




Speech By
Christopher Whiting

MEMBER FOR MURRUMBA

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ELECTRICITY AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr WHITING** (Murrumba—ALP) (4.52 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Electricity and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. This bill is to facilitate the operations of Energex and Ergon after they are merged into Australia's largest energy company, Queensland's own Energy Australia. It is crucial for Queensland that this bill is passed to make sure that the operations of this company work in the best interests of its shareholders, Queenslanders.

I want to talk about a couple of issues that have been raised in the debate. One is the amendment proposed in relation to the members of the IBIS board. I ask members to bear in mind that the amendment says that 'at least one member' must be based in the community. Certainly, that amendment gives the board the opportunity to have many community members. It gives the board flexibility. I do not understand why the opposition members are so perturbed by this amendment. It delivers what they say they want and they should support it.

The second issue that has been raised is why the committee did not travel to hear submissions on the bill. I point out to members that, in relation to that part of the bill that relates to electricity, we received one submission from the ETU and the ETU came to us to talk about it. We did not need to travel. For that part of the bill that relates to IBIS, we received two submissions and one of those submissions was from the LGAQ. To say that the committee had to travel when we had received this number of submissions would be really stretching it. Everyone could come to us. We could get the information. There was no need to turn this inquiry into a travelling circus. All the information was here. Everyone who had expressed an interest in this bill was here.

The member for Southport was perturbed by the presence of the ETU. Certainly, in the public hearing it became very clear why the members opposite could not wait to oppose this bill. From what they said, they had some real issues to settle with the ETU. I ask members to bear in mind that this was the first time those members had been in front of the ETU since the election. They definitely had some bones to pick with the ETU. There was some definite payback. They needed to show their face after what they regarded had been a hostile campaign that did them wrong. It was quite interesting to see how the members opposite faced off against the ETU. They were really hanging out for a fight. I thank the chair for protecting those ETU members from the hostile attitude of those members opposite.

This bill will facilitate the merger. I believe that it will help protect local jobs. We have heard that, apart from the local councils, the smaller depots for these energy companies are the major employers in rural and regional towns. This merger will keep those employees in towns. Those depots will stay in local towns. That will help drive local employment and the local economy. This bill will help create job security for these depot workers. We can do this because this entity will be government owned. As we heard in the committee hearing in relation to this bill, we need to support a government owned corporation being run as efficiently as possible and one that delivers for all Queenslanders, who are the shareholders in this entity. That is much better than the privatisation agenda of the last government.

I want to talk a little bit about privatisation. This newly merged body will be a bulwark against privatisation and sell-off. That is why the members opposite hate this bill. That is why they have whipped up a baseless fear campaign against it. If the LNP members oppose asset sales, they will support this bill. They will not do that. They are very open to selling off income-producing assets. They want to make a sell-off an option. They spent \$100 million on Strong Choices—on their proposed sell-off of these assets—and they do not want to waste that money. They want to keep their options open. What is the LNP's position? The member for Clayfield has refused to rule out privatisation. Can the member for Clayfield say that he will oppose privatisation? Can he send a signal to Queenslanders who want to hear if the LNP has shed its Newman-era baggage? It is simple. If the members opposite want to sell off the electricity companies, they will oppose this bill. If they have rejected the sell-off, they will support this bill. Queenslanders can see the pro-privatisation agenda of the LNP members by how they treat this bill.

This new entity and any subsidiaries will benefit Queenslanders. As the minister said in his introductory speech, this bill will help create an energy company for the future. I believe that we have a real need for this new entity. This new structure answers the question of how we are going to deal with rapidly changing electricity supply technology and the supply system. The whole electricity generation sector and the industry is changing. Instead of massive coal-fired power stations and massive steel towers pushing electricity out into the suburbs, whole suburbs are now producing their own electricity. We are transitioning from the sunshine state to the solar state. As at the end of March, we are now producing 1,500 megawatts of installed solar generation capacity. That equates to more than half a million rooftops. That effectively makes solar rooftops the second largest power station in Queensland. Thirty per cent of all detached houses in South-East Queensland now have a solar system. Not only that, the Palaszczuk government has a pipeline of proposed solar projects. We have short-listed seven Ergon renewable energy projects. We are testing and researching seven different battery storage systems. Our Solar 60 program will create 60 megawatts of solar generated power to kick-start a large scale renewal energy industry.

The question is how does this rapidly emerging Queensland solar industry fit in with the current system of generated and supplied power? What is the future for poles and wires streaming out from power stations? We know we need to be innovative and fast moving to be ready to adopt and to adapt to new technologies and to respond to these new situations. That is where this merged business and the new business unit facilitated by this bill comes in. This is where it has such a vital role. This bill will help us make sure we can transition successfully into the solar state, to ride this wave of new energy technology instead of being swamped by it. Just as an aside, I point out that this bill helps make sure we have a strong and stable company that can continue to subsidise regional electricity prices. That is a very important way that this entity can support regional Queensland.

The implementation of this bill means that we can answer some of these questions that I have posed here. How do you connect up half a million to a million solar houses? How can you make your whole state get the benefit from solar rooftops? How do you deal with the second largest power station in Queensland with effectively half a million shareholders? Can we do neighbourhood distributions to connect up Queensland houses? What about new suburbs that are using marketing and renewable energy as part of their pitch? Could they go it alone and perhaps not need the same level of traditional infrastructure? These are the situations where we need the new entity, facilitated by this bill, that can work for the good of Queensland. Such a body and its subsidiaries can work on a large scale or a small scale to help transition whole areas to a renewable energy future. For those companies that are already working in the renewable energy sector at a household level and in the commercial space and in new suburban divisions, this is not a threat. In fact, I believe that such a newly merged company and any subsidiary facilitated by this bill will be an opportunity. They will develop the renewable energy sector, enlarge it and create more commercial opportunities for those wonderful Queensland companies already in this sector. Queensland companies are leading Australia in this sector.

This will embed renewable energy generation into the wider system of energy power generation and distribution within the state. It will utilise the services and experience of those smaller companies who are already leading the charge to turn us into the solar state. These are the same companies that the opposition has been badly trying to scare, the ones that they have been trying to mislead for their own political purposes. As the minister said, the opposition to this bill by those opposite has little to do with the bill itself and more to do with their political advantage and their political agenda. While this bill has been about facilitating the operations of Energex and Ergon after the implementation of this merger, the posturing of the opposition members has been about their opposition to publicly owned assets and their desire to one day sell them off.