



Speech by

Dr Alex Douglas

MEMBER FOR GAVEN

Hansard Thursday, 7 October 2010

HOLIDAYS AMENDMENT BILL

Dr DOUGLAS (Gaven—LNP) (12.01 pm): The Gold Coast is Australia's holiday capital and arguably one of the most beautiful parts of the world. Over 10 million tourists—

Mr Ryan interjected.

Dr DOUGLAS: Yes, I think it competes with Maleny. Maleny is a beautiful spot. Over 10 million tourists come to the Gold Coast annually to do everything from surf to dream and maybe just recharge the batteries. I am privileged to represent one part of this amazing region in Gaven, in particular the Gold Coast Hinterland, Nerang State Forest and the Nerang and Coomera river regions, cruising right through what is probably the most breathtakingly beautiful part of the country. For many who drive past it day by day, it becomes just the norm. But in a world that is overpopulated, polluted, drab and grey, we are indeed very fortunate. It is very close to Brisbane for those who are Brisbane dwellers.

This bill today is about designated holidays for Christmas and new year. Specifically, this bill deems the dates 25 December, 28 December, 1 January and 3 January 2011 as public holidays. The member for Glass House has actually stated the reason: the adjustment in the calendar. These will be deemed to be public holidays.

This bill has significant financial implications for Gold Coast businesses because over Christmas and new year we expect our population to swell to 1.3 million. A potential group of 600,000 international, local and interstate guests and 50 per cent of our own population will be on holidays at the same time. We have a population of roughly 750,000. We would actually have nearly a million people in tourist mode. This does put enormous pressure on businesses to respond, and that is difficult. For many, Christmas and new year is the time of the year when the bulk of the tourist driven income is derived. In fact, most Gold Coast businesses would derive 80 per cent of their income and profits during December and January. After a very tough two years, those surviving businesses are really hoping for a bumper Christmas. I welcome all honourable members to come this year. They will certainly find that things are very good. Most of the theme parks are very affordable and have some new rides.

The initial signs are not good due to the 0.1 per cent decline in retail sales in Queensland, despite an enormously extended sales period throughout all the shops. There has been a 13 per cent decline in tourist visa applications from Asia Minor and a significant upswing in the Australian dollar that appears to be driving an excess of purchases of overseas holidays by Australians. The figures on that are not out, but we expect that up to 40 per cent of those who might normally come are actually in the process of considering overseas holidays. Christmas is predicted to be wet, and Virgin Blue has just formally shut down its tourist booking system. This has a significant impact on the Gold Coast as Virgin Blue has a 50 per cent split in the provision of services. It has provided 85 per cent of our incoming services to Coolangatta since Qantas actually exited the market. So basically Jetstar and Virgin are the major providers.

The shadow minister has clearly detailed why this bill needs to be delivered. As he correctly stated, it is because of the sell-out of Queensland's industrial relations system by the Rudd-Gillard government at no material advantage to Queensland workers. The minor anomaly is that the Fair Work Act 2009 recognises a public holiday declared or prescribed under Queensland law to be prescribed as such. There

seems to be a problem here since public holidays can be seen as a Clayton's holiday: the public holiday you are having when you are not really having a public holiday.

This year on the Gold Coast show holiday—a non-gazetted public holiday on the Gold Coast which was not in sequence with the Brisbane show holiday—travel on the Gold Coast rail system was charged at normal weekday rates because TransLink and QR did not recognise that as a public holiday. Similarly, that affects Brisbane people coming down on show holiday to the Gold Coast, who are charged weekday rates, about which they complain excessively. I have raised the issue about these gazetted days with the minister. Unfortunately, the difficulty is that there seems to be a view that outside Brisbane on these non-gazetted show holidays, which does affect the Gold Coast significantly, we are actually charged normal weekday rates. I would ask the government to seriously consider looking at this and changing it.

The proof for all to see is that the current government, the Bligh Labor government, is not respectful of both the law and the intent of the law. Gold Coasters already have to pay a surcharge on public holidays because staff are paid at higher rates. This is the major difficulty of excessive public holidays: increased wages and double-time penalties for staff. To then charge them transport fees at higher rates is actually capricious and unfair. The government needs to be fair in its observance of public holidays, including those regional holidays, especially in Australia's tourist mecca. Brisbane is but one part of our great state. Remember, we have 10 million tourists a year and we are expecting 15 million by 2014. That is a lot of people. If we get that growth, that will result in a lot of income to the state.

I would like to quote from Paul Burton, who wrote an article in the *Gold Coast Bulletin* on 1 December last year. He reflected on what the global financial crisis might teach us. In fact, like everything, it is appropriate to review these things. He states—

This experience of the Gold Coast emphasises that place matters: that a global crisis will impact differently on the Gold Coast compared with Brisbane, Sydney or Melbourne. The differences reflect different trajectories of economic development and local economic structures. A city based on tourism and building for an expanding population will have a different exposure or risk profile to one based primarily on manufacturing or financial services—

as could be said compared to Brisbane. The article goes on—

However, the differences are also a product of local governance structures and how local councils ... respond to major threats to their local economy.

These things are relevant. In fact, we need to consider those kinds of things with respect to the issue of allocating public holidays.

Some honourable members may be unaware of how we actually developed the issue of calendars as such. The issue was raised here. Members may be unaware that there were customary secular and non-secular calendar directives to include the critical dates based on what was previously the Julian calendar that was used and now the Gregorian calendar. Julian comes from Julius Caesar and Gregorian comes from Pope Gregory XIII. It is the solar calendar.

Mr Shine: What was TJ Ryan's attitude?

Dr DOUGLAS: I am sorry? We have collectively moved from the Julian to the Gregorian and partially back to the Julian. That is why 1 January is the start of the year. In Christian times, Christmas Day was the start of the year. The ancient Roman calendar started on 1 March, and that was corrected because there was a solar correction. So we actually moved to a solar correction because the Gregorian calendar actually corrects for the solar calendar, which is actually only 26 seconds out. Christmas Day is 25 December, which is obviously the historic birthday of Jesus Christ 2,010 years ago. By convention, we use this as the beginning of the modern calendar because it is the most approximate. It follows that three full moons after new year we have Easter. The arithmetic correction between the calendars is actually called the secular correction because it corrects the difference between the Julian calendar, which is secular, and the Christian, which is non-secular.

The reality is that these holidays are historic. Christian values and ceremonial dates are at the core of our Constitution and system of government. In an increasingly secular world these dates may have reduced significance to many. For non-Christians and atheists, Christmas and new year have equally become a time for family, rest, reflection and giving. It does not imply that they are forced to participate in traditional Christmas or new year vigils, and nor should it. It is akin to Ramadan in those countries where there are fundamental Muslim beliefs. By decree their holidays are at different times.

It is more than a little trite for some who claim aggressive secular values and atheism to not speak out against this decision here today. If we were all true to our beliefs we could see a conga line telling us what would really be declared formal public holidays. Christmas and new year is a sacred time for most Australians.

Honourable members, we need to clearly understand that there is no historic significance to the date 28 December or 3 January other than this year they fall on the other side of the Christmas and new year weekends. That is why they have been decreed. In other words, they allow for a long weekend. Australia has regularly been described as the land of the long weekend. Some say it in very disparaging terms. We

need to be careful about drafting laws that sometimes are hypocritical and reflective more of indolence than contrition. One adds this to the problems created for the public by public holidays.

I am a general practitioner and also a politician. I endorse the comments made by the member for Moggill. Specifically, I would like to discuss some of the issues raised by the member for Springwood a little earlier. What occurs in medical practices is that we actually do open on public holidays. We do work at night and we do work at weekends because people get sick at all hours. It is a privilege to look after people.

It was raised by a member earlier that people get sick out of hours. It may be inconvenient but a medical practitioner has to attend to them. Unfortunately, rosters have to be made and staff have to be placed on those rosters. It is very difficult and it is often unfair. This occurs at Christmas. When the population increases and people are on holidays accidents occur and people need to be seen. We have to have rosters and people have to be available at certain times.

There are arrangements that are formally made like after-hours services, and it is difficult for those staff. By and large, most people do not work every Christmas nor do they work every new year. If one works a new year, in general terms they do not work Christmas Day or Boxing Day. Most people tend to rotate. That is what happens in general practice.

That is not to say that general practitioners get it any better than others. General practitioners are not allowed to charge a patient if we attend a call-out other than for a normal day. The Commonwealth does not recognise a pay fee for the general practitioner. They are paid as they would be on any other day of the week yet they must pay their staff on a public holiday or out of hours as they are due under their awards. Most of them are covered under federal awards. They are very generous and most people do not disagree with those.

Equally, people need to understand there is a cost. Whilst it is a privilege to look after someone, if it is actually costing that general practitioner money people should not begrudge the service that is being given. If they provide the service it is a holistic one. All staff participate in it. I have rarely heard people complain about it. I think this point was well made by the member for Moggill. These are the true effects of public holidays.

What we as politicians must accept is that there are costs to any decision. The public ultimately have to wear those costs. The LNP will always do what it can to reduce the unnecessary costs that are a burden to the community. I believe Labor should do the same. A little understanding of these points would actually make that a little easier.

The gazetting is fair to those families needing a certainty of family time with income. It reflects values of sharing and community demand. The LNP supports the bill, but personally I can only emphasise the significance of the values lying behind its gazetting. Holidays are not just a reward for hard work; they are unique days that allow the community to celebrate how lucky we are both as individuals and collectively.