




Speech By
Tim Mander

MEMBER FOR EVERTON

Record of Proceedings, 22 April 2020

APPROPRIATION (COVID-19) BILL

 **Mr MANDER** (Everton—LNP) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (3.02 pm): I rise to speak on the Appropriation (COVID-19) Bill 2020. Previous speakers have already mentioned that Queensland has never before in its history faced such a health and economic challenge—definitely not in the last 100 years. Nobody would have thought, even as little as two months ago, that we would have the restrictions that we do at the moment; that families would be going through the heartache of losing loved ones; and that hundreds and hundreds of people would fall ill and become very, very sick—not to mention the economic impacts. We have seen our tourism, hospitality and international education sectors decimated. We have seen older people probably feeling lonelier than they ever have before. There is not one part of Queensland society that has not been impacted by the effects of this pandemic so it is important that the response to this, both on the health front and the economic front, is one that is considered, well thought out and effective.

From the beginning the opposition has offered bipartisan support when it comes to protecting the health of Queenslanders. We are thrilled, as the government is, with the progress that has been made in containing the COVID-19 virus. Every day that we hear of very few or, even better, no infections is another great day and another day closer to the end of the impact of the pandemic. We are lock, stock and barrel with the government with regard to the public health initiatives that have been taken—directed by the federal government—but we acknowledge the work that has been done in Queensland as well. There is no doubting our bipartisan support for that.

We also offer bipartisan support for the principle that governments provide economic support and economic stimulus. It is important that government plays a role when so many businesses have been impacted so significantly. It is important that stimulus is provided to keep people in jobs and business confidence up so that when the pandemic eventually finishes we can recover as quickly as possible. We offer bipartisan support for that principle.

In the Westminster system of government you have the government and you have the opposition, and it is our role as Her Majesty's opposition to keep the government accountable, to analyse its decisions and to make sure that taxpayers' money is being used wisely. It is okay for the Treasurer to come in here all self-righteous, demanding bipartisan support for her economic stimulus. That is fine in principle, but there are many, many details about which questions need to be asked and thoughts need to be challenged, and we will be doing that. We will be doing that boldly because it is our responsibility to the taxpayers of Queensland—particularly in my role as the shadow Treasurer—to make sure that the money that is being spent is directed to the right areas and is having the impact it should have.

When it comes to offering support for the stimulus package, there is no better model than the federal government. What the federal government has done has been nothing short of remarkable. In fact, I think it has taken the breath away from the federal opposition and the state Labor government. I do not think they expected the federal government would respond so generously, so quickly and so significantly. I think everybody acknowledges the JobKeeper package in particular and the other initiatives that have been announced. I think it is up to about \$200 billion worth of stimulus. I am so very happy that we have somebody like Josh Frydenberg as head of the nation's finances. What a great

model he is for treasurers across the country. What a hardworking and intelligent man he is. I want to congratulate the Prime Minister and the Treasurer for their management not just of the health crisis but also of the economic crisis.

When it comes to keeping the government accountable there have been many things that have happened that cause us to ask questions and challenge strategy. The Queensland Labor government was the last state government to announce any major stimulus package. The federal government announced two rounds of stimulus before Labor here delivered one. Business was looking for confidence and support from the Palaszczuk government, and the silence was absolutely deafening. South Australia announced a \$350 million relief package on 11 March, and it took nearly two whole weeks until 24 March until the state Labor government here announced a support package for Queensland. As other states braced their economies for the pandemic fallout, the Premier was promoting boxing matches in Townsville. Their priorities were all wrong.

Not only was it late, particularly compared to other jurisdictions, but there are areas in the package that are deficient. The opposition leader and others have already mentioned some of these things in speeches today, and I think it is important to look at these things.

Payroll tax relief is good and there has been some of that given and some refunds. We acknowledge that that policy is a good one and we support that but, when we have payroll tax deferrals at a time when businesses are not operating, in lots of ways that is a cruel hoax because that money has to be paid at some stage in the future. That is an enormous amount of stress and angst put on businesses when they know that at some stage—whether it is six, nine or 12 months down the track—they have to pay the money that is owing. We can say the same thing with some of the land tax relief that was given as well. Again, we acknowledge that part of that package is good and proper. However, when there are deferrals and when businesses are on their knees and not earning revenue or income, it is very difficult for them to think about the prospect of having to pay back a debt in the future.

Another deficiency which has been brought up—and I know it will be brought up again particularly by the shadow minister for small business—is that there has basically been no relief for small business whatsoever. The Palaszczuk Labor government is the only state government not to offer a small business support grant program. I know that I am not speaking alone when I say that I have been inundated in my office from small businesses which seem to be the businesses that have missed out on all of this. They are not at the big end of town. They are people who do not work for major operators or big business. These are people who have gone out on their own and risked a lot of their life savings, and they feel like they are missing out. There are 438,000 small businesses in this state, yet the Treasurer was in here earlier proudly boasting how they have supported 11,000 businesses out of 438,000. That is a big gap in anybody's language.

I have mentioned this twice today and I am going to mention it again. What is incredibly galling for small businesses when they are looking for small grants of \$10,000 or \$20,000 is that the Palaszczuk government would commit \$200 million to a foreign owned company that is owned by multibillionaires in the Middle East and China and other multimillionaires in the UK. All of these investors have themselves realised that they are not going to risk money in the firm they own, yet the Palaszczuk government has the gall to say that they will give \$200 million of taxpayers' money to keep Virgin afloat.

We want Virgin to remain afloat. We want Virgin to be flying in the sky again but we now have to let the administrators work out how that might happen. Let me repeat what I said in an earlier speech: if that \$200 million that was so proudly announced by the Minister for State Development had been given when his announcement was made, taxpayers would have lost the lot within 48 hours. Within 48 hours they would have lost the lot. That says a lot about the political and economic judgement of the Palaszczuk government so proudly headed up in this particular case by the Minister for State Development. That is galling to small businesses who would love to have a small loan to help them through this time.

The LNP was very quick to respond when we could see that it was necessary. We mentioned payroll tax relief but not deferral—I repeat: relief. We talked about freezing motor vehicle registration, putting a ceiling price on bulk water and electricity, fast-tracking \$500 million of road projects to get the economy going and delivering faster state government payments to small business suppliers to improve their cash flow and prevent job cuts. Of course, as I was just mentioning, we also believe that emergency small business grants of up to \$10,000 to match the other states should have been provided for small businesses. The Leader of the Opposition came out very, very quickly with that definitive plan to help kickstart the economy.

As we look at this appropriation bill, there are some questions to be asked about it. It is only a couple of pages but these pages are incredibly significant. The Treasurer has asked basically for an extra \$4.8 billion for the rest of this financial year and the next financial year to pay for some of the promises she has made. It would seem that it is an appropriation for \$4.8 billion or thereabouts, but only

around \$4 billion has been announced so we have questions about that gap and why there is a gap. We hope the Treasurer will be able to answer that in her reply speech or when we are in the consideration in detail stage.

We do have an incredible challenge going forward. Most of the state's revenue streams have been impacted in some form or another—whether it has been in land tax, payroll tax or transfer duty. All of those things are going to be impacted quite significantly. What I can say at this stage—and how ironic is this—is thank goodness for coal royalties. Thank goodness that we have resource royalties. Isn't it ironic that a Treasurer who has bagged that industry for the last five years is now going to benefit from it? It is a revenue stream that has been consistent and will provide some sort of rearguard support in our struggling economy. We do have that question about the amount that is being asked to be appropriated. We would like to see more detail about that because this will of course increase Queensland's debt. There is no state more vulnerable economically to absorb the impact of the coronavirus than Queensland.

Queenslanders will not forget this. Over the last number of years under the Treasurer's watch, we have had either the highest or the second highest unemployment rate in the country. We have had the highest number of long-term unemployed—that is, those who have been unemployed for more than a year. I am not talking about per capita but the highest number. We have frequently had the highest number of bankruptcies, and I think that still applies for the last 12 months—again, not per capita but in the country. We have had the lowest business confidence. Businesses have said that the Queensland Labor government is the government they trust the least amongst all of the states. We have had this debt that was projected to be \$92 billion at the end of the forward estimates but now of course we do not know what that will be.

As the opposition leader and one or two others have mentioned today, the Treasurer's statements about future budgets have been interesting. It was pretty clear to me when I had a briefing from the Treasurer that she said there would not be a budget delivered this year, but she seems to be taking great umbrage at that statement. This morning we read in the *Australian*—and I do not know if it was a quote or just a report—that we might be having a mini-budget, and then in the same article it said that financial statements are going to be provided. If the Treasurer is taking great offence at this, I say to the Treasurer, through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that she can put that to bed right here and now when she responds at the end of the debate and tell us when a budget that would have a full estimates process will be delivered.

At the moment, this bill is the budget. It is a three-page statement which is basically a blank cheque for an extra \$4.8 billion. I say to the Treasurer that if she has been offended about what we on this side of the House have said about what we perceive to be the comments she has made about a future budget she can put that to bed immediately and tell us when that budget will be delivered and when there will be an appropriate estimates process. This is more important than in any other state when we have an election on 31 October.

The people of Queensland have the right to know how this money will be spent, what the debt level will be, what the credit rating will be and what effect this will have on the defined benefit superannuation scheme for our hardworking public servants. All those questions and projections need to be provided so that the people of Queensland can make a decision on 31 October. The decision will be this: who do they trust with regard to getting us out of this financial mess, a financial mess that has been put upon us by the coronavirus. However, we were coming off a very bad base in the beginning; we were behind the eight ball in the beginning in terms of not being able to take such a shock to our economy. The people of Queensland will have to make a decision on which party, which side of politics, they trust to provide the recovery that is required economically in this state. I know who I will back because the people of Queensland will remember the economic mismanagement and incompetence of this state Labor government.

We support this bill because it is necessary to provide the stimulus and the support. However, we have a lot of questions about the detail. I remember the Treasurer saying that it was going to be apportioned to every department. We need to know which departments and which programs. The people of Queensland deserve to know that as well.

As it stands at the moment, until the Treasurer comes out, makes a statement and lets us know when the budget will be brought down and when there will be an estimates process so it can be examined properly, as far as I am concerned this is their budget, a three-page bill which appropriates an extra \$4.8 billion. I can tell honourable members that we in the LNP and the people of Queensland do not trust this Treasurer or this Treasurer's ability to handle that amount of money, which basically at the moment is a blank cheque. We will not let this go without scrutiny, without keeping this government accountable. As I said, the Treasurer can put it all to bed this afternoon in her closing speech by giving us those details.