



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

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PARLIAMENT OF QUEENSLAND AMENDMENT BILL

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—LNP) (Leader of the Opposition) (2.45 pm): I rise to speak to the Parliament of Queensland Amendment Bill 2009, which amends the Parliament of Queensland Act 2001. This bill is about government accountability. Accountability is one of the core principles of the Liberal National Party, yet it is a concept that seems to elude the members opposite. Nowhere is this more evident than in this bill that seeks to reform the existing committee structure. I say at the outset that we will be supporting this bill but we have significant reservations. It gets our reserved support.

I will not address the details of the previous bill that the Premier has brought in in relation to FOI, but I note that the Premier spoke about having received expert advice, that there was careful consultation and reviews and that all government departments were spoken to before bringing in the FOI changes, and yet there has not been that type of consultation regarding changes to this committee structure. That is a concern that the Liberal National Party has about the role of the executive in terms of coming to this parliament and controlling the parliament.

I note from the explanatory notes—because it was a very short second reading speech from the Premier—that, according to the government, the proposed changes to the structure of the parliamentary committee system are designed to create a committee system more focused on developing best practice policy and legislative solutions to issues facing Queenslanders while maintaining the necessary oversight role that parliamentary committees provide. It will align more closely with the current departmental arrangements and the priorities of the government. The bill will result in the parliament having six statutory committees.

The bill will amend the Parliament of Queensland Act 2001 to create a Law, Justice and Safety Committee in place of LCARC and amalgamate the Public Accounts Committee and the Public Works Committee and their functions to form the Public Accounts and Public Works Committee. The functions of the Members' Ethics and Parliamentary Privileges Committee, the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee, the Standing Orders Committee and the Parliamentary Crime and Misconduct Committee will remain unchanged under the bill.

The Law, Justice and Safety Committee will be a statutory committee as it will take on the legislative functions of LCARC. However, it is proposed that additional policy functions of a parliamentary committee will be conferred on the committee by resolution, as with the other parliamentary committees. The policy functions will cover an area regarding law, justice and safety that is referred to the committee by the Legislative Assembly. To complement the statutory committees it is proposed to establish three parliamentary committees to consider policy issues relevant to the portfolio areas of Economic Development, Environment and Resources, and Social Development.

A resolution of the parliament will be required to add parliamentary committee functions to the Law, Justice and Safety Committee in addition to the functions currently held by LCARC and establish and confer functions and powers on three parliamentary committees, namely, the Economic Development Committee, the Environment and Resources Committee and the Social Development Committee.

Having referred to some of those things from the explanatory notes, I come back to a press release by the Premier on Monday, 20 April 2009 in which the Premier announced the parliamentary committee shake-up, as the press release is headed, and I note that it was not necessarily after having received any expert advice or careful consultation or any reviews or any consultation with other government departments. It concerns me that, since the inception of the colony of Queensland, at every turn of the page in the history books Labor has eroded sacred democratic traditions. The old concept of the executive being accountable to the legislature has given way to a reverse system where the executive completely controls the parliament. Sadly, too often this Labor government seeks to emasculate the proper role of parliament in scrutinising the executive. We see this in how this government approaches question time, estimates, freedom of information and now parliamentary committees.

When I refer to that press release of Monday, 20 April I see that the Premier said that the shake-up will establish four new supercommittees, but on the second page of that press release she is quoted as saying—

Just as governments require renewal, institutions like parliament need to be refreshed to make them more effective and this is the most significant shake-up of these committees in decades.

Who has decided that we need such a refreshment or shake-up of the committee system? It is the Premier. She stated—

It is my belief that this system will produce better policy and better legislation for the people of Queensland.

If ever we had a case of the executive controlling this parliament and deciding what is going to happen with our committee structure, this is it—in the Premier's own words. The Premier has said we are going to change the committee system because she has decided that that is what we should be doing.

Weak though it is, the committee structure is one of the only remaining measures of government accountability in Queensland. We are the only Australian state without an upper house, thanks to the sneaky short-sightedness of early Labor governments. We have deficient freedom of information laws, and the Premier is at it again, manipulating the system to deter journalists from uncovering information that may be embarrassing to the government. Our estimates committees have become a forum for obfuscation and self-praise. And of course we have the committee system that is third rate when compared to the Commonwealth Senate committees.

The only measures available to the people of Queensland to keep their government accountable are controlled by the executive government. The Premier does not need to take 'Government Accountability 101' to understand the conflict arising from this. This bill seeks to amend the Parliament of Queensland Act 2001 to provide for a new committee system. The Premier alleges this new system will develop best practice policy and legislative solutions to issues facing Queenslanders, yet the legitimate concern that members of my party have about this bill is that it seeks to establish a policy clearing house for the Bligh government.

This bill will create a system whereby parliamentary committees are merely a means of containing criticism of the Bligh government. This system will allow the Premier to avoid answering the tough questions by deflecting them to a committee. I note that that is a leaf taken straight out of the Prime Minister's play book. By establishing a review of Australia's tax system, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is apparently excused from coping questions or criticism because the matter is the subject of an inquiry.

Reforming the committee structure is a cynical move by the Bligh government, especially when we look at the lack of consultation before bringing this bill into the House. This happened in the first week of our parliamentary sittings and now we have been presented with this bill. We are raising significant questions about it in terms of our concerns that the committees may well come forward with policy decisions so that ministers can say, 'It wasn't me who decided it; it was a committee.' And of course the government would have the numbers on that committee.

In addition to providing a diversionary tactic so that she can avoid answering tough questions, the Premier wants to dress up bad decisions. The Premier seeks to give her legislative agenda a veil of legitimacy by suggesting poor policies receive the majority support of an independent bipartisan committee. If the Premier were serious about receiving independent advice and bipartisan recommendations, these committees would involve a non-government majority. That is the way you get independent views. You do not get independent views from Labor backbenchers who have factional interests as their first priority, with the interests of Queenslanders and good public policy running a poor second or third.

The Liberal National Party has serious concerns over the proposed terms of reference of the new committees. The briefs are so broad and ambiguous that we have doubts about the ability of the committees to carry out their role of holding the government to account.

The role of parliamentary committees should be to investigate areas in which the government is failing to deliver for the people of Queensland. A recent example of this is the toxic oil spill in Moreton Bay. My concern is that the environment committee tasked with investigating the circumstances surrounding the

spill would be or could be confined to generalities, resulting in an obtuse report about Queensland's beautiful beaches. I found this to be true during my time on the Public Accounts Committee. For example, we do not have a performance management audit of government bodies or the audit facility as done by the Auditor-General. We have a performance management systems audit capacity. It does not get the same results, because performance management audits would be seen as having the potential to look at government policy and the implementation of it, which is something that this government does not want. Instead, the Public Accounts Committee had performance management systems audits which clearly do not end up with the same result.

The Public Accounts Committee would like to have looked into the cost blow-outs of the desalination plant, but instead we made an assessment of what happened when the government took over the project from the Gold Coast City Council and some of the management systems that were put in place. Again, things were found to be wanting but we did not deal with the nub of the issue that most Queenslanders would like to know about. Another example would be the \$9 billion blow-out in the cost of delivering water infrastructure in the state. That is the sort of thing that inquisitorial committees should be looking at.

We have little confidence in the vague nature of the descriptions of these committees, which are supposed to come up with policy ideas. Ministers are supposed to have ideas and the government is supposed to have ideas; they should not delegate these concepts to committees that, as I say, are supposed to be inquisitorial in nature.

There is no reason why these committees should not pursue a more active agenda. What is the government scared of? What does it not want us to know? The Premier is setting up the committees under the guise of accountability, but when it comes down to it the new committee structure is tantamount to the Premier's too-hard basket. The Premier has so little confidence in her own ministry and caucus to solve the problems Queenslanders are facing that she is asking the opposition to help them figure it out.

The Australian Labor Party is renowned for its hostility towards accountability measures. I recently met a delegation from the UK. Members of that delegation said that they found our interpretations of Westminster tradition and lack of robustness quite quaint. Whilst Queenslanders cannot be afforded the checks and balances of an upper house, we can readily ensure these important scrutiny functions are carried out by a parliamentary committee equipped with the necessary powers to hold the government to account.

While the committee structure established by this bill does not achieve this, as I have already indicated the Liberal National Party will give it our reserved support. I believe that we have a duty to Queenslanders to participate in these processes in spite of their questioned effectiveness. Therefore, today I foreshadow that I will be moving a motion for a review of the committees after they have been operating for 12 months under the new structure. This will help identify ways in which we can improve the system so that Queenslanders can have confidence in their parliament now and in the future.