



Speech by

Liz Cunningham

MEMBER FOR GLADSTONE

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ELECTRICITY AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL; ENERGY OMBUDSMAN BILL

Mrs CUNNINGHAM (Gladstone—Ind) (6.21 pm): I rise to speak to the Electricity and Other Legislation Amendment Bill and, as other speakers have acknowledged, because this debate has been truncated I will endeavour to be quick. There are a number of questions that I want clarified by the minister. In the second reading speech it was stated that the legislation is a win-win—a win for Queensland consumers through more competitive electricity prices and innovation in product offering and robust protection provisions for small customers and a win for industry given the legislation provides a clear and fair regulatory arrangement. I want to know the position for those workers who are in the electricity industry. What is their job security in the change of structure? What guarantees are there for that job security to continue?

I have raised this issue before but I will do it again, because when the privatisation of Suncorp Metway occurred I was briefed—if that is the word for it—by the then Treasurer and given an assurance that on the privatisation of Suncorp Metway the people in those positions would have job security. After the privatisation I took concerns by employees whose jobs were being terminated—rationalised I believe the word was—to the then Treasurer after the event and her comment at the time was that as it is a private entity the government could not be involved in those issues. I am pointed in my question, because after the event—after this is privatised—is not the time that workers should be having to be concerned about their job security. That has to be looked at before the event.

The other issue that I want clarified is the status that these workers will have once this is privatised, corporatised or whatever it is going to be. The current federal WorkChoices legislation becomes operational for many state workers if their workplaces are corporatised—that is, the Corporations Act picks them up. With this legislative change and previous legislative changes rolling up to this particular piece of legislation, I want to know whether they will now come under the WorkChoices legislation as a result of this legislation.

Mr Hinchliffe interjected.

Mrs CUNNINGHAM: That would be good. I would like that on the record, because I know that there are a lot of people in the workplace who are concerned. The unions are making some claims. The counterclaims are that the unions are exaggerating it, but many people in my electorate have lost their jobs in the last couple of months and state IR can offer them no solace. In fact, it says to talk to the feds and the feds do not know what they are talking about—not in relation to WorkChoices anyway.

The other issue that I want to raise with the minister is efficient pricing and improved investment signals. The minister's second reading speech to the bill said that the Queensland Competition Authority will assess the uniform tariff arrangements for electricity to ensure that the safety net arrangements remain efficient and that this approach will provide both customers and new entrant retailers with confidence in the long-term investment environment. Minister, it is not that long ago that the QCA and the Australian Competition Council—but it was the QCA in this instance—reviewed the pricing structure for water in my electorate. The Gladstone Area Water Board has had two or three reviews where other water boards have

had one. The QCA's end result was to suggest a 700-plus per cent increase in the price of water to the small community of Mount Larcom.

I do not know what sort of dreamy accountant thought that up, but the QCA which was established to protect consumers in Queensland in that instance—and there have been a couple of others—did not do that job. I want to know what assurance Queenslanders can have, particularly people in my electorate who lack confidence in the QCA, that it will protect the interests of consumers and that it will in assessing and watching the pricing available to retailers, both new entrants and particularly the domestic retailers, make sure that there is price protection for the consumer, not for theoretical economic programs. The previous speaker spoke about the connection times, and I would have to endorse his concerns. We have some horrendous blow-outs in the connection times for electricity in my electorate. Six to nine months is the norm and beyond that is often the case. Therefore, there are some real concerns that if this gets any worse under this new arrangement then not only domestic but also commercial retailers will be greatly concerned.

The last issue that I want to raise very quickly—and I have raised this before and I think the previous minister may have given some information to me—is that the larger commercial entities in my electorate and indeed any major investors across Queensland look to government for a package of incentives to give the Queensland site the preferred status. This includes water pricing, power pricing and other infrastructure pricing and availability. Whilst I am not encouraging that domestic consumers should be subsidising industrial consumers, there has been latitude within the government structure to offer attractive competitive prices for energy to the major players that come and establish in an area. In my area the major players were given things like some payroll tax incentives, competitive electricity and water prices et cetera. What I want clarified is whether this legislation will in any way undermine the government's ability to offer competitive prices to major job-creating industries that come and set up in our state—not just in my electorate but often in my electorate—and whether this will undermine the government's ability to negotiate those tariffs. I look forward to the minister's reply.