




Speech by

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MEMBER FOR INALA

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SOUTH-EAST QUEENSLAND WATER (DISTRIBUTION AND RETAIL RESTRUCTURING) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Ms PALASZCZUK** (Inala—ALP) (Leader of the Opposition) (2.32 pm): This afternoon I rise to speak to the South-East Queensland Water (Distribution and Retail Restructuring) Amendment Bill 2012. The Labor Party does not support this bill because it is an attack on workers' rights. The bill strips away their job security and it does so without warning or consultation. We know that the LNP thinks the only real jobs are in the private sector, which is what the Treasurer said in this House on 19 June. That is on the public record.

The government thinks people working for Allconnex, Unitywater and Queensland Urban Utilities do not have real jobs and, therefore, they must not be entitled to real consultation about the future of their employment or real job security. It is worth considering what those workers do. They provide water and wastewater services. Those are front-line services for the people of South-East Queensland, but the Premier and the minister are more than happy to strip away those workers' rights and job security without any consultation at all. That is the sort of attitude that has been characteristic of the Newman government.

Before the election the Premier said that hardworking public servants had nothing to fear from him. We talked about that at length in the House this morning. Unfortunately, it appears that hardworking public servants have every reason to be afraid of the Newman government, because it is on a mission to cut around 20,000 Public Service jobs—and I know that it will not be consulting people about that.

Let us talk about consultation for a moment. Consultation is very important. Something that we have seen consistently from this government is a lack of consultation. What does that lack of consultation show? It shows one clear thing: inexperience. Before submissions go to cabinet, ministers consult. They consult and the consultations are included in the submissions to cabinet. Ministers then debate the issues in cabinet. Ministers can express different views and represent their particular interests and stakeholders. Time and time again, from this government we have seen the inexperience of not consulting, not listening, not getting the policy right in the first place and then having to do backflips.

When the SEQ water reforms were implemented by Labor in 2009, three water entities were established. This model was established at the request of the then Lord Mayor of Brisbane, Campbell Newman. The Labor government's preference had been for a single entity, but we consulted with local councils. After that consultation, the Lord Mayor, now the Premier, got what he asked for: three separate water distributor-retailers. However, the Labor government recognised that there needed to be protections for the employees who would be leaving their current employment with councils and commencing work with one of the new entities. So we consulted again—there seems to be a theme here: consultation—this time with the workers and unions about how the restructure would impact them.

The system that the Labor government established, in consultation with workers and unions, to protect rights and guarantee job security was the 2009 workforce framework and, when workers at Allconnex were transferred back to their respective councils, the 2012 workforce framework. The framework provides job security, guaranteeing no forced redundancies for the life of the framework,

moving and travel allowances for workers who would have to travel to more remote places of employment or move house, protections for levels of income post transfer and redeployment training for staff who are moving into new and different positions. Those are the very conditions that this bill strips and wipes away without any consultation.

I note that the State Development, Infrastructure and Industry Committee's report on the bill was highly critical of the fact that no consultation had taken place regarding the removal of the workplace frameworks. In its report the committee stated—

This Bill will result in the removal of two Workforce Frameworks without prior consultation with key stakeholders and employees regarding the potential loss of job protection rights.

This is a damning indictment of the government. The House might be interested to know whether this issue came up at all during the election campaign and whether there were any commitments made at that time by the then leader of the LNP, now Premier, Campbell Newman. As a matter of fact, there were some commitments made. Let us examine them to see how the bill sits with the Premier's commitments before the election. The shadow minister raised this issue earlier in a speech to the House. He said that during the election campaign the Premier wrote to the unions and said—

In delivering our water plan, we will be pleased to work with the employees of Allconnex Water, along with other water providers and their unions to achieve the best outcomes for workers that are affected by any changes that take place.

That was a straightforward commitment to the unions, employees and water providers to consult with them first, before any change comes about. In light of that commitment, I have to ask some questions of the minister, which I hope he will be able to respond to. Firstly, was the minister aware of the commitment that Premier Newman made during the election campaign and how does he reconcile the lack of consultation with that commitment? Secondly, did the minister, his office or his department have any discussions with Queensland Urban Utilities, Unitywater, Allconnex or any of the councils regarding this bill and the termination of the workforce frameworks? If these discussions did occur, why were there no corresponding discussions with employees or unions? I ask that the minister gives an assurance that he will address these issues raised by the opposition in his response later this afternoon.

This bill breaches fundamental legislative principles by removing existing rights retrospectively. The workplace frameworks already in operation and the protections they offer workers are being terminated. Make no mistake, they are being terminated. This amounts to a retrospective attack on the rights of workers as guaranteed by the workplace frameworks.

The explanatory notes point out that the removal of the frameworks will expose some staff to forced redundancies and to the loss of entitlements. This has the potential to particularly impact staff at Unitywater where their enterprise bargaining agreement does not contain protection from forced redundancies. The minister has exposed the staff at Unitywater to the prospect of forced redundancies, once again, without any consultation. The bill also breaches fundamental legislative principles by removing existing rights without consultation. This amounts to a fundamental denial of natural justice for the affected employees.

I wonder whether the minister has bothered to consider how this bill will impact on hardworking public servants and their families. The minister clearly knows how much the water entities will save from these changes. He quoted the figure of \$2.8 million in 2012-13 for Unitywater. However, the minister may scratch his head and pass the buck if he were asked how many workers would be adversely impacted by these changes. Once again, I ask the minister: will he reveal in this House today how many workers will be adversely impacted by these changes? The government is simply trying to wash its hands of any responsibility with this bill. If there is any adverse impact on workers I am sure they will be the first to lay the blame on the water entities or the councils. The minister needs to say how many workers will be worse off as a result of these changes. If he can tell us how much better off councils and water entities will be surely logic then dictates that he will be able to follow through and tell us how many employees will be impacted.

The minister says that the government is committed to a level playing field and good faith bargaining in industrial matters but the evidence says something very different. I would not consider this bill, which strips away conditions without any consultation and in a denial of natural justice, a level playing field. I would not call new laws which give the Attorney-General power to terminate industrial action a level playing field.

Labor will not be supporting this bill because it is simply an attack on hardworking public sector workers delivering front-line services.