




Speech by

Liz Cunningham

MEMBER FOR GLADSTONE

Hansard Thursday, 17 May 2012

PARLIAMENT OF QUEENSLAND AND OTHER ACTS AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mrs CUNNINGHAM** (Gladstone—Ind) (9.49 pm): I rise to speak to the Parliament of Queensland and Other Acts Amendment Bill. I do so with some joy in terms of the changes it proposes to the role of the Speaker. However, I put on the record some concerns in relation to the structure of the bill. I believe that it would be inane for any of us to look at the structure and the make-up of the parliament since the election and not believe that changes to the committee system have to occur. The basic maths indicates that there are shortcomings in the ability of 11 people, that is, the non-government members, to fulfil the roles that were instigated by a parliament where the numbers were much closer. Therefore, the practicality of having to change the committee numbers is self-evident.

Government members have interjected to say that this is just a mechanical bill, but I do not believe that. This is more than a mechanical bill. It changes substantially the structure of the committee system. The committee system was touted—and has been for many years—as a very important institution in a unicameral parliament. Indeed it is that and that cannot be shied away from. It may be mechanical, but certainly it is more important than just a mechanical bill.

It is critically important that the community in Queensland has confidence in the processes of this parliament. I believe that one of the reasons we have the numbers that we do is because the community of Queensland had lost confidence in government and reacted stridently. However, the effectiveness and impartiality of the committee system under this new structure—which will be passed; the numbers are self-evident—will be seen in the months ahead. I hope that all non-government members, that is, the official opposition, the Katter Party members and the Independents, can act maturely and responsibly in the committee process and take seriously our responsibilities to the community of Queensland. One of the litmus tests of the changed committee system will be the number of dissenting reports. That will be a test for the community to see whether those of us on the minority side have a sense that the committees are operating as they should—that is, that they are the independent and objective reviewers of legislation.

This is our first sitting day and this bill is being rammed through, if I can use that terminology. Frankly, for what is it is worth, in my opinion we have to restructure the committee process to establish the committees and the establishment of the committees is critically important. I have some concerns in relation to the increase in the number of members on a committee from six to eight. I can understand that the make-up of six committee members had to change in terms of the comparison between government and non-government members. Changing it from six to eight exacerbates the risk of partiality creeping into the committee process. It is increased and increased exponentially. Again, that will call into sharp focus the responsibility on all committee members to act independently and objectively. I would be interested in the Premier's response to that. The increase from six to eight does reflect the make-up of the parliament. While that does not justify the increase, it gives more government backbench members the opportunity to gain committee experience, which is very important. I hope that it is not as some of the members of the opposition have intimated, which is that the increase is merely to give backbenchers, myself included, an increase in pay.

The policy objectives of this bill are fourfold. I will address a couple of them. The first objective states—

- set formulae to determine the size of the membership of the Parliament's portfolio committees so that they can practically and logistically operate as the political composition between government and non-government members in the Legislative Chamber changes;

I have dealt with that. The second point states—

- reform the Committee of the Legislative Assembly (CLA) by including the position of Speaker as a member and chairperson of the CLA for all of its areas of responsibility and outlining the circumstances under which the Speaker may exercise a deliberative vote at a meeting of the CLA;

I have already circulated amendments in my name, which will be dealt with in the committee stage of the debate. In the establishment of the Committee of the Legislative Assembly, I believe—and I certainly hope—that I consistently opposed the removal of the Speaker from his—as it was at that time—role in this parliament. I believe fervently that scores were being settled in that process while changes were being made to the parliamentary process, which may have been welcomed. However, fundamentally for me it was more about the removal of the Speaker from areas of responsibility where the Speaker should reasonably be retained. In this bill the amendments go some way to re-establishing the role of the Speaker. I am sad to say that I do not believe they go far enough. Whilst most of the amendments that I have moved—and I am under no illusions, I think they will go down in a screaming heap—

Mr Gibson interjected.

Mrs CUNNINGHAM: It feels like *deja vu*. When the bodies were on the opposite side, the ones on that side would sit there and say, 'We'll just put it to the numbers.' Yeah right; like that is going to happen! I believe it is critically important that the Speaker chairs the Committee of the Legislative Assembly. For what it is worth, I also believe that the Speaker should have a vote on all matters before the Committee of the Legislative Assembly.

In correspondence that was sent initially to the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee, because the CLA had not yet been formed, Gerard Carney stated—

To relegate the Speaker to a part-time member of the CLA, only when it is dealing with a matter relating to the standing rules and orders, undermines the status of the Speaker. Of equal concern, it undermines public confidence in the capacity of the Legislative Assembly to deal with issues objectively within a highly partisan political environment. This is so particularly in relation to ethical issues and parliamentary privilege, which are now to be dealt with by the CLA without the presence of the Speaker.

Some of Gerard Carney's concerns are addressed by this legislation, but I do not believe that the amendments swing the pendulum back far enough. As the chair of that committee, the Speaker should be the one who calls the meetings and sets the agenda. That is the normal role of the chair of a committee in this House. I would certainly encourage consideration being given to reinstating that power to the current Speaker. We have all spoken, both publicly and privately, about our confidence in the Speaker, who was elected to that role only two days ago. I believe that members of this chamber equally can trust the Speaker to undertake that further role well and efficiently. There are other matters raised in the amendments that I intend to propose in the committee stage, but I will deal with them at that time.

I thank the Premier for the briefing that we received yesterday morning. Whilst some concerns have been expressed about the lateness of the briefing, I will be honest: the bill was only introduced today and it will be passed tonight, so I think it was fairly timely. It is better than getting briefed tomorrow morning.

Again I state that this bill to restructure the committees is essential given the practicalities of members of this parliament being able to fulfil our obligations. There are self-evident risks in increasing the membership of committees from six to eight. Putting two non-government members and six government members on a committee clearly introduces a partisanship to the committee. This bill will pass. However, in passing it places an enormous responsibility on each and every one of us to take seriously our role as committee members and to act objectively and impartially and, where a bill has potential negative impacts on our communities, to be big enough, bold enough and strong enough to state in no uncertain terms that there are problems with the legislation and to state that clearly and without reservation. I look forward to the Premier's response.