




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Record of Proceedings, 8 August 2017

**APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL:
PUBLIC WORKS AND UTILITIES COMMITTEE**

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (10.37 pm): That was a good report, Mr Chair. No-one can have any confidence in the department of public works following the lack of clear and meaningful answers that we received from the minister at estimates. Sadly, the minister failed to answer a whole range of important issues, including the minister's unbelievable and arrogant dismissal of questions on public health and safety relating to the potential fire risk of aluminium external cladding on public and private buildings across Queensland that have been identified in the wake of the London Grenfell tower tragedy. The minister refused to release a list that he apparently has of more than 40 buildings in Queensland that potentially have dangerous cladding. The LNP is very concerned by Minister de Brenni's cavalier attitude. We will continue to pressure the minister and the Palaszczuk government to properly act to deal with this important issue in a timely and effective manner.

Confidence in leadership in the Department of Housing and Public Works has taken a dive under the Palaszczuk Labor government as plainly shown by the Working for Queensland survey. The government's own survey of staff in the department found that key indicators associated with integrity, management, behaviour and development commitments have declined in the Department of Housing and Public Works. Minister de Brenni claimed no knowledge of his department's own survey and arrogantly dismissed the findings. Given this attitude by the minister, the obvious question really needs to be asked: what is the cost ultimately to taxpayers of conducting the survey and why would anyone bother given the very arrogant and dismissive response of the minister which continues tonight?

Again, the minister's unbelievable and arrogant dismissals of questions related to staff cuts in the Procurement Services section of his department when budget papers clearly show that staff numbers have been slashed from 111 in 2014-15 to 59 in 2015-16 and with only a marginal increase since, despite the very damning Auditor-General's report of the failure in the department—the report and findings also arrogantly dismissed by the minister, blaming everyone else including the previous government when he has been at the helm for nearly 2½ years. The facts show that the minister has gutted Procurement Services—a key section of his department that is supposed to be responsible for coordinating purchases and supplies across departments and delivering value for money.

Other key concerns were the minister's poor explanation of what is planned with regulations that could see all metal roofs in Queensland having to be installed by licensed plumbers with a huge potential increase in home and commercial building costs. From the very poor explanations from the minister, it is plain that the Palaszczuk Labor government is failing to deal properly with the important issue of payments for building contractors and subcontractors, even with projects that are being directly overseen by the Department of Housing and Public Works, with the minister failing to provide clear details to the estimates hearing about security of payments—something he claims to be the champion of. What was most disturbing was the minister's arrogant dismissal of evidence that the department was withholding retention moneys from subcontractors and even using the other person's retentions to fund other government projects—something that should be banned.

Estimates pre-hearing questions on notice confirmed our concerns about the management and leadership of the department, with 8,500 homes underoccupied—which is nearly 16 per cent of the total housing stock in Queensland—and nearly 1,200 homes sitting vacant. That does not instil confidence when vulnerable Queenslanders are still on the waiting list for crisis accommodation.

Budget blowouts were clearly evident throughout the budget papers—employee expenses up by \$20 million from the previous year. It is clear that the minister has given up trying to rein in expenditure by forecasting an operating deficit of \$170 million in 2017-18. In 2015-16 he inherited a deficit of \$50 million. It has blown out to \$182 million—nearly fourfold in two short years.

It was no surprise that even after taking a question on notice to release an important QBCC submission, tabled on 31 March 2016, to the initial discussion paper on security of payments the minister has refused. This continues a long list of cover-ups that are becoming an all too common trait for this Labor minister and the government.

Estimates also confirmed the extent of the sale of government assets—something they all want to talk about, but let us remember that we sold nothing. This minister continues to sell social and government employee housing. Over the last two years the minister has personally overseen the sale of a quarter of a billion dollars in public assets.

We see staff increases in the Residential Tenancies Authority of 18 per cent, with an explanation that front-line services were increased to process rental bond transactions. If we were to believe anything that was actually said at estimates, the increase was that additional front-line staff were required to process rental bond transactions. If this is the case, it is interesting that the department expect a lower level of disputes to be resolved from the 80 per cent target in 2017-18 to 70 per cent this year—a target that is 14 per cent lower in transactions but achieving it with 20 per cent more staff.

The Housing Strategy continues to fail to acknowledge any innovation or changes from the failed policies of the Bligh and Beattie governments in delivering housing solutions for Queensland. We see a fixation on government-led delivery which delivers less and costs more but, more disturbingly, locks Queensland out of tens of millions of dollars of Commonwealth money that should be reinvested into the housing crisis being administered by those opposite.