




Speech By
Lance McCallum

MEMBER FOR BUNDAMBA

Record of Proceedings, 17 June 2020

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

 **Mr McCALLUM** (Bundamba—ALP) (6.24 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Electoral and Other Legislation (Accountability, Integrity and Other Matters) Amendment Bill. Accountability and integrity are absolutely essential in all that we do. They are at the very heart of our democracy, and Queenslanders must have confidence in each and every one of us as elected representatives. Without accountability, without integrity and without the unreserved confidence of Queenslanders, we have nothing, so today the Palaszczuk government is moving to strengthen what is already robust legislation, and we are committing to maintaining and strengthening the accountability and integrity of state and local governments in Queensland.

Turning to the matter of electoral reforms, this is all about ensuring the integrity of our election process, delivering historic new levels of transparency and trust, which are two values we believe in and two values all Queenslanders believe in.

The Electoral Reform and Accountability Act 2011, which was introduced by the Bligh government, imposed electoral expenditure caps and donations for state elections, but unfortunately that act was repealed by the then incoming Newman government.

The bill currently before the House amends the Electoral Act 1992 and provides for electoral expenditure caps for registered political parties and their associated entities, candidates and third parties involved in electoral campaigning; caps on the giving to and acceptance of political donations to registered political parties and their associated entities, candidates and third parties in campaigning; and requirements for registered political parties, candidates and third parties to maintain dedicated state campaign accounts.

It increases the dollar amounts for first preference votes for public funding for political parties and candidates, and decreases the threshold for eligibility of election funding from six per cent to four per cent of formal first preference votes. It also contains measures necessary to support the new funding and disclosure arrangements including registration requirements for third parties and clarification of accountabilities of agents and electoral participants, and contains measures around new electoral signage restrictions, similar to those contained in other state jurisdictions. These reforms will help ensure an open, accountable, transparent and level playing field when it comes to the political and democratic process in Queensland.

I turn to the matters in the bill that relate to local government. It is important to say that the vast majority of local councillors do the right thing and meet the high standards expected by the community. In those instances where this does not occur, this bill continues the government's rolling program of reforms to improve accountability, transparency and integrity in the local government system, and local government elections, building on previous reforms in the local government area by implementing stages 1 and 2 of the Belcarra reforms in 2018 and 2019 respectively.

This bill provides to amend the system for dealing with councillor registers of interests and conflicts of interests to ensure consistency with the proposed amendments to deal with registers of interest and conflicts of interest at a state level. It aligns the processes for filling councillor vacancies between the Local Government Act and the City of Brisbane Act, and provides for the runner-up to fill a casual vacancy from a first-past-the-post voting election. It allows for councillors to direct local council designated employees who provide administrative support to elected representatives within chief executive officer approved guidelines which prohibit provision of political assistance to councillors, and establishes a framework for local governments, including the Brisbane City Council, to contract staff to provide administrative and policy support to councillors and limit Brisbane City councillors' involvement in the appointment of senior contract employees to council.

The councillors' register of interest and conflicts of interest amendments are in response to feedback from stakeholders indicating that there can be confusion as to what amounts to a conflict of interest and also concerns about the number of matters having to be delegated to chief executive officers to decide, due to a majority of councillors declaring a conflict of interest. These conflicts of interest are largely arising due to the acceptance of donations or gifts by some councillors.

To address these matters, the bill addresses two new concepts—prescribed conflicts of interest and declarable conflicts of interest. A prescribed conflict of interest is defined by reference to particular scenarios such as the acceptance of a donation of \$2,000 or more in a prescribed period or the consideration of a matter before council where a councillor is the applicant or where a councillor has a prescribed conflict of interest and they cannot continue to participate in discussions or decision-making regarding that matter. All other conflicts of interest would be a declarable conflict of interest. Once a councillor has declared such a conflict, other councillors will decide whether they can continue to participate in decision-making on that matter, which is in accordance with the Belcarra stage 1 reforms.

The bill also seeks to address concerns raised about the number of councils losing quorum by making some technical amendments which will permit a minority of councillors to consider the nature of conflicts of interest held by a majority of councillors and determine if they can participate in decision-making.

Queensland councils told us they want clearer and more concise legislation in the areas of elections, governance and conduct. That is what we are delivering. Small not-for-profit third-party organisations also aired their concerns and we listened to them by delivering new thresholds for third-party registrations.

The Economics and Governance Committee received over 70 submissions, as has been previously stated, in response to this legislation. We listened to the issues raised during that committee process. There are a raft of amendments currently before the House which also deal with responding to the current coronavirus pandemic. I, like the member for Currumbin and every participant in the local government elections, has firsthand experience of what it is like to campaign through a global health pandemic. The amendments contained in this bill set out a sensible range of options to make sure that, should we need to, we will be able to adapt appropriately and ensure the safety of Queenslanders during the election should the pandemic continue unabated.

Speaking of elections, the opposition continues to talk about October and claims that this legislation is about the upcoming state election. That could not be further from the truth. Unlike the opposition—unstable, unpredictable and unable to get along—the Palaszczuk government is not focused on October. We will continue to work for all Queenslanders, delivering results today which will benefit our generations of tomorrow. This legislation is about further strengthening Queensland's democracy. It is essential as we continue to unite and recover. Communities across Queensland told us they expect increased accountability and integrity from their elected representatives. That is what we are delivering. I commend the bill to the House.