




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (6.48 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the Electoral and Other Legislation (Accountability, Integrity and Other Matters) Amendment Bill 2019. I start my contribution as I will continue, and that is not quite as happy as members opposite with what is being presented here this evening. This is an attack on our ability to operate in a true democracy in Queensland.

It is a missed opportunity for real reforms. What an insult when we see legislation that benefits one party over another. In this case, it is clear manipulation by those opposite for their own benefit. It is shameful. That is why we must oppose the more perverse parts of the bill. We have missed an opportunity to reverse some of the more contentious changes made by those opposite in trashing the recommendations of the Fitzgerald inquiry.

We should have restored public confidence in the electoral system by reintroducing a voting system recommended by the Electoral and Administrative Review Commission, which was established upon recommendation of the Fitzgerald inquiry. We should have given voters more options to express their political opinions, while preserving the voting choice available under full preferential voting. It is less likely to lead the voter to invalidate his or her vote through a numbering error because of its simplistic nature. We should acknowledge that banning one group of our community from contributing to the political process while strengthening the position of another that favours, funds and influences everyone on that side of the House is why this is a terribly dark day in Queensland politics.

With my local regional council supporting the proposed local government changes in the bill, I note that we will not oppose the local government changes, which are an improvement on the current integrity framework and originated from the CCC's Operation Belcarra report; however, we must stop attacks and overreach in the governance and influence of our local governments. There are major concerns about the processes being implemented by this government. Twice this week we have bypassed the proper scrutiny of the House. I am talking about significant changes made to the bill that water down what was proposed. It is unfathomable that we would exclude the committee processes.

There has been much said about how the ALP has sought to tilt the electoral system in its favour through the last-minute introduction of full preferential voting before the last election. It now seeks further advantages in the guise of support for democracy and fairness. This shabby bill does little more than restrict both accountability and integrity in the name of cheap political advantage. The bill encompasses various reforms, including changes to electoral campaigning, funding and expenditure for state elections and new integrity measures to apply to state and local government.

We know that under the current donation disclosure laws that apply in Queensland all electors have the opportunity to make their own judgement as to whether any donors—either individuals, corporations or trade unions—are in a position to exercise this sort of influence. We now have the

heavy, dirty hand of partisan politics at play. There were several submissions made on this proposal, and one submitter rightly commented that the government appears to believe that all influence must be limited; however, the influence of the majority of the electorate is at the heart of our political system.

The government has provided no explanation as to how it has been able to distinguish between improper influences and legitimate influences. As well as failing to provide evidence of the problems which this legislation is supposed to overcome, the government has championed a solution which is completely contrary to its express purpose. In the first page of the explanatory notes to the bill the government claims that chapter 2 of the legislation states that the bill aims to—

- secure the actual and perceived integrity of the State electoral and political processes by reducing the risk that a single person or entity can have an improper, corrupting or undue influence on political parties, candidates and third parties involved in electoral campaigning;
- level the playing field for electoral campaigning and ensure that an individual person or entity has a reasonable opportunity to communicate to influence voting in an election without being “drowned out” by the communication of others;

However, the reality of these amendments is that the power of particular persons or entities to exercise influence will be strengthened at the expense of others while the playing field will be tilted in favour of those who enjoy a privileged relationship with the current government.

The imposition of spending caps will work to the disadvantage of the opposition and to the advantage of the ALP. That is clear. It is also clear that when you throw in the unvetted opportunities for the 26 affiliated unions that control this government, you see clearly this is nothing more than a government flexing its arrogant majority. The third-party expenditure cap of \$87,000 that applies to trade unions will see 26 trade unions expending up to \$87,000 in each electorate. This could amount to over \$2.2 million of union influence per electorate. I know that the majority of Queenslanders find it offensive, but they are not surprised that a Labor government would introduce public funding and campaign accounts.

This reform requires registered political parties, candidates and registered third parties to maintain dedicated state campaign accounts to comply with the donation and expenditure caps. As we have seen time and time again, the government defers their responsibilities into the never-never. We see that the significant amendments defer action, in some cases to 2022-23. It is bad legislation and it does not do anything for the political process. In relation to trying to influence political donation caps and electoral expenditure we have more changes. The bill imposes caps that donors may make and defined recipients—political parties and their associated entities, candidates involved in electoral campaigning—may receive.

We missed an opportunity to deal with political signage. I supported restrictions on signage that was proposed earlier. We know that in the lead-up to elections and pre-poll it was a mess, but rolling back whatever we have done with these amendments is really disappointing. We had an opportunity to make real progress in that area. These third parties, which are now going to be allowed to proliferate, populate and pollute polling booths, have no real role in the election process except to disrupt and offer influence. Two corflutes only per endorsed candidate, which was originally proposed, was what we should endorse. Let's get rid of that stupid amendment and some real leadership on what the voters of Queensland, who put us here, really want.

The integrity offences that were proposed and recommended by the CCC certainly reflected just how bad this Labor government is. It is hard to reflect on anything that talks about integrity when time and time again we had Labor's integrity crisis presenting challenges for the weak Premier. The Integrity Act 2009 was amended to create a criminal offence when a minister knowingly fails to disclose a conflict of interest with the intent to dishonestly gain a benefit to themselves or another person or cause detriment to another person. What a shame the bill has been watered down to a tokenistic attempt to cover up countless Labor integrity scandals where no-one has been held to account. We recall the CCC slammed Labor's laws because they do not go far enough. We have moved amendments to roll them back even further. We must encourage transparency to reduce the risk of corruption.

Labor continues to mislead the public by claiming that it has adopted the CCC's recommendations, but this is completely untrue and a front to make out to the people of Queensland that the Labor government is interested in reducing the risk of corruption. These laws just let the previous deputy premier off. Labor clearly does not recognise the significance of failing to declare a conflict of interest if they categorise the offence as a misdemeanour rather than an indictable offence.

It is clear that we have seen a watering down of the bill with the huge number of amendments that were presented late last night. It is disappointing that there are so many missed opportunities in this bill. We could have done so much more in Queensland to enhance the political process, but as we have seen time and time again cheap political advantage is being taken at the expense of others,

ignoring those people who put so much into reform agendas like Fitzgerald and the other inquiries we have had. Today we have another bill that clearly articulates in favour of the ALP and those who influence the ALP. Trying to nobble their opponents is a cheap political stunt and it should be condemned for what it is. I oppose the bill.