




Speech By
Peter Russo
MEMBER FOR TOOHEY

Record of Proceedings, 16 October 2019

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

ELECTORAL AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr RUSSO** (Toohey—ALP) (12.02 pm): I rise in the House to support the passing 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 as amended. As the minister outlined in his second reading speech yesterday in the House, Operation Belcarra resulted in 113 criminal charges being laid by the CCC against councillors or council employees, and two of the four councils investigated have had to be dissolved or placed into administration. I intend to deal with several areas that are covered by the bills but not all of them.

I agree with the minister's comments that there are many councillors across Queensland doing a good job. I had the pleasure recently of meeting one of the hardworking mayors in Richmond. Richmond is home of Kronosaurus Korner and I had the pleasure of a coffee and a chat with the mayor, John Wharton, and the hardworking volunteer firefighters when I went to Richmond on behalf of the Minister for Fire and Emergency Services to open Richmond's new fire station. This is just one of the many mayors and councillors from the region who have real pride in the areas they look after. A visit with Kerri and the boys is on the cards next winter. I should add that I had the opportunity to view the impressive display of fossils exhibited in the museum.

One of the important aspects of the report by the committee that I will now turn to is that the CCC highlighted a lack of awareness amongst candidates of their obligations including electoral funding and financial disclosure obligations. The bill implements the government's response to Belcarra recommendation 12 by providing that the completion of a mandatory training course in the six months before the nomination date will be a condition of nomination. The committee's report notes that this aspect of the bill was widely supported by stakeholders. In relation to the training course, it should be noted that the department has developed an online course and regional workshops for candidates who cannot access or use the online course. The course will be rolled out in the coming months. All candidates, including sitting councillors and mayors, wishing to nominate for the 2020 local government election must complete this training before they can nominate with the ECQ.

A particular area of interest to me in relation to the amendments and something that has been raised by some of my constituents is the need for something to be done to ensure consistency between the Local Government Act and the City of Brisbane Act as well as improved access to information for councillors. It does this by providing that the information that councillors can request under the City of Brisbane Act is to relate to the council and that a Brisbane City Council councillor can request advice or information across all wards of the Brisbane City Council, as occurs in every other local government area in the state. The process that will be in place, once the bill is passed, will be that the chief executive officer must comply with a request for advice or information within 10 business days, or 20 business

days at the latest. These amendments reflect the importance of councillors having all the information needed to carry out their responsibilities and make informed decisions in the interests of the people of Brisbane.

The Right to Information Act 2019 exempts information relating to Brisbane City Council's Establishment and Coordination Committee from right-to-information requests for a period of 10 years. The amendments in the bill in relation to this important function of a councillor's work in their ward improves transparency and will be welcomed.

The stage 2 Belcarra bill is the second of three bills designed to implement the government's response to recommendations of the Crime and Corruption Commission's report on Operation Belcarra, which has been described as a blueprint for integrity and addressing corruption risk in local government, as well as seeking to continue a broader, rolling local government reform agenda guided by four key principles of integrity, transparency—reflecting electoral diversity—integrity and consistency as appropriate state and Commonwealth electoral and governance frameworks.

The objectives of the bill as explained in the explanatory notes are to implement the following: the government's policy in relation to several remaining recommendations of the Belcarra report following the enactment of the Local Government Electoral (Implementing Stage 1 of Belcarra) and Other Legislation Amendment Act; the government's response to a number of the recommendations of the inquiry report of the independent panel, titled *A review of the conduct of the 2016 local government elections, the referendum and the Toowoomba South by-election*, referred to as the Soorley report; and other significant reforms to improve diversity, transparency, integrity and consistency in the local government system, decision-making and local government elections.

I will now address the objectives of the Electoral and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2019, as these bills are being debated in cognate. As I have already stated, the objectives of the bill: improve the integrity, transparency and public accountability of state elections by implementing the further legislative stage of the government's response to certain recommendations in the report of the Crime and Corruption Commission titled *Operation Belcarra: a blueprint for integrity and addressing corruption risk in local government*; facilitate operational improvements and support efficiencies in the state electoral system by implementing the government's response to the report of the independent panel chaired by James Soorley titled *A review of the conduct of the 2016 local government elections, the referendum and the Toowoomba South by-election*; ensure that provisions of the Electoral Act 1992 and related legislation reflect the adoption of four-year fixed terms in Queensland; achieve improved consistency across the electoral system, including better alignment between state and local government elections and referendums; and make other minor improvements.

In advancing my argument for why the bills should be passed, I now turn to the report on the Local Government Electoral (Implementing Stage 2 of Belcarra) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill and deal with the Soorley recommendations as mentioned in the report to which I have just referred. In October 2016, an independent panel was established to undertake an inquiry into the performance of the ECQ's conduct of the 2016 local government elections, the referendum on fixed four-year terms and the by-election for the state seat of Toowoomba South. The Soorley report outlined a range of issues from the administration of the three polls including problems with postal voting and the organisation of the ballot process on the ground leading to reduced voter participation and delays in vote counting and the finalisation of the election results. To address these issues, the independent panel made 74 recommendations including recommendations relating to operational matters for the ECQ and recommendations of a policy and legislative nature for the government's consideration.

In conclusion, I turn my attention to prisoner voting. Members opposite seem to be saying that it does not matter what the High Court says, that we will do whatever we think and totally disregard the constitutional validity of our laws. That says the opposition is not capable of responsible governing. That is arrogant and ill informed and shows how out of touch with reality are opposition members. As noted by the committee, the existing provisions make Queensland the only Australian jurisdiction that does not provide for some level of prisoner voting. I commend the bills to the House.