Speech by

Hon. ANNA BLIGH

MEMBER FOR SOUTH BRISBANE

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URBAN LAND DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY BILL

Hon. AM BLIGH (South Brisbane—ALP) (Deputy Premier, Treasurer and Minister for Infrastructure) (4.30 pm), in reply: I thank all who have spoken in this debate for their contribution to what I believe is a very important bill before the parliament. I will state from the outset in my summing-up the government's purpose in bringing this legislation before the House. As outlined by the member for Mudgeeraba, in the lead-up to the 2006 election we took the very strong view that housing affordability was an emerging issue that the state had to pay attention to and that we had to identify those areas within our own policy and legislative frameworks where we could have some influence on the cost of housing. As outlined by other speakers, we do not for one minute believe that the state government on its own can solve the complexity of market forces and the other factors that affect housing affordability; we believe that it is something that requires the full attention of all levels of government—local, state and federal—as well as the operation of macro-economic policy as set by the Governor of the Board of the Reserve Bank in relation to interest rates. However, there are areas that the state government can influence.

We took considerable advice from people who work in the industry: from developers, planners and those who have experience in operating under the existing legislation, including local governments and the LGAQ. The consensus that emerged out of those discussions was that there are three areas in which the government can have an effect on the cost of housing: firstly, the issue of land supply; secondly, the issue of infrastructure charging; and, thirdly, the issue of holding costs. Each one of these areas can have an effect on the ultimate cost of the house. Clearly, if land supply does not match land demand, then prices will rise. Clearly, if infrastructure charging is not imposed in a way that is fair and equitable and has some certainty, then those costs are added to the final cost of the house, which developers pass on to purchasers, and we need to ensure that we are monitoring and enforcing reasonable infrastructure charges. There are now such wild differences between the infrastructure charges by different local government areas that it is very difficult to have confidence that these charging regimes are in fact being operated in the way that they were meant to.

In the area of holding costs, it does not take a rocket scientist to realise that as long as a developer has to hold land while they are going through a protracted development approval process, then all of the holding costs on the finances that underpin that land will eventually find their way into the cost of the home. Anything that we can do to expedite the planning process in a general sense is also important. Therefore, we see before the House a bill which addresses land supply, particularly bringing land that is within the proprietary of the Crown to market as quickly as possible through the Urban Land Development Authority, a bill that imposes a new monitoring and enforcement regime around infrastructure charging and various changes to the IPA that can expedite approvals wherever appropriate and possible to minimise holding costs.

I thank the opposition for its support of the bill, but I have to remark on the fact that it demonstrated its support for the bill by having every single one of its members speak against the bill. It is a new tactic, it seems. Let me address some of the issues that were raised by a number of speakers in support of but opposed to the bill. Firstly, in relation to the claim that this bill includes a new tax on property, I say—as others have—that this is simply not true.

I draw the attention of the shadow minister to the fact that state infrastructure charges have been part of the planning regime in Queensland since 2004 when it was first mooted in the first draft of the South East Queensland Regional Plan. These state infrastructure charges do not apply in all developments; they only apply in master planned communities. What is new in this bill is certain provisions that make sure that there is a new level of certainty about the charges that can be levied and the circumstances in which they can be levied and it provides transparency for the development community. I would have thought that those opposite would welcome that.

I am sure that throughout the consideration in detail stage we will hear more quotes from the member for Moggill, such as those we heard in his speech and the speech of others on his side, from the submissions to the government from the Property Council and the UDIA. I would caution the member for Moggill that the mere fact that the Property Council of Queensland asserts something does not make it true. That is certainly the case in relation to state infrastructure charges.

A number of speakers—the member for Warrego distinguished himself the most—asserted that the government was only putting in place this new Urban Land Development Authority because we were motivated by a desire to appoint unionists to the board. There was an overwhelming terror and fear spreading through the ranks of the coalition that people from unions might end up as members of the board. The member for Clayfield sought my personal guarantee that this would not be the case. I can absolutely guarantee to the member for Clayfield and others on his side of the parliament that every member of this board will be appointed on merit. Can I or will I guarantee that someone who is, or has ever been, or might be, or has spoken to someone who is a member of a union will be barred from being on this committee? No, they will not. Do members know why? That would be a fundamental breach of their human rights. We in this country are signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and one of the fundamental tenets of it is freedom of association. There was a time in this country when the Liberal Party of Australia believed in human rights.

There were a number of criticisms that the provisions of this bill would not address other issues that could contribute to housing affordability. Of course it does not. It only purports to do the things that it sets out to do. It is not a bill that deals with other areas of government activity, although in the last six months there are substantial areas where we have given tax relief: from 1 January this year we lifted the threshold in relation to first homebuyers' stamp duty responsibilities, which eliminated a number of first homebuyers from the stamp duty net; we have seen further adjustments to land tax provisions in this year's budget, as we did in last year's budget, so that small investors in the housing market—often an important part of the market for those who are renting—can still be investors in that part of the market; and in this year's budget we made a very substantial commitment of half a billion dollars into the public housing budget. While that half a billion dollars is a very important part of building our housing stock, it will do little more than replace the money that has been ripped out of the public housing budget by the federal government over the past 10 years.

The member for Moggill claimed to have more than 20 submissions from senior people in the property market. However, they all asked to be anonymous. I will therefore treat their submissions with a grain of salt. In my experience, senior people in the property market have no concerns about putting their views forward and nor should they. I welcome their views. I have had many meetings with them about this issue. Did they get everything in this bill that they wanted? No, they did not. What we see in the submissions is some parts of the development community saying that the government has not gone far enough. We equally see some members of the environment community saying that the government has gone too far. In my view, that is probably a pretty good indication that we have the balance right.

What we did see from the opposition was what I thought was a policy vacuum but was identified by the member for Mudgeeraba for what it is and that is policy envy. If those opposite did not think of it themselves they find it very difficult to support. As I said, the member for Moggill went through numerous areas where he claimed he was finding it hard to support the bill. The member for Warrego did acknowledge that urban land development authorities had been successful in other places. The member for Robina received a submission from his friends at the Property Council. What does he want? He wants to delay the delivery of affordable housing to Queenslanders. Why? He wants to consult with the property industry further. I advise the member for Robina and others that I have received all of their submissions and find nothing persuasive in them.

The member for Kawana says that we are not charging enough for infrastructure and we should be raising the charges. The member for Maroochydore wants more iconic legislation and for the state to intervene as the local authority has failed to listen to the people. The member for Gregory, on the other hand, loves this bill so much that he nominated other sites in his electorate of Gregory for activity by the urban land authority. The member for Gladstone reminded us all that she is disappointed, as we are, with the federal government backing out of funding of affordable housing. That was wrapped up by the member for Clayfield who was obviously confused and has no idea what he wants.

Mrs Sullivan: He wants to be the leader!

Ms BLIGH: Apart from wanting to be the leader. He complained first about the policy being too short and then complained that the bill was too long and produced too much red tape. The member for Currumbin distinguished herself by supporting the bill by viciously attacking it. If members are confused about what position the coalition is taking on this bill they can be forgiven, because I think they are confused.

Probably one of the most extraordinary allegations that permeated the speeches from the members of the opposition was the allegation that this bill is being rushed through the parliament with enormous and undue haste. I remind members, firstly, that legislation along these lines was an election commitment in 2006. There was one full workshop held with the relevant stakeholders in December last year. I have had two separate presentations to the development industry and the Local Government Association of Queensland over the last six to seven months and then the intention of the legislation was announced. All stakeholders were invited in for a full presentation on it. I then addressed a UDIA lunch and presented it in full. When the bill was available, a three-hour workshop was held on it before it was introduced into the House, so before it came into the parliament.

It was introduced into the parliament 14 days ago. What do the standing orders of this parliament provide for in relation to the amount of time a bill should lay upon the table of the House? It is 14 days. So this bill has laid upon the table of the House for exactly the amount of time that the standing orders provide for. It is those two weeks in which shadow ministers and other members of the coalition who have an interest in the bill are supposed to spend some time doing some work. I can only apologise to them if it is a big bill with a lot of pages that taxes them.

A government member: No pictures.

Ms BLIGH: There were no pictures and no illustrations, but any suggestion that there has been any undue haste about this bill really is not borne out by the facts. This is the normal process of legislation and I expect members opposite should be able to keep up.

Let me address two of the substantive issues that I know will be raised further in the debate and which were raised earlier. The first one is a reasonable question to be asking and I am happy to advise further; it is the question of appeal rights. It is not a matter that this government takes lightly. It is true that land which comes within the jurisdiction of the Urban Land Development Authority will not have the same appeal rights for all parties as if it were not in that jurisdiction. The Urban Land Development Authority is provided with a mandate to accelerate development within urban development areas. The powers afforded to the authority will ensure that development time frames are not obstructed by lengthy litigation which is often undertaken only to frustrate the process. The government has not taken this decision lightly, as I said, and we have built in substantial consultation mechanisms to ensure that the authority gets the development scheme right in the first place.

Clause 25 of the bill deals with this and mandates 30 business days for a submission period. However, once the development scheme is finalised, the removal of appeals will ensure that implementation of the scheme is not bogged down by delays. Additional protection is provided to the community through clause 56, which prevents the ULDA from granting an approval which is inconsistent with the development scheme which has been adopted.

Can I also say that the bill does provide a ministerial power to amend a submitted scheme at an affected owner's request. So a property owner who has land either within the scope of the Urban Land Development Authority or that is immediately adjacent to it and who is concerned about the proposed development plan does have a right to take that matter to the minister. The minister must hear it and does have the power to amend the scheme if the affected owner's request warrants it.

I suggest to the member for Moggill before he goes too far down this track that, if he really reads the submissions from the property development industry in relation to this issue particularly, he will see that what they are proposing are appeal rights for applicants—that is, appeal rights for developers.

Dr Flegg: That is who they represent.

Ms BLIGH: Yes, that is right.

Dr Flegg interjected.

Ms BLIGH: Well, frankly, I do not think it should be beyond the power of the Property Council to contemplate the rights of landowners. I am surprised to see that their submission does not mention the rights of affected landowners at all because of course they do not want that. They want to be able to frustrate the process themselves where it is in their interests to do so, but they do not want an affected property owner to have the same right to do so. That is hardly surprising.

Is this bill without precedent? No, it is not. There are other similar land development authorities in other states of Australia that have very similar provisions. In fact, those land development authorities in some circumstances have the power for the compulsory acquisition of land from private owners which this bill does not.

This bill is not without precedent in Queensland either. One model for the bill is in fact the South Bank Corporation. When did the South Bank Corporation Act become an act of this parliament? It became an act of this parliament in 1989. It is legislation of the Queensland coalition. It provides for no appeal rights. So the right of appeal to the minister that is provided here for the affected landowners actually goes beyond what the coalition did when it was on this side of the House. Similarly, in state development areas there is no right of appeal. So I would just say to the member for Moggill before he gets too far on this course and too high and mighty on it that his party has its own track record in this area.

This is done for a very simple and very important reason. That is, so these particularly strategic development areas can be moved to market as quickly as possible. Members cannot on the one hand say they want to increase land supply and on the other hand say they want to put in place a range of processes that will frustrate land getting to market.

The only other issue of substance which I know will also be raised during debate on the clauses is the question of whether the LGAQ should be nominating members to this board. I do accept that people who have had experience in local government have something very valuable to contribute to the operation of this board, and that is precisely why the provisions in the bill specifically mention people who have a demonstrated local government background and expertise. In fact the bill requires that at least two such people must be on this board.

This is a statutory authority of the Queensland state government and we will be making the final decisions in relation to the suitable members of the board. As with any board, we need to make sure we get the right mix of people. We need to make sure that there is appropriate regional representation and that people bring a broad range to the mix. So we will be making those decisions. I note that the member for Moggill probably has a different view.

All in all, as I said, I do thank members for supporting the bill. I find it extraordinary that the coalition supported it by speaking consistently against it. I can only assume from the contributions of coalition members on this, as in so many other areas, that their policy solution is to reduce the cost of housing by doing absolutely nothing. What we did not hear today were any alternatives, any different sorts of solutions or any policy responses that might have given us some cause to adopt a different approach. I look forward to the debate on the clauses. I commend the bill to the House.