



Speech by

Shane Knuth

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

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RACING AMENDMENT BILL

Mr KNUTH (Charters Towers—NPA) (3.28 pm): The Racing Amendment Bill 2008 is designed to transfer the responsibilities for harness and greyhound racing to new control bodies from 1 July 2008 as part of the reform process to remove government from the daily operation of the racing industry. The role of the government then becomes one of ensuring the honesty and integrity within the racing codes by making certain that the control bodies properly fulfil the roles provided to them under the act and the relevant rules of racing. This bill transfers the responsibility for racing to a new control body. I have reservations about that as the last transfer of responsibilities for racing from the government to Queensland Racing Ltd has seen what was once a vibrant and growing thoroughbred industry become a tool for the current chairman to further his own personal agenda.

Since the last transfer of responsibilities, the chairman of Queensland Racing Ltd, Mr Bentley, has become not only chairman of Queensland Racing Ltd but also the director of Tattersall's after his appointment in October 2006. The Tattersall's 2007 annual report states that all members of the board were considered to be independent with the exception of Mr Bentley who, as the chairman of the Queensland Thoroughbred Racing Board, is directly associated with a material supplier to UNITAB. So Mr Bentley is in a position to improve the outcome for shareholders yet remains chairman of the Queensland Thoroughbred Racing Board, which has a vendetta against non-profit TAB meetings. This is a monumental conflict of interest. It is appalling that this man is allowed to continue in his role as chairman of Queensland Racing Ltd while he is sitting on the board of Tattersall's. What message will this bill send to ensure that does not happen to greyhound and harness racing? Every decision made by Queensland Racing Ltd must be investigated to ensure the integrity of the racing industry across the state.

By removing more country race dates, Mr Bentley has given more race meetings to the TAB clubs, thereby increasing the overall profits of the company on which he sits as a director. The annual report for Queensland Racing Ltd states that Queensland Racing Ltd has enjoyed an excellent year, with good growth across-the-board. However, the statistics show that the number of meetings has dropped, the number of races has dropped, the turnover of bookmakers has dropped, and the number of bookmakers, jockeys and trainers has dropped. Is that what the greyhound and harness racing industries have to look forward to under these changes? The only statistics in the Queensland Racing Ltd annual report that show good growth are the average wagering per TAB meeting on UNITAB, which has soared. In the 2006-07 financial year the total wagering on UNITAB hit \$2.41 billion.

After the passage of this bill, Queensland Harness Racing Ltd and Greyhounds Queensland Ltd will adopt a code of conduct for their members and officials. The Queensland Racing Ltd code states clearly that every Queensland Racing Ltd official must avoid private, financial or other interests or undertakings that could directly or indirectly compromise or conflict with the performance of their duties. While the chairman sits on the board of Tattersall's and chairs the future of Queensland racing, that can be seen to be nothing more than a massive conflict of interest and being blatantly disrespectful of the organisation's own code of conduct.

Under the constitution to be adopted by Queensland Harness Racing Ltd and Greyhounds Queensland Ltd, the income and property of the relevant company must be applied solely towards the

promotion of the company and not as profit to the members. However, Queensland Racing Ltd clearly does not abide by the same ideals. Country racing is suffering. It is not being given a fair go. Consequently, the entire racing industry is suffering. Already there are fewer jockeys and trainers in country areas because of the astronomical cutbacks. They are travelling further and further to meetings. Because of the lack of support given to them from Bob Bentley, with his anti country racing and pro profit-making stance, it is getting harder and harder for country jockeys and trainers.

The responsibilities of Queensland Harness Racing Ltd, Greyhounds Queensland Ltd and Queensland Racing Ltd in managing their code include the allocation of race dates. But the web site for Queensland Racing Ltd is used as a propaganda vehicle for the chairman of Queensland Racing Ltd. It is astounding that he writes what he does and gets away with it. Recently he wrote that the Queensland Country Racing Committee rejected Queensland Racing Ltd's proposal of a 25 per cent increase to base prize money. He did not write that no region rejected the increase in the base prize money; rather, they rejected that in exchange for the increase in base prize money country racing had to give up 21 race meetings, adding to the loss of almost 200 race meetings since 2002. Mr Bentley was blackmailing the regions. He was dangling a carrot in front of their noses while tearing their guts out behind them.

Another responsibility of Queensland Harness Racing Ltd and Greyhounds Queensland Ltd is the distribution of money to clubs for prize money. I hope Queensland Racing Ltd's proposal of a 25 per cent increase to base prize money in exchange for giving up further meetings does not happen to harness and greyhound racing. But the chairman failed to mention that there was really no net increase to the prize money. In fact, the prize money from the reduction in the number of races would have been distributed to those country clubs that were fortunate enough to keep their race dates. So Mr Bentley wanted to rob Peter to pay Paul. There was no increase at all.

That is why there is a concern about this legislation, which is part of the reform process to remove the government from the daily operations of the racing industry. Mr Bentley said in his news release that during the 2006-07 financial year 52 race meetings conducted by non-TAB clubs failed to attract 30 or more starters. But he did not say that the majority of those race meetings continued but with reduced numbers of races. The race meetings that could not go ahead were often due to circumstances beyond their control, such as rain, access and illness. At no point in Mr Bentley's release is there any explanation as to why race clubs had to abandon meetings and how many meetings were abandoned totally. Mr Bentley did not say that Queensland Racing Ltd determines the class of races, which impacts on the availability of nominations. He did not say that Queensland Racing Ltd has full involvement with country race clubs, but it would not have a clue how to manage and organise country race meetings. Queensland Racing Ltd is kicking them in the guts. There is no consultation with country racing committees and no consultation with local trainers and owners. The chairman went on to say that the changes are desperately needed to the Racing Act to remove the disproportionate representation afforded to once- and twice-a-year race clubs where it is the company's own action that has turned many clubs into once- and twice-a-year race clubs.

Mr Bentley maintained in his release that he has received enough calls of concern from country owners and trainers to warrant Queensland Racing Ltd approaching the minister to change the act. We have not heard any concerns. The concerns that we hear are that committee members want more prize money, more race dates, and more race meetings. Who were the calls from, because committee members across the state have been receiving calls from owners and trainers in support of their stance and do not want them to be bullied into reducing the number of race meetings even further?

Another responsibility that is given in this legislation to the new control bodies is the allocation of funds for venue development and other infrastructure relevant to the code of racing. The government must have been concerned when on 6 April this year the Caloundra synthetic track was opened to much fanfare at a cost of \$6 million. It was heralded as the first of its kind in Australia and the first of three to be laid in the south-east corner. The question needs to be asked: what country race clubs have received funding for venue development and other infrastructure? One of the reasons given for the additional removal of race days from country races was to ensure success of the Caloundra race club. Supporters of country racing support monuments such as the synthetic track at Caloundra so long as they are not plundered for their benefit.

While there is not anywhere near as much harness and greyhound racing occurring in country areas, smaller clubs must be concerned about the direction the thoroughbred industry has taken since control was taken by Queensland Racing Ltd. The minister's role is to ensure that there is integrity in racing and that the industry decides what races are held and what funds are available to pay into those races. However, while the current chairman holds his position on the board of Tattersall's, there is no integrity in racing. It can only be seen as self-serving and hypocritical of him to remain at the helm of Queensland Racing Ltd.

Both industries—harness and greyhound racing—are reliant on the government getting this legislation right. They are both hopeful that this government has learned from the errors that are continuing to be made within the thoroughbred racing industry. They remain confident that, unlike the integrity of the

thoroughbred industry, the integrity of their industries will remain unscathed. It is a relief to hear Country Racing Committee members report that they have been reassured by the minister that there will be no amendments to the Racing Act. I for one hope that he stands by his word. I sincerely hope that the harness and greyhound racing industries are not driven into the ground by self-serving board members who care little about the growth of the industry, who care little about country racing and who care more about their own personal gain.