



Speech by

Fiona Simpson

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

Hansard Tuesday, 19 May 2009

PARLIAMENT OF QUEENSLAND AMENDMENT BILL

Ms SIMPSON (Maroochydore—LNP) (4.31 pm): There is a need for a more robust committee system which provides the opportunity for parliamentarians, regardless of their political allegiances, to fulfil their role as parliamentarians by providing scrutiny of the executive government. This is particularly so in a unicameral system—a single house of parliament, which is the Queensland parliament. As we do not have an upper house to provide the review function, committees are intended to help fulfil this role along with the official opposition.

Scrutiny, not policy development, should be the primary role of standing committees. There is a valid argument for select committees handling discrete and complex policy issues which require a sensitive bipartisan approach. The surrogacy issue was an example of that. But to extend this broader policy determination beyond select committees to general standing committees is a reform of debatable merit as it poses the danger of undermining the role of scrutiny.

In reality, most legislation in this parliament has a degree of bipartisan support. If people were to actually look at the amount of legislation that goes through this parliament with the support of both sides of the House, they would find that it is the majority of the legislation. But we recognise that there is a role in a house of debate to be able to scrutinise and not always agree.

Not only in this parliament but in life, good decision making requires robust insight, robust debate, ongoing dialogue and different viewpoints. I am sure there are many people in this place who have come to the table with one view and have found after they have heard the views of others that they have changed their minds. That is part of informed decision making.

Unfortunately, in modern parliamentary debate committees do not fulfil the role of good decision makers because of the lack of opportunity to come to the table with good intentions. The government says that this new legislation will provide that opportunity. We only have to look to recent parliamentary debates to find where this has not been the case.

The Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee was previously able, in a bipartisan way, to select the person to fill the Information Commissioner role. That was a good reform. Subsequently, we saw former Premier Peter Beattie step away from that. It was then only the government chair of the committee who was involved in the selection process for the Information Commissioner.

There are circumstances that arose in LCARC, which I cannot divulge in this parliament, that became matters of great contention, as other members of that committee at that time know. We cannot divulge those issues in this parliament except by referring to the reports that came out as a result of a complaint. Under the rules of committees, members are bound by confidentiality. One of the concerns we have is that this Premier will start to abuse these general committees by asking them to consider policy matters. There may be instances where there has been robust debate behind closed doors about why certain matters will be considered or not be considered as agenda items, but those reasons will never see

the light of day. Due to the confidentiality provisions that apply to these committees, the public may be left wondering why the official opposition is bound and unable to explain what happened behind closed doors.

My concern is that if policy based matters are to be considered by these committees then that may undermine the valid scrutiny role of the opposition. It may find that it is unable to explain why certain matters have not been brought into the public arena and have been considered behind closed doors. The committees have important roles to play, but the binding confidentiality requirements of these committees may undermine the scrutiny that is required to be fulfilled in a more public arena.

I want to address the very valid concern that has been raised concerning the merging of the Public Works Committee and the Public Accounts Committee. As my colleagues have mentioned—the member for Hinchinbrook ably outlined this earlier—this will have a very real impact on the workload of the members of this merged committee. They will have a much broader scope of responsibilities.

I want to remind the House of a previous committee that had an amalgamated workload. I refer to the Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee which was merged, under a previous structure, with the PCJC. As a member of that committee—and I am sure others who worked on that committee will agree—and without divulging the internal operations of that committee, I can say that it was an unsatisfactory workload and we could not properly scrutinise and fulfil both those statutory responsibilities. Consequently, those responsibilities were split because quite a considerable amount of work was required if appropriate scrutiny was to be provided with regard to the PCJC aspect of the committee, as required under the legislation of this parliament.

Therein lies the problem. The Public Works Committee and the Public Accounts Committee are very important committees. In fact, they are two of the most important committees of this parliament with regard to the fundamental responsibility of providing scrutiny of the government. To see these committees merged into a broader framework raises the real danger that pertinent issues will fail to receive the level of detailed inquiry they require. Non-government committee members who have very valid concerns about issues that should be raised and put on the public agenda will find that it is even harder to overcome the objections of the government members who dominate in these committees. There are some very necessary issues that should be inquired into by these committees.

But, once again, we do not know the fights that go on behind closed doors with regard to why certain issues do not see the light of day and should be scrutinised by the Public Accounts Committee and Public Works Committee. We can only assume what items may have been debated behind closed doors.

This is the joke. If parliamentary committees are really providing a robust level of scrutiny, shouldn't more of these determinations be open to public scrutiny? Shouldn't people see why certain items have been excluded from the consideration of these committees well before the final report and the dissenting report stage? The way the committees are currently structured, it does not provide that level of open engagement. As we should be reminded, accountability means that issues should see the light of day.

As I mentioned, one of the roles of committees is scrutiny. In reality, the government members control the agenda and determine what will and will not be debated. That is not addressed by the legislation before us. We only have the word of the Premier that there will be more of a bipartisan approach to issues than there has been in the past. The role of the opposition is certainly strengthened by having an additional 11 new members altogether, and we value the ability to have new people come on to our side to work with us on that very important role of providing scrutiny as well as active constituency support throughout this state.

In summary, this legislation is legislation that we have a great deal of concern about. We do support a strong and robust committee structure. This legislation does not guarantee that there will be a fundamentally different approach. We are committed to ensuring that we play our role, knowing that the resources of the committees are in fact being stretched further across a larger array of duties and not necessarily with a greater array of resources to provide appropriate backing. This parliament is one which over the years has seen a great predominance of government members who have distorted the legislative process. We believe that the committee structure should truly be reformed to ensure that there is in fact greater opportunity for proper inquiry where we have the opportunity to call witnesses to public forums, including those within the public sector, to have unfettered debate about issues which are currently gagged, and these rules of debate do not allow that gagging to be removed. I want to again raise my concern that the confidentiality provisions with committees are in fact going to continue to provide a gag upon those who are seeking to bring legitimate issues to the scrutiny of these committees and ultimately to the debate in the public forum.