



Speech by

Mr N. ROBERTS

MEMBER FOR NUDGEЕ

Hansard 8 December 1999

ELECTRICITY AND GAS LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr ROBERTS (Nudgee—ALP) (3.37 p.m.): As a former electrician and official of the Electrical Trades Union, I always take an active interest in developments within the electricity industry.

Mr Schwarten: It's been a while since you were on the pliers.

Mr ROBERTS: It has been a little while since I have been on the pliers. I actually have to renew my licence this year, as I understand it.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr D'Arcy): Order! It would help if the member for Nudgee spoke to the Bill.

Mr ROBERTS: Immediately upon coming to Government in mid 1998, the Beattie Government commenced a review of the electricity industry to ensure that it would provide better service in line with community expectations and greater reliability of the State's electricity system. One of the major components of the electricity industry restructure that was announced in early 1999 was to simplify and reduce the number of separate electricity corporations and bodies which had been created by the former coalition Government.

The Government also wanted to ensure that within the emerging competitive electricity market customers' rights were protected. This intention in the electricity sector reflects the Government's commitment in a range of areas to protecting consumers' rights. The restructure included the creation of a discrete consumer protection role within the Department of Mines and Energy. This role will be performed by the newly-formed Consumer Protection Office. It will provide an effective and accessible process to assist consumers who have a dispute or a complaint with an electricity entity, but with a minimum of bureaucracy and far less expense. It will also provide an independent dispute resolution process. All the functions of the Consumer Protection Office and independent arbitrators will mirror those of the formerly proposed ombudsman scheme in Queensland, and ombudsman authorities in other States.

In order to deliver a high-quality service to the people of Queensland, the Consumer Protection Office will be based on the following broad principles: accessibility to the consumer, accountability to the Queensland public through the Minister for Mines and Energy, a responsibility to analyse and report on systemic faults and issues impacting on consumers, and a focus on rapid response and decision making in terms of complaints that are made. There will be totally independent energy arbitrators located throughout Queensland, minimal legal processes, no cost to the consumer to access the system, and relatively inexpensive operating costs compared to those of a separate statutory authority.

In dealing with electricity customers' complaints, the Consumer Protection Office will adopt a three-stage process. Firstly, it will conduct an investigation. It will then endeavour to mediate the dispute between the parties and, if a resolution is not possible, it will then move to the next stage, which will be arbitration. Although the investigation and mediation of complaints will be undertaken by the staff of the Consumer Protection Office, appropriately qualified, independent arbitrators will be appointed with powers to decide any dispute that cannot be resolved through mediation. The new arrangements will make an important contribution to greater accountability of electricity suppliers to their customers.

One of the important features of the new Consumer Protection Office function will be the decentralised nature of the arbitration process with independent arbitrators located in regional areas

throughout the State. This will result in decisions being made more quickly, a regional perspective given to the issues that arise, and the decision making will be made by professional arbitrators who are trained and know what they are doing. I commend the Bill to the House.
