




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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UNIVERSITY LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr CRIPPS** (Hinchinbrook—LNP) (3.22 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate of the University Legislation Amendment Bill 2017. The policy objectives of the bill are to remove the capacity for universities to make statutes; require universities to have a policy for the election of staff and student representatives on university governing bodies; remove certain limitations on the delegation of powers and functions by university governing bodies; improve the integrity of the membership of university governing bodies; implement governance reforms for James Cook University; and make technical amendments relevant to some universities.

The seven public universities in Queensland are established under their own acts. I intend to confine my remarks to the proposals to reform the governance arrangements of James Cook University as it is the only institution that has consulted me in relation to the proposed changes to its governing council.

The explanatory notes accompanying the bill state that, during the course of the legislative review of university acts, it was identified that the JCU council apparently faced particular difficulties in ensuring it had the appropriate mix of skills, expertise, experience and corporate knowledge. JCU is presently governed by a 22-member council comprising three official members, eight members appointed by the Governor in Council, 10 elected members and one additional member appointed by the council itself. In comparison to all other Queensland universities, JCU has the equal largest governing body and the greatest number of elected members. The elected members comprise two members of the general staff, three members of the academic staff, one undergraduate student, one postgraduate student, one undergraduate or postgraduate student and two members of the convocation. The JCU council currently has power to appoint only one additional member, which is the lowest number of additional members across all Queensland public universities.

JCU was invited to develop a new governance structure, in consultation with its university community, for consideration by the government. Following consultation with its stakeholders about the proposed governance structure, the JCU council submitted a proposal for reform to the Minister for Education, and the government has supported that structure. As I mentioned earlier, I was involved in that consultation process. I would like to acknowledge the commitment shown by James Cook University to consult with the community, including me, in relation to these proposed changes to the council. I particularly appreciated the opportunity to share my views directly with the chancellor and other senior university officers.

James Cook University is a significant asset to the people of North Queensland. North Queensland communities have a strong attachment to JCU. It is important that the university reciprocate the local community support it receives through a commitment to high standards of governance. North Queenslanders, generally speaking, are proud of JCU, its achievements and its leading role in North Queensland as a centre of excellence in learning and research, particularly in disciplines relating to tropical communities and environments. Although I am not an alumnus of JCU, I have always been very positive about the contribution JCU has made to North Queensland.

I have to say that my perception of JCU has been somewhat challenged in recent times. This in turn has made me somewhat wary of the proposed changes to JCU's council which reduce the number of elected council members representing students, staff and the convocation in favour of more council members appointed by the Governor in Council or by the JCU council itself. For example, the treatment of Professor Peter Ridd by the administrative leadership of JCU last year was particularly regrettable. Outwardly, the action taken against Professor Ridd by JCU appears in conflict with the best traditions of academic inquiry, research and debate. In my opinion, it was a low point for JCU. I have been offered some excuses and some explanations for the actions taken by JCU against Peter Ridd, but they were most unsatisfactory to the point of being feeble.

The fact that JCU sanctioned Peter Ridd and threatened him with dismissal for publicly expressing his divergent views about the health of the Great Barrier Reef and the robustness of the research undertaken by other academics which suggested that the health of the reef was in question was outrageous. However, I also consider that it might be a symptom of a wider problem engulfing the discipline and the integrity of scientific research. Professor Ridd is, in my view, to be congratulated and thanked for speaking out about the health of the Great Barrier Reef at the risk of his employment and reputation, and I deeply regret the manner in which JCU treated Professor Ridd. Far from being censured for failing to act in a collegiate way, Peter Ridd needs to be supported for blowing the whistle on the important issue of quality assurance in scientific data. JCU's intolerance of this alternative view is inconsistent with the best traditions of scientific inquiry and research. I believe in fact that Professor Ridd made a compelling case for increased resources—

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Farmer): Order! Member for Hinchinbrook, I am conscious of the long title of the bill and ask if you could keep that in mind, please.

Mr CRIPPS: Certainly. Peter Ridd has made a compelling case for increased resources to improve quality assurance on scientific data—

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Member for Hinchinbrook, I am wondering if you could point out to me where your particular line of speaking is relevant to the long title of the bill, please.

Mr CRIPPS: Certainly, Madam Deputy Speaker. The bill relates to proposals to change the governance model for James Cook University. The governance model of James Cook University involves the election of representatives of parts of the university community and the way in which the university is governed and administered. I am commenting on certain governance and administrative processes within James Cook University and the relevance to the bill before the House in that regard.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Okay; thank you. You have the call.

Mr CRIPPS: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I simply cannot believe that a university has these types of disciplinary processes and has taken them against a distinguished academic because it did not like what he was saying. Questions should be asked about the administrative arrangements at a university that could allow this to happen when a tertiary institution like this should surely be a bastion of debate, a haven for the contest of ideas and, at the very least, supportive of free speech.

Very often major decisions of public policy can be made on the strength of scientific research and there is a very good argument in favour of making sure data and analysis is robust. As taxpayers, a lack of robustness could mean very expensive errors being made in the allocation of public finances. Even before Peter Ridd's case came to my attention, I often wondered how many scientists and researchers felt unable to speak out about a range of environmental issues because they were under pressure to accept particular views and outcomes to secure funding or protect their own employment from the institution or government that employed them. As such, I considered the proposed changes to JCU's council with these recent experiences fresh in my mind and I had an adverse reaction to some of them.

This is a proposal to reduce student and staff representation and remove any from amongst those of the university's convocation in favour of increased appointments proposed by the council itself, either directly or through the Governor in Council process. My reaction to this proposal is that the council runs the risk of becoming rather inward looking. Considering that several appointments to the existing council are already to be made via the Governor in Council process, it seems to me that there would be a large proportion of voices on the JCU council that have been appointed rather than provide representation to the various and diverse communities within the university. I think we should let the students and the staff at the university have their say because, quite frankly, there is no university without them. There is no reason the existing Governor in Council appointments and the direct JCU council appointments cannot secure the remaining qualifications, skills and experience required to govern the university in an effective way in the 21st century.

Lastly, I think the JCU council should look more carefully at ensuring that its different campuses are given more specific consideration in the make-up of the council. If it is going to run a multicampus model, those campuses need to feel part of the institution in every way. This may be achieved by requiring at least one each of the staff, student and convocation representatives and at least one each of the Governor in Council and direct council appointments to be from different campuses of JCU. Having said those things, I wanted to reiterate that I did appreciate the opportunity to comment during the consultation process by JCU with the community and I want to make it clear that JCU went to great efforts to give me the opportunity to provide direct feedback and I have said nothing here—

Ms Jones interjected.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Minister, I ask you to please withdraw that.

Ms JONES: I withdraw.

Mr CRIPPS: I want to make it clear that I have said nothing during the course of the debate on the bill that I have not said in that consultation process directly with JCU. I do not do those sorts of things and it is unfortunate that the Minister for Education is reflecting otherwise. I engaged in that process because I believe that JCU is a very important asset to North Queensland. I wish James Cook University every success in the future and I hope that my concerns about the new governance model prove to be unfounded.