




Speech By  
**Hon. Stirling Hinchliffe**

**MEMBER FOR SANDGATE**

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Record of Proceedings, 22 April 2020

### **APPROPRIATION (COVID-19) BILL**

 **Hon. SJ HINCHLIFFE** (Sandgate—ALP) (Minister for Local Government, Minister for Racing and Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (3.22 pm): In this sort of circumstance I would normally say that I rise with pleasure to contribute to the Appropriation (COVID-19) Bill 2020. However, in the circumstances we are in it is hard to say that we are taking much pleasure from the acts we perform in this place. The Appropriation (COVID-19) Bill 2020 provides supplementary appropriation for the 2019-20 budget and further supply for the 2020-21 budget. The word 'unprecedented' has been getting a bit of a work-out recently, but we truly are in unprecedented times. There are now more than 2.5 million cases of coronavirus, or COVID-19, worldwide, and sadly, more than 177,000 deaths have been recorded. We all know that this is unlike anything we have seen in our lifetime.

So many times in the past few weeks we have watched this pandemic unfold across the globe and I have been thankful that I live in Queensland, Australia. I know there are so many other people affected such as the people I speak to throughout my local community and also people I have been in touch with across the state, across the nation and indeed across the globe—I include a very good friend of mine who I grew up with in Chermside in Queensland who now lives in Sweden. The actions of self-isolation for himself and his family that he has taken in contrast to the decisions that governments have made in that country and in contrast to the results that that has wrought on that community are astounding.

To that end, because of the Palaszczuk government's swift action to declare a public health emergency in January and our brilliantly prepared medical front line led by our Chief Health Officer Dr Jeannette Young, Queensland has had one of the best responses in the world to this crisis. Admirably, Queenslanders themselves have responded and helped achieve that very world-leading, world-class response. This is not hyperbole; this is fact. The foresight, agility and medical experience that is the holy trinity that has put Queensland at the front of the pack as we battle this pandemic needs to continue to be part of how we respond.

The Appropriation (COVID-19) Bill builds on that response by providing a further \$3.18 billion for the 2019-20 financial year and a further \$1.61 billion for the next financial year 2020-21 on top of the \$21.35 billion already authorised by the Appropriation Act 2019. This funding will help provide the additional \$4 billion in measures to support Queenslanders' health, our jobs and our businesses that were announced by the Palaszczuk government on 24 March. When it was announced, the Premier said it was the biggest single relief package assembled by any state or territory. It includes: a \$300 million household relief package to give Queensland households \$200 off their utility bills, building on the \$50 asset dividend already announced; another \$2.5 billion to protect Queensland jobs and businesses, including a two-month payroll tax refund for small and medium businesses and large businesses specifically affected by COVID-19; a three-month payroll tax holiday and a further six-month payroll tax deferral for any Queensland small and medium businesses; \$500 million to help workers

who have lost their job or income to find jobs in industries vital to getting us through this crisis such as health care, agriculture, food production, transport and cleaning and a range of others that we will work on.

As part of that package we are also seeing the waiving of liquor licensing fees for venues that have had to close their doors. We are providing rent relief for businesses that rent premises from the state government. On that note I want to make particular mention of businesses in my local community that have made representations to me in relation to that, including Rewind Mid-Century, the lessee of a property owned by the Department of Transport and Main Roads at Shorncliffe. We are also giving sole traders and medium and small businesses a \$500 rebate on their power bill for this year. I know that will provide some relief to some local landowners and business owners in the Sandgate town itself and in Bracken Ridge to whom I have been speaking about these issues.

The package also includes \$1.2 billion to boost our frontline health response, including the expansion of fever clinics, emergency department capacity, acute care services and regional aeromedical services for our remote communities. On that point I want to make note of the opportunity that I had to visit the fever clinic established at the Brighton Health Campus in my electorate. For those honourable members who have not seen one of these fever clinics and the way in which they are dealing with the testing regime and the process for people presenting, I can say that it is truly like something out of a movie. It is something that people are not prepared for until they see it. This funding is to support measures like that. This \$4 billion announcement for jobs, businesses and health is on top of the earlier measures including \$500 million in concessional loans in our initial coronavirus assistance package announced in February.

In the time available to me I also want to make some references to my local government portfolio. As local government minister, I have been working closely during the past few weeks with the Local Government Association of Queensland and with Queensland Treasury Corporation in developing and working towards identifying what the needs might be for an appropriate support package for Queensland's 77 local governments. No part of the state will remain untouched by the pandemic response because no part is untouched by the pandemic. We hope and we trust some parts of the state will not be touched by the virus itself, but no part of the state will be untouched by the economic impact.

Significantly, that includes our 44,000 strong local government workforce. We need to make sure that these diverse communities, which have been affected in different ways by COVID-19, have the assistance from the Queensland government that is fit for purpose. That is why we are working alongside the LGAQ and the QTC to ascertain each individual council's need. I have been briefing mayors, who are all now declared elected, over the last couple of hours on a telephone conference alongside the LGAQ leadership.

It is disappointing that the Prime Minister announced that local governments would not be eligible for the Commonwealth government's JobKeeper program, a very brave and impressive initiative which I must acknowledge, but it is a shame that so many people in the community, particularly local governments, were not included in that package. This means that the nation's state and territory governments alone will have to support local government, a level of government so important to the delivery of services and outcomes right across our country, particularly here in Queensland.

The Palaszczuk government has a proven record on delivering job-creating infrastructure projects that support local governments and support employment by local governments, including the hugely popular \$600 million Works for Queensland program. It has never been more right than now that those communities across Queensland deal with the health, economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and for us to continue to work with local governments to make sure that their communities are safe, informed and supported through the response and recovery phases of the COVID-19 crisis. This is a crisis that is having significant economic and social impacts on communities and businesses—and indeed councils—who often run some of the key businesses in communities of rural and regional Queensland and have an important role in supporting their communities in responding.

The government is monitoring these impacts which are evolving rapidly and working in collaboration with the Local Government Association of Queensland and other stakeholders to identify how to best support councils throughout the pandemic and as their communities recover. For many of Queensland's remote and regional communities, the COVID-19 pandemic comes at a time when they have already been dealing with the impacts of sustained drought or recovering from recent bushfires or floods. To that end, I have approved amendments to the Indigenous Councils Critical Infrastructure program and the 2019-21 Works for Queensland program guidelines, allowing a number of eligible local

governments to access their allocations for COVID-19 response programs and activities. This includes a relaxation of reporting and information requirements that will speed up the grants approval process to get funding into their hands more quickly. The ultimate aim is to preserve councils' workforces to maintain morale and keep the continuity of employment that is integral to our communities. At this stage, these changes will stay in place until 30 September.

This is an initial response. There needs to be a broader and more comprehensive package in response that we will bring forward at a later stage. Our response is not just about new packages and investing in ways to support Queenslanders. Importantly—and responding to the concerns around what is represented in this appropriation—it is also about reallocating existing grants and funding to ensure they are channelled into the areas of need. That is a demonstration of a good, sensible, prudent response and not just a spend-a-thon. It is not about a competition of who can spend the most; it is how we can make sure that those resources are targeted at the right things at the right time. This has been effectively and efficiently done in my portfolio area of multicultural affairs where we have also been supporting workers in the not-for-profit community sector to retain their jobs through this crisis. We have provided a dedicated \$900,000 connections package for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants who are among the most vulnerable in our state. They are people facing extraordinary challenge, at this time without a certain status in terms of their visas.

It is very important that we step into the role to support those communities and the community organisations that support them. Funding will go to trusted community based partners whose role is critical to ensure that appropriate help is available at a local level. This package includes \$238,000 in initiatives and \$617,000 to top up existing programs. This includes scaling up the I Speak Your Language telephone support program delivered by the Multicultural Communities Council, Gold Coast, a very fine and decent organisation that does great work. We will help it do that work across a larger footprint of the state. It is also funding for the community connector role within Australian Red Cross for Community Queensland and for the Community Action for a Multicultural Society Program. Again, this is one of our well-regarded and significant programs that has contributed across the state.

While this appropriation bill acknowledges the need for significant financial support for jobs, businesses and health, this government's response to the effects of the pandemic in Queensland has been so much more. It has embraced so much more, because we know we all are in this together. It is vitally important that we continue to act responsively and collaboratively to respond to the challenge that COVID-19 represents. The appropriation bill provides the funding, security and support to ensure that these programs are delivered sensibly and appropriately and, as I say, in a timely way. To that end, I commend the appropriation to the House and wish everyone the best ability to stay safe.