



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MINISTER FOR EMPLOYMENT SERVICES:
WITHDRAWAL OF COMMENTS
SPEECH

Thursday, 30 November 2000

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner	Responder
Speaker Abbott, Tony, MP	Question No.

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Minister for Employment Services) (9.35 am)—Mr Speaker, I seek your indulgence briefly to clear up an apparent misunderstanding.

Mr Beazley—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. A member of parliament has required the minister to withdraw a statement that he made yesterday. That is the only matter that ought to be before the House. That is all.

Mr Reith—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I understand that you intend to provide the minister with indulgence, and that does not provide the Leader of the Opposition an opportunity for debate.

Mr SPEAKER—As the occupier of the chair, I will listen closely to what the Minister for Employment Services has to say and then respond appropriately in the interests of all members.

Mr McMullan—Mr Speaker, on a point of order: I refer to page 476 of *House of Representatives Practice*. How can giving leave to the minister to make a statement meet the requirements of the standing orders:

Having been asked to withdraw a remark a Member ... must withdraw the remark immediately, in a respectful manner, unreservedly and without conditions or qualifications.

How can a statement meet that requirement?

Mr Reith—Mr Speaker, I raise a further point of order. My point of order is very simple. It is clear from your remarks that you intend to give the minister the opportunity to address the House. Under those circumstances whatever the issues might be that the opposition want to raise they cannot be raised by way of phoney points of order to prevent the minister from addressing the House. They have their problems on the opposition side. We have all read page 1 of the *Daily Telegraph* today.

Mr SPEAKER—The Leader of the House will resume his seat.

Mr Beazley—Mr Speaker, on the point of order raised by the Leader of the House: I would have thought the appropriate precedence would be as follows. You can of course give indulgence to any member of the House, as you see fit, at any point in time, but the unfinished business here surely would take precedence over any indulgence. A request for a withdrawal is a simple matter—a simple, ordinary matter. It happens every day in this chamber and every day you exercise your authority. If, after the minister has withdrawn, you are prepared to give him some sort of indulgence, that is a matter entirely for you. But what is there in precedence is that you now have the first opportunity to act, with this minister being in the House after he has been requested to withdraw a statement about a member of parliament who has been offended by something he has said, and that ought to take precedence over anything else he does.

Mr Reith—Mr Speaker, on the further point of order—

Mr SPEAKER—This is the last occasion that I will recognise a point of order on the current ruling before me. I recognise the Leader of the House.

Mr Reith—Thank you for your patience, Mr Speaker, but the facts are that the minister has not been asked by you to withdraw. What the Leader of the Opposition is attempting to do is beguile you into preventing the

minister from addressing the House, which you indicated was your intention. We simply invite you to proceed with your stated intention without further delay.

Mr SPEAKER—I have indicated to the Manager of Opposition Business that I have taken this as far as I intend to take it in terms of an absurd—

Mr SPEAKER—At the great risk of diluting the authority of the chair, I recognise the Manager of Opposition Business. He knows the spirit in which I concede that to him.

Mr McMullan—I appreciate that point, Mr Speaker, but you have just said, correctly, that there is a ruling before the chair. Can you tell us what the ruling is. Are you ruling that he does not have to withdraw and that you are not going to require him to withdraw? Is that your ruling?

Mr SPEAKER—For the information of all members, there is a matter which was exacerbated by my misunderstanding of a statement yesterday. Following that, I spoke briefly to the Minister for Employment Services, who was in transit to Melbourne. I indicated to him that the House would be facilitated if he would come into the House and make a statement. I have a great deal of confidence in the commonsense of all members of this chamber. I do not believe that the Minister for Employment Services seeks in any way to fuel—

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr SPEAKER—It would not facilitate the House in any way if the chair were forced to take disciplinary action on any member of the House at this particular point in time. My conversation with the minister followed the remarks that have been referred to in the chamber. I invite the minister to clarify the matters that were raised yesterday, and I will take action if I consider his action has been inappropriate following the conversation I had with him. I call the minister.

Mr SPEAKER—Leader of the Opposition, the minister has been recognised. The minister has had no opportunity.

Honourable members interjecting—

Mr Beazley—Then I will have to move dissent from your ruling.

Mr SPEAKER—There has been no ruling. I am merely inviting the minister to come to the dispatch box and clarify a matter which I have already discussed with him. I call the minister.

Mr ABBOTT—My comment in the House yesterday:

... how can you keep the so-and-sos honest when you are taking their money?

was clearly a reference to the Australian Democrats party, which the member for Dickson then led. It was not a reference to the member for Dickson personally.

Honourable members interjecting—

Mr Beazley—Mr Speaker, I formally again ask that the minister withdraw his comments of yesterday. I will read these comments to you because what he has just said is an out-and-out lie.

Mr SPEAKER—The Leader of the Opposition—

Mr Beazley—An out-and-out untruth. I will read from the statement he made yesterday:

Yesterday the member for Dickson, responding to misleading statements from ACOSS, issued a press release—

He continued:

She did not do live media lest she be asked the obvious question: how can you keep the so-and-sos honest when you are taking their money?

There is nothing generic about that, Mr Speaker. The member for Dickson was repeatedly identified in that particular statement as the person who had taken the money. It was therefore an allegation, with the clear implication of a bribe. We require an unreserved withdrawal—right now!

Honourable members interjecting—

Mr SPEAKER—I would be very disappointed if, in order to get an opportunity to address the House, I had to rise. In a genuine effort to clarify this matter I invited the Minister for Employment Services to make a statement. I distinctly heard him say that he was in no way reflecting on the member for Dickson as an—

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr SPEAKER—I distinctly heard him say that he was separating the member for Dickson from—

Ms Kernot—That is not what he said.

Mr SPEAKER—Member for Dickson!

Mr SPEAKER—The Manager of Opposition Business will resume his seat. I distinctly heard the minister say that he was separating the member for Dickson from any reference that he made yesterday. I now ask him if in fact that was precisely what he did and if he withdraws any inference that the member for Dickson was in receipt of any money.

Mr ABBOTT—I've already done that.

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr SPEAKER—That was my understanding.

Mr Beazley—Mr Speaker, I move that your ruling be dissented from.

Mr Reith—Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order. The fact of the matter is that there has not been a ruling. But I would say to the Leader of the Opposition that if he cares to move a motion for the suspension of standing orders to allow the matter to be debated—

Mr SPEAKER—I warn the member for Swan!

Mr Reith—the government would allow him, without gag, to move a suspension motion, and the minister will be very happy to respond to each and every one of your baseless claims. The fact of the matter is that the government supports the minister; we support what he said—

Mr SPEAKER—The Leader of the House will resume his seat.

Mr McMullan—Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I am seeking a ruling from you on—

Mr SPEAKER—The Manager of Opposition Business may be seeking a great deal, but until the House is orderly he will not be recognised. I call the Manager of Opposition Business.