




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR SOUTHPORT

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PLUMBING AND DRAINAGE AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr MOLHOEK** (Southport—LNP) (4.26 pm): I rise to speak to the Plumbing and Drainage and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2015. I start by acknowledging the work of the Transportation and Utilities Committee for its considered review of the Plumbing and Drainage and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. I take this opportunity to thank all of those people and organisations that assisted the committee members in their consideration of this bill by appearing at the public hearing or through their written submissions. I particularly acknowledge the Master Plumbers' Association of Queensland, which took time to meet not only with us as a committee but also with myself and members from this side of the House separately on a number of occasions to review the bill and some of the proposals contained within it.

From the outset, I say that, while the opposition will not be opposing this bill, we do have some very serious reservations about certain aspects of the legislation. The bill contains amendments to a number of bills. In the first instance I will speak about the changes proposed to the Housing Act. Currently the construction of public housing is exempt from development approvals as building work is self-assessable by the Department of Housing and Public Works against all applicable codes. Those properties do not have local authority development or building approvals normally expected of the private sector. I would like to note that the not-for-profit sector does not benefit from the same exemptions as the department when undertaking the construction of public housing.

This bill inserts a deeming provision to amend the Housing Act to facilitate the transition and approval process of public housing stock to community housing providers and, in particular, has been brought up to facilitate the LNP's Logan Renewal Initiative. As members of the House know, this initiative is an important 20-year plan to bring about the renewal and revitalisation of public housing for tenants and to build a much brighter future for the residents of the Logan community. The Logan Renewal Initiative should be a high priority project with the potential to become one of the largest housing renewal projects in Australia. Almost 12 months ago in New South Wales, I attended a forum on public housing renewal. The New South Wales minister and other representatives from around the country were heralding the progressive nature and ambitious venture that our LNP government initiated through seeking large-scale renewal in Logan and, of course, through the work that was set to be approved with Horizon Housing for the renewal of areas on the Gold Coast at Varsity Lakes, Keebra Park and other parts of Southport.

The Logan renewal project includes the management of 4,731 public housing dwellings and a development program which will deliver an extra 2,000 additional social and affordable housing dwellings over a 10-year period. Just last week I had the pleasure of meeting with one of the proponents who has been involved in the renewal program. They, like us on this side of the House, have been incredibly frustrated by the delays that we have seen under this Labor government. The government undertook, what I would consider to be, a fairly unnecessary review and further consultation, simply delaying what should have been a significant and important project creating new jobs and opportunities.

Today in the House we have heard much ado about all the jobs that are going to be created and yet here was a program that was shovel ready—ready to roll. Queenslanders most in need of urgent accommodation would have benefited from this particular project. Despite it being ready to go, we have seen delays month after month. We have seen reviews. We have a government frozen at the wheel. They have no new plans or ideas of their own. They are simply holding up a great initiative.

I am pleased to be able to stand in the House today and support these deeming provisions because I understand how important they are to facilitating that project. I am pleased that we are finally going to see some action. These deeming provisions are also important in respect of other projects. It would be remiss of me not to mention some of the other projects around the state.

The proposal for the Gold Coast, which I mentioned earlier, was ready to go. Earlier last year I had the pleasure of meeting with community housing providers right across the state—on the Fraser Coast and in Bundaberg, Townsville and Cairns. I met with others in the great seat of Whitsunday. I can tell members that many community housing providers across the state have been incredibly frustrated by the delays that we have seen under this do-nothing government. It has simply held up great initiatives.

Hopefully these deeming provisions are a sign that the minister and the government are going to get on with actually building urgently needed housing and supporting our social housing providers across the state to deliver more jobs. Had the Horizon Housing project gone ahead on the Gold Coast as proposed there were some \$1.6 billion of new construction jobs in the wings and some 1,800 new dwellings to be constructed within some of the older social housing areas of the Gold Coast. We would have seen some 1,500 people moved off the waiting list on the Gold Coast.

It is incredibly frustrating to see the delays that have occurred. We are certainly supporting the deeming provisions. They make sense. It is important that we provide certainty for community housing providers. It is important for councils that as some of the old social housing stock is moved across into the hands of community housing providers, in partnership with government, there is certainty about the status of that stock. More importantly, there needs to be clarity for councils and local authorities that any new development will be compliant with the current building codes and planning codes.

I now turn to the other area that is covered under this legislation and that is the re-establishment of a specialist council for the plumbing industry. As I said earlier, we will not be opposing this legislation, but we do have some reservations about the amendment seeking to establish the Service Trades Council within the Queensland Building and Construction Commission.

We believe that plumbing industry stakeholders should have good representation to advocate for their needs in the industry, but we have concerns about the proposed costs. We heard in the public hearings from the current acting commissioner of the QBCC about the lack of clarity in respect of how the new assistant commissioner and this Service Trades Council would function and what the costs of it would be. It is also our view that the Masters Plumbers' Association of Queensland and other industry groups of this kind already have a significant voice on policy matters. It makes me wonder why we need to re-establish another level of bureaucracy and another formal structure within the QBCC.

I suspect that it may have a little to do with the fact that since the change of government we have seen significant change in the QBCC. There seems to have been a slowdown in the progress that the QBCC was making. We had a great response from the industry nearly two years ago when we set up the QBCC. There was great praise with regard to the appointment of the commissioner at the time, Stephen Griffin. He publicly said that one of the things he wanted to do was crack down on corruption and organised crime within the industry. It is such a shame that he is no longer there to see that through.

We have seen federally through the royal commission into trade union corruption all sorts of allegations come out. Some 40 people have been recommended to be investigated further. One can only wonder what is ahead for Queensland as we procrastinate and fiddle-faddle around with the work of the QBCC and start to water down its role.

I think it is incredible that some eight months on the QBCC still only has an acting commissioner. I note that the minister has had time to travel all over the state consulting with subcontractors, as he should and as is appropriate, but he does not seem to have had time to work out who the permanent commissioner of the QBCC should be. That is a great shame.

I think what the building industry is looking for and what the 220,000 people who are employed in the construction industry across Queensland are looking for is some real certainty around the role of the QBCC as the front line of defence, as an advocacy organisation, as a voice and as a representative for them to make sure that they are fairly looked after, they are paid and they are getting the best possible support they could hope for from an industry perspective. Hopefully, when the government has finished the 80-odd reviews that they are doing—the reviews of reviews—maybe they will actually get around to appointing a permanent commissioner for the QBCC. Perhaps the Master Plumbers' Association and other organisations might have more confidence about their voice within the QBCC.

I turn briefly to the matter of the legislative changes proposed in respect of residential tenancies and rooming accommodation. We heard a number of submissions through the course of our committee work about the proposed changes to the relevant act. We had submissions from the Property Owners Association of Queensland. We also heard from Harcourts, Enhanced Care, the Residential Tenancies Authority and a number of other organisations. We will not be opposing the proposed changes to the legislation to facilitate what is effectively a federalised scheme in terms of residential tenancy databases.

I do want to highlight a few of the concerns that we had. I am pleased to hear that the minister has agreed to address a number of them. One was, in particular, a reference to victims of domestic violence and abuse. I am sure that we all agree there is a need to protect victims, and the last thing we want is perpetrators being able to freely access that information through a national database by paying a small fee to find out where their former spouse may or may not have been living. I commend the minister on those proposed changes.

Another concern that was raised and discussed at length in the committee was about frivolous amounts being reported and recorded on the residential tenancy database, amounts as small as \$20. I understand that the amendments that the minister will move today will facilitate some regulation that sets out what would be a reasonable minimum amount, notwithstanding that the national provisions provide for a minimum amount of one month's bond. However, in some cases where there are no bonds applicable it is important to identify an amount that is reasonable. I am sure that members of the House would agree that \$20 is probably a bit frivolous. However, something in the order of a week's rent is probably a fair and reasonable starting point.

One of the other concerns that was raised through the process of review was in respect of the amount of time that people remain on the database and the fact that it is very difficult for people to be removed from the database through an appeals process. The national standard which is set at three years was discussed at great length. There was also discussion around the point at which the three years expire if there are multiple offences or recurrences of unpaid rent or damages. There should be provisions to cover that. I am pleased to see that the proposal before us deals with that. We would have preferred that the minimum period be five years, but I understand that the goal of the legislation and the proposal before the House is to bring our state legislation requirements in line with national standards.

In the presentations that we had to the committee, one of the groups suggested that if you are bankrupt you should not even be on the database. I am pleased that both sides of the House or both sides of politics through the committee process agreed that that was really not an appropriate position to take, and there has been no change in respect of that. I am particularly pleased that we were able to land in that space.

At the hearings we heard submissions from the Residential Tenancies Authority, which certainly wanted us to take a very strong stance in the provisions that were made in these amendments in respect of databases. I was pleased to hear from them a very balanced view. I raise that as a matter of public record, but I also think it is important to make this point: in so much as tenants have a responsibility to pay their rent and meet their obligations, there are many occasions—and I raise this as a warning to landlords—where landlords have failed to take appropriate action and they have unknowingly and inadvertently voided their own opportunities to make claims on insurance or evict troublesome tenants. There was some great advice from the Residential Tenancies Authority through the course of the hearings. For any in the House who are perhaps landlords or for others who are landlords, it is probably well worth reading the transcript to see some of the advice that they put forward for landlords around this. They did speak at length about a shared responsibility in respect of tenants and landlords. I look forward to hearing from the minister later in respect of those other amendments. I trust that he is going to take us down the path as per the committee recommendations.

I did want to speak very briefly to a couple of the clauses within the legislation. I note that one of the definitions that has been stated and is important is that of 'public housing premises'. The definition of 'public housing premises' will be deemed to mean 'premises that are owned, or were owned, by the State or a statutory body representing the State and to which any of the following applies—', and one of the important applications is where that property has been transferred from the state to a community housing provider. I am pleased to see that that provision has been made because it is of particular importance in relation to the work that will happen in respect of the Logan initiative and it is of particular importance in the future as we start to work more and more with community housing providers across the state to improve and increase the amount of available housing, both social and public housing.

I would also like to speak on the clause regarding councils. We are dealing here with section 94H, where the proposed amendments talk about the transfer of public housing premises. The provisions make the point that subsection (1) 'does not affect the transferee's obligation to comply with

all applicable laws for any development of the premises started on or after the transfer of the premises'. Initially we did receive a submission from the Brisbane City Council because they had some concerns about this and also the sale of public housing stock in Brisbane and what that may mean in a planning sense. It is my understanding that they subsequently withdrew from the opportunity to come and present to the committee because they realised that they had not identified some of those provisions that had already been made. I am pleased to see that we have gone out of our way to clarify some of those concerns.

In respect of the clauses that amend division 2 in relation to membership of the council, I am pleased to see that the wishes of the Queensland Master Plumbers' Association have been honoured in this. They particularly raised concerns with the committee, and with those LNP members on the committee privately, about the need for broader representation not just for plumbers but also for those contractors who work particularly with air conditioning and air-conditioning plant, and large-scale plant and installations. They raised concerns about the changing nature of the solar industry and the work there. They spoke at length about the need for greater representation in respect of firefighting systems. I am pleased to see that within the proposed legislation and the amendments that are mooted the representation that they were seeking has been well and truly covered.

Of course the Queensland Master Plumbers' Association, as we all know, is the peak industry body for Queensland. There are some 16,000 plumbers across Queensland. It is important that their views and their voice be heard. We have some reservations that we are simply creating another Plumbing Industry Council of old and we are certainly concerned that we do not return to the bad old days of unnecessary red tape and more and more layers of unnecessary management, but we are very keen to ensure that the plumbing industry is heard. We are seeking to be respectful of their views and their desire to work within the QBCC.

I note that they themselves have expressed some concerns around the current role of the QBCC and the fact, as I mentioned earlier, that eight months on we still have an acting commissioner. I would implore the government to get on with it and to find and identify the right person. During the hearings it was particularly disappointing when the acting commissioner came and we started to ask questions about the role of the Service Trades Council, the structure of it and, more importantly, the proposed costs. We started at \$50,000 and then it went to \$100,000. I think we loosely landed at \$405,000 a year as an ongoing operating cost. Somehow that was going to be miraculously paid for from within the existing budget.

In our statement of reservation we have flagged real concerns about the potential blowout of costs. I believe this is something the government will need to keep a very close eye on. I am sure that the industry will be keeping a close eye on this because the budget for the QBCC is funded through fees and charges collected from members of the construction industry across Queensland. When we introduced the QBCC some two years ago, we identified potential savings of around \$120 per member per year across the state. My sincere hope and concern is that we do not see a return to the days where fees start to escalate, because we all know those fees have to be paid by someone. One of the big issues facing the Queensland economy is housing affordability. If those fees are passed on through various building organisations, plumbers, services and trades, they end up being passed on to the consumer and that is of significant concern.

It was a great pleasure to attend World Plumbing Day celebrations last week. A video was shown which presented a very interesting insight into the important role that plumbers play around the world in terms of sanitation and the provision of safe water. As a councillor on the Gold Coast, I used to always say that no-one likes to talk about water and sewage. Sewage is not a particularly sexy item when it comes to public debate. It is the least appreciated infrastructure charge that people pay—

Mr Stevens interjected.

Mr MOLHOEK: Thank you, member for Mermaid Beach. In closing, I would like to acknowledge Bec Senyard, who is the first official female ambassador of the plumbing industry. We are told that she is one of only 46 female plumbers amongst 16,000 plumbers in Queensland. Bec grew up in a plumbing family. She played a very active role working with her father and running the family business. She is a mother of I think three children. She is very passionate about sanitation and the provision of clean water. She spoke at length about that at the breakfast last week. If anyone would like to follow her on Twitter, she has her own Twitter feed called the 'Plumbette' and writes regularly about issues in the industry

Mr de Brenni interjected.

Mr MOLHOEK: I take that interjection from the minister. I think it was Instagram. With that, I take my seat and commend the bill to the House.