




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR MURRUMBA

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ENERGY AND WATER OMBUDSMAN AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr WHITING** (Murrumbidgee—ALP) (4.50 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Energy and Water Ombudsman Amendment Bill before the House. I will quickly touch on the contents and the aim of this bill. As has been said before, it will allow non-residential electricity customers consuming between 100 and 160 megawatt hours of electricity per year to access the dispute resolution services of the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland. Secondly, it will extend the function of the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland to allow it to become that recognised external dispute resolution scheme. That is in order to deal with credit-reporting complaints in relation to the misuse of customer credit information. Thirdly, it will enable the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland to disclose customer-identifying information about complainants to the respective energy and water entities for the purposes of billing by the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland.

The minister has spoken very well on this matter. There are just a few points I would like to make. Firstly, this bill will allow many small businesses that have never been able to access the services of the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland to take advantage of its very effective service. Many high energy-using small businesses consume up to 160 megawatt hours of electricity per year. They are small businesses in terms of turnover or number of staff employed, but they have the high energy profile of larger businesses. They could be, as we have heard, a bakery, a laundry, a small supermarket or a takeaway that bakes its own rolls on the premises and are therefore high energy users.

Mr Krause: Dairy farmers.

Mr WHITING: And dairy farmers. I take that interjection. We have found that these small businesses experience the same difficulties as residential customers. They may have not fully understood the tariffs or the contract and they may experience long delays in sorting out disputes with the energy supplier, but until now they have been excluded from accessing the services of the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland. The amendments contained in this bill will allow an additional 5,100 high energy-using small businesses to have access to the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland. That is a great figure—5,100 small businesses. That is a great outcome for small business in Queensland. As we have heard, the sector employs the vast majority of Queensland workers.

We want to help small businesses sort out disputes with electricity providers—to spend less time working on these problems and spend more time in the business. These small businesses can get what is an excellent service from the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland. These small businesses may not have the expertise or resources to negotiate a solution or a better deal with their energy retailer. Larger companies may have an accounts manager who is experienced in dealing with suppliers, but small businesses need an experienced negotiator on their side. The Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland is exactly that. In the previous year the ombudsman was able to negotiate monetary redress for businesses to the value of \$375,000. Overall, it was able to negotiate monetary redress of \$1.1 million for Queenslanders. These 5,100 businesses can now access that service.

Secondly, these amendments are necessary if the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland is to effectively operate that user-pays system. Basically, each scheme participant—the distributor or retailer—pays the cost of the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland. So if a customer makes a complaint to the ombudsman about a retailer, that retailer or distributor would need to pay the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland the cost of handling that complaint on a fee-for-service basis. These amendments allow that energy retailer to reconcile a customer's information with the bill they are getting from the ombudsman's office. It may happen that a customer, after discussing their case with the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland, may be referred back to the retailer. That is what is known as a refer-back, and the energy retailer may get a bill for that. This is what the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland will be able to do with the changes to the act. In providing a bill to the energy retailer, the ombudsman says, 'This is the name of your customer who has been in contact with us and here is some basic information about them.' This bill is for reconciliation purposes, so the customer is protected. One of the great achievements of this bill is that it is about fairness to the energy customer and fairness to the energy company that is paying for the services of the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland.

Thirdly, the bill is necessary to further protect the privacy of energy customers. The Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland needs to be established as an external dispute resolution service under the Commonwealth Privacy Act 1988. The changed act now has new provisions including the introduction of civil penalties for breaching some credit-reporting provisions. That is a protection for the energy customers. Under this act, credit providers such as energy providers—they are credit providers because they charge for some services in advance—must be members of a recognised external dispute resolution service. That means that they can disclose customer information to a credit-reporting body to assess whether the proposed customer is creditworthy. If there is a problem with a breach of privacy for the customer, the customer can take their case to the external dispute resolution service. They are not just told to take it up with the energy provider.

This bill does create some new protections for customers, but I think the statistic we need to focus on is that it brings 5,100 small businesses in Queensland into the fold of the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland. That is a great outcome for the state.