




Speech By
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Record of Proceedings, 10 September 2014

**ELECTRICITY COMPETITION AND PROTECTION LEGISLATION AMENDMENT
BILL; NATIONAL ENERGY RETAIL LAW (QUEENSLAND) BILL**

 **Mr CRANDON** (Coomera—LNP) (5.14 pm): I rise to speak in this cognate debate on the Electricity Competition and Protection Legislation Amendment Bill 2014 and the National Energy Retail Law (Queensland) Bill 2014. A key precondition for the implementation of market monitoring, which is what the Electricity Competition and Protection Legislation Amendment Bill is all about, has been the development of a robust regulatory framework for monitoring the market to ensure that retailers are acting competitively and that the price that customers are paying for their electricity is fair. Although the Queensland government will no longer have a role in regulating retail electricity prices for small customers in South-East Queensland, it will play an important and ongoing role in monitoring the development of the market to ensure that competition remains effective. The cornerstone of this market, as I mentioned a moment ago, is the monitoring function.

Members in this House will remember a conversation that I had some time ago with my retailer of choice, Origin Energy, about solar panelling and billing issues. May I say that the saga continues. I use myself as a bit of a guinea pig in relation to this matter. By the way, I should say that it was my pleasure and honour to be involved in the committee in the development of report No. 47 and report No. 48 to the Legislative Assembly in relation to these two bills. But I digress. I will come back to what I was saying. Origin Energy is my retailer of choice. I stayed with them after the debacle that we had. Just over 12 months ago I negotiated a discounted price for my electricity on two properties. At the time Origin advised me that it was not necessary for them to remind me in 12 months time that, in fact, I would go back to the standard or regulated rate. I proceeded to argue my position, 'Why wouldn't you let me know that I'm about to run out?' The answer they gave me some 12 or 13 months ago was, 'Because we don't have to.' Since then this House has ensured that they have to. All retailers have to notify customers towards the end of their contract period—I believe it is at least 20 days before the contract period expires—to give people the opportunity to make contact with them.

In my reminder notice I saw that I could go to the Origin website. I went to that website. I think I am pretty web savvy. I am certainly capable of getting around most websites. But I ran into problems. I discovered that the offer that I could have was a seven per cent discount and if I paid in advance, or paid on time, there was an extra one per cent, so an eight per cent discount. I proceeded to go into that website to make that arrangement to take up that offer. The sad thing is that I ran into difficulties straightaway. I could not get into the website. I tried a few times. It was a little bit of a muck around. Eventually, in frustration, as most of us would do, I decided to ring the 1300 number to advise them of my difficulty and to ask them for some help. The conversations were interesting. I advised the first person I spoke to that I had had problems getting on to the site and I asked if she could help me. Yes, she could and she proceeded to start to tell me some of their rates. I said to her, 'Don't worry about that. Just go to the seven per cent deal. That's the one I want—the seven and one.'

Having advised her that I could not get on to the site, she advised me that she could not help me with that one and that the best that she could offer me was five per cent and one per cent,

because that was a website rate. Of course, I had explained to her that I could not get on to the website. Eventually she said, 'Would you like me to transfer you to someone who can help you with that?' I said that would be good. She transferred me to another retail person. I did not realise it was a retail person, I thought it was someone in the technical area. This person proceeded to go through the same spiel. This is all recorded. I have not had an opportunity to listen to the recording because they denied access to actual copies that I could take away. They said I could go to their office and listen to them but I am not allowed to take them away, which I thought was interesting. She went through the whole process again. I said, 'No, hang on, the seven per cent, one per cent deal.' She said, 'Oh no, that's online.' I said, 'But the previous person I was speaking to said that she was putting me through to someone who was going to help me with the online deal, the seven per cent, one per cent deal,' and she said, 'Oh no, I don't know anything about that. I can only offer you the five per cent, one per cent deal. I can't offer you the online deal because you are not online,' or words to that effect. I said, 'Look, I'm not happy about this. Can you put me through to a supervisor?' By the way, they were all very lovely people. They had a great phone manner. I said, 'I'm not happy.' She put me through to a third person.

This person I assumed was a supervisor. In fact, she identified herself along the lines that she was, indeed, a supervisor. I asked her some fairly straight questions. I asked, 'Are you telling me that the only way I can get this seven per cent, one per cent deal is on the website?' She said, 'Yes, that's correct.' I said, 'The previous person I was talking to told me that she is not allowed to offer me the seven per cent, one per cent deal, or even tell me about the website deal, unless I knock back the offer that she makes to me, which is the five per cent, one per cent deal. She is not allowed to even mention the website deal. Is that right?' She said, in a nutshell, yes, she was not allowed. That is their practice. That is their process. They are not allowed to, in fact, go through that process of offering me the seven per cent, one per cent deal. I said I was not happy and I would be wanting a copy of the tapes and so forth. She said that will not happen. I said, 'I can assure you it will happen.'

Immediately after that, having not been able to get my seven per cent, one per cent deal by the way, I then contacted the government liaison person and said, 'I've had a very bad experience with Origin yet again.' I went through all of the issues with them. They said, 'Let us check it out and we will get back to you,' and away they went. In amongst some missed calls and someone getting the flu they came back to me. I received an email from Tim O'Grady, general manager, public policy and government engagement. Let me read from the email—

Further to our conversation yesterday I would like to apologise again for your recent experience when signing up to a contract with us. When you indicated during your first call to us that you were experiencing difficulties in signing up to our eSaver online 7% discount offer we should have moved you to this contract on that call. This would have saved you unnecessary subsequent conversations, calls and frustration. I understand that your new contracts with the higher eSaver discount started on 28 August.

That is because I made a fourth call to them and said, 'Look, this is where I want to go. This is the problem that I have had. Can you help me?' This final fourth person said, 'Yes, of course I can. I am more than happy to do that. Because you could not get online I am allowed to offer you the seven per cent, one per cent deal. You don't have to go through this other process.' Anyway, she was good enough to help me and it was all done. To read further from the email from Tim O'Grady—

To clarify our standard process, we make our best offers available to all customers when they call us for an offer. This does not include the eSaver offer which is a bigger discount available through our lower cost online channel only. However, if the customer is experiencing any difficulties in accessing the eSaver offer online we then fulfil that offer on the phone as part of the standard process. We are continually training our staff—

and it continues on. I have to tell members that it did not happen. I spoke to three people in a row and on three occasions I was told that they could not assist me in giving me that seven per cent, one per cent deal. That is my example and my concern in relation to this industry.

Origin is not on its own. Today I made a phone call to the Big Electricity Switch. By the way, first I went online. I clicked on 'See Group-Discounted Offers'. It did not take me to the group discounted offers, it took me to an area where, if you are a customer, you can get in and have a look. I thought, 'How strange is that?' So I contacted them by telephone and after a long wait, five to seven minutes waiting for them to answer, a fellow came on the line. He asked me a couple of questions. He asked me about whether I have solar panels to which I replied that I did and I am in South-East Queensland. He said that as a retailer they can offer a 12c discount off their rate of 28.42c per kilowatt plus GST and their per day cost of 87.58c plus GST. I said, 'What is the regulated rate?' He had no idea what I was talking about. The industry in South-East Queensland has a regulated rate. I double-checked that with the people sitting over in the corner. We have a regulated rate in South-East Queensland. I took my own recording this time so I do have it on tape, and this fellow assured me that there is no such thing as a regulated rate in South-East Queensland. He assured me that there is not one anymore. I have got news for the second retailer and that is that, yes, there is a regulated rate and it stays in place until 1 July 2015. Once again we have a retailer that is supposedly on our side.

These are the Big Electricity Switch people; they are supposed to be doing the right thing by all and sundry, but I can assure members they are not.

Where do I go with all of this? I voiced some of my concerns in the committee process. My concern is that we have a long way to go with the retailers that are servicing the people in South-East Queensland. The two contacts I made—one to Origin, and remember it took me four calls to get there, and one to this other mob, the Big Electricity Switch—both failed the test of honesty and integrity. They failed the test. We are less than 12 months out from going to a monitoring process. These people have a long way to go to get their act together. I will be monitoring them between now and 1 July 2015. I am going to be having people ringing them on my behalf and asking questions and if they do not tidy up their act between now and then I will come back to this House and pinpoint them as individual organisations. Every one of them is on notice. I will name them and go through the experience that the individual that makes that call on my behalf provides to me. I will probably be in the room with a recorder to make sure I have got everything right. My concern is we have a long way to go. I think we have 13 retailers in the South-East Queensland corner at the moment. If it is like Victoria, it is expected to go to something like 19 retailers in South-East Queensland. They are all going to be out there scrambling. They are all going to be out there inclined to not want to tell you the full story when you phone them. They will be inclined to make it difficult for you to work through the mire of their website. As I said, I could not get into their website. I had to be one of their people already. I had to already be registered to get into the website of these second people and with the first one I just could not get online. I could not do it.

I commend the minister for the effort that he has put in over the past two and a half years to come to grips with this massive issue for people in not only South-East Queensland but also right across Queensland. There are massive cost-of-living and electricity pricing issues. It was a big job and he has done it well. I congratulate him for the effort he has put in. At the end of the day, we want electricity prices held down by market forces and I commend the minister for his efforts in that regard. I put on notice all electricity suppliers and retailers in South-East Queensland: I am going to be watching you between now and 1 July and I will bring you back to this House each and every time I discover that you have improper practices in your retail sector.