



Speech by

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STATE MEMBER FOR LOGAN

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ELECTRICITY AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr MICKEL (Logan—ALP) (4.14 p.m.): The Queensland electricity industry has undergone a series of reforms, including entry into the national electricity market. That move made so much sense, given Australia's population of about 20 million people. It is hard to believe that it was actually opposed by the coalition. I know that may cause some embarrassment to my honourable friend opposite, but all the opposition did, in opposing that move, was change the name of the grid from Eastlink to Westlink. The cost of that change was \$100 million. The opposition, when it was in government, changed a couple of the routes, but essentially that debate was about entry into the national market. The saying, 'If you believe in nothing, you will fall for anything' was a testament to the opposition of the time. In those days, they fell for anything.

At that time we were trying to get major investment into Gladstone. I remember that the government of the day, the Goss government, had to make a tough decision—a decision that hitherto had been unthinkable—as to whether or not to sell the Gladstone Power Station. But given the choice between jobs for Gladstone at a reliable price and overcoming what would have been our traditional hesitation, we went for the Gladstone region and jobs. Today, we have jobs and an export-oriented industry.

Interestingly, a few weeks ago I went to the Gladstone Power Station with the minister and spoke with some of the work force to ascertain their view of working for a private employer. To a person, those people were very happy with the new employment arrangements. I remember that great debate about that issue at the time, and I do not want to get into a heady personality contest today. Here we are, a few years later, and we have a successful company and, more importantly, a very happy work force.

The former Goss government also corporatised and restructured the government owned electricity industry to increase efficiency and competition. I find the comments of the member for Nicklin remarkable. On the one hand, he is criticising senior management. For doing what? For doing what consumers want, namely, lowering electricity prices! I have never had one person come into my office and say, 'Listen, old friend, I want you to increase electricity prices.' That was the logic of the honourable member's contribution. If he wants that for the Sunshine Coast, let me assure him that the people of Logan do not want that for themselves. They want increased competition at affordable prices. With those affordable prices, we might be able to attract more industry and give more working families in my electorate a job. I represent a fast-growing area. Every one of those families in my electorate has an expectation that they will be connected to an electricity supply that they can afford. So I urge the minister to encourage further competition to ensure that we are getting value for money in the electricity industry.

As a result of the increased competition, do I have a reasonable expectation that what I have said is true? I refer to the uniform electricity tariff in Queensland which, in real terms, has decreased since 1990 while large industrial customers have received price reductions of up to 40 per cent as a result of contestability. In other words, Queensland has become a better place in which to invest, because of the decisions that we have made. In my own electorate, there are many multimillion-dollar projects that aim to protect the price advantage, but also—and importantly—provide a more reliable supply to the whole electorate of Logan, which is made up of closely settled urban areas and residential acreage.

For example, the Browns Plains substation has been significantly augmented. I will explain to the House what I mean by that. Under the old system, parts of my electorate were connected to Jimboomba, which is a drive of about 20 minutes. That meant that in a power failure from Jimboomba—that could happen with the wind blowing down the lines—parts of the suburbs of Boronia Heights and Hillcrest retained power supply but the parts that had the industry were connected to Jimboomba and lost it. As a result of the augmentation in Browns Plains and the reclosers that have been put in, Energex has ensured that the whole suburb is now connected to the closely settled area. That has been a tremendous boost to a nursing home, for example, in Boronia Heights, run by an excellent group of nuns, the Sisters of St Paul de Chartres. It was tremendously worrying in summertime when the electricity would go out for those people. Now it can be restored very quickly. The same applies to industrial areas.

We have a fast-growing area in the nearby electorate of Algester—in the suburb of Forestdale and in parts of my electorate called Hillcrest. Just up the road a bit, in an industrial estate which has undergone a massive expansion, there was a lot of criticism of Energex. I thought it was unfair criticism because Energex had to clear a pathway so that the powerlines could be upgraded. Now all of that vegetation is growing back. But what has it resulted in for those people? No longer do they have outages. No longer do they have phasedowns. They have a significantly improved electricity supply.

I have gone through the debate the honourable member for Cunningham alluded to some time ago. Residents in Marsden and Kingston were subjected to high powerlines. Nobody wants them, but everybody wants electricity. What we were able to achieve through that process was to go down a corridor. I thought that the management of Energex and Powerlink were tremendously sensitive to the local residents. They ran it down the Logan Motorway and protected it as much as they could, under very difficult circumstances.

Government is always accused of never looking far enough ahead, of short-term planning. I turn now to the Park Ridge-Crestmead area and also the Munruben area, which I picked up from the member for Beaudesert at the last redistribution. An electricity corridor had been set aside in that area under the Bjelke-Petersen government in the 1980s. In 1998-99, when Powerlink came along and said, 'We would like to exercise our option on this corridor,' it was met with outrage by the local residents, who all wanted the lines moved or undergrounded. Yet the government had set down a corridor some years previous.

So the debate the honourable member for Cunningham is going through is one that we all have to endure. All people who come to Queensland have an expectation that they will be connected to electricity. Energex has listened to those concerns, as has Powerlink. I congratulate the officers on their involvement in that. We have delivered an outcome that I thought five years ago was scarcely possible.

In augmenting the Browns Plains station we have given some of the acreage areas access to Browns Plains. They have built a new substation at North Maclean, which has helped the people in Munruben Forest and Chambers Flat, and we have just completed a new substation near Teviot Road. That will help the rest of the suburb of Munruben. That means that the problems they had, of outages and phasedowns and disconnection when there was a big storm, will occur less often.

Unlike the member for Nicklin, I am full of praise for the officials who presided over that process. There has been a very difficult debate about the new powerlines going through my electorate. I am like the member for Gladstone in that I have found that the people there are given the worst job. They have to negotiate an outcome that is good for the state but at the same time tell people that the electricity lines will have to be built. I congratulate Gordon Jardine—I hope that the minister will pass on my congratulations to him—and his officers. Also, I have heard praise from the local community about the consultation work that Wayne Hickey is involved with in relation to the vegetation management plan that he has put down for that area. I also put on record my thanks to the Energex customer liaison person who was available for us, Janelle Savage. Any time I take an Energex query to her she is very responsive, receptive and prompt in replying to me.

There is a tremendous amount happening in the Queensland electricity industry. The minister can be very proud of the fact that we have world-class, low-cost energy production. That does not mean we can leave things as they are. If we leave them as they are, we will lose our competitive edge. Low-cost, reliable, efficient electricity is in the interests of consumers—the families in my electorate—and also in the interests of industry, which we are trying to attract to Queensland.