




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR WARREGO

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ELECTRICITY AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Ms LEAHY** (Warrego—LNP) (9.23 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate on the Electricity and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. This bill seeks to facilitate the implementation of the merger of the electricity distribution businesses, Energex Ltd and Ergon Energy Corporation Ltd, under a parent company with a separate energy services business being established. The bill also seeks to amend the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities (Justice, Land and Other Matters) Act 1984 to modernise the provisions currently applying to the Island Industries Board, how it operates throughout the Torres Strait and the Northern Peninsula Area, providing essential retail services. I wish to focus on the facilitation of the GOC merger and some of the issues that will arise in regional areas as a result of this legislation.

There is no doubt that affordable electricity is very important to businesses and households right across the state and that governments need to be vigilant and ensure that electricity is affordable, regardless of where people live or work in this great state. I found it very interesting that the committee received very few submissions in relation to the bill, given the importance of electricity to all regional communities. That seems to be highly unusual. It is further concerning given that this is possibly one of the largest mergers in the history of Queensland, with an estimated total value of \$25 billion. That there were so few submissions is very strange. It is unusual. Given the government's intention to establish a new energy services division in Townsville, one would have thought that the government would have been keen to have the committee travel to North Queensland to talk with the community about this matter. That was not the case. As the government members on the committee wanted to hide, they voted against travelling and hearing from North Queenslanders, or any regional Queenslanders for that matter. That is a very disappointing circumstance.

It is also disappointing that the committee did not travel to hear first-hand from those communities in the Torres Strait and the Northern Peninsula Area which rely on essential retail services through a network of supermarkets, service stations and retail convenience stores. The bill deals with the food security of residents in remote communities. If it was good enough to change the legislation, it should be good enough to go and talk directly to the communities and the residents affected by the changes. There seems to be a consistent pattern emerging with this government in relation to regional Queenslanders, and not just those in North Queensland: change the legislation but do not bother to talk to those affected by the changes or allow the parliamentary committee to hear their concerns. I detect a distinct repetitive arrogance towards regional Queenslanders from this government.

I note from the committee chair's forward that, during the committee's inquiry on the bill, issues were raised about the Queensland government's decision to merge Energex and Ergon under a new GOC and establish the energy services business as part of the new structure. The forward states that the committee report does not address the issues, as they are outside the scope of the bill. However, the government mentioned the energy services business in both the explanatory notes and the

Treasurer's first reading speech. The government tried to shield the proposal from scrutiny in the committee process and that should not happen in the committee, in the parliament or in this debate.

The submission of the Electrical Trades Union seemed to be well briefed on the establishment of the energy services division. The ETU seemed to be so well informed in their submission that they expect the new division will be well positioned to respond to a changing electricity supply market and deliver new products and services to households—yes, households. Therefore, they would be in direct competition with small local businesses across the state. In future, this would allow the new company to unfairly bid against local, rural and regional small businesses. Local electricians in places such as Morven, Charleville, Roma, St George, Cunnamulla, Miles and Chinchilla, to name a few, will have to compete against a state-owned monopoly for their bread-and-butter electrical work. A level playing field or fair? Certainly not!

In future, we may see government agencies and departments, schools, hospitals and the like being directed by government to use the merged electricity company rather than their local electrician, taking work away, again, from local small businesses. You would ask the question: what is the government really trying to hide? What don't they want Queenslanders to know about their proposal to set up a monopoly business in competition with mum-and-dad small businesses?

I will now turn to the staffing estimates for the electricity workers. There are some concerning comments from Queensland Treasury in the committee report in relation to related employee savings and the expected reduction of 366 positions by 2020. Treasury further advises that opportunities to redeploy some existing staff to the proposed energy services business are currently being examined—not possible; examined—and this may reduce the merger implementation costs. Keep in mind the innovative energy services business is reported to be based in Townsville. I have to tell members that that is a long way from the depots and workshops in south-west Queensland of Ergon Energy—a long way to move the family if redeployment becomes an option.

It sounds to me like no electricity worker's job is safe in this whole process and regional Queenslanders jobs are again being hung out to dry by the ETU and the state government. This is cold comfort for Ergon Energy workers at the depots and workshops across my electorate in the communities of Roma, Charleville, Cunnamulla, Tara, Miles, Chinchilla and St George.

I have some questions in relation to this legislation and I would appreciate it if the minister could address some of these as they are of interest to my constituents. Will all of the current employees of Ergon and Energex have to reapply for their positions in the energy company? In the explanatory notes it states that there is a requirement for the state electricity entity to comply with a direction given to it by the responsible minister. This section will not apply to the parent company in Energy Queensland. I hope the minister can help me here—why is this the case? It is for the many reasons that I have outlined that the opposition will not be supporting this legislation.