



## **INDEPENDENT SPEAKER HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

The Hon. A. PICCOLO (Light) (20:06):  
I might make a small contribution to this debate and welcome the opportunity to discuss this important issue, because I think this issue is in some ways symbolic of other reforms which we may have to undertake in the parliament if we are to survive this century and gain the trust of the people who elect us to this place.

I think the idea of having an independent Speaker would certainly enhance the way the chamber operates and so I thank the member for Florey for bringing this bill before us. I am hopeful that the bill will be successful but if it is not I think that the debate in itself is worthwhile having, because it does challenge what we have seen in the time I have been here, almost 16 years, and challenges the way we think about this chamber. That brings me to the next point: what are the benefits of

having a potentially independent Speaker?

I should say at the outset that in what I am saying, as other members have said before me, this is not a reflection on any Speaker. This is about the position of Speaker, rather than the current incumbent or previous incumbent. All the Speakers who have held that position in my time in this chamber have had their strengths and some have had less strengths than others, but all of them have done the best they can, but all of them have been members of parties and all of them have, to some extent, been influenced by that relationship to their party.

My personal view is Speaker Atkinson was probably the one who had a slight independent streak about him and would often chastise our side of parliament as often as he would the other side of parliament. From that, I have some insights into what a potentially independent Speaker could do. In terms of the benefits of having

an independent Speaker, I think something very important that is perhaps lost in this chamber, but also lost in probably all lower house chambers in all Australian territories and jurisdictions, is that often the parliament and the executive become one.

The reality is that if you have a majority party who heads this chamber and the Speaker is one of that party the line between the executive and the parliament is a very fragile line and invariably, because the Speaker's position relies on the support of their own party, that must influence, if not consciously then unconsciously, the way they may vote at times in their position.

That is not suggesting anything improper. That is just suggesting it is just a political reality. So the idea of an independent Speaker would certainly remove that sort of restriction or constraint or that pressure or bias from the Speaker of the day. I think it is very important. It is an important distinction in our democratic institutions that the executive and the parliament are two separate institutions, but the reality is in practice they become one, because when the major party that forms government also controls the Speaker and the chairmen of all those committees, etc., it is very hard to hold the executive of the day accountable for their performance. Other Speakers have alluded to that in terms of question time. In question time you

can see, if you like, the brutal end of the strong link between the executive and the parliament in the sense that while the rules say ministers can answer questions in whichever way they wish, at times they do not even go close to the question which is asked.

With an independent Speaker, I think that would change, and that would change for the better. That would change for the better not only what happens in parliament in terms of accountability of the government of the day but also how the people outside this chamber would perceive us. That is very important, because we are, sadly, on a trajectory whereby people have less trust in our institutions. Unfortunately, both governments and the parliament have less trust today than they did some years ago.

We need to redress that if we are to maintain a civil society. So I think that break in the strong nexus between the executive and parliament is an important one. An independent Speaker would also give the opportunity for the Speaker to be a defender of the legislature much more clearly and speak on behalf of the legislature rather than speak on behalf of the majority party of the day. I think that is a benefit too: the Speaker can actually speak with confidence not only of the majority party but of all of the parliament. I think that is an important distinction and a very important thing to do. That said, I know some Speakers and particularly

some Deputy Speakers have done a very good job in that regard, but the reality is they are still seen to be a member of that party, although they have tried their very hardest to be impartial, and I think that within those restrictions they have done an excellent job.

The Speaker would also become a much more effective voice for the house rather than a voice for the party, because if they are independent there is no obligation upon them to actually speak on behalf of their party or be seen to speak on behalf of their party. They would speak on behalf of the parliament itself. They are some of the things I think are worth considering in the context of this bill. They are some of the strengths I see in it. I am happy to listen to what may be some of the drawbacks. One drawback that has been brought to my attention is that if a member of a political party has to resign their position to become the Speaker, it then means that political party is minus one member on the floor. In the English parliament, where that happens, it is not such a big issue because they have a membership of 650 MPs. In a chamber of 47, one vote is perhaps more valuable.

One in 47 is perhaps more valuable than one in 650. Having said that, even in the British parliament it is a problem, because I think Margaret Thatcher came to government as a result of the previous government, the Callaghan government, losing a vote of confidence by one vote. The Speaker at

the time was a Labor Speaker; had he been on the floor, that vote of confidence would not have got across the floor, and we may not have seen Margaret Thatcher for some time. So that is one of the drawbacks. But one has to weigh up the drawbacks against the benefits, and from my point of view at this stage, certainly from what I have heard today, the benefits of having an independent Speaker outweigh the potential drawbacks. One of the things I do, as all members do, is do tours of parliament, particularly with students. I know some members of parliament on the other side like to bash the unions, etc. I do not necessarily do that. I am quite complimentary about some famous Liberal premiers. One of the things we talk about, though, is the bar and how it defines the floor of the chamber. I explain to them how important that definition is, what it is about. It is about the battle between the then monarch and the legislature about power and who represents the people and how, I think it was James II—I am happy to be corrected—was put on the throne.

Mr Brown: Charles II.

The Hon. A. PICCOLO: Sorry, Charles II—I am corrected. After the Cromwell period, Charles II was put on the throne. It was done on the basis that he and his heirs and successor would never interfere with the running of the people's chamber. That is very important because, previously, Speakers had been, to some extent,

targeted by monarchs if they did not toe the monarch's line; in fact, I think seven Speakers lost their lives. They were beheaded by the monarchs of the day for not doing the right thing, as the monarchs saw it.

One of the Speakers was beheaded about 510 years ago during the time of King Henry VIII, who decided to behead one of the Speakers, Edmund Dudley, because obviously Edmund Dudley did not do the right thing according to the king, apart from his poor wives of the day who from his view did not do the right thing by him. The role of the Speaker is very important. I understand the first Speaker was appointed in 1377.

Over time, the position has evolved to maintain the independence of the Speaker. The independence of the Speaker is important even today, as the member for West Torrens says, in our mother parliament of England. For those reasons, I wish to support this bill.