



Speech By  
**James Lister**


**MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS**

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

### **ELECTORAL AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr LISTER** (Southern Downs—LNP) (3.11 pm): I rise to speak in the cognate debate of the Local Government Electoral (Implementing Stage 2 of Belcarra) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2019 and the Electoral and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2019. I say at the outset that I take this very seriously, as I am sure most members of the House do. It is an important thing. Local government is a very important matter, particularly, I believe, in the bush. Local government potentially has more impact on the everyday lives of the citizens of Southern Downs than may be the case in a metropolis. I will allow the city members to disagree with me on that if they wish.

I would like to say how much I appreciated the contribution by the shadow Attorney-General, the member for Toowoomba South. He pointed out that he had a speech prepared that focused on the technicalities of the bill and that he was going to go through it in a forensic fashion, rather like my honourable friend the member for Warrego did in her contribution. He said that in the hour preceding his speech he decided that he would speak more generally about some of the issues surrounding the most recent developments. It did not escape the notice of anyone in the chamber or anyone watching from their office that there are two key departures from what the government has been talking about for some time in relation to this bill. As we all know, they relate to conflicts of interest and registers of interest as well as compulsory preferential voting. The member for Toowoomba South made the point that it was almost not worth having that component of the bill at all, considering that some of the most contentious components have been excised.

It is very interesting that the component relating to compulsory preferential voting has been removed. I sit on a committee of this parliament. I wish that I had known at the time of the recent public hearing what I know now—that is, the government is unsure about whether compulsory preferential voting is the right thing to do. The fact that it has been removed from this bill suggests that it is the wrong thing to do. I pay respect to the Minister for Local Government for his honesty in saying to the House that the Premier had listened closely to the views of local government. Obviously the local government community had been successful in lobbying the government to remove compulsory preferential voting from its proposals. I think that is a good thing for Queensland. The question then is: does Labor really support compulsory preferential voting? Perhaps that is for another time.

I cannot resist responding to the member for Logan's contribution to the second reading debate yesterday. He talked about how the Labor Party 'takes people with us'. I found that impossible to reconcile with the sordid history of electoral law in the last 20 or so years under Labor governments. Of course, we are all familiar—I was not in the chamber at the time as I was not a member—with that lamentable occasion when, with 18 minutes notice, the state government junked a fundamental reform of the post-Fitzgerald era; that is, optional preferential voting, a system the Labor Party itself committed to in the post-Fitzgerald environment. I have seen the material provided by the then state secretary of

the Australian Labor Party, Wayne Swan, in-principle supporting optional preferential voting and particularly speaking about the importance of making sure that the votes of electors are able to be discerned, as long as their intention can be seen from what is on the ballot paper. In my opinion at least, it is clear that optional preferential voting provides better scope to realise that intention.

We are all here, frankly, because of corruption in a prominent South-East Queensland council. The member for Bundamba spoke about that earlier. I agree with the member for Bundamba: she ought to be proud of what she has done. It was not an easy route to take to highlight the corruption that was endemic there or to take on powerful interests associated with the Labor Party, but she did so—to the lasting benefit of Queensland. Perhaps this bill could be called the 'Local Government Electoral (Member for Bundamba) Anti-Corruption Bill'. That would probably be an appropriate recognition of her service to the state in this matter.

I will now talk about some of the things said yesterday by my honourable friend the member for Mermaid Beach, speaking as he does with the authentic voice of someone who has been in local government. There a few members in the chamber who have that authentic voice. I believe I am looking at one in the minister himself. He was not a member of local government? Well, probably one in every five members would have been. There is a lot of experience in relation to this, particularly, I would say, on our side.

The member for Mermaid Beach, who was a Gold Coast mayor, made the observation that, while in no way suggesting that he or I or the LNP oppose the important recommendations of the Belcarra report, the role of councillors has been diminished over time in terms of their freedom of action. It is vital that they are subject to accountability and that there are rigorous processes to detect and prosecute corruption in councillors. I think we need to be careful that the mechanisms we employ do not disempower councillors and have them always jumping at shadows. Yesterday the member for Jordan made the observation that there are over 1,000 complaints currently with the Office of the Independent Assessor. That is not an appropriate way to measure the efficacy of anti-corruption mechanisms in our state. I suggest that shows that, given that 80 per cent of complaints are dismissed without even being investigated, there are a lot of political shenanigans going on between candidates or councillors who have opposing views or who differ personally, to use that system to make each other's lives hard.

I take on board what the member for Mermaid Beach said in that it perhaps makes those who would make great councillors think twice about whether or not they want to embark on a career where they are increasingly subordinate to an empowered CEO who is potentially favoured in terms of their access to resources in defending criticism or accusations of wrongdoing. That could lead us to have ineffective councillors or councils that are dominated by councillors who do not have the strength to restrain a wayward or dominating CEO or staff.

In relation to that issue, I want to table some newspaper articles from my electorate of Southern Downs concerning some of the things which can happen when a council becomes un beholden to the proper electoral influences on councillors. One council in my area has accumulated vast Stasi style notes on opponents of the council—on their movements, on their facial expressions, all of that sort of stuff. There was a very revealing article about that in the *Southern Free Times* on 13 September 2018, and I table that.

*Tabled paper.* Article from the *Southern Free Times*, dated 13 September 2018, titled 'Don't look sideways—and keep quiet' [\[1843\]](#).

There was also a recent report in the current edition of the *Southern Free Times* regarding some concerning, I would say, revelations surrounding the approval of the solar farm outside Warwick. As the local member of parliament, I can say with absolute certainty that that is a very unpopular move and was pushed through with the use of a code assessable pathway. Some of the revelations there are at length because it has taken a long time to secure the necessary disclosures under right to information, but that has revealed some concerning interactions. I also table that report for the benefit of the House.

*Tabled paper.* Article from the *Southern Free Times*, dated 10 October 2019, titled 'Special Report: "Political pressure" behind solar farm', page 1 of 2 [\[1844\]](#).

*Tabled paper.* Article from the *Southern Free Times*, dated 10 October 2019, titled 'Special Report: "Political Pressure" behind solar farm', page 2 of 2 [\[1845\]](#).

I want to stress again that I do not in any way at all suggest that the proposals in the Belcarra report or the recommendations are not right. I respect them and the members on this side of the House respect them as well, but I would just caution all of us that it is best to have councillors who feel that they do have some freedom of action and who are accountable electorally to their constituents. That results in people who know and understand their community and people who have the support of their community making the decisions for their area. Excessive regulation and attempts to impose restrictions on councillors may not necessarily be the best thing for the people of Queensland, so I ask members to think about that. I do support the bill. However, we will have some amendments.