

The Hon. W. R. BAXTER (North Eastern Province): At the outset I thank the Minister handling this Bill and Mr. Trayling for their co-operation in enabling the debate to be brought on at this stage, probably more for my benefit than for the benefit of anyone else. I am, of course, pleased to return to the Victorian Parliament after an absence of some two years. It is rather devastating, as a sitting member, to be defeated, and probably not too many members of this Chamber have had that experience. Mr. Taylor is one that I know. I suffered that experience in 1976. Although finishing on top in primary votes, I was defeated on preferences.

At that stage I did not envisage being back in the Parliament in as short a time as two years. Naturally I seized with both hands the opportunity to return, as a number of other aspirants seized the opportunity to try to become members of Parliament. Fortunately, in a hard-fought by-election, I was successful.

It is interesting to consider the composition of the two Houses. A two-way exchange has taken place between the other place and here, with the Premier and the Deputy Premier at one stage having graced this Chamber. Mr. Chamberlain, Mr. Taylor and I have made the move to this place. There seems to be one vital difference, however. The two Leaders of the Government made the change voluntarily, and I am not sure whether the other three of us really did. However, I am very happy to be again a member of the Victorian Parliament.

Mr. President, I thank you for your welcome back to the Parliament, and I look forward to your guidance during my term here. I recall with much pleasure my association with you during the last Parliament, when we were both members of the Road Safety Committee and I also recall many happy associations with Mrs. Fry when we went on a number of inspection visits with the Road Safety Committee.

I have taken over as member for North Eastern Province from Mr. Keith Bradbury, a man who served this Parliament with great distinction for many years. It is unfortunate that Keith Bradbury was forced to retire through ill health before the end of this Parliament. If he had been able to stay on, he would have had 25 years' service, which is a fair record in anyone's language.

He was perhaps an aloof man in some respects in his dealings with other members of Parliament but he was as straight as a die, and we all knew where we stood at all times. He was an excellent member around the electorate. I found that not only in my association with him as member for Murray Valley but also during this election campaign. Often when I went to towns that I thought Keith Bradbury had seldom visited, it was said, "You will never be as good as Keith Bradbury because he has been a top-class member." That sentiment was echoed throughout the huge North Eastern Province, from Corryong right down to Kinglake West, which is almost a suburb of Melbourne. I may never be as good as Keith Bradbury but I will certainly be doing my best to make a contribution to the work of this Parliament and this House while I have the honour to be the member for North Eastern Province.

I also had the privilege of serving with the predecessor of Mr. Evans, Mr. Ivan Swinburne, a former Minister in a Government of this State, who again was a highly respected member both in the Parliament and outside. I look back with much pride on the fact that I had the opportunity of serving in this Parliament for three years with Ivan Swinburne as Leader of the Country Party, as it then was, and later the National Party, in this Chamber, because there is no doubt that he was an excellent Parliamentarian. I think he read Hansard from cover to cover every week and he went through every Bill, clause by clause. Very few members of Parliament have that sort of dedication. I am sure that my colleague from the North Eastern Province would have found that

the advice and assistance he received from Ivan Swinburne was valuable indeed.

I return to the Parliament somewhat troubled about the future of Parliamentary democracy. It seems to me that the image of Parliamentarians as a group is declining quite rapidly, and I do not mean that to relate just to recent times because of some difficulties that may have occurred over land deals and other matters; it seems to have been occurring over a few years. Individual members of Parliament are held in the highest esteem, but as a group I believe their image in the eyes of the electors is lower than it ought to be and, regrettably, seems to be declining even further.

I know of a number of reasons for this. Firstly, Government is becoming more complex. In the 1930s and 1940s when there were a few basic departments it was clear in which direction the Government was heading, and it was easier to make a firm decision and to stick to it. I can appreciate the demands and pressures now pulling from different directions on Ministers who have to make a firm decision and then stick to it. However, the average voter in the street is looking for a firm direction and because he is not obtaining it at present he is losing some faith in the ability of the Parliamentary system to achieve what he is seeking.

There is a cross-pollination of ideas. Some years ago-this may be an unfair way of putting it-one could almost slot people into various files. If a person took an attitude on an issue, one was fairly safe in assuming that he had a similar attitude on many other issues, but this no longer is the case. Just because a fellow is against the exportation of uranium now, it does not mean that he has a similar attitude on other issues. His views could be right across the spectrum. That makes government difficult and it makes the life of politicians more difficult in deciding what their actual course should be.

Members of Parliament ought to support the party system. "Party" is often a dirty word amongst the electors. I have had it said to me often, and no doubt other members have had it said to them, "You will be dominated by your party. How do you put up with being in a party?"

My answer is that Parliament could not work without the party system. If we were a group of individuals here nothing would be done. Ministries would come and go with great rapidity and there would be instability and great confusion. I do not find the party system to be as over-constricting as the average person in the street believes it to be. Three parties are represented in this Chamber simply because each party generally encompasses particular philosophies. I know that various disagreements occur and on some issues honorable members are lukewarm, but I can say in my previous period as a member of Parliament and since I have returned to it I have had very few disagreements with my party and I do not think I am dominated by the party. I do not believe members of the Government party feel that way. They have the right to vote against the party if they so wish and to make their opposition known. Members of the Labor Party, under their system, are perhaps a little more restricted.

Honorable members should not be backward in defending the party system because-the Parliament could not work without it. I thank you Mr. President, for your indulgence in allowing me to wander about and not speak specifically to this Bill.

The Country Roads (Amendment) Bill has been well canvassed by my Leader. There is no doubt that clause 3 is the most significant clause in the Bill, although, when reading the Minister's second-reading speech one could be excused for not grasping that fact. It seems to me that clause 3 gives the Minister specific direction over the board. One might be tempted to speculate

on why that is required and whether the board has been bucking the Minister in recent times, and this provision is aimed at overcoming that. Be that as it may; I agree with the concept.

I believe all Government instrumentalities ought to be directly responsible to the elected representatives of the people. This is where our Federal colleagues made an error when they split the old Postmaster General's Department into two independent corporations-Australia Post and Telecom. They were set up as statutory bodies which are quite remote from the Parliament and from the Minister, and they tend to go their own way. I fully support the concept that there ought to be Ministerial direction over these statutory authorities.

The Country Roads Board certainly has a record of which it can be proud. In the past 30 years Victoria's road system has improved out of sight. Everybody concedes that. However, I have much concern for the future. At the current rate of road funding - my Leader referred to it tonight and in the document that he, produced going back over a ten-year term - it is clear that the allocation of funds by both State and Federal Governments is declining at an alarming rate. I was pleased to note that the new Minister of Transport verified that and endorsed the comments by Mr. McDonald in his document.

I refer to a later Country Roads Board report. I am not sure whether it is one of the glossy documents to which Mr. Walton referred earlier tonight, but it is nevertheless useful. It shows the downturn in funding over the years, the money requested by municipalities and the amounts that they have actually been allocated.

The report refers to the rural State highway system and says

In rural Victoria there are more than 6,000 km of State highways, most of which have a sprayed bituminous seal surface over a pavement of natural roadmaking materials.

The report goes on to discuss how that was done. It continues

To maintain the system in a satisfactory condition under increasing traffic volumes, it is imperative that each year approximately 3 to 4 per cent of the system be reconstructed and approximately 12 per cent be resealed. In 1977-78 and 1978-79 the Board was able to allocate sufficient funds to enable only approximately 1 per cent to be reconstructed and only 10 per cent to be resealed.

Then this is the pertinent point--

Unless substantially increased funds can be made available to enable a viable programme of reconstruction together with maintaining an adequate resealing programme on the rural State highway system, serious deterioration of long lengths of rural State highways could occur.

To me this is the most alarming paragraph in the Country Roads Board report because roads are the lifeblood of the nation, particularly of the rural community, and without adequate funding the roads will return to the gravel surfaces and rough tracks that they were previously. If that happened we would be in serious economic trouble.

The paragraph from which I quoted referred only to State highways and, as a former municipal councillor, I am particularly concerned with unclassified roads. They are primarily the responsibility of local government although assistance is received from the Country Roads Board. In 1977-78 the councils asked for almost \$99 million but received \$41 million. In 1978-79

they requested \$107 million and received almost \$42 million. That is an indication of the shortfall in funding and it concerns me very much indeed. As my Leader said tonight, there is no sense in State members of Parliament passing the buck to Canberra. We are certainly disappointed that funds raised by petrol tax are not reallocated to road funds to the extent that might be desired. It is the responsibility of State members to ensure that revenue garnered from motorists by the State Government is allocated fairly and squarely to road construction and maintenance. It is a simple fact that this does not happen, and something should be done about it. As I said before, the new Minister has already acknowledged that fact.

I refer to a few specific problems. One is the fresh declaration of State highways. Years ago the then Government, in its wisdom, declared a number of highways to be State highways, which meant that they were then fully financed by the Country Roads Board. Since that declaration, there seems to have been an extraordinary reluctance on the part of the board to declare any additional roads to be State highways notwithstanding changed traffic patterns. One example is that part of the BenallaTocumwal Road, north of the Murray Valley Highway in the Shire of Cobram, which links Victoria with New South Wales. It is of little use to the Shire of Cobram, and yet last year that shire was required to use \$25,928 of its rate revenue to maintain that road. The shire has made many representations to the Country Roads Board to have the road declared a State highway and the extraordinary answer that it received was that the board agreed that the road should be declared a State highway but that it did not have any funds. I can understand the board's problem in funding but if it agrees that this road should be declared a State highway, surely it is placing an unfair burden on the ratepayers of the Shire of Cobram to expect them to find \$26,000 a year to maintain the road