



Speech by

Rachel Nolan

MEMBER FOR IPSWICH

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ELECTRICITY AMENDMENT BILL; ELECTRICITY AMENDMENT BILL (NO. 2)

Ms NOLAN (Ipswich—ALP) (10.41 p.m.): The hypocrisy of the Deputy Leader of the Opposition in this debate has been, even by his own miserable standards, breathtaking. I am afraid that, as a woman who has a passing interest in both truth and consistency, I cannot let it go unchallenged. I have worked as a Treasury adviser and I also well remember the Borbidge-Sheldon years and these guys' performance on electricity. While the Nationals today might want to make like cleanskins in this debate, I think it is important that people know just where they have been.

In the past year the Nationals have changed their position on electricity policy more often than they have changed their underwear. The self-righteousness of the member for Callide this evening as he told us that he personally had warned that trouble lay ahead with power and, secondly, as he tried to pin the tragic death of Greg Maddock on the Premier was truly appalling.

As shadow treasurer the member for Callide has an important role to play in the parliament, and the myths that he has tried to perpetuate tonight have been truly stunning. The shadow treasurer began by trying to tell us that for years, in his words, he had personally warned that the extraction of dividends from the electricity GOCs would lead to blackouts. Let us take a look at the record here.

While the dividends the Beattie government has taken from power GOCs have come, by definition, after capital upgrades and maintenance, the Borbidge government, of which Mr Seeney was a part, took a very different approach. Between 1996 and 1998 the Borbidge-Sheldon government restructured the industry to extract \$850 million in special dividends. Then Treasurer Joan Sheldon said at the time that the payments reflected a policy of 'better value from more effective management'. How nice! How sweet and benign!

While Opposition Leader Lawrence Springborg unilaterally announced in August that it was National Party policy to decorporatise the electricity sector and somehow take it back into the bowels of government, it was well known during the Borbidge years that, having lived first off the short-term proceeds of the Suncorp Metway sale, Borbidge and Sheldon were actively trying to privatise the power GOCs in order to sustain their leaky budget for a few more years. How quickly the times change. Five years ago the Nationals were privatising electricity completely. Now, flying in the face of 20 years of Australian micro-economic reform, they want to socialise it, bringing the management of this huge economic driver back into the bowels of bureaucracy. Bob Quinn described the new Nationals policy in the *Gold Coast Bulletin* on 14 August as 'frankly ridiculous'—and he was right. What this massive change of position proves once and for all is that the Nationals will say and do anything, because at their core on matters of economic policy they understand very little and they believe in absolutely nothing.

The third myth that the National Party has tried to perpetuate in this debate is that Queensland suffers from a lack of power generation. Those of us who remember the Sheldon treasury will very well recall that a lack of generation and delays in linking to the national electricity grid led to blackouts in early 1998. But we also know that since those days we the Beattie government have opened the coal-fired Swanbank E, Millmerran and extensions at Tarong. Queensland now has excess power generation and

indeed sells its surplus at a profit to the national market. But when the Premier mentioned this in late July, what did Lawrence say? He said—

We had Mr Beattie as late as Wednesday claiming on ABC Radio that there is excess generation capacity throughout Queensland.

Lawrence said—

Again he has lied to and misled the people of Queensland.

This was on 30 July. By that stage this issue had been running for more than six months, but the Nationals had not worked out that in electricity there is generation, there is transmission—that is on the big lines, for those guys who do not understand—and then there is distribution. And this issue is not about generation; it is about distribution.

So what does all this amount to? It amounts to a National Party opposition that does not understand the electricity industry, that does not know how power is generated, transmitted and distributed, that does not understand its governance and that has more positions on how to deal with it than a swami taking a yoga class.

What do the Nats do when they are out of their depth on policy? They do what they have always done: they jump straight into the gutter. When the Somerville report came down Peter Beattie said—

We are the government, and at the end of the day that's where the buck stops.

He said—

We are not seeking to blame anyone else.

The Nationals' leader, in contrast, called for blood, demanding the sacking of boards and energy executives with the words—

This government never sacks anyone. It doesn't matter what they've done or haven't done.

But after Greg Maddock tragically killed himself the Nationals very much changed their tune. They completely ignored the fact that the investigation into Mr Maddock's expenses was initiated by the Auditor-General, and they tried to pin Maddock's suicide on the Premier. In question time on 11 November our charming friend Mr Seeney asked the Attorney-General whether, given that 'the coroner has the power to determine "what caused the person to die"', the coroner would 'investigate the concerns expressed by Mrs Maddock, Don Nissen, Sally Pitkin and Brian Kilmartin in relation to the Treasurer's'—that is not Treasury and not the Auditor-General but the Treasurer's—'investigation of Mr Maddock'. I have to say, this question was one of the grubbiest I have heard in here because implicit in the question is an attempt to associate Mr Maddock's tragic suicide with personal pressure from the Treasurer and, as they have suggested repeatedly through this, with personal pressure from the Premier.

Of course, no-one will be surprised to know that the question was wrong in law. The coroner investigates what physically killed a person, and we all know what that was. The coroner does not investigate how that person happened to be feeling at the time. It was wrong in politics, given that it was the opposition, not us, which demanded the sacking of the power executives. And it was just plain offensive to presume that any of us can ever imagine why a person chooses to kill themselves. How do we ever know why a person kills themselves? How foolish to suggest that we can even try to presume and how offensive to ask a question like that as a means simply of scoring political points. Mr Seeney's question in this parliament in the last sitting week was a low point even by the Queensland Nationals' standards, but doesn't it just sum them up?

In this debate the Queensland Nationals have failed to understand how the power industry works. They have gone from one policy extreme of privatisation back to socialising it again. They have completely ignored their own actions while in government and they have topped it off not just by pretending that they did not call for the power executives to be sacked but also by trying to blame the Premier for a man's death. But, then again, from these hypocrites over here what more would we expect?