




Speech by

Trevor Ruthenberg

MEMBER FOR KALLANGUR

Hansard Thursday, 12 July 2012

ELECTRICITY (EARLY TERMINATION) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr RUTHENBERG** (Kallangur—LNP) (12.41 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Electricity (Early Termination) Amendment Bill 2012. I will read from a very helpful website, 'Electricity tariffs and the cost of living. Know your rights'. It states—

Electricity is essential to our Queensland lifestyle—it powers our homes, and keeps our businesses and industry running.

Population growth, an ever-increasing demand for energy and the need to expand and upgrade Queensland's electricity infrastructure are among the many factors that impact on the cost of electricity which is set by the independent Queensland Competition Authority.

If any electorate understands this, it is mine. My constituents live in the fastest growing area in Queensland at the moment. Nonetheless, the businesses in my electorate are primarily small retail businesses, and most are suffering at the moment because of the legacy of 20 years of Labor's maladministration of the Queensland economy. This in turn hurts the income and potential of those people working in these businesses—working families. If Labor wants recognition for something then I recognise its legacy in driving small business to the edge of extinction. In fact, many businesses in my electorate over the last 2½ to three years have actually gone out of business as a consequence of the pressures put on them by the former government.

Small business is one of Queensland's biggest employers—if not the biggest. When small business is hurting, so are our people. After knocking on the doors of 14,000 homes in my electorate in the 18 months prior to the election and meeting many, many people, both in my office and at the mobile offices I conduct each week around the electorate, I know that the issue of the cost of living is front and centre for most families. The Labor government sucked them dry and they became very weary, swatting away Labor's hand that was forever trying to pinch money out of their hip pocket and take money from their family budgets due to that government's reckless spending habits.

In response to this, the LNP promised to act to help cut the cost of living and provide a little relief in the budget of working families. One of the first bills to pass through the House of this 54th Parliament was the Treasury (Cost of Living) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2012. One of the noble objectives of that bill was to freeze the regulated standard residential retail electricity tariff, tariff 11, at 2011-12 prices for one year from 1 July 2012 and to display carbon price impacts on electricity bills.

We the government acted in good faith and according to our clear commitment to the people of Kallangur that we would lower their cost of living. One of the provisions of the Treasury (Cost of Living) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2012 was to allow a regulation-making power to be inserted to give the minister the ability to make a regulation requiring a distribution entity to pay an amount to retailers to mitigate the impact of the price freeze if required. We the government already accounted for the possibility of a retailer potentially not getting as much income for the 12 months during which tariff 11 will be frozen. We not only acted in good faith; we also implemented our policies in good faith for the people of Queensland.

The urgency we place on this bill is testament to the level of seriousness cabinet places on this issue—to give hardworking, family budget weary Queenslanders some relief at long last, after years of

Labor maladministration and ever-increasing taxes. I again thank and acknowledge the Premier and Treasurer, on behalf of my electorate, for their determination to help working families in my electorate.

Unfortunately, we live in a world where sometimes the trust extended in good-faith actions is not reciprocated in kind but that good faith and trust are abused, resulting in someone getting hurt. The LNP government acted in good faith and, most regrettably, some unfeeling corporate bosses in some companies have decided that their bottom line is more important than some goodwill building with their customers. In my estimation, this is cheap advertising at the very least.

These companies have acted independently and without consideration for the people they serve—their customers. They do not exist without the trust of their customers and I fear for them that their current cash-grab strategy is short-term thinking that will cost them dearly in the long term as people like the Premier and his family, the member for Coomera and, indeed, I and my family now move our business to other businesses that are more accommodating and focused on their customers in these toughest of economic times—times, I might remind people, that were brought upon us courtesy of the state Labor government that did not have a clue as to the pain they were causing working families. This pain is now perpetrated by a federal Labor government more focused on a cosy relationship with the Greens and more interested in extreme left-wing socialist income redistribution schemes dressed up as a carbon tax—an insidious tax that will place erroneous pressures on the small businesses in my electorate. They are already suffering from the effects of the greedy Labor machine.

My son plays football. The club turns lights on twice a week so that the players can practise. He loves that game. All members of the club chip in for that. I wonder whether we are going to be playing football by candlelight in the not-too-distant future and training as all the parents shine their lights on the field so that we can afford to pay the electricity bill. I call on the Prime Minister to show some intellectual honesty and get rid of this insidious tax.

Mr Crandon: Shine some light on it.

Mr RUTHENBERG: Shine some light on it indeed.

The bill also includes amendments that will require retail entities to notify affected customers if the increased charges are more than the notified prices. Retail entities must also inform customers that they are entitled to exit the contract without penalty. Customers will then have 20 days from this notification to notify the retailers of their decision to terminate the contract without incurring early termination fees. A notice period of 20 days is a current feature in many market contracts. The termination notice will take effect within 10 business days of the advice to the customer.

The bill includes a transitional provision that enables the prohibition of exit fees to apply to customers with market contracts who have been notified of price increases between 1 June 2012 and the date of the commencement of the bill. These customers have 20 business days to terminate their contracts with their current retailers.

This is choice, and choice is something that we on this side of the House agree with—that is, people making their own decisions. This bill clearly shows that this government gets it. We get how much working families are hurting. We get the pressures being felt by working families. We understand the impact of these heartless companies' actions on working families—unlike the federal Treasurer, who talks tough but cannot bring himself to act in the interests of families he so quickly pretends to act on behalf of.

I challenge the members of the Labor Party in this place to stand up for working families—not just left-wing interest groups—and defend the rights of the working people of Queensland by doing the right thing and denouncing the insidious carbon tax and supporting this bill.

Mr Minnikin: They abandoned the workers.

Mr RUTHENBERG: I take that interjection. I absolutely agree with the member. That interjection is spot on; they abandoned the workers.

Folks in my electorate of Kallangur and all of Queensland can find some very useful information on a very helpful government website called 'Electricity tariffs and the cost of living. Know your rights'. The government has implemented a key election promise and has frozen the standard residential electricity tariff known as tariff 11 for 2012-13 at 25.38c per kilowatt hour.

The Queensland Competition Authority has a list of all Queensland electricity retailers offering services to residential customers and small business customers. I encourage all in my electorate to review this and get the best deal they can for their families. They do not need to accept the dreadful practices of companies not interested in being part of this community. I am appalled at the lack of community spirit displayed by some of the electricity retailers in this state. I am further perplexed by their apparent lack of commercial judgement in estimating the risk associated with openly displaying this obvious disdain for their customers. I suggest they will backflip on their decisions once they see the level of movement away from their customers to that of their competitors.

On behalf of my constituents I would like to say thank you to the minister, to the Premier and to the cabinet. I say thank you for fighting for working families, thank you for being proactive when these families are under attack and thank you for having the guts to say how it is and then acting accordingly in the appropriate urgent manner. I am happy to support this bill.