




Speech by

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MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

Hansard Wednesday, 9 March 2011

COMMITTEE SYSTEM REVIEW COMMITTEE: REPORT, MOTION TO TAKE NOTE

 **Mr LANGBROEK** (Surfers Paradise—LNP) (Leader of the Opposition) (3.07 pm): It is my pleasure to rise to speak to this committee report on the review of the parliamentary committee system. I note the contribution of the member for Waterford and all the contributions of members of the committee. I understand that this process was conducted in great spirit, with a genuine interest in reforming the parliamentary committee system, which is something that is certainly long overdue and which should hold the executive to account.

Looking at the experience of the three members of the opposition who served on this committee, I note that we put very experienced members on it. The members for Toowoomba South, Callide and Southern Downs have contributed over 50 years in combined parliamentary service. I know that, on the government side, the Leader of the House, the former Minister for Public Works and the member for Yeerongpilly—and the Independent member for Nanango—also contribute a significant amount of experience. There was a genuine attempt, which has obviously been achieved, to come up with a better system to show that we do believe in open and transparent government—the LNP certainly does—that is accountable to the parliament and the people.

We welcome the review. I know that since it was first put into the public arena there have been significant issues that have been publicly aired. We support the recommendations. I know that there have been issues with the present Speaker, who has raised his concerns. Whilst he was criticised today in the contribution of the member for Rockhampton, I think it is interesting that consideration is being given to changing some of the recommendations in relation to which the Speaker has expressed concern. I think it is only fair that the Speaker should have been able to express those concerns and issues about the standing orders and their application and whether he should have some sort of input in that respect and also the issue of the maintenance of the parliamentary precinct. It was disappointing to hear the contribution of the member for Rockhampton—one of the most experienced members in this place. I see him scuttling back to his chair now.

Mr Schwarten: Absolutely.

Mr LANGBROEK: Here he comes. I am happy to take it, because let us have a look at some of the things the member for Rockhampton had to say in that charming contribution just before lunch. The former member for Ashgrove was in his last term when I came here. You can only take people as you find them. All I know is that when I expressed an interest in the standing orders the former Speaker, the then member for Ashgrove, was happy to impart some of his knowledge to me. The point is that when Jim Fouras made his contribution in the paper the other day it certainly led to some issues that have been addressed or will be addressed by the government in considering what they are going to do with the recommendations.

It does not add anything to the debate to have a former minister of the Crown now on the back bench carrying on like that and making reflections on the current Speaker. It needs to be said that the former minister's contribution, the member for Rockhampton's contribution, before lunch was a disgrace. It

was a disgrace from a long-serving member of this parliament. Someone should tell the member for Rockhampton that Sir Les Patterson was a caricature, not a model for how you conduct yourself in public life. In his contribution he was having a go at the present Speaker and former Speakers because of some sort of bias and anger he has about things that happened in times long gone. He should put that behind him when we are looking at a committee like this that has made recommendations for the future of our parliament—long after he and I will be gone.

We saw contempt of the parliament shown by this former minister just last sitting week when the business of the House was suspended so that the then minister could come in here and give a valedictory. We have seen the erosion of parliamentary powers, and it is important that parliamentary committees are given authority in this place and have more powers, as we are going to see, so that members can appreciate their importance in our parliamentary system.

I note that committee members were unanimous in stating that 'our present committee structure is under resourced, does not have sufficient influence over the executive of government, does not receive sufficient attention in the parliament and is largely unknown to the majority of Queenslanders'. That is a damning indictment from a bipartisan committee. In a unicameral system—one of course given to us by the Labor Party as a result of it having abolished the upper house—a strong parliamentary committee system provides a much needed check on unilateral actions by the executive. I think that many people are concerned at the number of MPs who are part of the executive and that leaves fewer to independently represent the community. This community has doubled in number since the last increase in the number of MPs.

Let us have a look at Labor's track record. It does seem that the Beattie and Bligh Labor governments have set out to deliberately dilute committee powers. In the process they have effectively eroded the integrity of the committee system. I have served on the public accounts committee and it was a privilege to do so. It gave me an insight into many of the issues of the Auditor-General, but the democratic process has not been accorded the respect that it should have been in Queensland. Members have spoken in here before about the estimates committees, which have been described as a farce. Even the member for Waterford in his contribution just now acknowledged that they could be improved. We know that estimates committees have provided only a token opportunity for investigation. I have sat on those estimates committees and have seen that those reports and proceedings are soaked in layers of government self-justification and back patting.

The former member for Waterford, who was the minister for industrial relations at my first estimates committee, did not answer questions. We had very little ability to cross-examine or none at all, and half of the time available was allocated to government Dorothy Dixers. A great example of that is following the sale of Queensland Rail only 15 minutes were allocated to opposition members for questioning the Minister for Transport on this matter. In reality, even less was available as the shadow minister was thrown out by the committee chair. The reason was that she dared to try to press the minister to actually answer her questions. It was a disgrace that such a major government decision—

Mr O'BRIEN: Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to a point of order. I was the chair of that committee. I find the remarks of the Leader of the Opposition offensive and I ask that he withdraw them.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms van Litsenburg): Order! Will the member withdraw.

Mr LANGBROEK: Madam Deputy Speaker, I ask for your ruling as to whether that is a personal reflection. I made no reflection on the chair of that committee.

Mr O'BRIEN: Madam Deputy Speaker—

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Will the member resume his seat. I ask the member to withdraw his statement.

Mr LANGBROEK: I withdraw. It is a disgrace that such a major government decision—one which the current government deliberately did not disclose during the last election—was not subject to cross-examination.

Time and time again we have seen major legislation introduced into this House and debated without in-depth consideration by an appropriately resourced committee. The Scrutiny of Legislation Committee has attempted to perform a difficult job well, but the limited time and powers to properly consider complex legislation has hampered its performance. Those on the other side of the House should hang their heads in shame. They should hang their heads in shame for their continued trampling of open and accountable government. This review has shown that the committee system is not just failing; it has failed. It has become too dominated by the government, too remote from the public and representative groups, too limited in their use and too restricted in reference and powers. The time is long overdue for reform.

So let us have a look at some of the committee recommendations. The LNP is committed to real transparency in our democratic system. We welcome the recommendations of the Committee System Review Committee. It is a pity that the government has only moved to restored the parliamentary

committee system now, but we support a rejuvenated committee system. I know that the former leader has always asked for more rigorous estimates processes and other reforms that until now have never been considered.

We also need a committee system that has the ability and powers to investigate issues in more detail than can be accommodated here in the House. Committees should allow the opening up of important topics to wider consultation and input through submissions and hearings. I know committee members found that when they went to New Zealand. That is a significant matter that I have heard about from New Zealand members of parliament through their processes and through the way they look at legislation before it comes to the House.

These committees should provide a link to the people most affected by the issues in the formulation and consideration of legislation. By working in a bipartisan manner—and that is what has come out of this review—the issues can be examined more fully, tested more strenuously and the result can better reflect the needs of the community. I welcome the expansion of the committee system to include a number of statutory portfolio based committees. I heard the contribution of the honourable member for Southern Downs before lunch and I understand that is still to be finally clarified.

The review recommends the portfolio committee being able to report on 'all aspects of government activities, including investigating and reporting on events, incidents and operational matters'. Queenslanders deserve best practice in parliament just as we do in fields such as science and manufacturing, agriculture, tourism, education and health in the 21st century. For example, the health committee would be able to investigate the management of our hospitals and the pay debacle. The LNP also supports the expanded consideration of legislation with opportunities for public input from stakeholders and citizens. I hope the government will take on board the recommendation that any exceptions to referring legislation be transparent, narrowly defined and extraordinary in nature.

In addition, I welcome the proposal to refer budget estimates to the relevant portfolio committee. This will allow committee members to develop a depth of understanding for complex matters—something that I have already pointed out does happen under the current committee system but certainly could be extended so that MPs from both sides and/or Independents could understand many of these matters better than they currently do.

I welcome the proposal that appointments to key statutory roles will require bipartisan support, including the roles of the Auditor-General, the Crime and Misconduct Commission chairperson and commissioners, the Criminal Organisation Public Interest Monitor, the Electoral Commissioner, the Information Commissioner, the Right to Information Commissioner and the Privacy Commissioner, the Integrity Commissioner and the Ombudsman. These are positions that over the years, including in the years that I have been in this place, have been subject to questions. When members have asked about particular positions they have just been told who is going to be appointed as opposed to there being proper bipartisan consultation.

I support the establishment of the Committee of the Legislative Assembly. I understand the concerns of the Speaker about his exclusion from this committee. There is conflict when it comes to the honourable Speaker's role in referring matters and his possible inclusion. This may be an issue that deserves further consideration. I understand that is happening when it comes to standing orders matters.

The LNP welcomes the recommendation that the time allocated for ministerial statements be reduced to allow for more consideration of committee reports. The opposition understood that we had to give as well in order to make these reforms possible. As a result, for legislation considered by a committee the recommendation is that members of parliament who are not on the committee have a reduced time to speak on the bill. In addition, the review calls for Wednesday parliamentary sittings to be delayed to allow committee business from 9 am to 1 pm.

I am disappointed to see that one of the important issues of reform for this parliament was expressly excluded from consideration in this review. That is the issue of truth in parliament. I want to reiterate that the LNP is committed to reinstating section 57 of the Criminal Code to make it an offence for any person to tell a nontruth to a parliamentary committee.

Queenslanders deserve their parliament and its committees to deliver real scrutiny of the executive government. The LNP welcomes this report. However, these proposals should just be the start of bringing back honesty, transparency and accountability to the management of this state. I am committed to providing Queenslanders with a real choice at the next election—a choice for them to get their Queensland back.