



Speech by

Judy Spence

MEMBER FOR SUNNYBANK

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PARLIAMENT OF QUEENSLAND AMENDMENT BILL

Ms SPENCE (Sunnybank—ALP) (Leader of the House) (3.13 pm): I am pleased to speak in support of the Parliament of Queensland Amendment Bill this afternoon. Members are right in acknowledging that this is one of the most far-reaching reforms of the committee system that the Queensland parliament has ever engaged in. It is a very important issue that we are discussing this afternoon.

The committee process has always been an important part of the Westminster system. Committees are important in holding the executive arm of government accountable. They are important in safeguarding the interests of the people. They have traditionally been an important part of allowing backbenchers and opposition members a role in policy formation. They have traditionally been important in taking the interests of the parliament and the government and those policy decisions out to the people for discussion. What we are debating today is a genuine effort by this Queensland government, by this Premier, to reform what has become, I believe, a pretty old and stale committee system in this state.

The history of committees goes back to the early Queensland parliament. I am informed that until 1922 Queensland used parliamentary committees exclusively in areas such as legislation, land transactions, sale of government assets and policy proposals, with members of both the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council often working together on issues of concern. How sad is it, then, for us today to hear opposition members repeatedly tell us that they do not see themselves as having a role in the policy position of this government, that they think they are irrelevant, that they think the executive arm of government should be doing all of the policy formulation and that backbenchers and opposition members should not have a role in that? That is fundamentally what they are arguing here today. Before 1922 it was the case that the opposition did have a role in policy; in the new millennium obviously the opposition does not want to have that power.

With the abolition of the upper house in March 1922, by what is called a bold and visionary Labor government, came the demise of the parliamentary committee system in this state. Between 1922 and 1987 parliamentary committees only involved themselves in pretty mundane things to do with the running of the parliament. So there was the library committee, or the refreshment room committee, or the parliamentary printing and building committee. They did not have the kind of bold committee system that we are proposing here today.

Occasionally they did have select committees. I think a memorable one, the education committee, was chaired by Mike Ahern under the Bjelke-Petersen government in the 1970s. It was a very memorable committee because it brought to the fore the education issues of the day. Social issues were discussed and sex education was discussed, which was quite a novel thing in the 1970s. That was a very important select committee of the day. But fundamentally we failed to have a very effective committee system from 1922 to 1987.

We have heard the opposition relive today the importance of the committee system when the Liberal Party, under Terry White, in 1983 proposed the establishment of a public accounts committee. Then Premier Bjelke-Petersen—who did not believe in the committee system because he felt it was a costly waste of time and who did not believe opposition members should have a role on committees and that

committees should be for government members only—fought that decision and that ended in the dissolution of a 26-year-old coalition government in this state. So committees have always had an important role in Queensland politics, and members who are thinking about this issue today and debating this issue today ought to realise that we have a long history of fighting for a free, open and purposeful committee system in this state.

It took then Premier Mike Ahern in 1988 to establish first the Public Accounts Committee and then the Public Works Committee. Then we had the Fitzgerald inquiry, and one of the recommendations of the Fitzgerald inquiry was to have a comprehensive system of parliamentary committees to enhance the ability of parliament to monitor the efficiency of the government. After that inquiry, with the election of the Goss government, several other committees were established. Those committees have gone through some name transformations, but for the most part their functions have existed in that fashion for well over 20 years now in this parliament.

I think it is time for us to shake up the committee system. When committees were first formed in the early 1990s they did get a lot of attention. They made a lot of recommendations that were often quite critical of government, even though they were dominated by government members. Government certainly put a high price on making sure that it reported on and conformed to the recommendations that were coming out of the committee system.

I remember being on the Public Works Committee, which I chaired for one term but was a member of for two terms, and making a number of unpopular decisions as far as the government was concerned. One of the unpopular decisions was to move Aboriginal housing from the department of Aboriginal affairs into the Department of Housing. I think that was the right decision. We made that decision in the early 1990s. The government of the day did not necessarily agree with that decision.

We also looked at the refurbishment of the Townsville prison. We recommended that in that refurbishment they knock down the wall of the prison and replace it with a razor wire perimeter fence. At the time that was incredibly controversial. The prison officers did not like it. The department did not like it. I do not think the government liked it. I think they thought that the world was going to end and that prisoners were going to escape from Townsville prison in droves if they knocked down the wall and replaced it with razor wire. Of course, that did not happen. Now all of our prisons have razor wire perimeter fences rather than walls. A decision that the government of the time did not like remains, I think, the right decision.

Another decision of that particular committee was the recommendation to build disability access at the front of the Brisbane convention centre. What had been provided in the plans was backdoor disability access. Our decision to put disability access at the front of the convention centre added \$5 million to the cost of the project. I think the committee was not very popular as far as the government was concerned. I still believe that was the right decision. That decision really opened up the view of government on how disability access should be provided from that day forward.

They are three of the decisions of a committee in the early 1990s which came about because the committees were new and fresh and open to the possibility that they could scrutinise government and make recommendations that would be considered. I think that in the last decade or so a lot of the committee reports—and I generally have a look at them—have become very formula driven. Certainly, the media does not pay much attention to them anymore. While governments do pay attention to those reports, I do not think too many of us could pinpoint in the last decade too many recommendations that have led to significant changes in government policy.

I know that the Leader of the Opposition has put forward the proposition today that non-government members should outnumber government members on these committees. That is certainly not the case for committees in Australia or around the world. I was in Canberra last Thursday and spent the day talking to a number of Labor and non-Labor politicians, including quite a number of senators, about the committee system in Canberra where they have government-dominated committees. It does not seem to be a problem there. In fact, the non-government members, the opposition members, were incredibly enthusiastic about the way the committee system runs in Canberra.

The opposition members realise that they have more to gain out of the committee system than the government does. They realise that the committee system favours them and gives them the opportunity to scrutinise the government. That is a smart way of looking at it. That is what the committees are meant to be about. I think it is sad that opposition members still have not worked out that they are actually on those committees to make the government accountable. They do not necessarily need to be the majority on those committees to do that. They can do it in a number of ways.

I am disappointed that the opposition continues to say today that these new committees are designed by government to rubber-stamp the policies of government. The Leader of the Opposition said that he thinks we want to contain the criticism of government in this new committee system. He also said

that the government wants to dress up bad decisions by referring government policies to committees. This is simply not the case.

What the opposition has failed to realise is that the committees can make references themselves. They can generate their own inquiries. If members look at the legislation that we are debating here today they will find that it is not just about these committees accepting referrals from the government. The committees can still generate their own projects and their own references. I really hope that in the consideration in detail stage we do not have a debate based on that misunderstanding by those in the opposition.

I would like to comment on the comments made by the member for Moggill. He seems incredibly disappointed that the Public Accounts Committee is no longer a stand-alone committee. Under this particular model it will be aligned with the Public Works Committee. Having served on the Public Works Committee and observed the Public Accounts Committee for a long time, I am very comfortable with the fact that we are combining those committees. If members looked at the reports that have been produced by those two committees over a long period of time they would agree with me that they have become very formula driven. There are a lot of synergies between the work of the Public Works Committee and the Public Accounts Committee. I am quite confident that the seven or so members on the new committee can do both jobs quite successfully. They will probably bring some different approaches to it which are long overdue.

Committees are an important part of the process for opposition members to gain greater understanding of the policies of government and the workings of the Public Service. The fact that public servants can be brought before these committees and scrutinised, given their incredible powers, is something that the opposition should applaud today.

I reiterate that this shake-up of the committee system is a genuine attempt by this government to enliven a committee structure which we believe has become rather staid and formula driven and needs fresh ideas. As we continue with this debate today I hope that opposition members—and I see there are a considerable number of them who want to contribute to this debate—will put their ideas forward with the appreciation that, rather than stifling the opportunities for opposition members to contribute to the accountability of government and to contribute to policymaking, we are hoping that we can open up their opportunities to do all of the things that an opposition should do in a committee system. I support the bill.