




Speech by  
**Curtis Pitt**

**MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE**

Hansard Thursday, 17 May 2012

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**PARLIAMENT OF QUEENSLAND AND OTHER ACTS AMENDMENT  
BILL**

 **Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (8.46 pm): As the Leader of the Opposition has outlined, we will be opposing the Parliament of Queensland and Other Acts Amendment Bill 2012 that was introduced by the Premier after the lunchbreak today and that is being debated only hours later. As has been covered earlier tonight, since the beginning of this month I have been in constant contact with the Leader of the House to seek details in writing of the proposed legislative changes that we are debating this evening. Under section 81(1)(d) of the Parliament of Queensland Act 2001, at present decisions relating to the practices and procedures of the Legislative Assembly are to be made by the CLA and not unilaterally by the Premier or jointly with other members of the government. I take on board that advice has been received from the Clerk. I have not seen that advice, but certainly I would be keen to see it at some stage.

A request for a briefing continued, and it was only in the early hours of last night that we received formal notification that this would be the legislation introduced and debated today and that a briefing would be provided by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet this morning at nine o'clock. Better late than never! Despite that, I sincerely thank Tim Herbert and Zoe Wilson for making time available to brief members of the opposition office, other non-government MPs and me.

This is not just any piece of legislation. It is very important legislation about the very parliament we are working in and the very important committee system that received support from both sides of politics in the previous parliament, that is, until the Premier decided to throw all of that out to suit his own agenda. When the LNP was in opposition they wholeheartedly supported the current committee system. However, in government it seems they cannot bear the scrutiny. Barely a year ago the Deputy Premier, then the opposition leader, stood in this place and said—

As the Premier said in her contribution—and I agree 100 per cent with what she said—this is proposing a new process that will require a cultural change. It will require a change in culture on the part of members of this parliament irrespective of where they sit in the parliament.

It seems the cultural change that is so necessary for the new committee process to work, as touted by the now Deputy Premier, lasted only until the Deputy Premier found himself on the government benches. With this bill the Newman government is saying that it does matter where you sit in this parliament, and obviously when you sit there.

According to the LNP, it seems scrutiny, accountability and integrity is something to be called upon when in opposition and something to be dismissed when in government. As recently as 11 May on the ABC the Deputy Premier said—

The Parliament exists so that the Executive Government, that is the Ministers have to come there and subject themselves each day to the test, to answer questions and to be accountable.

It seems that the Newman government ministers are happy to take the test as long as they have the answer sheet as well. Already today some frontbenchers have failed the 'Seeney test' and all those who have seen the member for Callide in action in this place know that he certainly does—and I respectfully say

this—set a high bar. It will be interesting to see how many of them can pass the ‘Seeney test’ and how many of them are for the high jump.

In late 2009 the then state government released the discussion paper *Integrity and accountability in Queensland*. This discussion paper, which focused on the importance of scrutinising the government, amongst other things, led the then Labor government to create an all-party committee to review the committee system that was in place at the time. The committee received submissions, held public hearings and consulted with community groups and stakeholders. In December 2010 the Committee System Review Committee delivered a report to the parliament supported by all sides of politics. The report made 55 recommendations which profoundly changed the parliamentary committee system. Once again, the member for Callide talked about reforms that the next generation of parliamentarians would come to fully appreciate. Today, however, it seems that all of this means nothing. The report, all the work spent by the members of the committee, the months of public input, the time spent debating the report in the House, the bipartisan way these changes were approached—all of this has been cast aside to protect the government from scrutiny.

The approach that the Newman government is taking to ‘restoring accountability in government’—as it professed to do in its election flyers—has been shown up once again today as nothing but rhetoric with the extraordinary move to declare this bill urgent so that it can be rubber-stamped and fast-tracked through this parliament. It is ironic that a bill which is about scrutiny of legislation, and of the government more broadly through the committee system, is itself rushed through the parliament with public consultation cut and examination by the committees ignored. The Premier was reported as saying that it is unnecessary for a committee to look at policies that were made public during the election campaign. This statement just shows the arrogance of the Newman government and how fearful they are of Queenslanders being able to scrutinise their policies. He went on to say—

They’ll be fast-tracked through the parliament and we believe that’s fair enough, because we had a very clear agenda which we put to Queenslanders so it will go through as quickly as possible.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that committees will be bypassed completely. The Premier also stated—

Other matters—the new legislation, the new issues—that come up, unless of course there is a real compelling urgency about them, they should go to committee.

They should be debated and there should be public hearings and indeed you’ll see that happen.

After the first two bills, including the bill we are currently debating, were put through today as urgent bills, it was refreshing to see the member for Southern Downs introduce two bills that were actually referred to portfolio committees, followed by two others. I will certainly be keeping a keen eye on whether we will see more of the latter over the next three years, instead of what we saw with the cost-of-living bill introduced today. For the record, we opposed the urgency motion surrounding that bill but, more importantly, we oppose the LNP’s arrogance in avoiding proper scrutiny of its legislation. Referring legislation to a committee does not mean that it cannot come back before the proposed date for the second reading debate. What it could mean is that the relevant committee could give consideration to and—heaven forbid—value-add to the bill. However, I do not recall the Parliament of Queensland and Other Acts Amendment Bill, which as we know proposes changes to the committee system, ever being announced by the LNP prior to the election nor it featuring in any campaign literature. The excuse that the election result was not to be foreseen does not cut it.

Within the space of a few days, the Premier has essentially broken his own promise. By declaring this bill urgent, he is saying to Queenslanders that there should not be any public hearings, that there should not be any input from the public, nor should there be any full or open debate. His new motto is clearly ‘don’t you worry about that’. He is saying that he alone is the arbiter of what was made clear and what was not. Based on this thinking, why even have a committee system if it is not going to be used? If every piece of legislation that is remotely related to election commitments will skip the investigative process of the committee system, then why bother with it? I will tell honourable members why. Even though this LNP government is only six weeks old, it has already set itself on a dangerous trajectory, on a path towards a style of government which we have not seen since the days of the Bjelke-Petersen era. I do not bring up that era as just another throwaway line. I hope we will never see another government in this state that is just as corrupt and self-serving as that of the Bjelke-Petersen government. However, we must be ever vigilant not to allow a 21st century, soft version of the type of behind the scenes, covert and slow centralisation of executive power and marginalisation of opposing views that we are already seeing with the Newman government.

If someone were bold enough to call what was there during the Bjelke-Petersen era a ‘committee system’, they would find the contempt and disregard with which the conservative side of politics viewed the virtues of accountability and integrity in government. They would find that their idea of checks and balances was three—some could argue—very ‘critically important’ committees. They were a printing committee, a parliamentary buildings committee and a refreshment rooms committee. It would be

laughable if it was not so serious, if it did not play a part in plunging this state into darkness for more than three decades. Sadly, this is not a case of stirring old ghosts. It is not a case of reviving thoughts of a long gone era.

On 2 March this year the following was reported in the *Courier-Mail*—

It is understood Mr Newman told the gathering that Joh Bjelke-Petersen ran the last decent government in Queensland.

His behind-closed-doors comments came only hours after he publicly labelled the same regime corrupt while touring the late former premier's home of Kingaroy.

If this statement is taken in isolation, it may not be given much weight. But together with what we have seen so far—especially today—it is disturbing. It is disturbing to me, to my colleagues in the opposition, and it is sure to be viewed as disturbing by all Queenslanders who value freedom, democracy and the rule of law.

To date, the Premier has increased the numbers in cabinet from 18 to 19; increased the number of parliamentary secretaries from seven to 11 and, through this bill, changes their titles to assistant ministers; increased the number of government whip positions from three to four. There is certainly no hint of 'smaller government' yet. There is a Leader of the House, the honourable member for Mermaid Beach, who, prior to this bill, was the chair of the CLA who will also undergo a name change, and I will talk a little more about that later. Then there are the seven portfolio committees in relation to which this bill proposes increasing the number of government members from three to six and reducing the non-government members from three to two. Not only is the government overwhelmingly in control of the House, it now proposes to potentially diminish the voice of the opposition to one member on certain committees.

Let us be clear about what this is all about. For those who have not been counting as we have been going along I will make it simple: 19 plus 11 plus four plus one plus seven plus 42 equals 77. There might be a couple of double-ups, but out of a possible 77 government members after the election of the Speaker, would you look at that—all 77 will have a job that entitles them to an above backbencher salary. This is not a coincidence. I understand that because there is a backbench with the numbers provided by this unique parliament, keeping the committee numbers the same as they were would have meant creating a class system on the backbench, and that just would not do—or perhaps we should say no can do. Even if we concede that the changes were needed because of the functionality of these committees, that would mean that there would be no reason it has gone from six to eight. Quite clearly, you could still have six people on every committee and reduce the number of non-government members on those committees. There is no reason to go to eight other than looking after and feathering the nests of the backbench. I would like to hear the Premier's comments in relation to that.

When we again look at the Premier's comments that it is unnecessary for a committee to look at policies that were made public during the election campaign, we see that the amount of work being performed by those committee chairs, drawing roughly an additional \$21,000 and members of portfolio committees drawing more than \$8,000 extra, is immediately reduced.

Another matter that I hope the Premier will be able to address in his summing-up this evening relates to the name changes, specifically changing 'Leader of the House' to 'Manager of Government Business'. We were advised at this morning's briefing that this was to better reflect the role and duty of this position, and this statement was confirmed in the Premier's introductory speech. I want to be very clear that this question is not being asked as a reflection on the current Leader of the House, the honourable member for Mermaid Beach. I ask: will the Premier please advise whether this means that the Manager of Government Business—if this bill is passed—will from here on be devoting his attention to the government only instead of being the servant of the whole House, as the position has previously offered?

I also want to ask the Premier whether he can confirm that the assistant ministers will not receive any additional entitlements to those received by parliamentary secretaries, as raised by the Leader of the Opposition. I am interested whether additional salaries are to be paid to the holders of these positions. The bill provides that the additional salaries will be determined by notice in the *Queensland Government Gazette*. In this time of cost cutting and paring down of public sector jobs, I just want the Premier to confirm that no additional salary will be paid to assistant ministers above what was received by parliamentary secretaries.

The Labor opposition will continue to pursue and scrutinise this government, whether it is the swag of broken promises we have already seen or, as we see today, the abuse of power through the government's huge majority. The people of Queensland did send a clear message at the last election. We respect that decision and know the LNP government has a mandate for change. But to be very clear, this mandate was an instruction from the people of Queensland to deliver good government and to make their everyday lives better. The changes proposed by the government are not in the interests of democracy or accountability, and they are certainly not in the interests of the people of this great state. In this already disproportionately partisan House making the one avenue left to legislators in the Queensland parliament to scrutinise the government—our committee system—just as partisan is unwarranted, unjustifiable, and most certainly undemocratic.