

Speaking Notes

Hon John Mickel MP

Speaker of the Queensland Parliament

to officially launch

The Secret History of Democracy

6pm Thursday 30 June 2011

- Professor Kay Ferris
- Co-authors and editors, Ben Isakhan and Stephen Stockwell
- Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for the opportunity to say a few words tonight on what is an important occasion. I am honoured to be asked to launch Ben and Stephen's book. When I heard of its title, it immediately resonated with me.

The Secret History of Democracy - just the words in themselves have appeal:

- "Secret" – it's hardwired into us, I think, that if there's a secret we want to know what it is.
- "History" – it's one of those areas that I've always been interested in. Generally I find history interesting, even fascinating. I might not qualify as a history buff, but I'm a student of history; certainly of electoral history.
- "Democracy" – another area that I have not just an interest in, but also an active involvement. As an elected Member of Parliament, my job is part and parcel of our democratic system of government.

So putting them together, the "secret history of democracy" was always going to appeal to me. But the title of Ben and Stephen's book resonated more deeply than it might usually have.

For at the time, I was knee deep in an unfolding chapter of democracy here in Queensland: one which definitely had a secret dimension to it, and one which I felt undoubtedly had historical significance.

I still am knee deep in that unfolding chapter of democracy, and tonight I thought I would take you ringside for a closer view of what it involves.

The reason I can take you ringside is because I am in the ring....not in my normal role as Speaker acting as referee in the contest between the two main sides in the Parliament: The Government versus the Opposition.

No, I am in another fight – it has been going on for the last six months or so, though is not all that well known.

This one is the Government versus the Speaker.

I would like to report that I'm doing well, fighting the good fight, so to speak, and holding my own.

In truth, though, I'm not doing too well at all. I'm barely hanging in there. I still haven't recovered from the king-hit landed on me before the opening bell, nor some of the blows as the fight has unfolded.

Allow me to explain. Since last December I've had good reason to become more closely acquainted than usual with our system of democracy here in Queensland.

Last December was when a Review Committee set up to look at our system of Parliamentary committees handed down its report.

It was December the 15th. I remember the day well. I had just arrived at Parliament House and was on my way to my office. I passed a political journalist from one of the television stations, who asked: What does it feel like to be nobbled?

I had no idea what he might be referring to, and even when I looked at the report and its recommendations thought the question was just a case of not properly understanding or exaggerating what it said.

Yes, the Review Committee did recommend a new Committee of the Legislative Assembly, responsible for – among other things – Standing Orders, which was an area that the Speaker ought to be involved in.

Yes, it did recommend that management responsibility for the construction and maintenance of parliamentary buildings and electorate offices be transferred to the Department of Public Works, which was concerning.

But on that day I tried to put the most benign interpretation on these aspects, believing I suppose that they could be clarified and sorted out in due course.

After all, the Review Committee had been set up to, and I quote from its terms of reference, “conduct an inquiry and report on how the Parliamentary oversight of legislation could be enhanced and how the existing Parliamentary Committee system could be strengthened to enhance accountability”.

Nobbling the Speaker? No, that wasn't what the review was aimed at doing.

Little did I know how prophetic the words of the journalist would prove to be.

Bit by bit over the last six months the government has taken the fight up, to the point where we currently have a Bill before the Parliament that removes the Speaker from having any administrative role in the running of the Parliament.

The Speaker's role has been tightly circumscribed to inside the Legislative Assembly chamber. Outside the chamber, the Speaker has effectively been nobbled.

Instead we have a committee that has been placed in charge of running the Parliament – a committee that includes the Premier and the deputy Premier, but not the Speaker; a committee that even the government's own solicitor, the Solicitor-General no less, says is in breach of the Westminster convention.

How has this all happened? How on earth could we start out with a Review Committee set up to inquire into the parliamentary oversight of legislation and end up with the executive thrusting itself into the running of the Parliament, with the Speaker being railroaded in the process?

How have we got into this situation without it becoming a political issue?

How have we reached this point without it becoming a public issue – with this chapter of democracy unfolding largely out of the public eye; with the government moving to diminish the role of Speaker, without the Opposition kicking up a fuss and with the media largely ignoring it as an issue?

There are a number of reasons, at least that I know about. And some I don't know about. Reasons that to this point remain secret – that I am not privy to.

Not the least of those I do know about is that this downgrading of the Speaker's role comes packaged with some very worthwhile reforms to the Parliament's committee system, which helps to muddy the issue.

And, of course, it isn't presented as downgrading the Speaker's role. Instead it is dressed up as a further reform.

Perhaps the main thing to understand is that it has happened in increments – by degrees – so that no one single step has caused any great alarm, resulting in Members on both sides of the House being prepared to go along with what's being recommended to them, to fall into line and support what is happening.

The king hit I referred to earlier? Well, that was preceded by a sucker punch – the Review Committee's terms of reference, which most people presumed the Review Committee would be bound by, and accordingly confine itself to inquiring into the Parliament's committee system to enhance the oversight of legislation and improve accountability.

I certainly did.

So then came the king hit: the Review Committee, in secret, blatantly going outside its terms of reference and delving into the administration of the Parliament – the Speaker's area of responsibility; and the government only too happy to accept them doing this.

The next step was for the government to come up with a response to the committee's report that made it look like the government was acting on the committee's recommendations, when in reality it was taking them much further – removing the Speaker from his administrative role and handing it over to the new Committee of the Legislative Assembly.

The fix by this stage was well and truly in. The Committee of the Legislative Assembly, with its role very substantially expanded from that outlined in the Review Committee's report, proceeded to review the *Parliamentary Service Act 1998* and write the Speaker out of his administrative function.

In other words, the committee conferred on itself a role that originated with the government, and not the other way around as has been portrayed of the government implementing the Review Committee's recommendations.

As I said, this emasculation of the Speaker didn't happen all at once. It was more subtle than that. It happened by degrees: first the Review Committee ploughed the ground, taking its tractor into another paddock altogether from where its terms of reference said it ought to be.

Then the government planted the crop with its response to the Review Committee's Report; while next the Committee of the Legislative Assembly grew the crop.

Mix in a few red herrings, pull the wool a bit further over people's eyes, for example:

- argue how the Speaker in the Queensland Parliament isn't truly independent like in the British Parliament, in the House of Commons
- argue how the parliament should be run by parliamentarians, not just by a single person, the Speaker – ignoring the fact that the Speaker has a Speaker's Advisory Committee made up of parliamentarians; and also failing to explain why the Speaker cannot be included on the new Committee of the Legislative Assembly
- argue how we don't have a true separation of powers in our State's system of government, as if that justifies blurring the separation that we do have even further

- make a virtue of necessity by accepting that the Speaker has to be on the committee when it is considering Standing Orders
- table a favourable opinion from the government's solicitor, the Solicitor-General and wave that around as official approval...

...and there you have it: a Bill before the Parliament proposing to do away with the Speaker's administrative functions, diminishing the office of Speaker, and undermining the independence of the Parliament.

The Bill is scheduled to be debated in the August sittings of Parliament. In the meantime, we will have the Estimates Committees hearings at the Parliament, where I will appear to answer questions about the annual appropriations for the Parliament.

That ought to be interesting. I won't be able to talk about much for the coming financial year. Responsibility for that is being taken out of my hands.

The Estimates Committee hearing next year for the Parliament will be even more interesting. We will have a committee examining a committee – there will be no single point of accountability – and the government will provide the answers and provide the accountability instead of the Speaker performing that function on behalf of the Parliament.

In time, I am sure this particular chapter in the history of Queensland's democracy will be written. It needs to be chronicled so that people can know and understand what happened, and why and how.

Which brings me to Ben and Stephen's book, "The Secret History of Democracy", which looks at democracy from its longest and widest views.

Ben and Stephen's work is valuable in the way it chronicles and presents information necessary for a proper understanding of the evolution of democracy – in a way that makes it available and accessible.

The importance of this cannot overstated, given the centrality of democracy to our lives, and the lives of so many people around the world.

The information in Ben and Stephen's book will enable a better understanding of how we reached the point we are at today.

Information forms the basis of knowledge; knowledge leads to understanding; understanding builds perspective and insight.

The better the perspective we can develop and bring to bear in formulating public policy positions and for the purpose of informing the role and actions of government the better for society on whose behalf governments govern.

Ben and Stephen recount the familiar history of democracy, starting in ancient Greece, continuing with the Roman Republic, then "Taking an enormous historical leap forward, the traditional story of democracy usually picks up again with the signing of the Magna Carta around AD 1215", with a series of further developments in England, Europe and the fledgling United States of America, and "Moving forward, the standard history of democracy tends to view the last 200 years as a triumphal march for the Western liberal model".

The book tells us that, and I quote, "This sequence of events – from the humble beginnings in Attica to the global spread today – constitutes the standard history of democracy. There is, however, a very serious problem with this widely accepted story. While it records many important events and inspirational moments, it is profoundly flawed."

And so the book reveals a far wider story, and enables a reader to get a sense of the “complex and divergent history of democracy... to move beyond the traditional narratives towards an understanding of democracy’s history that celebrates the complexity of its overlapping trajectories and intersecting practices.”

Together with Ben and Stephen’s chapters and those of other contributors, the book tells us how democracy was developing in the Middle East, India and China before classical Athens; how it clung on during the Dark Ages in Islam and in Iceland and Venice; was often part of tribal life in Africa, North America and Indigenous Australia; and is still developing today in unexpected ways through grassroots activism.

Ben and Stephen state: “In a very real sense, this book argues for a more democratic view of the history of democracy. One that, at the very least, pauses to consider the democratic potential found in all regions, in all cultures and in all historical epochs.”

They hope their book helps to create a rich debate on the question of democracy’s history.

In their words: “We hope that, with this standard history brought into question and these standards ‘secrets’ revealed, people all over the world may come to have a greater sense of ownership over democracy, and take pride in practising and re-creating it for their time, for their situation and for their purpose.

“It is our ambition that this book not only sets the tone for future discussion, but also plays a part, however small, in understanding and aiding the struggle of all peoples against tyranny and oppression and towards new, historically relevant frameworks for the practice of governance by the people.”

This is a big cause – we only need to consider the global scale to be conscious of that – it is a real cause, and it is a just cause.

It is a cause that this book can contribute to in a real and tangible way through the information it contains and conveys:

- to an improvement in knowledge
- to a more sound understanding, and
- to an overall better perspective on the history of democracy, and thus democracy itself.

This is a book for the whole world. I have no doubt of the important contribution it will make to the cause of democracy. For that we are indebted to Ben and Stephen.

On your behalf I congratulate Ben and Stephen on their book, and it is now my pleasant duty to do the honours and declare “The Secret History of Democracy” officially launched.