




Speech By  
**Lachlan Millar**

**MEMBER FOR GREGORY**

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Record of Proceedings, 25 May 2021

### **DEBT REDUCTION AND SAVINGS BILL**

 **Mr MILLAR** (Gregory—LNP) (6.19 pm): It is fantastic to follow the minister in this debate. I would like to ask the minister: where was she at the time of the closing of the Longreach Pastoral College by the minister for agriculture? Where was this minister when they closed down the Emerald Agricultural College? You talk about vocational training and supporting it, but where were you when it came to rural school training? Where was the minister—

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Ms Lui): Pause the clock. Member, I ask you to direct all comments through the chair.

**Mr MILLAR:** Where was the minister when it came to the Emerald Agricultural College? There was not one mention in her speech about supporting the Emerald Agricultural College. The minister was sitting around the cabinet table with the minister for agriculture and did not support the Emerald Agricultural College or the Longreach Pastoral College staying open. Where was that mentioned in that speech?

The words 'debt reduction, savings and the Queensland Labor Party' should never be used in the same sentence—not today and not ever. The Labor government is hooked and addicted to debt and cannot save. Putting a Queensland Labor Party in charge of debt reduction and savings is like putting Dracula in charge of the blood bank.

We are debating an economic bill at a time when the Queensland economy faces serious structural challenges: our outgoings are greater than our income. Unsurprisingly in these circumstances, our borrowings keep growing. Yes, interest rates are currently low, but we all know that will change. Yes, I know other states are taking advantage of these lower rates to increase their borrowings, but they are borrowing to invest and grow their economies. They are borrowing to build things which will pay for themselves and more. We are borrowing to keep the wheels from falling off. We are borrowing to pay for the pens and the paper, for government expenses. The Labor government likes to gloss over this.

In March this year the Queensland Auditor-General urged the Palaszczuk government to be more transparent about its plans to pay down debt. This came as the Treasurer confirmed total government debt would hit \$130 billion by the 2023-24 financial year. The Auditor-General said that for the first time in eight years the Queensland government was forced to use borrowings to pay for operating expenses and to fund its day-to-day activities in 2019-20. That is borrowing to pay for the pens and the pads and to keep the lights on over at 1 William Street.

The Treasurer announced a \$3 billion savings drive with cost-cutting targets. Such cost-cutting target drives should be looking for waste so any cost cuts are sustainable. Just picking winners and losers by setting departmental efficiency dividends is not responsible government. I sense this may be what is happening when I look at Queensland Health.

An answer to question on notice 301 asked by the member for Mudgeeraba suggested that funds for patient travel from the regions is down across the board. The way the Labor government runs these funds gives country Queenslanders no transparency. They are often just refused or given a decreased

amount and there is no real avenue of appeal. While the Palaszczuk government builds seven new hospitals in the south-east corner, it appears to be actively manoeuvring to roll the North West Health and Hospital Service in to Cairns and Townsville as an efficiency measure. If this is so, it is darkly ironic that Mount Isa should be offered up as an efficiency dividend while also contributing vastly to Queensland's royalties and earnings.

I believe that the Treasurer has found \$3 million of the \$3 billion. No wonder the scramble is on. If the Treasurer's cost cutting is ever to make our outgoings more sustainable, this bill is supposedly about the other big issue: paying off debt. However, there is nothing anywhere in this bill that will actually reduce Queensland's debt. Although it is called the Debt Reduction and Savings Bill, I note there was not a single submission by an economic or other business representative, and that is a strong statement in itself.

In December 2019 the then treasurer, Jackie Trad, announced the establishment of the Queensland Future Fund. The fund, essentially an investment fund to pay down Queensland government debt, was to be seeded with funds from the existing debt retirement schemes plus \$3 billion of the defined benefit scheme's so-called surplus. As recently identified by the Auditor-General, these assets have now dwindled away. Surprise, surprise!

This bill is about funding rescues for the Queensland Future Fund by changing the Queensland Titles Registry into an asset. It will now be a business called Registry Co with an estimated value of \$4.1 billion. This is a bit of a puzzle in itself. New South Wales has estimated the value of its title office at \$2.6 billion and Victoria puts theirs at \$2.85 billion. Why would Queensland's Titles Registry be worth so much more? We do not know; we have not been told. It is just throwing a bone to the credit rating watchdogs in the hope it fools them into not downgrading Queensland's credit rating further. Regardless, the Queensland Future Fund will struggle to earn enough to reduce the debt. It may pay the interest payments.

Moving on, the bill abolishes the Queensland Productivity Commission. It will be rolled into the Treasury department. Queensland will lose the benefit of the independent economic review body that tells the truth about important issues from electricity prices to delivery of services to remote Indigenous communities such as Mornington Island. In a similar vein, the bill also abolishes Building Queensland.

One thing I would really like to talk about—and it is something that is certainly very important to people in Western Queensland—is the bill's provisions regarding printed notices, which is a good way to communicate to people in Western Queensland. The Treasurer has justified the move of no longer requiring such notices to be printed by citing a recent move by one media company to close some regional and rural newspapers and move mastheads completely online. Rather than leading to a complete loss of printed newspapers in Queensland, new newspapers have been established in the seat of Gregory such as the *Highlands Leader*. We also have the *Longreach Leader* and the *Barcoo Independent* as well as *CQ Today*—local newspapers reporting local news, be it state or local. I would ask that the Treasurer reconsider supporting these regional newspapers.

Finally, I would like to put some information on the record and correct some of the assertions made by the minister for agriculture earlier on in this evening's debate about the agricultural colleges. In 2012 when the LNP came into power we found the agricultural colleges in disrepair, wracked with \$7 million of debt. Dalby's agricultural college had already been sold by the Labor government. The Burdekin agricultural college had already been closed by the Labor Party and machinery was getting ready for a clearing sale. The Longreach Pastoral College and the Emerald Agricultural College were barely alive with students numbers at the lowest ever seen.

When the LNP were in power between 2012 and 2015 we wanted to fix this. We established two local boards for the Emerald Agricultural College and for the Longreach Pastoral College to make sure we had local content and local people involved in running those colleges. Instead of those colleges being directed by people in Brisbane, we had local enthusiasm to increase the numbers. We invested in bursaries at both the Longreach Pastoral College and the Emerald Agricultural College and we built those numbers up. Those numbers were going up and up in 2015. We re-established the Emerald Agricultural College and the Longreach Pastoral College to make sure we had rural training skills in Queensland because the LNP sees the importance of rural training skills and the fundamental need to have these rural training skills continued in Queensland.

What has happened here and what Minister Furner will not admit is that he was the one who closed down the Longreach Pastoral College and the Emerald Agricultural College during the last term. The minister even went up to the gates of the Longreach Pastoral College and allowed the *Longreach Leader* to photograph him bolting the gates shut. The Emerald Agricultural College and the Longreach Pastoral College have been institutions for rural training in Queensland for well over 50 years.

Of course, the Longreach Pastoral College recently celebrated their 50-year anniversary. I think it was in 2019 or 2018 and well over 300 people descended on Longreach to admire and rejoice and absolutely celebrate rural skills training. Soon after that the Labor government here in Queensland closed down the Longreach Pastoral College and sacked the staff. We are talking about such well-known staff at the Longreach Pastoral College as John Arnold, well known in the horse industry.

Of course, the Emerald Agriculture College has been shut down. Talking about selling assets, only last week the Labor Party sold the Emerald Agricultural College's beef property Berrigurra, just west of Blackwater, for \$32 million. When it comes to selling assets, it is the Labor Party in Queensland that has form. The Labor government is still selling assets in rural and regional Queensland and its members should be ashamed of themselves.