



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**MINISTERS OF STATE  
AMENDMENT BILL 2005**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 28 February 2006**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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| <b>Date</b> Tuesday, 28 February 2006<br><b>Page</b> 75<br><b>Questioner</b><br><b>Speaker</b> O'CONNOR, Brendan, MP | <b>Source</b> House<br><b>Proof</b> No<br><b>Responder</b><br><b>Question No.</b> |
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**Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR** (Gorton) (7.01 pm)—I rise to support the Ministers of State Amendment Bill 2005 and in particular the amendment moved by the member for Wills. In doing so, I will probably emphasise the amendment in my contribution. The fact is—and the member for Banks has clearly outlined the concerns I have in the main—that there has been a recent decline in the principles of ministerial accountability. There is no doubt that since the election of the Howard government in 1996 there has been a change of heart by the Prime Minister and the government about the way in which it, as an executive government, wishes to handle breaches of ministerial responsibility and accountability, and this has led to a deep cynicism and scepticism in the community about the role of people in this place. That is a great shame.

As the member for Banks indicated, there has been a whole host of ministers since Federation who have resigned from the ministry. As I understand it, the first resignation that occurred was in 1903 by Charles Kingston. He did so as a result of a difference of opinion with the executive government on policy. There have been a number of ministers who have resigned on fundamental policy grounds in moments of conscience. It occurred in the period when prescription was being proposed and throughout our relatively brief history as a nation. There is no doubt, if you look at some of the resignations from the executive government of ministers who believed they were in breach, say, in the 1970s and 1980s, you would find what we would regard as technical breaches of Westminster principles of ministerial responsibility and, therefore, cause for their resignations, but some of them pale into insignificance when compared with the failure of ministers in the Howard government to take responsibility for such breaches.

*Mr Hunt interjecting—*

**Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR**—I guess the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage wants to debate this issue. He can get up after me and defend his ministers. I am sure he will—probably starting with the Minister for Foreign Affairs. He can defend his ministers all he likes, but the reality is that there have been breaches. Since 1998 the Howard government has chosen to turn a blind eye to those breaches. Any of the members here who take any interest whatsoever in these matters would know that between 14 October 1996 and 26 September 1997—less than a 12-month period—there were no fewer than seven ministers who resigned from the Howard ministry for alleged improprieties in expense claims and travel expenditure. I think people generally know what that was about.

It must be difficult to come into this place and aspire to such high office and then have to make the decision, as a matter of honour and in abiding by long held principles, to tender your resignation. But in all of those cases—I will not name the particular ministers—they terminated their office and effectively offered their resignation to the Prime Minister in good faith, and I think they did so in good honour. They followed many others prior to the election of the 1996 government who also resigned for breaches of ministerial responsibility.

What seems to have happened since then is a blatant disregard for any accountability by ministers for such important events including, of course, the 'children overboard' affair. It seems now—at least since I was elected to this place in 2001 and some would argue from the commencement of the term previous to my election to this place—that there is a government that refuses to accept these principles. As I say, there was no doubt that significant matters arose from the 'children overboard' affair. I accept that the then Minister for Defence, Peter Reith, during the election campaign was no longer running for office—indeed, the parliamentary secretary at the table was his successor—but there is no doubt in my mind and, indeed, in the minds of the majority of Australians, I would say, that he acted dishonestly when he confirmed that they were photos—

**Mr Hunt**—Madam Deputy Speaker, on a point of order: I would ask that an accusation of dishonesty be withdrawn, even though it is against a former member of this House, because it is an allegation about his conduct whilst in the House.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BK Bishop)**—Perhaps the member would like to rephrase his statement.

**Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR**—I am happy to so that we can get on with the substance. Peter Reith, the former minister, asserted what we now know to be a lie. He asserted a fact when it was found to be untrue.

**Mr Hunt**—Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise on a point of order. It is simply moving from one formation to a worse and more accusatory formation. I would see the use of the word 'lie' as almost a direct defiance of your ruling.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER**—Under standing order 89, I think it could be deemed to be offensive and I would ask the member to use parliamentary language.

**Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR**—As I said, I am happy to withdraw the assertion on the basis that the alleged lie took place while the minister was in office. It is not surprising that the successor of Minister Reith wants to defend the indefensible by jumping to his feet in these matters. The obvious fact is that we know now that it was untrue that children were thrown overboard and the assertions made by the minister were found to be incorrect. Clearly, as a result of those assertions, the government gained politically. There was no accountability; there was no attempt by the government to account for its behaviour in that regard. There was no attempt by the Prime Minister to account for his repeat of the assertions that we now know were based on either incorrect assertions or dishonest statements made by whomever. The fact is that this government has probably, at least from the kids overboard on, allowed such matters to be perpetuated for political gain. I was very interested to read the editorial of the *Australian* today which correctly said:

But the Howard Government did have something to gain.

This is with respect to the kids overboard. The editorial also said:

Then defence minister Peter Reith and immigration minister Philip Ruddock knew an election-winner when they saw one and turned the "children overboard" affair into an anchor for the Government's border protection policy. As evidence emerged that the incident never happened, ministers and minders all ducked and dived for cover. To their underlying disgrace, mandarins who should have served the public interest, not the Prime Minister's electoral ambitions, helped them.

That is from the *Australian* newspaper today, which quite rightly points to the fact that the level of honesty, the level of accountability, had dropped from that moment on. The *Australian* concluded on this matter by saying:

The Government's behaviour in the children overboard affair looks no less disgraceful now than it did back then—however the Prime Minister seeks to spin it.

I think the *Australian* newspaper is quite correct when, in today's edition, it basically says the Prime Minister is more about spin than principle and more about providing an opportunity for him to gain electorally rather than being honest with the Australian people. I think it is important to note that this government has indeed used spin rather than honesty in its approach. I applaud the *Australian* newspaper for today making that point very clear when it suggests that the Howard government, indeed the Prime Minister himself, has been attempting to revise events of the 'children overboard' affair in his favour when we know that it was used dreadfully and was abused. People who found themselves in a very dangerous situation were vilified by this government in order for the government to gain electorally. I cannot imagine anyone wanting to associate themselves with the behaviour of Peter Reith, except for the parliamentary secretary at the table, and the fact is that the *Australian* got it right today by effectively saying that the government acted in a disgraceful manner when it came to its behaviour with the 'children overboard' affair.

I think it is important to note, though, that the first term of this government showed that the Prime Minister's promise that there would be an adherence to ministerial responsibility was in fact the case. In less than 12 months we saw seven ministers resign as a result of breaches of ministerial responsibility, but from that time on, as the member for Banks indicated earlier, they have put up the shutters. They said: 'We can't really have the government bleed over matters as feeble as Westminster principles of ministerial accountability, so we'll now deny when we make mistakes or, rather, we'll blame somebody else for anything that occurs.'

We can see that with the Australian Wheat Board scandal. Here is a situation where it is clear from the evidence that the government was aware that kickbacks were being made to the Saddam Hussein regime, that \$300 million

worth of bribes were made under their watch—under the watch of the Minister for Trade and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and their department. The government chooses either to ignore that or to blame someone else. If we are to blame anyone, they suggest that we should blame the public servants.

Something as significant as the largest bribe in Australia's history going to a regime such as that of Saddam Hussein is a matter of such historical significance that it beggars belief that this government does not accept any responsibility for its actions or its behaviour in this regard. That is why I think the amendment moved by the member for Wills is quite correct in condemning the government for allowing standards to decline at the same time that salaries for ministers are increasing. It is not just about accountability; it is about the way in which the public perceives this place and our role as their representatives in the House of Representatives. The government has shown no concern for that.

Since 1998 we have seen an absence of accountability by this government. Even when matters of such significance, such outrageous breaches of ministerial responsibility, do occur, we see no action taken by the Prime Minister to force his ministers to resign and no honour, in my view, for ministers if it would not cause them to tender their resignations in these cases. That decline leads to cynicism and scepticism amid the community, which brings dishonour on this place.

So, whilst we support the bill and support that an independent tribunal should of course measure the appropriate increase for minister's salaries, the government would do well to consider their neglect of the long held principles of the Westminster system in this place and to return to some level of honesty and honour and ensure that when something improper occurs, such as the \$300 million bribes paid in the Australian Wheat Board scandal, they take some responsibility themselves. They should not try to pretend it was someone else and they should not by virtue of a limited terms of reference of a commission avoid proper scrutiny. They should effectively say, 'We have done the wrong thing here,' or, 'Something has been done under our name that has shamed this nation, shamed this parliament and shamed this government, and we will attend to that. We will atone for those failures and we will, in the case of the minister or ministers responsible, expect their resignations.' That has not happened and, as a result, there is a high level of cynicism towards this government. Until the Prime Minister changes his ways and his approach to ministerial responsibility it can only get worse.