




Speech By
Hon. Mark Bailey

MEMBER FOR MILLER

Record of Proceedings, 1 September 2021

PUBLIC HEALTH AND OTHER LEGISLATION (FURTHER EXTENSION OF EXPIRING PROVISIONS) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Hon. MC BAILEY** (Miller—ALP) (Minister for Transport and Main Roads) (4.52 pm): I would like to thank the Transport and Resources Committee for their consideration of the amendments to repeal the Personalised Transport Ombudsman Act 2019. I would also like to thank the chair of the committee, the member for Kurwongbah, for his leadership and hard work. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all industries across our economy. The last 12 months have been particularly tough on the personalised transport industry. That is a reality and a fact. Anecdotally, industry advised that during the height of the pandemic they saw decreases of up to 90 per cent in rank and hail businesses and an approximate 70 per cent drop in booked trips in Brisbane alone.

More recently, we announced that the taxi security levy will also be suspended in 2020-21 while a review is undertaken as part of our continued support during the pandemic. This will deliver savings of \$405 per taxi service licence this financial year. That is why the decision was made to defer the Personalised Transport Ombudsman Act 2019 in September last year to help the industry focus on their recovery from the impacts of COVID-19. Those opposite would like to imagine that COVID-19 is not a reality—they have shown consistently that that is their reckless position—but we do not believe that to be the case on this side. We know it has to be considered, not just from a health point of view but in terms of its impact on industries.

The government used this time afforded by the deferral to review the role of the ombudsman to ensure that it met the requirements of the industry and government moving forward. To ensure industry continued to provide essential transport services during the pandemic, the Palaszczuk government stepped in to provide financial assistance packages to enable operators to stay afloat and so drivers could continue to work. A \$23 million package was announced last year which included one-off payments to taxi and limousine operators, wheelchair accessible taxi operators, taxi and limousine licence holders, and authorised booking entities.

This funding followed the \$54.5 million essential transport services package announced in April last year which saw targeted relief across the transport sector to help Queensland move through the pandemic. Now, almost a year later, the industry remains deeply impacted by the pandemic and the government considers industry recovery to be a priority for us. In this context, the government does not believe that the addition of new regulation is an appropriate response to the current circumstances, given the change in circumstances due to the pandemic. These views were also expressed by industry stakeholders consulted about the Personalised Transport Ombudsman.

Stakeholders representing the taxi, limousine and rideshare industries that were engaged did not support the ombudsman. I quote from the Taxi Council of Queensland, which said, 'I commend the Government on prioritising reducing regulatory burden for the industry'. Farcically, the opposition seems to be advocating for red tape here, but we are working with industry. Additionally, the Taxi Council of Queensland said that utilising the government's existing dispute resolution services and TCQ's

experience in mediation makes much more sense than adding another layer of bureaucracy for the personalised transport sector. They did not consider that the office would usefully help to address the issues facing the industry, such as reduced patronage and driver shortages.

The Personalised Transport Ombudsman's role was conceived to provide services to investigate and facilitate resolution of personalised transport complaints in the pre-pandemic era. We have found that the number of complaints arising within the industry is significantly lower than anticipated when the Personalised Transport Ombudsman Act 2019 was enacted. As a result of that lower number of complaints—and we acknowledge that; it is a reality and we should respond to it—the Personalised Transport Ombudsman is no longer the most cost-effective way to deal with industry complaints. You have to respond to the evidence, and that is what we are doing. For the volume of complaints arising, this can be delivered through alternative means at a significantly reduced cost.

TMR is currently in the final stages of establishing a mediation service for the industry in conjunction with the DJAG dispute resolutions branch. My department is partnering with the Taxi Council to maintain and strengthen its existing mediation service to address issues specific to the taxi industry. This reflects the expertise in taxi industry matters that the Taxi Council has developed through many years as the peak representative body for the taxi industry. Both mediation services will be available at no cost to participants.

The government acknowledges that some costs have already been incurred to establish the PTO. Steps were taken to establish the ombudsman prior to deferral of the legislation so approximately \$430,000 has been spent to date. I might add that the decision of the government actually constitutes a saving of more than 90 per cent of its budget. That is not something that is highlighted by those opposite, but it is a fact. The \$5 million allocation is there and more than 90 per cent of that has been saved. Costs included network and project team costs to establish IT systems. Office accommodation was secured at 53 Albert Street in Brisbane and lease costs were incurred. There were a few other costs as well.

The committee recommended that TMR investigate the banning and recall of licence plates issues by Personalised Plates Queensland that misrepresent vehicles as limos or taxis. Distinct number plates are issued for taxis and limousines that enable passengers to identify that their vehicle is appropriately licensed. Information is published on the Queensland government website to inform the public about how to identify their personalised transport vehicle.

As a government, you have to respond to the circumstances and the changing realities, and that is what this is about. Those opposite might offer up their great wisdom based on their great transport record of ordering trains from overseas that were not disability compliant and of stopping train driver training and cutting 48 drivers, or even saying that public transport is going to be obsolete in five or 10 years time. That is the great wisdom of those opposite when it comes to transport matters.

We as a government will respond appropriately to the changed circumstances that we see, and we are working with the Taxi Council in this regard. They support this measure that will assist their industry. They are not back up to pre-pandemic levels at all at this time, and we want to help them and support them as partners in industry. The fact that the Taxi Council supports this part of the bill I think shows that we work very well with stakeholders. We also are happy to change our position when the circumstances themselves change. That is what responsible government is about. We take pride in the fact that that is what we do: we work with stakeholders. I commend the bill to the House.

Debate, on motion of Mr Bailey, adjourned.