



Speech By
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MEMBER FOR WARREGO

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PUBLIC SERVICE AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Ms LEAHY** (Warrego—LNP) (3.58 pm): I rise to make a contribution on the Public Service and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. I note the Education, Employment and Small Business Committee examined the bill and I thank them for their efforts in doing so. I too wish to thank the public servants across Queensland, particularly those in my electorate, especially the teachers who have had a very disrupted year and the nurses who are at the front line doing a lot of the COVID testing. Even though there are no cases in my particular region, they are certainly conducting those tests. There is also a lot of activity going on with the department of agriculture staff at the front line because they are working very hard to make sure our seasonal workers can get through so that people can buy grapes, food and garlic in Woolworths and Coles across Queensland.

We heard earlier from members opposite about how they have looked after public servants. However, I want to specifically mention a public servant who is not being looked after by this Labor government. I received an email from a very caring member of the public about a police officer who has to man the border between South Australia and Queensland. It is a very remote area and that border is manned between 8 am and 4 pm by the police officer from Thargomindah. His overnight accommodation is at the Ballera gas field. I am advised that the police have been absolutely fantastic on the border.

However, this caring member of the public was very concerned that they had not been given adequate resources by the Queensland state government. It is an hour drive each way from where they are accommodated at Ballera to the border checkpoint. They work an eight-hour shift on the border crossing checking the passes of people travelling from South Australia into Queensland and vice versa. Disappointingly, they are not even provided with a portaloos. All employees are supplied with toilets at their workplace, but this Queensland Labor government cannot give this officer a portaloos. There are not too many options out there; there are not a lot of trees on that border crossing. Unfortunately, the only option is a shovel. I would appeal to the government to see if something could be done to give these wonderful public servants, who are doing a very tough job out there on the border crossing between South Australia and Queensland, a portaloos. It would be very, very helpful to them. They deserve to have some decency in relation to the job they are doing in ensuring the checks and balances are done on the border.

I now move to the objectives. The policy objective of the bill is to give effect to the stage 1 public sector management reforms which arise from the recommendations of the review of the public sector employment laws done by Peter Bridgman, otherwise known as the Bridgman review, which was finalised in May 2019. The Bridgman review concluded that there are significant problems in the Queensland Public Service employment laws, which led to some 99 recommendations being made. The LNP does not oppose the bill. However, we do have some concerns, firstly, the time that it has taken for the bill to come before the House. It has been almost 1½ years since the Bridgman review was completed.

A second concern is in relation to the special commissioner for equity and diversity. The LNP favours diversity in the workplace and notes that the Public Service is already very diverse. The proposal to employ a special commissioner comes with concerns not because of the functions of the special commissioner but because this will add another layer to something that is already well resourced. The Public Service already comprises hundreds of positions which focus on promoting a diverse workforce. It, therefore, raises the question why a high-paying position needs to be created to add another layer of bureaucracy. A lot of these things are already happening. I am not sure why we need that additional duplication.

In addition, the government has also launched the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy 2015-2020, which includes inclusion and diversity targets. The strategy boasts about the current government's framework that drives inclusion and diversity, including the Public Service Commission, the QPS Inclusion Champions of Change and all agencies that are actively involved in championing inclusion and diversity.

While it is clear the Palaszczuk Labor government have a plan to promote an already diversified workplace, the same cannot be said about Labor's plan to stimulate Queensland's economy, which is expected to boil over into almost \$100 billion of debt, a debt level that we have not seen before in Queensland. It is not the cost of the commissioner alone that will cost taxpayers; it is the time and resources which will flow from any of the administrative inquiries. This is another example of where the Labor government's priorities are all wrong when it comes to the use of taxpayers' funds. A time when we actually have a recession in Queensland is a time when the government should be focusing on stimulating the economy and making sure jobs are there for people who are now unemployed.

In relation to disciplinary action, the LNP does not oppose clause 28, which allows a public servant who is being disciplined to first ask the Public Service Commission to review a procedural aspect of the department's handling of a matter before the discipline matter is finalised. However, the LNP does have concerns with the slow nature of disciplinary matters which ultimately comes at a cost to taxpayers. It is clear that the final decisions and outcomes arising from disciplinary matters within the Public Service take far too long.

For instance, last year former public trustee Peter Carne was suspended on full pay for one year—he was earning \$300,000 a year—after serious allegations were made relating to misbehaviour. Prior to that, the Labor government's former chief scientist, who misused \$75,000 of public funds for personal gain, was suspended from duty after working only six months of her three-year contract. Eventually, after stalling the proceedings 19 times, she was convicted of fraud and sent to prison. However, that suspension lasted for 2.5 years. I am aware of other public servants who have been suspended for longer than 2.5 years. In one case that I am aware of it actually persisted across two governments, and this was despite the government's own policy which suggests suspensions without pay should occur when criminal charges have been laid and the matter is prevented from being finalised due to an external factor outside the agency's control.

These are just two high-profile examples of how disciplinary matters take too long to finalise. That costs Queensland taxpayers money. There needs to be a way in which these matters can be dealt with quickly. It is also better for the mental health of the individual facing the disciplinary matter if it is dealt with quickly because it enables them to get on with their life and make their decisions. With the Public Service consisting of over 223,000 employees it begs the question how many employees are now on full pay while their drawn-out investigations are taking place? I suggest to the government that there is probably quite a number of public servants who are actually in that position. I feel for them because they want to see some light at the end of the tunnel, not just a suspension, or 'gardening leave'.

What is worse is that the disciplinary matters are also set to take even longer since Labor has announced that disciplinary matters can now be put on hold because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, this means more money is wasted while employees who are being investigated for corruption or serious allegations are awaiting a decision to be made by the HR department. I can say that in the case of the public servants I know who have been suspended for two to three years, it does not do their mental health any good whatsoever to be in that situation. The sooner these things are resolved, the better it is for both sides.