



Speech by

Mr D. WELLS

MEMBER FOR MURRUMBA

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FIRST SPEECH

Mr WELLS (Murrumba) (11 a.m.): Mr Speaker, may I begin by observing one of the courtesies of parliamentary tradition and congratulate you on your election as Speaker. Like many of my colleagues on this side of the House, I was genuinely surprised at the even-handedness of a number of your early rulings. If you continue as you have begun, Sir, history will exempt you from the general condemnation it will pass on the Government from whose ranks you came, and you will be held in respect by all those who also respect parliamentary democracy.

Another of the customary courtesies of the Westminster tradition is that a new member may say a few words in honour of his predecessor. I think everybody in this place is aware of the differences of opinion between myself and the previous member for Murrumba, differences which were pursued in an electoral fight to the finish. Nevertheless, one can honestly wish to place on record the achievements of an opponent, and I do so now.

As a local member, R. C. Kruger entered fully into the life of the community he had the honour to represent for nine years in this House and six years previously as a local councillor. He had an excellent memory for names and faces, and knew many people in his electorate, just as he was well known. He regularly attended many local functions and took a particular interest in local sporting groups. He is still honoured as a patron of many of those groups, and is well thought of.

As a parliamentarian he served on the Opposition front bench between 1980 and 1986 in the capacity of, successively, shadow Minister for Lands, Forestry and Survey, and Primary Industries. In respect of forestry he was particularly interested in the dieback phenomenon and the threat it poses to our environment and timber reserves.

His main interest in primary industries was in fruit and vegetables, which had also been his own crops when he was farming.

Mr Kruger made a contribution both to the life of his community and to the work of this Parliament. I wish him well for the future.

The people of my electorate live in the suburbs of Petrie, Lawnton, Bald Hills, Bracken Ridge, Clontarf and Kippa-Ring. Some also live in Kallangur, Murrumba Downs and Dohles Rocks. They belong to three different municipal districts and, in some ways, do not have the sort of community of interest that would be expected under a just redistribution. They were placed in the one electorate because the Government wanted to take some Labor voters out of the electorate of Pine Rivers to make it safe for the Minister for Family Services. But they do have one important community of interest. They were determined to return a Labor member. This is because they know that for a long period now Queensland has led the way in Australia in terms of high levels of unemployment. They know it, because they experience it.

Redcliffe and Chermside Social Security offices, which service my constituents, are currently reporting the highest rates of increase in unemployment in the State. My constituents know that if they lived under a Labor State Government, that Government would be doing something to stimulate local industry, as other State Governments do.

My constituents also know that Queenslanders have the lowest average male weekly earnings in Australia. Families in my electorate experience that, too. They know that this National Party

Government's attacks on the trade unions and the working class are effective, and they know who profits from them.

My constituents work constantly raising funds for their local p. and c. associations so they can provide their children with facilities that, in other States, are provided by the Government. They are hit by electricity tariffs and car registration increases. And when they look across the bay at Moreton Island, they know that its fragile ecosystem is about to be undermined by the vandalism of the Minister for Mines and Energy.

My local ALP branch members made great sacrifices of their personal time during the last State election campaign. They worked very hard in an electorate which many people said that Labor could not win in the circumstances. My local branch members worked so effectively among my constituents that the final Labor vote in Murrumba actually increased. My sincere thanks to all of them.

In sending me to this place, my constituents have paid me the highest honour it is in their power to bestow. It is no fault of my constituents that the Parliament they have sent me to is the world's most expensive rubber stamp. It is no fault of theirs that their votes are worth only half of the votes of the electors of Peak Downs and Roma. The 15 000 people who voted in those electorates, taking the two together, elect two members, while the 16 000 people who voted in mine can elect only one. Neither is it any fault of my constituents that the forms of Parliament have been subverted to the whim of the Executive.

The forms of parliamentary Government have been so far subverted in this place that a certain National Party political stunt that took place last week, which sums it all up, just passed for normal. His Excellency the Governor appointed as commissioners for administering the oath or affirmation of allegiance the ruling triumvirate of the member for Barambah, the member for Somerset and the member for South Coast. Of course, in doing that, he was acting as always on the advice of the Premier, so it was the Premier who was responsible. The Premier had his own reasons for wanting to do a job which should have been left to the Clerk or some other politically neutral officer of the Parliament.

Having secured himself this commission, the Premier then went and sat in the Speaker's chair, thus insulting this Parliament. That chair belongs to an officer of the Parliament, not the Government. The Premier and his two henchmen then stood on the Speaker's dais and handed down Bibles to honourable members so that they could take the oath.

Mrs CHAPMAN: I rise to a point of order. Far be it from me to interrupt the maiden speech of a new member—

Opposition members: Sit down!

Mrs CHAPMAN: I will not sit down. I have a right to stand. I object to the honourable member's use of the term "henchmen" as he has done. I ask him to withdraw it.

Mr WELLS: I withdraw the offending term. I will use instead the term "sidekicks".

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The honourable member will not use that word, either. He will withdraw it.

Mr WELLS: I withdraw the word and substitute the word "colleagues".

As I was saying, Mr Speaker, the chair in which you are sitting belongs to an officer of the Parliament, not the Government. When the Premier and his two colleagues handed Bibles to honourable members so that they could take the oath, they were usurping the role of an officer of this Parliament. That is not the role of an officer of the Government. The whole exercise was designed to imbue honourable members with the idea that the act which legitimated them as members of Parliament had something to do with the ruling hierarchy of the National Party.

The metaphor they constructed by that charade was of political legitimacy flowing down from them on the Speaker's dais to the members below. In other Parliaments, the oath of affirmation is administered by the Clerk, with members, including the Prime Minister or Premier, standing with equal humility around the table.

The oath which I took was a contract between God and myself and had nothing to do with the hierarchy of the National Party. I would like honourable members to know that, if I choose to communicate with God, I do not need a group of political stunt-staging, interfering old men to act as intermediaries.

The particular abuse of democracy I have just been describing is only an abuse of form, not substance. I have spent a little time on it in order to show how far the pendulum has swung. The point is that the Government can usurp the functions of politically neutral officials, and neither the media nor the public notices, because they are so used to this sort of thing happening that they think it normal.

Much more important in the long run are the following subversions of the Westminster system—the management of question-time, the embedding in Standing Orders of procedures which make it impossible for the Opposition to bring on a motion of no confidence, the absence of a public

accounts committee to examine Government expenditure for waste, extravagance and deceit and the politicisation of the public service.

First, I turn to question-time. Discussion has concentrated on the refusal of Ministers to answer questions. This is a fair point to make. However, it is only a point about tactics. The substantial point is that the Standing Orders which have been drawn up for the protection of this Ministry let them get away with it. In the Federal Parliament there is provision for an unlimited number of written questions on notice. A member can ask as many questions as he, or she, likes—a hundred in one day, if necessary. These will be published in *Hansard* and, in due course, a written response will be published, also in *Hansard*. The whole exercise attracts parliamentary privilege, and it saves the time of the House. If a member wants information, the thing to do is to put a question on notice. If a member wishes to make a political point by asking a question, the time for that is question-time.

In this place, by contrast, it is practically impossible to get information. If a sensible question is asked, the Minister probably does not know the answer. If he does know the answer, it is probably in his interest to conceal it, so he talks about something else instead. Of course, that tactic is occasionally used in every Parliament, but in some places the tactic is a double-edged sword. If a Federal Minister evades a question, the evasion is like an electrical signal to the Canberra press gallery. They immediately set to work, like Woodward and Bernstein of Watergate fame, to find out what is being hidden. The press receive information and documents from various sources, as do members, and these are exchanged. Where parliamentary privilege is needed, the press give documents to members so they can be quoted under privilege. Importantly, the Standing Orders of the Parliament are such that it is easy to ensure that such matters are raised.

From what I can tell, there is scope for a great deal more of that in this Parliament. The point is, however, that the sanction that makes the free flow of information inevitable in Canberra does not exist in Queensland. That sanction is unrestricted access to written questions on notice. The introduction of that system in Queensland would go a long way towards transforming Queensland from an information-poor political system to an information-rich political system. The cost would be minimal—much less than a few trips in a Government jet to Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Wagga Wagga—and the rewards in terms of open government would be immeasurable.

The next abuse is another instance of Standing Orders being used to protect an incompetent Ministry. In other Parliaments it is easy for the Opposition to bring on an urgency motion or a motion of no confidence. Throughout the history of Westminster Parliaments, motions of confidence have been the means by which Governments have demonstrated to the people to whom they are responsible that they had the confidence of their elected representatives. Such motions provide an opportunity for the Opposition to draw attention to a Government's shortcomings, and for the Government to provide a vindication of its record, or fall in the attempt. In this Parliament, one cannot do either. The Opposition could give notice that on the next sitting day it would move a motion that the Government had lost the confidence of the House, but there is nothing in Standing Orders that would make the Government bring it on for debate.

Alternatively, the Opposition could seek leave to move a motion of no confidence, but, judging by the previous form of this Government, leave would not be granted. The Leader of the Opposition has moved an amendment to the motion for the adoption of the Address in Reply declaring no confidence in the Government. At least that is something. However, the Leader of the Opposition will never be given the opportunity of doing what any other Opposition Leader in this country is permitted to do, namely, to move a motion of no confidence, be heard and be answered on the spot by having the matter debated forthwith.

It is a sad travesty that it took three and a half months from the date of the election before the Government deigned to face the Parliament. It is a pathetic tragedy that this most lack-lustre and talent-free of all State Governments governs, more than does any other Government, by Executive decree, with Ministers' rudimentary minds untutored by exposure to parliamentary debate. But it is a ridiculous farce that this Government has rigged Standing Orders so that it will not have to risk a motion of no confidence, even in a Parliament that it has itself gerrymandered.

The third of the major subversions of Westminster democracy to which I will refer is the absence in Queensland of a public accounts committee. Let me tell honourable members what a public accounts committee is. It is a committee drawn from all parties in the Parliament, its membership being in proportion to each party's numbers in the Parliament. In other words, it is a committee that Government members can control. It is a devastating indictment of this Government that it is so lacking in intestinal fortitude, and has so much to hide, that it is afraid to submit itself to the scrutiny of even a committee on which it would have the numbers.

The job of a public accounts committee is to inquire into details of Government expenditure programs to ensure that the tax-payer is getting value for money. Such a committee is assisted in its role by the right to call people before it to advise on the programs being inquired into.

Witnesses to a committee can be public servants, citizens who are supposed to benefit from a program or persons otherwise affected. The result of a public accounts committee inquiry is very frequently a major saving of public funds. Combined with the introduction of program budgeting, the work of a public accounts committee would yield a tremendous saving of funds to the Queensland taxpayer. Program budgeting, by the way, is the system which operates in Canberra and elsewhere in Australia under which, when departments put in their requests for budgetary funding, they have to spell out in detail what programs they need those funds for. It is not just a good idea. It is blatantly, obviously, a good idea. It is an idea to which the Queensland Government is therefore relentlessly opposed.

To return to the Public Accounts Committee—the reason it is such a significant issue, apart from the fact that it is so obviously a sensible idea, is that the Government of Queensland has ensured that this is the only comparable Westminster-type Parliament that does not have one. The Legislative Assembly of New South Wales has a Public Accounts Committee. In Victoria, the Economic and Budget Review Committee and the Public Bodies Review Committee are joint committees of both their Houses. Again, in South Australia the Public Accounts Committee is a joint committee of both Houses. The Western Australian Public Accounts and Expenditure Review Committee is a committee of their Legislative Assembly. Tasmania has a Public Accounts Committee as a joint committee of both Houses. The Northern Territory has a Public Accounts Committee. The Federal Parliament has a Public Accounts Committee and a Public Works Committee, both of which are joint committees of the House and the Senate.

New Zealand has a Public Expenditure Committee. Great Britain, the mother of Parliaments, has a Public Accounts Committee that is a select committee of the House of Commons. Yet we in Queensland, who pride ourselves on inheriting our institutions from Great Britain and even have a knight of the realm as our head of Government, we in Queensland, who are proudly and aggressively Australian, are alone in the parliamentary tradition which flows from those fountain-heads. We are alone in that only our Government refuses to allow the people's elected representatives to inquire into the expenditure of the people's money. One would not need to have a suspicious mind to wonder why.

What sort of matters would a public accounts committee inquire into? Here are some suggestions. A glance at the departmental Accounts Subsidiary to the Public Accounts reveals a tremendous incidence of lapsed appropriations. A lapsed appropriation is a sum of money that was voted to a department by the Parliament, but which the department did not spend. Lapsed appropriations generally occur as a result of either incompetent planning or incompetent execution. I will deal with some examples.

From the last Budget for which accounts are available, the Housing Commission had lapsed appropriations of \$8,173,987. That is bad enough, but a glance at the subheadings makes it worse. The sum of \$2,940,300 was supposed to be for building houses. In other words, about 100 additional Queensland families could have had homes. I could find that many families wanting Housing Commission homes in my electorate alone. So could the honourable member for Caboolture, who was discussing the matter with me the other day. The sum of \$3,759,530 was supposed to be for advances to borrowers, that is, people who were looking for Housing Commission funds to build their own homes. The flow-on from house-building in terms of employment generation is greater than in any other industry.

That is what was forfeited by the Government's incompetent economic management—incompetent economic management which a public accounts committee would be able to inquire into and remedy, as happens in other States.

The Honourable Minister for Family Services, who took the liberty of interjecting on my maiden speech a little while ago, has decided to forfeit the role of Standing Orders watch-dog and has gone back to her ministerial kennel.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The honourable member will withdraw the word.

Mr WELLS: I withdraw the word. The Minister's Department of Children's Services had lapsed appropriations of \$483,667. The biggest part was in capital subsidies to licensed institutions. Honourable members will know a few charitable institutions who could have spent that money usefully. The Railways Department had lapsed appropriations of \$16,359,868. The Department of Community Services had lapsed appropriations of \$4,763,462, most of which—a sum of \$2,927,738—was voted by the Parliament for the Aboriginal Welfare Fund but was not spent. Another \$502,296 was allocated for the development of Aboriginal communities but was not spent either.

The Electricity Commission had lapsed appropriations of \$32,168,552; yet it keeps hitting Queensland consumers with higher and higher electricity bills.

The Health Department had lapsed appropriations of \$37,840,005. The biggest failure of that department to use the funds that this House voted to it was in hospital capital development, where it failed to use \$12,246,115. That is a lot of life-saving equipment that could have been in place right

now. It is important to remember that I am talking about people's lives and happiness, not just figures in a ledger. Had the then Minister for Health been more efficient, that much hospital capital expenditure or that much life-saving equipment would have meant that a calculable number of Queenslanders' lives could have been saved.

The then Health Minister also failed to use \$8,570,878 that had been voted to him for the purchase of stores. Few members in this House could not think of ways in which that money could be spent in their local hospitals. Another \$6,748,646 was supposed to be spent on home help for the elderly and disabled.

The lapsed appropriation in the Education Department was \$3,596,015. Everyone knows that the staff to student ratio in Queensland could be improved. Parliament voted \$226,424 for student teacher bursaries; however, it was never spent. In schools, an amount of \$208,827 was available for special projects and \$639,002 for equipment, but it was never distributed. Meanwhile, p. and c. associations throughout the State are slogging their guts out to raise funds for toilet paper, light fittings, set texts and library equipment. The TAFE sector could have used the \$511,096 that was supposed to be disbursed to it. Finally, an amount of \$1,614,834 was supposed to go to universities and CAEs. That is a lot of teaching equipment or, better still, a lot of student places. This morning during question-time the Minister for Education berated Canberra because his department was not able to provide the places that he wanted to provide. He needs only to talk to his book-keeper.

So far I have referred to the money that the Government was voted and that it was supposed to spend in the interests of Queenslanders but did not. What about the other side of the ledger? What about money it spent that it did not have?

This Government had no less than \$318,575,820 in unforeseen expenditure. That is \$318.5 million that it did not put before the Parliament in the Budget, but spent anyway, because it was too incompetent to stay within its appropriations. All honourable members are familiar with the sacred red book entitled *A Guide to Public Financial Administration in Queensland*. It was put out under the authority of Sir Llew Edwards and Sir Leo Hielscher. Page 50 of that book states—

"The principle that should be observed is that recourse should only be had to unforeseen expenditure as a matter of urgency."

It would have taken a lot of matters of urgency to add up to \$318.5 million.

The role of a public accounts committee would be to investigate matters such as these with a view to making the functioning of the State more efficient. Hundreds of millions of dollars that have been designated for programs for the benefit of the people of Queensland are not being spent. Hundreds of millions of dollars are being spent outside of the Estimates approved by Parliament in each Budget. How can anyone deny that Queensland needs a public accounts committee?

The final abuse of Westminster democracy to which I will refer is the politicisation of the public service. The civil service tradition, also inherited from Great Britain, emphasised the idea of promotion according to merit. To secure this there was a universal system of appeals, whereby somebody who thought himself or herself better qualified than the person promoted could have his or her respective qualifications examined by a second judge to ensure that no mistake was made.

In Queensland, that system is being eroded. A glance at the *Queensland Government Gazette* shows that an increasing number of positions are being marked "non-appealable". Today the Premier admitted in this Chamber that a majority of positions above the level of class 1-15 are now marked "non-appealable". The result of excluding the safeguard of public service appeal is not good for the independence of the civil service; nor is it good for its efficiency.

Mr Speaker, this catalogue of abuses of Westminster democracy amounts to a damning indictment of the National Party Government. The House is demeaned by those abuses. I am proud to be a member of this Parliament, but only because I am proud to represent Queenslanders and the people of my area. I look forward, though, to the day when, once again, a re-enfranchised people will be able to elect to this place a group of men and women who have the will and the courage to reassert the democratic birthright of those who sent them here.
