



Speech By  
**Jennifer Howard**


**MEMBER FOR IPSWICH**

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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**

 **Ms HOWARD** (Ipswich—ALP) (5.02 pm): I rise to speak in support of the cognate debate, and in particular, the Local Government Electoral (Implementing Stage 2 of Belcarra) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2019. This bill implements the second stage of the Operation Belcarra reforms which aim to restore accountability, integrity and transparency in our local government—something to be commended. I commend the Attorney-General, Hon. Yvette D’Ath, and the Minister for Local Government, Hon. Stirling Hinchliffe, for introducing these bills and for delivering these reforms after undertaking significant consultation with stakeholders, councillors and communities right across Queensland. As we all are aware, the matters that led to these reforms are extraordinarily serious and involve a number of councils, including the Ipswich City Council.

Stage 1 of the acts implementing the Operation Belcarra reforms provided powers for dissolving a local government or suspending or dismissing a councillor where the local government minister reasonably believes it to be in the public interest. The matters that arose out of the CCC’s investigation into the Ipswich City Council were serious and effectively undermined the public’s confidence in our council. As the member for Redlands said, it undermined all government representatives. It ultimately led to the council’s dismissal in August 2018, following months of public revelations of wrongdoing by councillors and council employees which left our community shocked and reeling.

The Ipswich investigation, known as Operation Windage, uncovered significant corruption risks in the Ipswich City Council and ultimately led to 16 people, including council employees, two mayors, two chief executive officers and one chief operating officer, being charged with 91 criminal offences including official corruption. The CCC uncovered a widespread culture of governance and integrity failures including consistent breaches of policy, inappropriate workplace interactions between councillors and council employees and misuse of council funds and assets. It also found a workplace culture that ignored or no longer recognised inappropriate behaviour or conduct and neither challenged nor reported it. That sort of behaviour posed grave corruption risks which needed to be stamped out to restore the community’s confidence and trust in local government.

Failures of governance caused by the Ipswich City Council also resulted in the Ipswich CBD redevelopment coming to a complete standstill and caused significant economic uncertainty for our local businesses, leading to some being forced to close up shop. Ipswich has now been without a council for 14 months and, yes, while we have a council we do not have council representation. There have been many challenges associated with that, but in that time we have been working through the issues and also working towards introducing a new divisional boundary model which in the future will substantially change the way we engage with local government.

Like the member for Mermaid Beach, I am a big supporter of local government. It is the level of government closest to people. Really, if anything, these last 14 months have shown just how important good local government representation is for us in our city. In the past year, the council has engaged

Ipswich residents on their thoughts about council and given them a say on the type of model they want to see for their council. Community reference groups have also been established to provide residents an opportunity to engage meaningfully with the council on a wide range of issues affecting the city. I commend the work of the interim administrator, Greg Chemello. Over the past 14 months he has set the wheels in motion to restore the integrity, accountability and transparency that we talk about quite a lot in the Ipswich City Council. It has been a huge undertaking, but he has done a good job in restoring confidence and in developing a thorough understanding of our community's needs and challenges and the potential of our city.

People in Ipswich are resilient and have weathered a lot of tough times throughout our history, particularly in recent years. Certainly, the dismissal of our council was another major upheaval that our community was forced to experience, but over the past year we have shown that we can get through it. Through the Palaszczuk government's Belcarra reforms, we are bringing back stability and certainty for the city of Ipswich. We do not want to return to the 'good old days', as the member for Mermaid Beach referred to. We cannot have integrity and transparency if council is lurching from one scandal to the next. I am confident that our government's rolling reform agenda will deliver on our commitment to improve transparency, integrity and accountability for the benefit of not only the Ipswich City Council but all councils across Queensland that have seen significant governance failures and wrongdoing.

The bill implements a number of recommendations made by the CCC's Operation Belcarra report in addition to a number of recommendations made by the Soorley report, which reviewed the conduct of the 2016 local government elections, the referendum and the Toowoomba South by-election. This bill will make a number of improvements to ensure transparency such as implementing real-time electoral expenditure disclosure, requiring candidates to disclose their interests upon nomination such as whether they are a member of a political party, trade or professional organisation. It will provide for greater transparency on which councillors are operating in a group during elections and, if elected, may operate as a collective. It will require additional information about donors of gifts, loans and third-party expenditure and whether expenditure will go towards supporting particular candidates, groups or parties. It also puts the onus on candidates and councillors to have knowledge of the original source of a gift or a loan.

In addition, we are improving accountability by amending the way we define 'candidates' for an election. Sitting councillors will now be included as defined candidates, meaning that they will be required to disclose gifts, loans and other donations regardless of when they receive it, up to and including the period prior to their nomination. The definition of 'candidate' will also include any person who has announced or publicly indicated their intention to be a candidate in council elections. Importantly, this bill restores integrity by making it a condition of a candidate's nomination to undertake mandatory training prior to the local government election. Last but by no means least, accountability is being restored by reforms in managing councillors' conflicts of interest. These reforms are part of our government's reform agenda to restore accountability, transparency and integrity in local government. I cannot think of anything more important. I commend the bill to the House.