




Speech by

Annastacia Palaszczuk

MEMBER FOR INALA

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PARLIAMENT OF QUEENSLAND AND OTHER ACTS AMENDMENT BILL

 **Ms PALASZCZUK** (Inala—ALP) (Leader of the Opposition) (7.37 pm): I rise to speak in relation to the Parliament of Queensland and Others Acts Amendment Bill 2012. Given that today we are debating amendments to various acts, including the Parliament of Queensland Act, it seems appropriate to remind members of the important role that parliament plays in our democratic process. Ultimately, the main functions of parliament are twofold: to debate and pass legislation to help maintain and improve our society; and to scrutinise the activities of the executive government. Sadly, today we find ourselves exercising one function to undermine the other. Members must make no mistake: this legislation is an attempt to reduce the level of scrutiny on the executive government and we all know what happens when the executive is unfettered—just let us cast our minds back to the Liberal and National governments of the Joh Bjelke-Petersen days.

Only a few short weeks ago, the Premier was proclaiming that he would govern with humility, grace and dignity. Yet here we are, on the very first day of business in the new parliament, debating a bill that diminishes accountability and subverts the role of portfolio committees. On top of that, the bill has been declared urgent meaning that the government completely bypasses the committee system. There is nothing humble, gracious or dignified in what the Premier is doing with this bill.

What a difference a few weeks and a massive majority make. The people of Queensland will be extremely disappointed that the government has failed to live up to its promises and its principles, opting instead to use its overwhelming majority to avoid scrutiny. Members on the other side of the House have no respect for parliamentary democracy. In the lead-up to the state election Queenslanders were warned that the LNP was prepared to say and do anything to win power and that their words could not be trusted. How prophetic these words have proved to be.

Casting our minds back to the period leading up to the election, we constantly heard about the LNP's five-point action plan. In fact, the Premier addressed this issue today in this House in his maiden speech. He said 'restore accountability in government'—not take away or sideline but restore accountability. Moving forward a few weeks to the very first business day of the new parliament under the LNP government, what do we find? The LNP is moving to wind back accountability by stacking the parliamentary committees with its own appointees. On its own this move is disturbing. However, when judged against the LNP's position just 18 months ago when the report of the Committee System Review Committee was completed, it is a shame—

Mr Seeney: Who would you like to nominate?

Ms PALASZCZUK: Are you going to chair this parliament or not?

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Dr Robinson): Order! I hope that the Leader of the Opposition is not making a reflection on the chair.

Ms PALASZCZUK: I am not making a reflection.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: I do ask that the leader be given the opportunity to make her speech without too much interjection.

Ms PALASZCZUK: 'Dignity, humility and grace'.

Mr SEENEY: I rise to a point of order. If the Leader of the Opposition wishes to be provocative she cannot then stand there and demand protection from the chair. If the Leader of the Opposition wants to make a speech without being provocative she will be listened to in silence. But if she wanted to provoke responses, she was guaranteed to get them.

Ms PALASZCZUK: I am always happy when the Deputy Premier gets up on his feet. I would like to see more of it.

When judged against the LNP's position just 18 months ago when the report on the Committee System Review Committee was completed it is a shameful desertion of principle and policy. At the time the review committee's recommendations were being debated the following point was made in this chamber, and I will quote it so that all new members can hear what was said. It was said—

Indeed, the people of Queensland will be the big winners because they will get more from this process. They will have the opportunity to participate in the scrutiny of legislation, to give their views and to provide their expertise. The committee examination process will provide them with a practical overview of the way legislation may affect them and it will allow members of parliament to judge this better. This will result in better legislation coming through this parliament.

Who provided this analysis? Who in this chamber made this statement? The Minister for Health, who sat on the committee, made this assertion when he was debating the report in the parliament. Now the Premier wants to bypass the committee system. The Premier told journalists earlier this week—

I'm saying don't be surprised if we don't just take it straight through and put it through quickly ...

I'm just trying to forewarn you today that there will be occasions, like with this cost-of-living thing, that won't go to committee, because it won't need to. It's very clear-cut, straight up and down.

In just 12 months the Liberal National Party's position in relation to transparency and accountability has shifted completely.

At this juncture it is worthwhile reminding the chamber of some of the extensive background to our current committee structure. This background may be enlightening for some of our newer members. The Committee System Review Committee was established in February 2010 to conduct an inquiry into how the existing parliamentary committee system could be strengthened to enhance accountability. Among the committee's members were the member for Callide, the member for Southern Downs and the then member for Toowoomba South. Committee members applied themselves to the task diligently, examining parliaments both here and abroad for examples of best practice in parliamentary accountability mechanisms. Public hearings were held, submissions were received and stakeholders were consulted. The entire committee visited the New Zealand parliament in June 2010 to examine our kiwi cousins' approach to parliamentary committees. A delegation of the committee also visited Canada as part of their work. All this activity resulted in a very thorough report being tabled in this chamber on 15 December 2010. Most importantly, the recommendations of the committee enjoyed bipartisan support. The recommendations were hailed as innovative, groundbreaking and the most significant reforms to the Queensland parliament since the abolition of the Legislative Council back in 1922.

The tabling of the review committee's report led to an extended debate in the House in March 2011 about the merits of the committee's recommendations, with many members of the Liberal National Party taking the opportunity to express their support for the groundbreaking changes. In a move that put the public ahead of politics, the then Labor government endorsed the vast majority of the committee's recommendations and took steps to enact these changes. Further extensive debate took place in this chamber in May 2011 when the legislation to enact these changes was discussed and, once again, the Liberal National Party was overwhelmingly in support of the changes.

A close inspection of the comments made by the LNP members at this time shows three overriding principles: firstly, greater scrutiny of the executive was needed; secondly, the changes enjoyed bipartisan support; and, finally, the changes would provide a framework for the operation of parliamentary committees here in Queensland for years to come. Of course, I would hate to be accused of quoting anyone out of context, so I want to remind members and some of those opposite about the committee changes during the parliamentary debate on the report.

The changes made to our committee system were described in this chamber last year as a 'once-in-a-lifetime reform' that would 'completely change the way we operate'. The same speaker noted that the review committee was making significant reforms and recommendations for this parliament for the long term. Which speaker offered these words of wisdom? No, it was not a Labor member.

Mr Seeney: Me?

Ms PALASZCZUK: No, it was not the member for Callide. It was the member for Southern Downs, and of course he was not alone. Another speaker observed that the proposed committee reforms would be something that 'the next generation of parliamentarians will come to appreciate'. The next generation is here tonight. Who offered this piece of insight? The member for Callide! And what about this quote—

Queenslanders deserve their parliament and its committees to deliver real scrutiny of the executive government.

That was from the member for Surfers Paradise. It is amazing to think that, within the space of a year, these experienced, senior LNP members—now ministers—would completely abandon their principles and walk away from their stated position on these committee changes. All of them were sitting around the cabinet table when it was decided to proceed with these changes to committees. A year ago they stood in this chamber espousing high ideals and principles. Today, sadly, they have walked away from the report that bears their endorsement.

Mr Seeney: What changes are you talking about? What are the changes?

Ms PALASZCZUK: The report that bears their name and bears their endorsement. This is what they are walking away from. The fact remains that the principles the LNP seemed so fond of last year are still vitally important to our democracy. The need for an independent committee system capable of greater scrutiny of the executive is still needed. Under the reforms adopted last year this was achieved by a balanced representation on portfolio committees by appointing the nominee of the Leader of the Opposition as chair of the Parliamentary Crime and Misconduct Committee, and I will come to that later.

Mr Seeney: That's not even in this bill. It's a completely different bill. It's in the CMC bill.

Ms PALASZCZUK: You have not stated what you are going to do about it. Here is your opportunity today to stand up—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! It would help if the Leader of the Opposition were to address her comments through the chair.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Here is an opportunity for the Premier and the Deputy Premier to stand up tonight and say whether or not they will support the recommendation of the bipartisan Parliamentary Crime and Misconduct Committee.

Mr Seeney: I can tell you that now.

Mr STEVENS: I rise to a point of order. This has no relevance to this particular—

Ms PALASZCZUK: I take the Deputy Premier's objection. He has said no, he will not accept the recommendation of the Parliamentary Crime and Misconduct Committee.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Please take your seat.

Mr STEVENS: I rise to a point of order. The Leader of the Opposition is referring to the Crime and Misconduct Act, which has no relevance whatsoever to this particular bill, the Parliament of Queensland and Other Acts Amendment Bill. She is talking about a completely different piece of legislation. Mr Deputy Speaker, in relation to relevance, I ask that you bring her back to discuss matters in relation to this bill.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I am listening carefully to the Leader of the Opposition and encourage her to address the bill.

Ms PALASZCZUK: It is highly relevant. As a lawyer, if you go back and look at the bill, it amends the Parliament of Queensland Act—

Mr Stevens: You're a member of parliament.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Exactly. If you go back and look at the consequential amendments in the schedule, clause 7 states—

This section applies to each of the following provisions of the *Crime and Misconduct Act 2001* ...

I am being completely relevant. The fact is that the government do not want to discuss this issue tonight because they do not have an answer. The Deputy Premier has made it very clear—and he has put it on the public record here and now—that he will not be supporting the recommendations tabled by the member for Gaven.

Mr Newman: You had the numbers. Tell the truth.

Ms PALASZCZUK: No. Everybody decided on this. The member for Gaven was appointed by the previous Leader of the Opposition.

Mr Newman: You had the numbers.

Ms PALASZCZUK: It is not about numbers, Premier. It is about accountability, it is about transparency and it is about whether or not you are going to accept the recommendations of this committee.

Mr Seeney: I told you we're not, no. What part of no don't you understand?

Ms PALASZCZUK: It is a bipartisan committee. This shows how you do not even understand how the committee system operates in this House. When the committees meet—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Leader of the Opposition, again, I encourage you to speak through the chair and I encourage you not to use the word 'you' and I encourage all members of the House to direct their comments through the chair and not use the direct 'you' but the third person. I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Ms PALASZCZUK: The former chair of the Parliamentary Crime and Misconduct Committee, the member for Gaven, was a member of the opposition. He was a member of the opposition appointed by the then Leader of the Opposition. Since then, the all-party committee of the Parliamentary Crime and Misconduct Committee unanimously determined that the chair should be appointed by the Leader of the Opposition. The Deputy Premier tonight has confirmed to this House that that is not going to happen. So, once again, there is no accountability and no transparency. The government is walking away from its principles, walking away from what it said to the people of Queensland about keeping accountability. It is just walking away and not living up to expectations.

The Premier is treating the public with a lack of respect if he seriously thinks that stacking the portfolio committees will result in greater scrutiny of the executive. The Premier's move to increase the number of members on the portfolio committees to eight and to allocate six of those positions to government MPs can only have one result—watering down accountability in Queensland. By having 75 per cent of the committee positions filled by his own yes-men, the Premier is trying to minimise the opportunity for scrutiny of the government and its legislation.

I acknowledge that the composition of the 54th Parliament represents challenges, but stacking the portfolio committees is not the answer. It is also worth pointing out that by increasing the number of members on the portfolio committees the cost of committees increases because more members are eligible for the \$8,217 allowance for committee work. So less than two months after the Premier wins an election in which cost-of-living issues were at the forefront we find ourselves here tonight in an absolutely extraordinary situation.

The LNP put cost-of-living issues at the centre of their election campaign, and one of the first steps the Premier did today was to introduce a bill on the cost of living. Yet the very first bill that the Premier is debating in this House tonight will increase the cost burden on taxpayers to fund extra salaries for his massive backbench.

Mr Newman: Don't worry. We've found plenty of savings.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Did you say 'don't worry about that'? Is that what you said? I take the Premier's interjection. Or should it be a case of just wait and see?

So we had the extraordinary situation of two urgency bills presented, both bypassing the committee system, and which bill does this government choose to debate tonight? Not the cost-of-living bill that is going to benefit Queenslanders but a bill that is going to benefit their own purse. This is an extraordinary situation. I am happy for you to go and explain that one to the public tomorrow. It is absolutely extraordinary what we are seeing in this House tonight.

However, let me get back to the issues at hand. Every member of a parliamentary committee receives an extra \$8,217 a year on top of their base salary. We currently have seven portfolio committees. By increasing the government representation on those committees to six, a total of 42 LNP members will receive this allowance. In addition to all of these committee members are the parliamentary secretaries/assistant ministers that the Premier has appointed—11 in total, an increase of four on the previous government. So that is four extra assistant ministers—four extra salaries for assistant ministers. Let us not forget that 18 cabinet ministers were not enough. So we also have an extra cabinet minister and the costs, the accommodation and the travel that goes with that. I ask the Premier in his reply later tonight to actually detail all of these costs. How much is this costing the taxpayers of Queensland?

Mr Rickuss: What's the relevance of this?

Ms PALASZCZUK: Oh, it is relevant. When you throw in the allowances to the whips—now to be called the Chief Government Whip, the Senior Government Whip and the deputy government whips—you realise that in the Newman government everyone wins a prize.

These changes mean that nearly every member of the massive backbench will get extra pay. This decision has nothing to do with democracy. The Premier is strangely silent about finances when it comes to finding extra money for these backbenchers. I call on the Premier to provide an outline of these additional costs to taxpayers in his summing-up speech tonight. Yet he is prepared to cut funding to Sisters Inside and his disability services minister will not pursue the National Disability Insurance Scheme because it is 'not a priority'. If the Premier and the government truly believe in accountability, they would not be stacking the committees so that the government has 75 per cent representation.

Another distinct difference between the existing legislation and the government's proposed new approach has been the partisan way in which it has been developed. The current committee structure was

determined by a review committee that was well represented by both sides of politics as well as the Independents. In fact, it was repeatedly highlighted that the members of the review committee boasted more than 130 years of combined parliamentary experience. The point being made was that this vast experience provided insights that would be invaluable in improving our committee system structures. Compare this level of experience with the entire LNP caucus—48 government MPs can now boast a whole three days of experience in government. I doubt that this level of experience is sufficient to justify overturning the work of the review committee.

Despite several requests from the opposition, the government refused to provide the opposition with any details of these significant changes in the lead-up to today's sitting. Instead, more information was released to journalists than was provided to the opposition. Members may be interested to know that after our repeated requests and at least two letters the opposition was finally provided with a copy of the bill at 8 pm last night and we were briefed on the contents of the bill at 9 am today—only a few short hours ago.

Mr Rickuss: You're the most overresourced, overfunded opposition in Australia on a comparative basis.

Ms PALASZCZUK: We are talking about accountability and transparency, which is what you went to the election about.

Mr Rickuss interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: The member will cease interjecting please. The opposition leader has the call.

Ms PALASZCZUK: This is about being accountable. This is about what you went to the election about and it is about what you are not delivering.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Again, if the Leader of the Opposition would refrain from using the direct word 'you' and direct her comments through the chair, that would help.

Ms PALASZCZUK: There is no humility, dignity or grace in denying proper scrutiny—hardly the actions of an open and accountable government.

Mr Stevens interjected.

Ms PALASZCZUK: You can change it. You can be open and accountable. You have got every right to do that, and you are the Leader of the House. The Leader of the House has the opportunity to do it.

Another consistent theme of discussions during the process that led to our current committee system was a recognition that changes would stand the House in good stead for many years to come. Yet here we are on the first day of parliamentary business under the Newman government and these so-called long-term reforms are being unravelled. Reforms that took almost two years to develop and implement have been abandoned in the first two months of the Newman government and on the very first full sitting day of parliament.

The Premier—a person new to the activity and conventions of this chamber—has determined that he will be the one to choose which bills will be referred to committees and which ones will bypass scrutiny altogether. He will choose. The Premier will choose. Obviously, principles have a use-by date if you are in the Liberal National Party. It highlights the hollowness of the LNP's commitment to accountability in the lead-up to this year's state election. Of course there were plenty of people who had their doubts about the sincerity of the commitment, but I do not think anybody would have expected him to have done this as quickly as he has. The time frame for breaking this promise is extraordinary.

One of the overriding themes of the 2012 state election was cost-of-living pressures, yet this government's first item of business when it comes to legislative change is to water down the accountability measures that are already in place. It shows that this government, which is less than two months old, has already got its priorities completely and utterly wrong. The Premier is putting his own team's interests—the interests of the LNP—ahead of the public interest.

There is one element of the bill which the opposition is comfortable with. I refer to the sections relating to the role of the Speaker on the Committee of the Legislative Assembly, or the CLA. There has been a lot of debate, both written and verbal—

Mr Newman: It's your legislation.

Mr Seeney: It's our amendment that you voted against.

Mr Newman: Yes, you voted against it.

Ms PALASZCZUK: You were not here. There has been a lot of debate, both written and verbal, about the changes made to the CLA last year, particularly in relation to the role of the Speaker. I want to rise above the emotive elements of the arguments that have been put before this House and in the wider public arena and look at this matter objectively. I want to remind everyone in this chamber that the genesis of the establishment of the CLA and its functions was the bipartisan review of the committee system.

These recommendations came with the ringing endorsement of the then opposition members of the committee—the member for Southern Downs, the member for Callide and the then member for Toowoomba South. The government indicated that it accepted the bulk of these bipartisan recommendations and proceeded with implementing them. My understanding is that some adjustments in relation to the role of the Speaker were made once the legislation was introduced last year, but the fact remains that both sides of the House were of the opinion that these changes could improve the operation of the parliament.

In hindsight, I think we all agree that in reality any good intentions have not been fully realised. I think there is a general consensus that the role of the Speaker is such that these changes are necessary. I want to make it clear that Labor's opposition to this bill does not extend to the provisions relating to the role of the Speaker. I think the amendments relating to the Speaker's role on the CLA are sensible.

Nowhere during the 35-day election campaign or the 12-month period that Campbell Newman spent as de facto Leader of the Opposition was a change to the committee system foreshadowed. It was not part of the Premier's one-day plan, the seven-day plan, the 30-day plan, the 100-day plan or the first-term plan. Despite this, apparently the structure of our parliamentary committee is the most urgent issue confronting Queensland and the government because it is the very first piece of legislation we are debating under this government.

We all know what the Premier is doing. He wants to minimise the glare of scrutiny over his government. As I said at the start of this debate, this is a matter of integrity and the Premier has fallen well short of acceptable standards. That is why the opposition is determined to do everything it can to keep this government accountable. We will be holding this government to account over its election commitments which are already being broken at a disquieting rate. We will also be working hard to rebuild the Labor Party, to restore the public's trust in our party and to reconnect with the people of Queensland. Already the community is realising the dangers inherent in the LNP's large parliamentary majority. We need to restore the balance to the parliament and ensure that the government is held to account, otherwise we will continue to see flawed pieces of legislation and laws that put political interests ahead of public interests being rammed through this parliament.

I note that there has been no information from the government about the extra cost being incurred through the changes to the committees, the extra parliamentary secretaries and the extra cost to the ministry. The LNP has been silent, except for tonight when the Deputy Premier said that he was not going to be supporting the changes to the CMC committee. However, Queenslanders demand and deserve more. They demand accountability and they demand transparency from their government.

Mr Seeney: That's why there are only seven of you left, because that is what they demanded.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Humility, grace and dignity. I am sorry, Deputy Premier, but I do not see from you any sign of humility, grace and dignity. As I stated clearly, the opposition will be opposing the bill but we will be supporting the amendments dealing with the Speaker.