

COMMISSIONER FOR PUBLIC SECTOR STANDARDS - ATTACK BY PREMIER

188. Mr P.D. OMODEI to the Premier:

I refer to the Premier's attack this morning on the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards - a highly respected woman - in which he described her latest report as including "sweeping statements", being "very, very deficient" and having the simplest of facts wrong. Page 88 of the commissioner's report states -

Unfortunately, government and some of its advisers have, at times, treated watchdogs as part of the problem, rather than seeing them as part of the solution. The problems and concerns reported by the accountability officers are sometimes responded to by criticism of the officer, rather than being seen as a warning alerting the government to a need for action.

How does the Premier justify his bullying, thuggish attack on Maxine Murray?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER replied:

I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the question. It is a remarkable question.

Mr P.D. Omodei: You might think it's funny, Premier.

The SPEAKER: Order, Leader of the Opposition.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: Does the Leader of the Opposition want me to sit down and not bother to answer, or does he want to listen to the answer? Does he want to get bullying and thuggish?

Is the basic proposition being put by the Leader of the Opposition that the government cannot be critical of any report that is critical of the government? Is that what he is saying? He should give me the apparently long list of attacks the government has launched on these independent officers. Where are they? If the quality of the report is deficient, is the government not able to say so? Is the government not able to make that assertion? Must the government sit and be completely silent?

Mr T. Buswell: You are shooting the messenger.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: I did not shoot the messenger. She is still able to operate. I said that the report is deficient, and it quite clearly is. It contains the assertion, for example, that there are 150 political term-of-government appointees in ministerial offices. That is simply not true.

Mr R.F. Johnson: Including yours, of course there are.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: Again, this is the quality of what we get from members opposite: an assertion that it is true. It is not true. We are now in May 2007. I understand that the number of term-of-government appointees in ministerial offices in the middle of last year was 150. It is now about 117, at the last count. We have looked at the names of these officers once again to see how close this figure is, and less than 50 per cent of those 117 appointees are what could be called policy advisers or media officers.

Mr T. Buswell: Where is your policy division?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: The policy division is in the Department of the Premier and Cabinet.

As I recall, the person who wrote the best description of how the English constitution and those based upon it work was a journalist by the name of Walter Bagehot. In 1867, he wrote a book called *The English Constitution*.

Ms S.E. Walker: How do you know this?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: I have a degree in politics from the University of Western Australia. This is one of the few things I remember about it. Bagehot provided the definitive description of the way in which the English constitution works. He talked about cabinet and its role. As opposed to the strict separation of powers supported by the purest model, Bagehot described the role of cabinet, as I recall, as the "hyphen which joins, the buckle which fastens"; it binds the legislature to the executive. Our system of government works because it is a cabinet system in which ministers have responsibility to make sure that the executive operates properly. Every second day, people from the other side of the chamber demand that the government sack somebody in the executive, saying that it is the responsibility of the minister to make sure that his or her department is working properly and, when it is not, to intervene and get rid of the offending person. The opposition makes that assertion every day. What members opposite are saying is in complete contradiction to the model that is being proposed by the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards. The Royal Commission into Commercial Activities of Government and Other Matters, of which I have some passing knowledge and memory, recognised that politics was a part of government, and any attempt to deny that fact, or to ensure that it did not take place, was doomed to failure. As I recall, the Royal Commission into Commercial Activities of Government and Other Matters recommended term-of-government appointees to get around what had been identified as the problem of the politicisation of the public service. I know that it happened, because I observed it happening. It happened under the government of

Richard Court. Senior operatives - supporters of the Liberal Party - were promoted to senior positions in government.

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: I call to order the members for Nedlands and Cottesloe.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: The term-of-government appointee, as I recall, was recommended by the Royal Commission into Commercial Activities of Government and Other Matters as an alternative model to the blatant politicisation of the public sector. As I said, in April this year, I think there were 117 term-of-government employees in ministerial offices. Less than half of those - somewhere between 40 and 50 - were policy advisers. Is the opposition suggesting that policy advisers should not, in any way, shape or form, take into consideration the politics of the day? They are policy advisers.

Mr P.D. Omodei interjected.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: The Leader of the Opposition was one of the worst offenders in the Court government. How many employees did the Leader of the Opposition have in his office during the term of the previous government? He was one of the worst offenders, but he is suffering short-term memory loss. As I recall, another assertion made in the report is that the number of staff in ministerial offices has increased by 50 per cent since 2001. By my reckoning, there are substantially fewer ministerial staff in the government today than there were when the present government took office.

Mr P.D. Omodei: Where did you get your information?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: It came out in last year's estimates. An inquiry from the opposition produced that piece of information. Are we suggesting, as the report does, for example, that the Premier of the day, or the government of the day represented by the Premier, should have no role in the appointment of the directors general of departments? Can we sustain a model of government like that? Did the previous government do so? All these reforms were put in place while the Leader of the Opposition was a minister in the previous government. The Court government adopted these recommendations and implemented them.

Mr P.D. Omodei: We did not put that into a community liaison unit. Will you get that money back?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: Do I recall a gentleman called Matthias Cormann working in a ministerial office whilst the Leader of the Opposition was in government? Did the Leader of the Opposition employ any other Liberal Party functionaries? Are we to suggest that in Western Australia, as opposed to every other place in the world, people who are members of political parties cannot be involved in government as policy advisers on a term-of-government approach?

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Order!

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: The assertions in the report do not bear scrutiny. When we apply some analysis to the assertions -

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for Cottesloe, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition and the member for Nedlands to order.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: We can apply analysis to the assertion. I sought advice from Mal Wauchope and said, "These assertions have been made; are there any examples I can address?" He said, "No examples are ever provided; all we ever get is the assertion and when we seek specific information upon which we can act, nothing is ever forthcoming other than the condemnatory assertion." As I said to the media when I was questioned about this outside, "Point out one other jurisdiction in Australia, or for that matter anywhere else in the world, where there are higher degrees and more components of accountability on government than there are here in Western Australia." We have the Public Sector Standards Commission, the Ombudsman, the Auditor General and guess what else we have; we have an organisation called the Corruption and Crime Commission, the most powerful watchdog in Australia ever. Everybody knows that when we from Western Australia speak to our colleagues from other parts of Australia, they are amazed at the level of accountability and scrutiny that we subject ourselves to in Western Australia. They also know that if that same level of accountability and scrutiny had been applied to the federal government, that government would have been swept away by now. Does anyone honestly think that Alexander Downer and the wheat board scandal would have survived the scrutiny that ministers go through here on a daily basis? There were 20 or more minutes sent to his office to alert him to what was going on, but nothing was ever done. Does anyone believe that in any other jurisdiction, state or national, here in Australia, or anywhere else in the world for that matter, there are more degrees of accountability and scrutiny over a government?

Mr C.J. Barnett interjected.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: By his own interjection the member for Cottesloe is agreeing with me. He has given a basis for it; but he is agreeing with me. He gave the basis for it as the history of Western Australia, but he has agreed with me. The assertion is correct. I find very disappointing a report of this nature because it makes a whole series of unwarranted assertions about government in Western Australia.