




Speech By
Peter Russo
MEMBER FOR TOOHEY

Record of Proceedings, 17 June 2020

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

 **Mr RUSSO** (Toohey—ALP) (6.41 pm): I would like to speak in support of the Electoral and Other Legislation (Accountability, Integrity and Other Matters) Amendment Bill 2019. The bill contains a series of significant amendments relating to funding and expenditure for state elections, signage for state elections, conduct of ministers, conduct of councillors and other local government matters.

The Economics and Governance Committee in its report No. 37, which was tabled in the Assembly on 7 February 2020, has recommended to the Assembly that this bill be passed. The amendments contained in the bill seek to improve the actual and perceived integrity and public accountability of state elections and to ensure public confidence in state electoral and political processes.

The amendments contained in the bill focused on four factors that had been identified as key to mitigate the risk, perceived or real, that a single person or entity could have an improper or undue influence on political parties, candidates and third parties involved in electoral campaigning. The significant amendments, as I have already outlined, related to funding and expenditure for state elections, signage at state elections, conduct of ministers, conduct of councillors and other local government matters.

The Economics and Governance Committee noted in their report that 'a wide array of stakeholders were consulted' on the amendments relating to funding and expenditure for state elections, ranging from registered political parties, peak bodies and professional associations to various groups likely to be classified as 'third parties' in an election. The committee received 73 separate submissions from the community and heard from 25 interested parties and the two departments with interest in this legislation. The inquiry definitely heard from a number of stakeholders about the issues addressed in this bill. I will speak briefly on the four areas of amendments proposed under this bill.

The amendments for funding and expenditure for state elections seek to level the playing field for electoral campaigning. This will ensure that an individual person or an entity has a reasonable opportunity to communicate with voters to influence voting in an election without being 'drowned out' by the communications of others. The amendments relate to funding and expenditure by way of introducing donation caps. Donation caps limit gifts that can be received from and given by a single donor during the relevant donations cap period for the relevant type of recipient. This has the effect of restricting funding sources for electoral expenditure.

It is also proposed to introduce amendments relating to signage at state elections. Specifically, the bill proposes to reduce the number of signs displayed by a particular party, candidate or third party engaged in campaigning in the area surrounding entrances to pre-poll voting offices and ordinary polling booths, or the grounds in which they are located. This will ensure that areas around polling booths are more neutral for voters and prevent damage to structures at venues used as polling booths caused by affixing election material.

The number and nature of signs that can be used by election participants during voting hours within 100 metres of polling booths will be limited, with restrictions specified on the size and placement of those signs. The Electoral Commission of Queensland stated to the committee that these amendments may facilitate a more positive experience for voters in helping to ensure that 'they are not impeded during the voting process', as well as benefiting 'suppliers by minimising potential damage to venues'. The committee noted concerns raised by stakeholders regarding the proposed signage limitations. Representation has been made to consider the number and nature of signs that could be allowed to be displayed while still achieving this goal.

The bill contains amendments that aim to improve the integrity and accountability of ministers by amending the Integrity Act and the Parliament of Queensland Act to create a new offence under each act. These new offences give effect to the government's commitment to implementing recommendations proposed by the Crime and Corruption Commission.

The new criminal offence in the Integrity Act would apply for a minister who knowingly fails to disclose a conflict of interest with the intent to dishonestly gain a benefit for themselves, or another person, or to cause detriment to another person. The new offence in the Parliament of Queensland Act would apply where a minister fails to comply with the obligations of members of parliament to register their interests with the Registrar. The offence only applies to ministers and reflects the decision-making nature of cabinet, the higher obligation on ministers to uphold the standards of integrity and ensure there is public confidence in government.

The bill introduces a new dishonest conduct of councillor offences into the Local Government Act and the City of Brisbane Act that apply if a councillor fails to comply with particular conflict of interest or register of interests requirements with the intent to dishonestly gain a benefit. These offences align with the proposed new dishonest conduct offences in the Integrity Act and Parliament of Queensland Act which would apply to members of cabinet.

Contravention of the 'relevant integrity provisions', for which the dishonest conduct offences apply, would also amount to misconduct under conduct provisions in the Local Government Act and could result in disciplinary action being taken against the councillor.

The amendments contained in the bill applicable to the Local Government Act and the City of Brisbane Act further provide for a number of amendments introducing further reforms to improve transparency, integrity and consistency as a whole in the local government system and its decision-making.

Full consideration was given by the committee to the principles under the Legislative Standards Act and whether the bill has sufficient regard to the fundamental legislative principles articulated in the Legislative Standards Act. The committee was satisfied that provisions were justified and appropriate in the circumstances. I support the committee's recommendation that the bill be passed. I commend the bill to the House.