Unless the opportunity is there for that scrutiny then the sort of incompetence that we have seen from the Labor government continues to grow and becomes a characteristic of the government that goes unchallenged.

Of course the opposition will oppose this motion because it entrenches, if you like, the removal of that right that we had to speak within the first two hours of parliament when the parliament is fully assembled. This motion gives us instead a half-hour block on Wednesdays after question time when there is much less scrutiny of what is happening in the House, and it certainly cannot be construed under any circumstances to provide greater opportunities for the opposition. The opposition gets few enough opportunities in this House. I think the members of the general public would be appalled if they understood just how few opportunities those of us in opposition get. All of us on this side of the House have people ask us when we go to public functions, 'Why don't you do this?', 'Why don't you do that?', 'Why don't you bring this up in parliament?' and 'Why don't you say this to him?' The reality is that we do not get any opportunities in this parliament to do the sorts of things that the people who send us here expect us to do.

When this proposal is passed later today, the sum total of my opportunity to speak as the opposition leader, as the leader of the alternative government, will be in the matter of public interest debate on Tuesdays after question time, one two-minute speech on Wednesdays after question time and that is it. I do get an opportunity to ask two questions a day. We all know that question time by its very dynamic is a forum in which the opposition is always going to come off second best because we sit over here and we bowl the questions up. We get 30 seconds to ask the questions and the ministers get three minutes to answer them and they say anything they like. With three minutes to answer of course the ministers are going to berate the questioner, as they always do when they cannot answer the question. The only opportunity that the opposition has traditionally had in this House to raise issues is private members' statements every morning—the two-minuter, as it is referred to. Two minutes a day is all the time that the opposition leader has had in the last 12 months. The government has curtailed the system so much that only the opposition leader gets that time.

Mr Horan: We are restricted with bills now too.

Mr SEENEY: Exactly. The government has used a whole range of other mechanisms to try to prevent wide-ranging debate and to deny members of the opposition the opportunity to raise issues. There is a requirement to stick to the subject of the bill. In the years that I have been here the consideration in detail stage of the bill has certainly been restricted to make it much harder to raise issues that are not directly related to the bill.

The point needs to be made, and made very clearly, that there has traditionally been 20 minutes a day, 60 minutes a week, for private members' statements. If we look back over the years of this parliament at previous governments and previous Speakers, that time gave an opportunity not only for the Leader of the Opposition but also for members of the opposition and Labor backbenchers to make public members' statements every morning. This government has curtailed that. Over the last 12 months it has forced us back to a position where the opposition gets two minutes a day to respond to the 58 minutes that the government takes to read its ministerial statements. Now it wants to take away the opposition's two minutes a day because it cannot stand sitting there for two minutes listening to an alternative view, listening to the real truth about its abject failures and its underperformance.

The government wants to take those two minutes a day away and give time to us when the House is not fully assembled and when the scrutiny and the attention is not there. I believe this is an admission of

the government's own failure. It is an admission that the government does not have the capacity to withstand the proper scrutiny that this House should provide to any government. It is an admission that the government cannot stand the scrutiny that any competent government should be able to withstand in our democratic system. Of course we will oppose the motion.