Speech By
Melissa McMahon

MEMBER FOR MACALISTER

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DEBT REDUCTION AND SAVINGS BILL

Mrs McMAHON (Macalister—ALP) (3.02 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Debt Reduction and Savings Bill 2021. This bill will implement a range of debt reduction and savings measures which will deliver benefits in relation to state debt. These measures include the transfer of the Queensland Titles Registry to the first Queensland Future Fund through the Debt Retirement Fund and restructuring a number of other entities. This bill provides the mechanism for the transfer of functions, assets, liabilities and employees from the Titles Registry to the new entity Registry Co. The Queensland Titles Registry provides an essential service to Queenslanders and the property and development sector, processing over 600,000 lodgements and over $2.3 million in paid title services just in 2020. Registry Co will be owned by the state through the Queensland Future Fund and will form part of a trust managed by QIC.

This bill does not in any way alter Queensland's system of indefeasible title once the title's registry functions have transferred to Registry Co. The bill provides the state with the power to protect the registers and ensure the delivery of services under the new operating arrangements. The state will still continue to guarantee title to land on registration and compensate where required.

Under the new arrangements, Registry Co will have the power to set title registry fees for each financial year. However, the bill does ensure that fees can only increase each financial year up to a cap linked to increases in the consumer price index. This bill also provides that the fees for the financial year must be published on the website at least 30 days before the start of each financial year. This fee-setting provision of the bill provides the public and industry with certainty and transparency.

The inclusion of the Queensland Titles Registry in the Debt Retirement Fund will improve the state's debt-to-revenue ratio when it is assessed by ratings agencies. Along with the Palaszczuk government's contribution to the Debt Retirement Fund of $5 billion, as outlined in the COVID-19 Fiscal and Economic Review, the inclusion of these investments will improve Queensland's debt-to-revenue ratio by approximately nine per cent as assessed by rating agencies calculating our debt burden.

More importantly the passage of this bill, which enables the transfer of the Titles Registry into the Future Fund, will mean that it is not an asset that can be sold. The roles and responsibilities of that function will be secured in public ownership. We know that if there is a body or agency that is performing well, the opposition will eye it off for sale. They will not be able to put together justification for selling it, which usually results in further dollars in donor pockets. The Queensland taxpayer will continue to own the value of the Titles Registry as an asset that can be offset against it, thereby reducing our net debt.

Some of the savings outlined in this bill relate to the restructuring of public entities in order to improve the efficiency of government. The amalgamation or restructure of public entities into existing government departmental structures means that their specialised expertise, roles and responsibilities will be transferred to relevant departments to better drive outcome for communities and the public sector.

The bill abolishes the Queensland Productivity Commission as a statutory entity, allowing for the integration of the commission's functions into the Queensland Treasury as the Office of Productivity and Red Tape Reduction. This new office will be focused on the current and future economic challenges facing Queensland. It will have a role in developing policies to promote economic recovery and productivity growth. With this inclusion into the Treasury, the advice provided by the new office will be more practical in nature when aligned with the government's economic strategy.

The other restructure I would like to touch on is the abolition of the Public Safety Business Agency, or PSBA. This will be enacted by the repeal of the Public Safety Business Agency Act 2014. This is one government agency I have had my fair share of dealings with. The agency was initially created with the aim of consolidating and delivering shared corporate services for agencies such as the Queensland Police Service, the Queensland Fire and Emergency Services and the Inspector-General Emergency Management. Although the aim was to reduce waste and duplication, what actually occurred, as determined by a number of reviews into the agency since its inception, was an increase in complexity of governance and service delivery, which resulted in increased inefficiencies and lack of responsiveness to customer agencies. This in turn led to increased risks and rising costs across the various portfolios. Despite the stated objectives and benefits extolled by the Newman government when it was established and despite constant refinement, augmentation and adjustment, despite the dedicated energy and expertise of PSBA staff, that organisation failed to achieve these objectives and benefits.

Prior to the 2017 election, we announced our plan to disestablish PSBA, and I can tell the House that this announcement was roundly supported by QPS members. Having dealt with HR matters prior to the establishment of PSBA and after its establishment as a service delivery agency, I can say that it failed to meet some of its most basic levels of customer and consumer satisfaction. Efficiencies in consolidation of services did not result in efficiencies for the end user.

Previously in the QPS, an officer could approach a district or regional HR officer to discuss the best way of managing or processing a HR matter—quite a regular occurrence in an occupation with complex rostering and leave provisions and high rates of worker rehabilitation. A game plan could be worked out and correct applications with the required data could be submitted. With PSBA, no-one had any idea who they could speak to regarding a complex HR issue other than calling a 1300 number. Nine times out of 10 the person on the other end of the line had little to no idea about how to respond to such complex matters and occupation-specific inquiries. When advice was given and an application submitted, it would inevitably be rejected and have to be applied for again. It caused a great deal of unnecessary stress for people who were on leave for a range of health reasons to have their leave cut short or for some to have to return to work in order to recomplete paperwork. This loss of expertise within the original owning agency and subsequent failure to meet the needs of staff within those agencies created an underlying lack of faith and confidence in PSBA. It is interesting to note that PSBA considered the supported agencies as their customers, not the end users of their services.

The just under 1,100 PSBA employees delivering services will return to government departments that the agency supported. The QPS and QFES will absorb all PSBA functions. Staff and functions will be reintegrated based on demand workload, the needs of receiving frontline services, the legislative requirements of the departments and individual employee considerations. Queensland Government Air will transition to the QPS and will continue to meet service delivery requirements. ICT services will be primarily centralised within the QPS as its largest client, with critical service delivery aspects of ICT remaining unchanged.

Years after the LNP's last shot at government in this state—they were unceremoniously dumped—fear and distrust are still felt and acknowledged, even at my local police station. After a stint in the comms room, I remember being in the meal room when the conversation turned to the staff loss that occurred at the station. Between the PSBA realignment, the Public Service purge and the commissioned officers cuts, the station had lost a significant number of staff—sworn and unsworn. Everyone else in the station, mostly the uniformed staff, had to pick up the slack for these cuts. One of the senior officers referred to it as 'the night of the long knives', having to come into work the next day to tell people that they were no longer required when clearly the evidence and workload of the staff pointed to the opposite.

The measures contained within this bill are sensible savings measures that do not cut frontline services and do not hurt Queenslanders. I know that the opposition will complain that the $3 million in direct savings foreshadowed in this bill is not enough, but that kind of money is welcomed in my community if those opposite want to beg off. That kind of money, or even a portion of it, would be welcomed by the Centre for Women & Co. providing domestic and family violence counselling in Logan. It would be welcomed by the Beenleigh Housing & Development Company working to make homes affordable for local Indigenous families. It would be welcomed by our junior sporting clubs that are valiantly struggling to provide adequate sporting pathways in facilities that are over 50 years old. It is outrageous that members of the opposition would turn up their noses at such savings when in other instances they are calling on everyone else to tighten their belts and save money where they can. I support this bill. I commend it to the House.