



Speech by

Fiona Simpson

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

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INTEGRITY BILL AND COMMISSIONS OF INQUIRY (CORRUPTION, CRONYISM AND UNETHICAL BEHAVIOUR) AMENDMENT BILL

Ms SIMPSON (Maroochydore—LNP) (8.27 pm): This cognate debate is unusual in that it combines a debate on a government bill and an opposition bill. From my recollection, I do not believe that has occurred in this parliament before. Certainly if it has it is not a common practice. Usually it would be a cognate debate of government bills.

Firstly, let me address the bill that has been introduced by the Leader of the Opposition and member for Surfers Paradise, John-Paul Langbroek. This bill really recognises that there has to be a lot more done than what the government has presented in its bill—that is, primarily the establishment of a commission of inquiry to investigate corruption, cronyism and unethical behaviour.

The Premier stands hand on heart in this parliament and says that because there are people of her administration who are facing inquiry before the Crime and Misconduct Commission the government has therefore fulfilled its responsibilities and is squeaky clean. She claims that there is no systemic failure within government.

What we have seen in recent years has been a series of significant and troubling events. We have seen government ministers now in jail and senior officials in fact charged and found to be under a cloud of corruption under this government. Yet still the Premier says there is no systemic failure. What we have seen in recent times is a clear indication that this government has not only been there too long but has exceeded any previous government with regard to an abuse of power as far as the executive government having no respect for the role of parliament and no respect for general parliamentary and democratic processes is concerned.

Earlier this year the Premier announced that she was going to change the parliamentary committee structure. This was not a process that came from a recommendation of the parliament itself. It was not a recommendation that had come from any previous consultation with the members of the opposition. It was a dictate from the Premier and subsequently it became a resolution brought to the parliament to fundamentally alter the way the parliamentary committee system was designed. That in itself is just one example of the arrogance of this government and how out of touch it is with the fact that an abuse of power of the executive that increasingly usurps the role of the parliament to have inquiry into matters is not healthy for democracy in this state. So we saw a radical overhaul of the parliamentary committees.

Is it any wonder, then, that when the Premier said that there was going to be reform of the integrity provisions in the state that some of the submissions that came forward identified this very problem with the way that the parliamentary committee structure had moved from being one of scrutiny to one that was policy based and to one that was hampering the role of scrutiny? I believe that comment was contained within a submission of the Clerk of this parliament. I think that sounds a loud warning bell that institutions such as the parliamentary system require strengthening not undermining and that changes to the parliamentary committee system should not be dictated by the Premier and the executive government. That process should have not only bipartisan but also multipartisan input and broader input from the

community and other stakeholders to ensure that any change reflects and upholds the public interest and the interest of our democratic institutions.

The government's bill that is before the House has failed to address systemic failures of government and has failed to address the fact that a pattern of corruption has emerged in this government. The issues surrounding Gordon Nuttall, a former minister of this Labor government, should never be forgotten. It was an absolute disgrace to watch the Labor members of this House use and abuse their numbers in this place to wipe the criminal slate for that member in regard to misleading the parliament and then to proceed to change the Criminal Code of Queensland to make it legal to lie to parliament. That process in itself should point to a systemic culture within this Labor government of corruption and a willingness to cover up for its mates rather than to deal honestly with these matters, and that is an issue that continues.

How many other issues that this government knows about have been covered up and not investigated? Certainly, the government members will say hand on heart that when they know about something they will refer it to the CMC. We know that the reality is that the only time such issues are referred to bodies such as the CMC is when they have already been made public. That in itself is the problem. You cannot rely on something falling off the back of a truck and making it into the media as a system of automatic checks on the abuse of power in government.

When there has been a pattern of corruption that has emerged under a longstanding government and where one of its own ministers goes to jail, that is an indication that a commission of inquiry that has the powers to look into these systemic issues is vitally important. It is also vitally important to have an examination of ways to address other areas of failures within the democratic process. That is why I support strongly the provisions that have been brought before the House by the Leader of the Opposition. It is necessary to get to the core of these issues. For the Labor government to continue to deny that there is a problem is, in fact, just more evidence of how desperately needed this bill is. The members opposite have never really admitted that they have allowed these issues to flourish in their midst. They have never admitted that people are often living in fear in the public sector particularly, as we have heard referenced by my colleagues, in a department such as Queensland Health.

There are good public servants in this state who are there to serve the people and who want to do their job. But they are bullied and find themselves in a situation where the whistleblower protections do not adequately ensure that their careers are protected from the abuse of power that is hanging over their heads. The politicisation of the upper levels of the public sector mean that there are people in the public sector who are being compromised from being able to fulfil their duty of serving the community without fear or favour.

Mr O'Brien interjected.

Ms SIMPSON: The member obviously did not pay much attention to the debacle that occurred in Bundaberg and which is continuing to occur in Bundaberg in regard to the health system. If that was not a systemic failure, what was? When you have failures that a government is trying to cover up until people are dying, you realise that there has to be more than just a bandaid approach to fixing them.

When corruption permeates a government and a system so that people are scared to speak up, that can have the impact of services failing to the extent that we saw them fail at Bundaberg. That was a systemic failure. It was not the failure of one individual doctor or health bureaucrat; it was a systemic failure. Those who had the courage to speak up were pilloried for speaking up. Nothing has changed under this government. It has learnt nothing. People continue to be bullied for standing up because of their concern for others. The health system is just one example. If ever there was a need for a commission of inquiry into the corruption of this government, Gordon Nuttall is an example, but there are many other people who have suffered at the hands of a government that has been in power for too long and which is in denial.