



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR CAIRNS

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ELECTRICITY LEGISLATION AMENDMENT AND REPEAL BILL

Ms BOYLE (Cairns—ALP) (10.43 p.m.): I, too, am very pleased to support the Electricity Legislation Amendment and Repeal Bill before the parliament. I was amazed to hear the remarks of the Leader of the Opposition when he indicated a preference on his part for the much more costly system of an ombudsman. I argue with him. I think this bill is correct and that he is quite wrong. What we are enshrining in this bill is a very sophisticated consumer complaints mechanism. It is one that is clearly weighted towards assisting the consumer and offering the consumer four levels at which that complaint can be heard and hopefully dealt with, eventually to the consumer's satisfaction.

The complaints mechanism is so sophisticated that it has already been reviewed and finetuned prior to the minister bringing the bill to the House. I congratulate him and his staff on taking that additional time to trial the method first. As a consequence of those trials, there has been some finetuning resulting in the establishment of what is really a four-stage dispute resolution process with independent energy mediators to be appointed by the regulator, the Under Treasurer, to a mediation panel that will mediate on disputes between electricity entities and customers. The independent energy mediators either must be graded members of the Institute of Arbitrators and Mediators Australia or must possess the qualifications and experience which are considered by the regulator to be appropriate to carry out the functions of an energy mediator in dispute resolution processes. This might not sound as though it is particularly sophisticated, but it is.

Unfortunately, it has been the case in many jurisdictions that willing amateurs who think that they understand mediation and dispute resolution offer their expertise on the basis of their knowledge in the specific field but have no particular training in the dynamics of the mediation and conciliation process. It is a skill that takes some time to develop and requires education. I am pleased indeed that that is very clearly embraced in this model for the ECPO. I am also pleased about the detailing of the functions and responsibilities of the ECPO and that the very first of these is raising public awareness—that is, ensuring that the public knows about the dispute resolution service, its functions and, most importantly, how to access it. I am sure that many members will be very pleased as that public awareness occurs because it will save us from finding that mechanism for consumers.

The second specific function and duty is advising on the appropriateness of internal complaint handling procedures implemented by electricity distribution and retail entities. The importance of that, of course, is that it continues to place the emphasis on the entities themselves for managing customer complaints in a proper and orderly fashion and upholding their complaints from time to time as valid and well based and dealing with them. This is the model to which we should all subscribe so that progressively as time passes there will be less and less need for the third and fourth stages in the ECPO's dispute resolution process because the entities are themselves functioning better and better in terms of managing their customers, particularly their angry customers.

The ECPO will also liaise with key stakeholder groups and peer organisations and look for those systemic causes that result in a number of complaints over a period of time and assist the entities to resolve those systemic problems. It does not matter what those problems are. The ones that come most often to my office relate to accounts, electricity being turned off, unjustly according to the customer, and vegetation issues, that is, vegetation that the customer wished had stayed instead of being cleared. They are about disconnections, interruptions to power supplies and whether or not there is some basis for compensation for the interruption to power supply. In any case, whatever the complaint might be, the first stage will assist the consumer to ensure that all have equitable access in

terms of entering the first stage of the process and will offer assistance if needed to express on paper or otherwise their concern.

I have no doubt that this model will work well. I must say that it is the most sophisticated model of its kind that I have seen. I am sure that the minister is correct in his statements that it will be much more cost effective than the outdated ombudsman model being used in some other states. We have seen in our own Ombudsman's office the slowness of that model and the dissatisfaction felt by many who made their complaints a year or even 18 months before finally getting a legalistic interpretation that never really dealt with the issue that had concerned them. This model will be quicker and, I have no doubt, more effective. I am pleased to support the bill.
