




Speech By
Ann Leahy

MEMBER FOR WARREGO

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DEBT REDUCTION AND SAVINGS BILL

 **Ms LEAHY** (Warrego—LNP) (6.39 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate on the Debt Reduction and Savings Bill and thank the members of the committee from both sides of the House for their consideration of this legislation. However, at the outset I will quote the second paragraph of the non-government members' statement of reservation—

The Debt Reduction and Savings Bill 2021 may have the most misleading title to ever pass through this Parliament.

I note that the member for Coomera also proposed a different name for this bill—'the Treasurer's tool to fool ratings agency bill'. I note that the member for Kawana has some amendments for the title as well—the 'Debt Non-Reduction and Minimal Savings Bill'. Those words from the member for Kawana better describe the content of this bill. When one delves into the content, it does not take long to form the view that the intent of the bill does not reflect the title. The bill does not significantly reduce debt or significantly reduce the interest payments on state government debt. I again refer to the statement of reservation from non-government committee members. They were working very hard. It states—

There is no real debt reduction proposed nor is there any significant savings to be identified.

The statement also highlights the Labor government's failure to understand the balance sheet, or maybe Labor was just trying to create some smoke and mirrors to avoid a credit agency downgrade.

The debt reduction amounts to assigning an arbitrary value to the titles office of \$4.1 billion. The statement of reservation also says that the assumptions behind the figure have not been made available. Non-government members advised that during questioning in the public hearing the response received from the Deputy Under Treasurer was that it was based on earnings. That is not a very detailed explanation. Given that the New South Wales titles office was valued at \$2.6 billion and Victoria's at \$2.8 billion, it begs the question: how did the government arrive at that \$4.1 billion figure that has been calculated for Queensland?

By moving that \$4.1 billion figure into the Queensland Future Fund, the government then proposes to use the assets to invest and get returns to pay down interest. Given that Queensland's interest bill is north of \$3 billion per annum, the return on the assets is very questionable. In relation to the \$3 billion over four years promise by the Treasurer in his first reading speech, the committee was told there was only \$3 million identified so far. There is a big difference between \$3 billion and \$3 million.

Let me come back to assets and put on the record who actually sold assets in Queensland. Labor was the one that sold the assets. In 2011 the Labor government sold Queensland Motorways for \$3 billion. Labor sold the Abbot Point port for \$1.8 billion. In 2010—and I remember it well—Labor sold QR National for \$4 billion. Labor sold the Port of Brisbane for \$2.1 billion. Labor sold Forestry Plantations Queensland. Labor sold the Cairns and Mackay airports. Labor sold the Brisbane Airport. Labor sold the wind energy assets. Labor sold the gas assets and Enertrade. Labor sold Powerdirect. Labor sold Sungas and Sun Retail and also Allgas. That is billions of dollars worth of Queensland assets sold under Labor governments. How short the memories of those opposite are. Although Labor sold assets—and successive Labor governments have sold assets—Queensland debt continues to grow under Labor and will reach \$130 billion over the forward estimates.

It is disappointing that this bill will reduce the transparency of oversight bodies, with the closure of two of the few remaining independent bodies to provide economic oversight and advice to government—that is, Building Queensland and the Productivity Commission. The Queensland Productivity Commission was established by former treasurer Curtis Pitt in 2015, and the former treasurer should be thanked for establishing this strong independent voice. The QPC is the state's independent economic review body established to review complex economic and regulatory issues and to propose policy reforms to government. It regulates prices and terms of access for monopoly infrastructure in Queensland.

The QPC has reported on regulatory pricing principles for the water sector. It has also reported regularly on regional electricity prices, and I might add that those reports are well worth a read. Queenslanders will lose a lot of transparency on electricity pricing with this change in this legislation. The QPC has also reviewed service delivery in remote Indigenous communities and most recently improving regulation. The government has advised that the functions of the QPC will be integrated into Treasury through the establishment of the Office of Productivity and Red Tape Reduction. A department within Treasury is a long way from the independence of the QPC which will be lost.

The bill also repeals the Building Queensland Act which was introduced by the Palaszczuk government in 2015. The act established a body to provide governance on infrastructure projects along with the associated business cases. The effectiveness of Building Queensland as a sound driver of infrastructure investment at best is questionable. Its existence has not stopped the government from committing to significant infrastructure investments without a business case—for instance, the Gabba redevelopment—or prevented cost blowouts from the Southern Queensland corrections facility or led to the development of a credible business case for Cross River Rail.

The bill also removes the need for the government to publish notices in print newspapers. The explanatory notes state that the publication by government agencies will be satisfied by digital or electronic advertising or publication to reduce costs and red tape. That is okay if people actually have internet access. Many people in regional Queensland do not have internet access and do not have internet access that will enable them to find those things on those particular websites. This is a cruel cut by the Labor government to local regional newspapers. The Labor government is withdrawing the very advertising that helps pay the wages of local journalists and local regional jobs.

The Queensland Country Press Association submitted that the proposed wording of the legislation be amended to mandate that in regional areas where a printed newspaper is published statutory public notices be placed in that publication, with the option to advertise notices online should there be no relevant print publication available. I have had many a conversation with James Clark at the *South West* newspaper in my electorate about the lack of government advertising in his newspaper. He is appalled—absolutely appalled—as an independent business at the lack of advertising that he receives. He will be further appalled when he reads what the government has put forward and these amendments to go online with public notices. The Country Press Association has thought about this and I believe that it has found a balanced outcome.

The proposed changes to 'digital advertising' lack any detail about what that means. It ignores the fact that news websites or government online portals do not have dedicated public notice sections. It is hard enough for members of the public to find the relevant information they need now on state government websites. This change will only make that more difficult for them. The principle behind advertising important government and corporate public notices sections of newspapers is to bring those decisions to the attention of the public, not to bury them away in some newly created, hard-to-find, hard-to-download section of a website.

Mr McDonald: Have some real consultation.

Ms LEAHY: I take that interjection from the member for Lockyer: there should be some real consultation. This is a time when the Labor government should be supporting diversity of local independent newspapers and publications in regional areas.

Honourable members interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Kelly): Order, members. The member has taken your interjection. It would be good to listen to what she has to say.

Ms LEAHY: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your protection. All this Labor government is doing is continuing the slippery slope of a shutdown rather than embracing the positive resurgence of those independent newspapers such as the *South West* and another magazine in Dalby. This bill really is the 'Debt Non-Reduction and Minimal Savings Bill'.