Speech By

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MEMBER FOR WARREGO

Record of Proceedings, 18 June 2020

ELECTORAL AND OTHER LEGISLATION (ACCOUNTABILITY, INTEGRITY AND OTHER MATTERS) AMENDMENT BILL

Ms LEAHY (Warrego—LNP) (12.31 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the Electoral and Other Legislation (Accountability, Integrity and Other Matters) Amendment Bill. In keeping with my shadow responsibilities, in the first instance I will address the matters contained in the bill that have direct relevance to local government, and some of the changes to local government are an improvement on the current legislative profile.

Before doing so, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the many mayors and councillors who were successful at the recent local government elections. These people played a key role in local communities during this challenging time. Just like me, I am sure they would have preferred to see this legislation, particular to local government, and those relevant provisions being debated back in March. Therefore, they would have been in place at the commencement of the new local government term, not some three months later. We are here debating legislation that should have been debated early in March when it comes to local government matters. Indeed, some of this legislation was incorporated in the Local Government Electoral (Implementing Stage 2 of Belcarra) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill, which was debated in October last year. One would ask: why has it taken so long for this legislation to reach this point?

For a start, let's refer back to the explanatory notes in the Belcarra stage 2 bill. Firstly, in Belcarra there was Labor's vote-rorting approach to the compulsory preferential voting in local government, which caused a major stir throughout Queensland councils, so much so that Labor had to fall on its sword to ditch the CPV proposals. Secondly, there were amendments in the Belcarra No. 2 bill to remove the conflict of interest registers and interest provisions—they are some of the provisions we are seeing come back now. This was to enable further work which had to be undertaken following the recommendations made by the CCC on 6 September in relation to how these matters could be more properly addressed at the state level. We all know where these recommendations flowed from. They were a result of the CCC's examination of the former deputy premier and the CCC's calls for improvements to the cabinet processes and legislative reform. Clearly, at that time it was simply too much of a hot potato for this government to deal with. They did not want to debate anything with the words 'corruption' or 'deputy premier'.

There is one further point worth highlighting here about this Labor government and it is that the integrity problem was not one in the local government sector. Indeed, the integrity problem was brought about by this Labor government's own member. Therefore, the government is trying to address problems of their own making. Had the government wanted to assist the local government sector, this legislation would have been debated in October last year with a commencement date aligned with the 2020 local government term. The legislation could have been debated in the March sitting, the one where we pulled up stumps and went home; we did not sit for the full sitting week. There could have still been time to align with the 2020 local government term.

What is disappointing is that the new mayors and councillors are already doing their training on integrity measures under the current legislative profile, which they have been applying themselves very diligently. This long, drawn-out process has negative consequences for local government. Once this legislation changes, they will have to go back for further retraining as these changes are extensive in the way councils will be required to operate going forward.

The need for councils to have certainty and confidence in the legislation has never been more important. The constant changes, particularly in relation to the conflicts of interest provision, often result in unnecessary complaints to the Office of the Independent Assessor. Councils at this time need to devote every precious moment of their time to help their communities. Now more than ever leadership is needed on the ground to help drive local economies back to prosperity due to the challenges they have seen with bushfires and floods, the tourism downturn and now the coronavirus economic crisis. When it comes to local government disappointingly, but not surprisingly, the track record of this government has been one step forward and two steps back.

I now move to the establishment of the councillor advisory role. Given the increasing complexity that councils are facing, the appointment of advisers to eligible councils to assist the mayors and councillors with media activities, event management, policy development and providing a further level of clarity and consistency has been prescribed in this legislation. However, the establishment of the councillor adviser role does raise some concerns. The changes may be well intended, but without proper consultation there is a potential for unintended consequences. There are industrial relations implications for both council and the incumbents which need to be properly reviewed.

At the Brisbane City Council there has been a longstanding practice of employing political staff of the Lord Mayor, committee chairs and the Leader of the Opposition. That goes back decades and covers administrations of different political persuasions. In their submission, the Brisbane City Council advised that they absolutely do not accept the proposal that the minister, through regulation, can dictate the number of advisers each councillor may appoint and the function they can perform. It should be sufficient that the allocation of advisers must now pass through the full council and the remuneration totals published each year. Councillors will then rightly be judged by the electorate on their decisions.

Here we have a situation where the Labor government is dictating the number of advisers within the LNP Brisbane City Council. Brisbane City Council state in their submission that such an action could only represent serious and unprecedented partisan political interference. The question needs to be put to the minister: what is the rationale for dictating the number of advisers? The number of advisers was not contained in the recommendations from the Operation Yabber report of the CCC, so what is the real motivation for wanting to dictate this aspect of the LNP council administration?

I will now move to the change in how vacancies in elected office are to be dealt with. The explanatory notes to the amendments state that the reforms are to clarify and strengthen the filling of a vacancy in the office of a councillor. They are the amendments that we got at nine o'clock at night. Filling the vacancy of a mayoral position during the first 12 months after a quadrennial election with a runner-up is a significant departure from the existing legislation, which states that the position must be filled by way of a by-election. What if the departing mayor won with 80 per cent of the vote and the next two candidates had 11 per cent and nine per cent? How could appointing a runner-up be a reflection of the electorate's wishes in those circumstances? They would be appointing somebody who won 11 per cent of the vote.

Mr Krause: Outrageous.

Ms LEAHY: I take that interjection from the member for Scenic Rim; it is absolutely outrageous.

What if the departing mayor was part of a group—and there was a group in my local council. Would it not be fairer to allow the group to nominate a replacement? These are questions that should be answered by the government. This is why these amendments need to be scrutinised by the committee system and stakeholders. We had only about 24 hours to absorb some 229 amendments and 100 pages. The full implication of these amendments has not been realised by the stakeholders or by the public. This is just another rorting of the voting system by the Labor government and it is particularly undemocratic when it relates to the way that mayors can be elected.

In the time remaining, I will touch on the recent local government elections. First, there was a postal vote fail. Many people did not get to register their postal vote applications because the system crashed. Secondly, people did not get their phone vote, so we had a phone vote fail. Thirdly, on the all-important night of the election, we had an election results fail. Here we have a government that requires candidates to do real-time electoral donations reporting about integrity but they do not deliver

real-time election results. We do not know if the ECQ will fine the 700,000 voters who did not vote due to COVID-19 concerns. If the March local government and state by-election is anything to go by, Queensland's online vote count publication will be another embarrassing failure. How does the Attorney-General expect the ECQ to prepare for the potential postal vote while at the same time struggle to fix the mess that was caused back in March?

In relation to the rest of the bill, Labor is shameless in its manipulating of the electoral system to its advantage. The Palaszczuk Labor government will stop at nothing to try and rig the electoral system and maximise its own interests, even if democracy is the casualty in the process. In so many amendments I can see the union and GetUp! fingerprints. The Labor Party should be ashamed of its sneaky tactics and its self-interest which it favours over any democratic principle; in fact, this government has a history of trashing our democracy. A fair-minded individual would recognise that moving amendments to this extent—100 pages long—with little notice is quite simply wrong. This is history repeating itself. Sadly, democracy went out the door with Labor long before it moved the amendments to remove optional preferential voting with 18 minutes notice.

(Time expired)