




Speech By
Trevor Watts

MEMBER FOR TOOWOOMBA NORTH

Record of Proceedings, 22 April 2020

APPROPRIATION (COVID-19) BILL

 **Mr WATTS** (Toowoomba North—LNP) (4.51 pm): I rise to offer my contribution to the Appropriation (COVID-19) Bill 2020. Before I begin I would first like to thank the people of Toowoomba and the Darling Downs for all of their efforts throughout this crisis—and we have had some truly sensational results in containing any outbreaks on the Darling Downs—particularly to the health workers and the other frontline staff. I would also very much like to thank the police across the state as they have had their role stretched. Whether it be making sure people are doing the right thing or whether it be policing our borders, we know that the police and QCS staff are under increased pressure as we go through this crisis.

I turn now to the bill. Firstly, I want to say that before the introduction of this bill the Queensland economy was in pretty bad shape. That means that when a crisis comes—and we have had some good times here in Australia—we need to be in good shape. Unfortunately, the Queensland economy was not in good shape. We know that that makes it much more difficult for the Queensland economy to bounce back. Whether it is our unemployment relative to the other states, our youth unemployment, which was at some 14 per cent in January, the nature of the debt that is colossal and an intergenerational theft, or the public servants' superannuation being raided over the last few years, all of these things make us more vulnerable to a crisis, and the blame for all of these things needs to be laid firmly at the feet of the Labor government.

First and foremost, we have to ask ourselves: what shape were we in and where does that leave us now in terms of making a competitive response? This bill is looking at allocating some \$4.8 billion to try to ensure that we have some adequate response. I certainly support there being a response to this crisis. However, I want to look at what should be going on not just with this bill but with the process of this parliament. Fortunately for us, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association put out a guide, a *CPA toolkit for Commonwealth parliaments*, which I will table at the end of my speech, telling us the sorts of things that we should be doing to ensure we are in good shape as we go through this crisis. It lists one of them as keeping parliament operational, something that has not happened here in Queensland and has meant that we have had very little knowledge of this bill prior to it coming into this House. It states—

In order for Parliament to remain operational, it must ensure that it acts just as efficiently in scrutinising all legislation and holding the Executive to account under all circumstances.

That is interesting because that is not necessarily what has been going on here in Queensland. It is nice to be back in the parliament discussing this bill. It would have been nice to have had a look at the bill a little earlier so we could understand all of the implications and perhaps get a little bit of detail about where the \$4.8 billion is due to be spent. Another part of that same document talks about bipartisanship. It is interesting as it gives an example. It states—

In Pakistan, a Parliamentary Committee comprising party representatives from across the political divide has been formed to deliberate and make recommendations to the government, on how to manage COVID-19.

That is an interesting concept. I think it would be particularly useful to ensure we have proper scrutiny of the executive as we go through this process. It goes on—

Likewise in South Africa, there has been a show of unity across all 14 political parties within the national Parliament in response to the spread of the virus across the country.

It is interesting that Pakistan and South Africa have managed to put some scrutiny over proposed government legislation, yet here with our parliament, Premier Palaszczuk's plaything, we find ourselves with very little scrutiny. We find ourselves with a guillotine hanging over our heads on these very important bills we are debating today. As honourable members know, I am not a big fan of the guillotine. I believe that the best legislation will come from the best scrutiny.

It is also interesting that the same document talks about not losing focus on other things. We need to ensure that as we go through this crisis we do not forget we still have to run the entire state. One of those things that we hope focus does not get drawn away from, particularly as our Police Service gets stressed and is put under budgetary pressure, is the crisis we have been experiencing in youth crime around the state. I hope that parts of this budget will be allocated to the Police Service. Again, I cannot thank our police officers across the state enough for the job they are doing. With tight allocations of PPE and difficult sets of circumstances, they are doing a fantastic job; However, we still have a youth crisis. We know that people are still out there stealing cars. We know that the police still have to manage and do their other jobs.

I hope that a good percentage of this budget is allocated to the Police Service so that the appropriate overtime and other expenditure can ensure we are kept safe throughout this period not only from the virus but also from other things that we know are going on in our state. We know that crime has been skyrocketing under Labor, and I will give some examples. Robbery under Labor has gone up 107 per cent, unlawful use of a motor car has gone up 85 percent, assault has gone up 36 per cent and unlawful entry has gone up 35 per cent. It is important in this budget—

Ms TRAD: Mr Deputy Speaker, I rise to a point of order. I ask you to rule on relevance. This is not about crime statistics; it is actually appropriations.

Ms Bates interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr McArdle): If you do not mind, I will deal with the point of order, thank you. The member did indicate that the funding question was a question for him in relation to law and order issues. He is referring to statistics to support his argument. I do remind the member—the Deputy Premier is partly correct—you need to be more succinct in how you link the two together because you are wandering quite a bit.

Mr WATTS: Virgin has been offered \$200 million by this government. Obviously, if people have a friend's ski lodge to use they have the phone number of people to contact about a \$200 million payment. Interestingly enough, four per cent of this appropriation bill, which is a little bit above what the police budget receives from the state budget—

Ms TRAD: Mr Deputy Speaker, I rise to a point of order. Regardless of the fact that I was not mentioned in that comment, it was directed my way. I take personal offence and I ask the member to withdraw it.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: I did not hear the member referring to you, Deputy Premier. I understand the ruling is that it must be a reference to the individual person involved, not a general statement. I will take advice from the Clerk on the point. I have taken advice from the Clerk, Deputy Premier. There was no direct reference to you; there is no point of order.

Mr DICK: I rise on a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The member was entirely out of order, contrary to the standing orders on relevance, talking about someone in the government who may have had the phone number of the CEO of Virgin.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: There is no point of order. Please resume your seat, Minister.

Mr DICK: It is not relevant.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Minister, I asked you to resume your seat and then you spoke over me. Is that a reflection on the chair?

Mr DICK: I apologise if you see it as a reflection on the chair.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Thank you.

Mr WATTS: The relevance is that out of this \$4.8 billion, \$200 million has been committed to this airline. The relevance is that, in the portfolio for which I am responsible, four per cent of this \$4.8 billion is \$192 million. Roughly speaking, if we follow the reduced proportion that the Labor government

allocates to the police in the Queensland budget, that \$192 million should go into police resourcing to ensure it copes with this crisis. The relevance is that I want to ensure that the police budget is not scrimped and scraped so that a foreign owned organisation gets \$200 million over our frontline police officers who are out there dealing with this crisis day to day without enough PPE gear or some of the protections they need.

I know the government has made great strides in terms of trying to get that organised for them. That is only appropriate. If we are to ask police officers to speak to people out of their car windows at the state border, they should be well protected from this virus. That is why \$192 million should be the minimum amount allocated to the police out of this appropriation. That amount is a little over the normal amount it is allocated from the Queensland budget. I am concerned that the police will miss out on some of the resourcing needed from this program, because other entities have better access and the ability to access that money.

I am also concerned about where this money will come from, because I have spoken in this place about the budget and about how as debt climbs it is intergenerational theft. We are taking money from our children. They will have to pay tax to pay for the things we have spent money on. The simple fact is that with COVID-19 we are in extraordinary times. This is not an inappropriate time for such an event to occur, but we should not have allocated \$92 billion before that that we should not have had. Those children who now access free kindergarten will pay tax for their lifetimes to try and gain control of this government's forward spending.

We need to ensure that in particular the QCS—under pressure in our prison system and also in terms of looking after prisoners released into very difficult sets of circumstances—receives the funding it needs to practise social distancing and to manage our prison systems in a highly stressed situation. We do not want to see any more incidents where we lose control of our prisons, albeit for a brief moment of time. In addition, in this regard we know that next financial year there will be a changeover from private to public operations. Again, it will be very important to ensure a safe and smooth transition so that the funding is available for the QCS.

Earlier, the Treasurer said that we will put forward a budget in Queensland. I look forward to the estimates process where we look not only at this bill but also at what else is put forward to ensure we can scrutinise where every taxpayer dollar is spent. We need to ensure that this money goes to the appropriate services, be they our health frontline workers or Police Service PPE. The Police Service will need a good chunk of this money to remain operational and effective in terms of dealing with the crime wave in Queensland that occurred under the Labor Party before this crisis and in terms of managing all the stress of the Police Service and additional demands.

We already know that the rate of domestic violence climbed about eight per cent and that it takes police a long time to complete the paperwork on each and every callout. I urge the Treasurer to ensure that the Police Service is not short-changed from this allocation, that it has the resources it needs not only to deal with the COVID situation but to get on top of the unexpected and unwanted issues that come from this situation such as the growth in domestic violence. We need to ensure that our prison service also has the capacity to manage prisons in a safe and responsible way through this process.

I said that I will table a document from the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. In doing so, I want to ensure that going forward this parliament is not seen as a plaything of the government, that this parliament does its job in holding the executive to account. The simple fact is that the parliament's job is to scrutinise what the executive does on behalf of the people of Queensland. I will table that document at the end of my speech. The simple fact is that if this parliament is not sitting, how can it scrutinise the executive? If it cannot scrutinise the executive, we are far from the best practice of operational parliaments across the Commonwealth, something not endorsed by anybody. It is very important that, in terms of a Treasury bill, such as this one, which is fundamental to dealing with the crisis, we allocate the resources needed to be able to deal with this crisis. This is fundamentally important, but it should be scrutinised. It cannot be scrutinised because we have this general sort of 'number' to do a few things and we might allocate a bit of money to a mate somewhere if we can.

I want to ensure that money gets allocated where it is needed, that some people do not have better access to the executive than others. I want to ensure that this crisis is well managed and financially responsibly managed, because the people of Queensland can ill afford to waste money with an executive not being held to account, avoiding scrutiny and avoiding explaining itself to the people of Queensland, be it through the media or through this parliament. It is very important that everything the executive does through this crisis is well scrutinised, particularly when it comes to spending money, because going into this crisis we were in the weakest and worst position economically of just about every state and territory in Australia. This is not a time to not scrutinise the executive. This is a time to

ensure the executive is held well and truly to account. Shutting down this parliament and guillotining this bill is not the way to do it. The guillotine should not apply to this bill. Every member should be allowed to speak, and I condemn the government for that.

Tabled paper. Commonwealth Parliamentary Association report, undated, titled 'COVID-19 Delivering Parliamentary Democracy: CPA Toolkit for Commonwealth Parliaments' [\[633\]](#).

(Time expired)