




Speech by
Jackie Trad

MEMBER FOR SOUTH BRISBANE

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

 **Ms TRAD** (South Brisbane—ALP) (10.31 pm): I rise to speak to the Parliament of Queensland and Other Acts Amendment Bill 2012. I am also pleased that my presence on the speaking list has piqued the interest of the member for Kawana. I am going to go out on a limb here and predict that he probably will not agree with what I have to say. As a newly elected member to this House, I have participated in the excellent induction course organised and conducted by the Clerk and officers of this parliament. I put on record my thanks to those officers for all of the work and effort that was put into the induction of the record number of new members to the 54th Parliament. One of the areas we focused on was the current parliamentary committee structure that was recommended in a bipartisan review committee of the former parliament. Sadly, I note that senior members of the new government—namely, the Deputy Premier—who so recently championed these reforms and sat on this review committee are now champing at the bit to start weakening them, particularly the PCMC as he revealed tonight. But first I believe it is important to reflect on the parliamentary committee system and why these reforms are necessary for a better democracy and a more effective legislative process.

The 20th century saw a decline in the committee system that characterised parliaments of the 1800s. This decline was evident prior to the abolition of the upper house. As we know, Queensland has been a unicameral parliament since the abolition of the upper house in 1922, and many members have referred to that here tonight. The upper house was a body that was appointed, not elected, and had a history of protecting the vested interests of the few rather than assent to the legislative reforms delivered by the elected Legislative Assembly. Since that time there was a long period with no real committee system to speak of. The lack of parliamentary scrutiny and built-in checks on executive power was one factor in the emergence of the corrupt Bjelke-Petersen regime that Queensland suffered under for three decades. It was not until the Fitzgerald inquiry and the election of the Goss Labor government that real reforms to this parliament occurred. Commissioner Fitzgerald made the point in his report that throughout the world parliamentary democracies serve their constituencies better and function with far greater transparency when a comprehensive system of committees was in place. The early 1900s saw the establishment of the modern committee system. Over the years hard work was undertaken by members of parliament from both sides of politics to scrutinise legislation and help improve the impact of laws on the people of Queensland. The committee system developed further with the establishment of permanent statutory committees under the Parliamentary Committees Act, the evolution of the estimates committee and select committees established on an ad hoc basis where particular issues or investigations arose.

The changes finalised in 2011 built on this progression of committees to strengthen the role of the committees and the legislative responsibilities of all MPs. Here tonight much has been made of the fact that it took the Labor Party a long time to pursue these reforms, but we did pursue these reforms in a transparent and bipartisan way, and the opposition at the time was part of that process. These changes were undertaken with much consultation, deliberation and consideration. The changes received widespread support from inside and outside this chamber. Importantly, and as I mentioned earlier, in 2011

changes received bipartisan support and in fact some of the most strident advocates for the reforms are now sitting around the Liberal National Party cabinet table.

The new government has provided no justification for its proposal to trash these important parliamentary committees, not only through this bill but also the tone of its debate, including quarantining the scrutiny of election policies from parliamentary committees as announced by the Premier. No-one is doubting the mandate that the Liberal National Party has in this parliament, but to say that Queenslanders scrutinised all LNP policies at the last election to the standard required to enact laws in this state is just ridiculous. It is simply another glib comment that displays a complete lack of understanding of the work and scrutiny required to take policy from motherhood statements of principle and action to legislation that enables change through law and regulation. What is evident is that this government is contradicting the advice of its own members of parliament who in opposition unanimously supported the establishment, composition and role of these committees in 2011.

Premier Newman's direction to weaken the committees is more than just a partisan attack on the opposition. This goes beyond party politics to the very nature of our parliamentary system. Quite simply, the committee system serves democracy in Queensland. Now more than ever, the checks and balances that committees provide are required. It is also important to note that this issue is not an esoteric academic discussion. This is not just a debate about the nature of this state's parliamentary democracy, as important as that is; it is also a debate about whether we as elected representatives—all of us—serve our constituencies to the best of our ability.

The report of the Committee System Review Committee has made it clear that the functions of committees should include consideration of proposed legislation both from a policy point of view and to ensure compliance with fundamental legislative principles. Legislation we pass in this House actually affects the lives of Queenslanders in very real ways. Delivering the best outcomes for the people we serve, whatever side of politics we are from, demands from us the commitment and dedication to scrutinise all legislation that comes before us. We do that so we may find inconsistencies, avoid unintended consequences and, if possible, improve the draft language that comes before us. That is, after all, the basic work required of the legislative branch in our democracy. Alternatively, if we find points of contention where consensus cannot be reached, scrutiny ensures that at the very least when the parliament makes a decision on an issue it does so knowingly, having actually turned its attention to each point rather than allowing hurtful changes to slip through unsighted. No doubt in the months and years ahead we will debate many pieces of legislation where the opposition will have fundamental differences with the government. We will stand up for the values and interests of the people we were elected to serve.

The point of this committees legislation is that even well-intentioned legislation can contain within it errors, weaknesses, contradictions or unintended consequences that will hurt Queenslanders. Throughout my own career and voluntary service, I have found that in the end the product is better when it has input from numerous people and when new ideas are welcomed, not stomped on.

Again, the role of committees as oversight is not an obscure, disconnected concept. The benefits that come from oversight and welcoming input and ideas from others are things that Queenslanders can associate with in their own lives, in their own workplaces, in their own homes and in their own organisations. In the years to come this government may rue the day that it confused a large majority with a monopoly on wisdom and knowledge. We are debating these issues today because, as its first move as a new government in this parliament, the LNP is weakening oversight and transparency and, in doing so, weakening this parliament itself.

To recap, the LNP wants to increase the size of the committees but reduce the number of non-government MPs on those committees. As the member for Gladstone noted, that can only have a partisan effect on the deliberations of the committee. This obviously represents a massive stacking of committees with government members. Meanwhile, the new Premier has said that he will not subject any legislative changes initiated by election commitments to the scrutiny of parliament committees. Therefore, as a result of this legislation we will have larger committees stacked with Liberal National Party members who will be denied by their Premier the ability to give detailed consideration to legislation affecting the communities they were elected to represent. Welcome to democratic reform Liberal National Party style!