




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR IPSWICH

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

 **Ms HOWARD** (Ipswich—ALP) (12.41 pm): I am pleased to support the Electoral and Other Legislation (Accountability, Integrity and Other Matters) Amendment Bill 2019. In the Attorney-General's speech introducing this bill to parliament, she said that the project of ensuring the integrity of our democracy is an ongoing task. It is a task the Palaszczuk government is up to. This is a bill that is about restoring trust in our political system and democracy. This is extremely important at a time when trust in politicians and political institutions is at an all-time low. In the 2019 Australian Election Survey, 25 per cent of surveyed Australians said that people in government could not be trusted. That is the lowest figure the survey has recorded over a 50-year period. A further 56 per cent said that the government was mainly run by a few big interests only looking out for themselves and the top end of town.

There is a perception among the public that politicians only work for their donors and not for the people they are meant to represent. The donation and expenditure caps implemented by this bill take the money out of politics and stop the electoral arms race where, too often, we see candidates who have the most amount of money influence the outcome of an election. Part of the reason voters have been driven to populist candidates lately is that they believe that governments are run solely to look after the large donors and lobbyists. It has left many voters feeling disenfranchised, disengaged, and feeling as though democracy does not work for them. While we cannot solve all of the causes of this declining trust in democracy, the amendments introduced in this bill—amendments that ensure integrity, accountability, diversity and transparency in our politics—will go some way toward restoring people's trust in democracy and encouraging greater civic participation.

Caps on donations and expenditures help secure the integrity of our state elections and reduce the risk that a single person or entity can have an improper, undue or corrupting influence on political parties or candidates. It levels the playing field when it comes to campaigning and encourages a diversity of candidates and public discourse. This bill means that, as an endorsed candidate in the upcoming state election, I am limited to spending a maximum of \$58,000 on my campaign. It also means that any one individual or entity is only able to donate to my campaign a maximum of \$6,000. No longer will candidates with the fattest wallets be allowed to use their wealth to unfairly drown out their opponents, and no longer will donors from the top end of town have undue influence over candidates and parties.

This bill will also increase public funding available to eligible political parties and candidates to ensure proper public discussion and campaigning. I am also pleased to see that this bill strengthens accountability and integrity by introducing criminal offences relating to ministers who fail to disclose conflicts of interest with the intention of obtaining a benefit or causing detriment. A large part of voters' declining trust in democracy comes from a perception that politicians are in government for themselves.

While I have been involved in politics for decades, the vast majority of elected representatives are serious about the job of governing and representing their constituents. But I am not naive to the fact that there are some out there who are drawn to politics for the opportunity that it presents them to

perhaps abuse their power for their own benefit. I know this from observing firsthand the abuse of power and corruption that went on for years, as we found, in the Ipswich City Council. Significant legislative changes by our government, a Labor government, have been brought in since the Ipswich City Council's dismissal in 2018 to stem the risk of further corruption and abuse of power in Queensland local governments. Through this bill, we are strengthening local government accountability and integrity by introducing offences for dishonest conduct by councillors and councillor advisers.

Lastly, this bill will introduce new amendments around signage at state elections. As much as I personally love election campaigns, we do know that voters are getting fed up with having to run the gauntlet of excessive signage at polling booths on election day; it has gotten a bit out of control. Again, it comes down to money. The candidate or party who can throw around the most amount of money can drown out their opponents by swamping the polling booth in a sea of signage and bunting.

Some voters also see the signage as damaging to the environment, particularly all the plastic bunting. At the end of the day, it is a large amount of waste, and there is a problem for us all when trying to promote sustainable environmental values as a government. Because of the amendments in this bill, our polling booths will be a more politically neutral space, allowing all candidates equal opportunity to communicate to the public. At the next state election, candidates and registered third parties will be limited in the number of signs they can put up at polling booths. It will now be considered an offence to display unpermitted signage within 100 metres of a polling booth's entry or to set up signage at a polling booth the night before election day.

Throughout this debate we have heard some pretty damning comments from members about the Electoral Commission of Queensland.

Ms Grace interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Stewart): Order! Member for McConnel.

Ms HOWARD: We have heard some pretty damning comments from members about the Electoral Commission of Queensland. I want to go against the grain a bit when it comes to their performance during the March local government election.

Mr Crandon interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Coomera!

Ms HOWARD: While I acknowledge that there were some hiccups, not the least being the agonisingly slow publication of results, I do think it is fitting to remind people that a good proportion of the problems—

Mr Crandon interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Member for Coomera, you are now warned under the standing orders.

Ms HOWARD:—were a result of the declining efficiency of Australia Post. Despite loud voices to the contrary, there was no spike in COVID-19 infections as a result of the ECQ decision to go ahead with voting on 28 March. This was largely due to the excellent advice of our Chief Health Officer but also to the fastidious work of ECQ staff right across Queensland. I want to place on the parliamentary record my thanks to ECQ for their work during what was likely to have been one of the most challenging elections in the history of Queensland.

Encouraging a diversity of voices in our electoral system is better for our democracy and, what is more, the cap on candidate spending will see advertising pared back so that in the weeks leading up to the election day our media will not be saturated by those who have the most money to throw on political ads. Democracy must work for everyone in our society—not just for the wealthy and politically connected. I fully support these reforms because they will help restore integrity in our political institutions and rebuild people's trust in democracy. It is important we do this, because there are no other good alternatives to democracy. I commend this bill to the House.