




Speech By
Hon. Jarrod Bleijie

MEMBER FOR KAWANA

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ELECTORAL REFORM AMENDMENT BILL

 **Hon. JP BLEIJIE** (Kawana—LNP) (Attorney-General and Minister for Justice) (6.28 pm), in reply: I start by thanking all honourable members for their contributions to the debate this evening on the Electoral Reform Amendment Bill—an important bill. I will start where the member who just finished left off in terms of the consultation we have undertaken on this bill over the last couple of years. We made it abundantly clear in 2011 what our position was on these types of reforms when we strongly opposed the Labor Party legislation when it was introduced which increased political fundraising or public funding to political parties from \$3½ million to about \$25 million in the 2012 to 2015 electoral cycle. In fact, I heard the crossbenches talking earlier in the debate about ripping off the taxpayer. We are saving the taxpayer. We are saving the taxpayer in this legislation. Under the former government's legislation, it was a \$25 million windfall, mostly to the Labor Party and to the major political parties. We are saving the taxpayer money in terms of these reforms.

Sitting suspended from 6.30 pm to 7.30 pm.

Mr BLEIJIE: I thank all honourable members for their contributions this evening. I will give members an update with respect to why we are making these reforms and refresh the memories of members in terms of the 2011 amendments, which I referred to in my contribution to the second reading debate.

In 2009, members of parliament went to an election. At that election members of parliament were entitled to about \$1.54 per vote, if my memory serves me correctly. What generally happened was that the votes were tallied at the end of the election day and the winner would be announced. All the candidates who received over four per cent of the vote were entitled to \$1.54 or so per vote. Generally, for the major political parties—I know that it was for the LNP and I assume it was for the Labor Party—the candidate did not get the money; it was returned to the political party. The total cost of that public funding for the political parties and candidates for the \$1.54 per vote was about \$3.5 million. So in 2009, it was \$1.54 per vote. Generally, the candidates of political parties did not receive the money; the political party received the money. I looked at this matter previously and saw that it was the same arrangement for the Labor Party. The candidates did not receive anything unless they were an Independent. In 2009, \$3.5 million was spent by the taxpayer.

Come 2011, Paul Lucas stood in this place and moved amendments. We debated those amendments that he had introduced one month earlier. At the time I indicated that it was one month after the 2010-11 floods, where people in Grantham had lost their lives and so forth. Shortly after that, the biggest priority for the Labor Party was to make sure its political fortunes and its money was there. It was not the Labor Party's money, it was not business money, it was not union money; it was taxpayers' money. The Labor Party wanted to make sure that it built up its war chest if it was going to lose the election in 2012, or whenever it may have held the election.

We debated the laws on the Wednesday, the day after the federal budget and the day before Gordon Nuttall appeared in this place. So there was plenty of diversion around the time the

amendments were debated. At that time, we estimated—and it has now been proven because of the returns that were issued after 2012—that we had gone from \$3.5 million in public funding in 2009 to about \$24.5 million. I heard some of the crossbenchers talk about the public funding component of this funding. We estimate that we will be saving approximately \$8 million for the taxpayer, rather than it costing them \$24 million. It will be substantially less, but we estimate about \$8 million.

The parties will get less. I do not think that it is any secret that the LNP organisation does not particularly like the fact that it is losing money or getting less money. I suspect that the Labor Party does not like the fact that it is going to be getting less money. No political party liked it when we cancelled their administration funding two years ago. But at the time we made a commitment that we would save taxpayers' money substantially rather than just turn off the coffee machines in the head offices of political parties.

We opposed the 2011 amendments that were put in by the Labor Party, substantially giving \$24.5 million in public funding. Not only that, the amendments severely restricted a citizen's right to participate fully in elections by capping expenditure for political candidates. They capped the donations that citizens and corporations could give to political parties. The other thing that the Labor Party did in 2011 was to put an associated entity provision in the legislation, which essentially said, 'If you are one association under the corporations legislation and associated by that legislation to another company, then you can only give one donation. You are considered an associated entity, therefore, one person and you can expend only "X" amount of dollars—I think it was \$75,000 to \$80,000—in each electorate across the state.'

There was an exception, though. Although the Labor Party said that companies that were associated can put in only one donation, the exemption was unions. Unions as third parties were exempt from the associated entity provisions. So despite the fact that there are, I think, 22 registered unions in Queensland and about 16 of them actually have in their constitution that they are officially associated and affiliated with the Labor Party, that provision did not apply. In 2011 we moved an amendment to say that, if it was okay for companies and citizens, that it should be okay for the unions. Of course, at that time the Labor Party rejected that amendment.

I turn now to our amendments. We are righting the wrongs in terms of letting people freely participate in an election. People will be able to spend what they want at an election. I can think of one person who will benefit in Queensland. It is not going to be any of us, who are not billionaires. I can think of one billionaire who is potentially going to be helped by these amendments. It is certainly not the Liberal National Party. It is certainly not the Labor Party. It is certainly not me. It is going to be people like Mr Clive Palmer, who we see going right around the country spending all of his money on political campaigns. But we believe that that is his right. We believe that anyone should have the right to spend what they want to spend in an election campaign. If a candidate wants to spend 'X' amount, they should be able to spend that amount. If they want to make donations, they should be able to make donations.

I want to deal with the issue of donations. It is no secret that the unions do not donate to the Liberal National Party. I not sure if we have ever received any donations from the unions. But it can be said that business groups, individuals and corporations give money to both sides of politics. The Labor Party has taken donations from businesses as well as from the unions, which have their lifelong drip line. If I ask myself: why do businesses donate money to political parties? I suspect it is because they want to make sure that there is a government there that has a strong plan and is supportive of business right across the state. I can think of a lot of businesses that may support the government's reform of workers compensation laws. That is good for business. If the Labor Party were elected, it would repeal that legislation. If the Palmer party were elected, it said that it would repeal all the legislation. So that law that enables every business in Queensland, which is getting their premium notices at the moment, a reduction of about 17 per cent in the average premium, would be repealed by the Palmer party and would be repealed by the Labor Party. That is our democracy. People can assist governments, political parties or Independents to get elected if they believe that they are going to stick up for the rights of businesses or citizens. That is why we believe in a free election period where you do not have the restrictions, as we have with the current laws that the Labor Party introduced in 2011, and where people can donate if they wish. A citizen, a corporation, a union can donate to the Liberal National Party, the Labor Party, or an Independent—or any other political party. It is their right as a Queensland citizen to do so.

I will deal now with the threshold issue, which is the increase from \$1,000 to \$12,400. We would like the threshold to remain lower. Tonight, I saw the Premier on the news and he said, 'If we

had our way, we would love it to be lower. But we have a few issues.' The first issue is that we do not have laws consistent with the legislation. The Crown solicitor has advised that our laws—

Ms Trad: Table it.

Mr BLEIJIE: The member should refer to my introductory speech where I tabled legal advice. I would say to the member for South Brisbane to go to the Table Office and grab a copy of the legal advice. The legal advice talks about section 109 of the Australian Constitution and the inconsistencies between the federal legislation and the state legislation.

Ms Trad: That would be the new Solicitor General who gave you that advice.

Mr BLEIJIE: It was the same Crown Solicitor that the Labor Party had advising them when they were in government. If I can address this issue: we want to make sure there is consistency between the state laws and the federal legislation. The inconsistency is this: if a person, individual or corporate entity gives money to a federal political party, like the Labor Party, for instance, it also has to get disclosed under our laws in the Queensland division, but under two separate regimes: \$12,400 at the federal level and \$1,000 at the state level. We want it to be consistent. The Crown Law advice shows us that the best way forward is to make it consistent. We want to end the confusion, as I just indicated.

We give this commitment to the people of Queensland: once these laws go through, with the amendments I have put in, if the federal government adjusts its legislative disclosure threshold from \$12,400—up or down—we believe it should be consistent and we will adjust it accordingly. The Premier will be writing to the Prime Minister suggesting that if they are going to proceed with electoral reform in the Commonwealth then they should look at reducing the disclosure limit. The Premier made that commitment on TV tonight. If this parliament passes the legislation the Premier, within the next 48 hours, will write to the Prime Minister and say our laws are now consistent with the federal laws and if the federal government wish to proceed with a reduction in the threshold limit, which has been discussed by a few members at the federal level, then of course we would support that and encourage them to do that.

The opposition leader in her contribution made claims about submissions that were made to the green paper. She says she does not know where to find them, she cannot find them, we have not released them. If the opposition and their 24 staff go to www.justice.qld.gov.au, Corporate Information, Community Consultations, the opposition leader will actually find links to the 254 submissions that were made. And guess what? They are public! You can even get the Labor Party submission. It is all public.

Ms Trad: When did they go up?

Mr BLEIJIE: About a year ago. If the member for South Brisbane wants to she can see all 254 submissions.

Government members interjected.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Miss Barton): Order! There is a lot of conversation across the chamber. If you wish to have conversations across the chamber you can take them outside.

Mr BLEIJIE: At 241 the LNP made a submission which you can follow the link to. At 240 Katter's Australian Party made a submission. Submission 252 was from the Queensland Labor Party. There are a few here that are not for publication but that is because, I suggest, the citizens wrote and asked that they be private or confidential, as it is their complete right to. There are submissions from the Teachers Union, the Nurses Union, the Electrical Trades Union and the Council of Unions. You can click on all of these. Nothing is hidden. It is on the Department of Justice website and, quite astonishingly, it is under Community Consultations. The opposition leader misled the parliament yesterday when she came in here and in the debate said we did not release these submissions. If those opposite cannot find them with 24 staff I make the suggestion that maybe instead of the staff opposite tweeting disrespectful photos during the day they could go onto the department website and find all the submissions.

Mrs Frecklington: That would be too hard for them.

Mr BLEIJIE: I take the interjection from the honourable member for Nanango. That would be too hard for the opposition. The facts are that we issued a green paper in January 2013. Submissions closed on 1 March 2013. Outcomes of those submissions were reported in July 2013. Legislation was introduced in this House in November 2013. Debate commenced 20 May 2014. This process has taken 18 months. That is hardly ramming the legislation through, I would put to honourable colleagues. We have consulted. We have been upfront. We said in 2011 that we opposed the legislation. We did oppose the legislation.

Mrs Miller interjected.

Mr BLEIJIE: I do not know if the member for Bundamba, who is interjecting not from her seat, said anything during the debate in 2011 about how all of a sudden she did not have to go to unions and ask for money any more, that the taxpayers were going to fund her campaign. That is essentially what happened. The funds dried up for the Labor Party and they said, 'Let's get the taxpayer to pay for it.' A couple of months after the taxpayers were recovering from the dramatic floods of 2010-11 the Labor Party said, 'We will get the taxpayers to fork out another \$21 million and pay for our next election to make sure we get re-elected.' Fortunately, Queenslanders are not fools and they only elected seven at the time.

These laws are about making sure that we go through a transparent process with the Queensland public, which we have over an 18-month period. As I said, we will be introducing a phase 2 legislative agenda which will deal with the Redcliffe by-election, canvassers and what happens at polling stations. The Electoral Commission produced a report on those issues. We will look at proceeding down that path.

With respect to the amendments proposed by the member for Gladstone, we will not be supporting them. The issue of optional preferential voting or compulsory preferential voting was contained in our green paper. From the feedback we were getting we formed the view that we do not intend to change the system in Queensland. We will retain the status quo which is the optional preferential voting system. I thank all members for their contributions to the debate this evening and I commend the bill to the House.