




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR GREGORY

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ELECTRICITY AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr MILLAR** (Gregory—LNP) (5.50 pm): I rise to speak about the electricity distribution businesses of Energex and Ergon Energy. We have heard members on this side of the House, such as the member for Whitsunday, the member for Nanango, the member for Redlands and the member for Southport, discuss reasons why the LNP is against this course of action. In the 21st century Australia's electricity is essential to the participation of Queenslanders in our economy and in our communities. Queenslanders need to ask themselves how merging these two bodies can be of any benefit to them in terms of quality and cost of supply. In my electorate of Gregory, both of these issues are a constant barrier to business competitiveness and individual quality of life. Let me give you some examples of the main electricity issues businesses face in the seat of Gregory.

Between January 2015 and February 2016, Albro Station—which is on the Clermont-Alpha line—logged 41 quality-of-supply instances with my office. These include blackouts which last hours, and on one occasion up to 24 hours; brownouts, where lights and appliances flicker on and off for extended periods of time; and worst of all, multiple and sequential power surges which trip earth leakage devices and damage equipment and appliances. What does that mean to people in the seat of Gregory and to the people of Albro Station? When the power goes out it costs them thousands and thousands of dollars because they live about 80 kilometres from the nearest town with a local shop or IGA, so food goes to waste because of power outages. When we talk about damage to household equipment it is not just toasters and blenders: it is expensive appliances and tools in the shed such as welders and grinders which are affected.

Here is another example. I have written to the Premier about the dire situation of small businesses in west central Queensland due to the drought. For these struggling small businesses electricity supply is an essential and fixed cost. A publican in Longreach showed me his quarterly electricity bill of \$9,000, which is the cost of opening his doors before he even sells a single beer. In this sense it is a fixed impost on his business because he has to sell an awful lot of beer to pay for that. We are losing small businesses across the west due to the extended drought, but one of the best ways we can help small businesses would be to get them a decent supply of electricity at a decent cost.

On the central highlands the story is the same. Emerald's high-value irrigation farms and orchards are a bright spot in the ongoing drought, but they are being slugged with such steep charges that farmers tell me they are seriously considering going back to diesel pumps to pump their irrigation water. It has become so bad that they are prepared to drop the electric motors out of the sumps and move back to diesel engines to try and draw water for irrigation. The problem for these people is that, when they seek to get off the grid, they may not get permission for their solar installation because of the condition of the network in their locality.

In regional Queensland there is no alternative supplier to Ergon: it is a monopoly. That is all we have out there. Like many of my constituents I fear that, by making that monopoly body bigger and extending its geographic territory, country Queenslanders can expect less attention and service with no relief from prices. This is a very important issue. We have Ergon in regional Queensland and Energex in South-East Queensland. Our biggest fear out there is that it will be the people who are on the Ergon grid who will suffer, who will miss the opportunity to have their say and who may see a lesser service than those who have Energex. That is a real concern. After all, the government will still be able to rip the dividends out of the new merged organisation, just as they did at the last budget. Those so-called dividends are really just a way of making people pay a tax on their electricity access and consumption. I cannot see that my constituents will be better off. I fear they will be worse off in terms of price, service and quality of supply and repair after natural disasters such as bushfire or flood. I also believe it will see even more government jobs ripped from the bush, further impacting our historic towns.

I know the Palaszczuk government has promised the ETU that this would not happen to their members. We all wondered what the point of the merger was if there would not be any savings in jobs. It all became clear when the government announced that it was setting up in opposition to private mum-and-dad electricity businesses who perform retail installations. Times are tough in regional Queensland, so it is not surprising that one constituent saw this as a chance for stable employment. Sadly, my staff had to explain that these jobs were being created for the electricians already employed by the Queensland government who would be made redundant when Ergon and Energex merged, so there would be no new jobs to apply for. The unspoken truth is the government risks sending family businesses in country Queensland to the wall with this merger. The concern here is that I do not think this merger will be of much benefit to regional Queensland. Not only are we seeing an alternative business set up against our hardworking electricians; we also saw a promise that there would not be any job losses or redundancies.

I can tell you now that there has already been a redundancy in my region of Gregory. In the heartland of the Labor Party, Barcaldine, a person who was a big supporter of the Labor Party does not have his job anymore because he was made redundant and had to compete for his job with someone in Rockhampton or Gladstone. This is a person who supported the Labor Party in your heartland: Barcaldine.

An honourable member: I'll bet he's had a drink at the Globe!

Mr MILLAR: He has had a drink at the Globe, he has had a drink at the Union and he has also had a drink at the Shakespeare. He is a man who has family in town, he is a grandfather, and now he has to consider whether he can live in Barcaldine anymore. He is approaching 55, 56 and he has to choose whether to move closer to the coast away from his family. I think how he was been treated is appalling. He was a true believer in the Labor Party, yet he has lost his job as a result of this merger. I think that is absolutely wrong.

Mr Power interjected.

Mr MILLAR: His job has gone. This person worked for Ergon but now there are no opportunities for him in Barcaldine, so the family has left and the children are gone from the local clubs and schools. I think it is absolutely wrong and I do not support this bill.