




Speech By
Charis Mullen

MEMBER FOR JORDAN

Record of Proceedings, 15 October 2019

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTORAL (IMPLEMENTING STAGE 2 OF
BELCARRA) AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

ELECTORAL AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mrs MULLEN** (Jordan—ALP) (5.19 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Local Government Electoral (Implementing Stage 2 of Belcarra) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2019. I will also make a short contribution to the Electoral and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2019. The bills before us provide some of the most comprehensive reforms to elections at a state and local government level that we have seen in some time. As the minister indicated in his introductory speech, transparency and accountability are the foundation stones on which we build governments, whether state or local. The amendments proposed through these bills will improve integrity, transparency and public accountability of both the state's electoral system and Queensland's local government system.

Findings from two key inquiries in 2016—Operation Belcarra and the Soorley inquiry—have informed key reforms that are being addressed through these legislative changes. A significant focus of the bills seeks to address a number of the key recommendations of the Crime and Corruption Commission's Belcarra report, tabled on 4 October 2017. Operation Belcarra, initiated in September 2016, was the result of a number of allegations against South-East Queensland council candidates during the 2016 local government elections. Whilst the investigation dealt with the specific allegations raised, it also identified deficiencies within the current system and found widespread noncompliance with legislative obligations relating to local government elections and political donations.

Stage 2 of the Belcarra reforms, which these bills address, has a strong focus on disclosure, with a number of key recommendations to be implemented. The bill amends the Local Government Electoral Act to require disclosure of electoral expenditure of \$500 or more incurred by candidates, groups of candidates, registered political parties and associated entities during the disclosure period for the election. The bill provides that electoral expenditure is expenditure on, or a gift in kind given for, particular purposes including political advertisements and other material advocating for or against a candidate, group of candidates or political party.

Another important disclosure mechanism is the requirement to publish and maintain a register of interests for all candidates—a key condition of nomination. The act will also require candidates to declare additional matters on their nomination forms which the ECQ will be required to publish on its website. These additional matters will include matters relating to a candidate's membership of a registered political party, trade or professional organisation. It will also disclose whether a candidate or close associate of the candidate is or has been within the previous year a party to a contractual agreement with the local government or entering a contractual process, for example through a tender process. It also addresses legitimate community concerns regarding candidates who may have development applications before a local government by ensuring these matters are disclosed prior to an election.

The bill also addresses the issue of a group of candidates operating as a collective whilst declaring themselves as independent. This means that group campaign activities such as using the same campaign slogans, brands and how-to-vote cards and sharing the same resources will not be allowed unless those candidates are recorded as a group under section 41(4) of the Local Government Electoral Act. These reforms are all aimed at improving transparency and allow voters to understand the financial interests of potential candidates and to ensure that independence is a term that is not just bandied about but is truly reflective of those candidates.

We know that sadly the reputation of local government, particularly in South-East Queensland, has suffered in recent times. Suspicion, loss of trust and confidence has impacted the entire sector. In my own electorate, which covers both the Ipswich and Logan local government areas, we find ourselves with interim administrators currently overseeing both councils. The next round of council elections in March 2020 will be particularly important as we seek to restore faith in and the good name of local government. I speak with many in my community who raise with me their growing desire to see council candidates who bring the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding of their obligations as a potential councillor.

The bill will now require councillor training as a mandatory requirement for all candidates, something which I believe is a good start for those who are serious about putting their names forward for election. Perhaps, for the member for Mermaid Beach, it may discourage those who just want their five minutes of fame, and I do not think that is necessarily a bad thing. We need people who are serious to come forward as candidates and I do not think some training will be a problem for most people. It also reflects on an old-fashioned view of what councils were. These are not tin-pot clubs; these are major organisations with large budgets, staffing and obligations. The amendment of section 26 of the Local Government Electoral Act will now provide that a person may be nominated as a candidate for an election only if the person has, within six months before the nomination day for the election, successfully completed a training course about the person's obligations as a candidate and as a councillor if they are elected or appointed.

The Belcarra report recommendations will also improve the integrity of state electoral processes as outlined in the amendments being proposed through the Electoral and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. This includes expanding the ECQ's functions in administering and implementing strategies to encourage compliance with the election funding and financial disclosures of the Electoral Act and a full review of offences and penalties across Queensland's electoral legislation. There are important reforms to postal voting that are more realistic in terms of frequency and reliability of postal services and the growing popularity of early voting in our communities. There are also welcome improvements to the processing of declaration envelopes for postal votes to allow those ballot papers to be included in the preliminary count to ensure that votes can be counted much faster and seats declared earlier than has historically been the case.

I want to congratulate both the Attorney-General and Minister for Justice and the Minister for Local Government, Minister for Racing and Minister for Multicultural Affairs for the work that they have undertaken on these two important reform bills. The Belcarra report and the Soorley inquiry identified many significant issues that needed to be addressed and recommended a detailed number of legislative reforms. Most of these have been agreed to or agreed to in principle by the Palaszczuk government. There are even further reforms that have been identified through stakeholder consultation and continuous improvement, and these are also included in this legislation. I also want to acknowledge the critical work of the CCC whose recommendations underpin key features of this bill. The Palaszczuk government has a strong record of enhancing electoral integrity, transparency and accountability in Queensland. These bills aim to further strengthen public confidence in both our electoral system and local government system as key democratic institutions. I commend the bills to the House.