




Speech By
Michael Berkman

MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

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DEBT REDUCTION AND SAVINGS BILL

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (12.13 pm): I rise to make a contribution on the Debt Reduction and Savings Bill 2021 and to add to what the member for South Brisbane has already said in her contribution. We will not oppose this bill overall, despite the fact that it ultimately does achieve very little in the way of savings. It is pretty extraordinary to see a piece of legislation this large that will achieve only \$3 million in identified savings.

It is almost comical hearing members trying to come up with examples of what \$3 million could achieve in their electorates. Not only will \$3 million be spread across all electorates in the state; but \$3 million in an electorate does not do a great deal. I look at the investment in a new school proposed for Maiwar. I obviously welcome that investment with open arms, but this amount that we will be saving is something like one-22nd of the amount that would need to be spent on that school.

To describe the bill as unambitious or bland is maybe even a little generous. There is an irony in the fact that we have spent about 2½ days worth of government business in here—and all the expense that comes along with parliament sitting, all of us occupying this space and all of the staff who go along with that—for a saving of \$3 million.

That said, we will not oppose the bill overall, but there is one particular part of this bill that we absolutely cannot support—and that is the abolition of the Queensland Productivity Commission. The member for South Brisbane suggested in her contribution—and I completely agree—that we need more independent scrutiny here in Queensland, not less.

If we look at the functions of the Productivity Commission, it does really important work, despite, as the member for Toowoomba South identified, a pretty sharp decline in the amount of work that they have been doing over the last few years. Undertaking inquiries, providing advice to the minister and conducting independent research and analysis to assist in policy setting is vitally important work.

I will be the first to make the case that we cannot make government decisions and set policy purely on the basis of productivity or economic development. Indeed, a lot of the measures of economic success that we use are misleading or even warped to the extent that they drive bad policy. Using GDP or GSP even as a standalone indicator of success drives some really warped outcomes, particularly in a state like Queensland. When we look at things like natural disasters, the billions of dollars in the cost of recovery all appear on the positive side of the balance sheet as a GDP measure. These kinds of economic assessments cannot be viewed as the be-all and end-all in policy setting.

The QPC does genuinely important work but, most importantly, it is independent. While the minister will initiate those inquiries or the research and analysis and can provide directions to the QPC on a range of matters, ministerial direction cannot be given about the content of the Productivity Commission's advice or reports. That is a vitally important point. When we consider the changes being proposed, we need to be really honest about the fact that that kind of independent analysis will not come from Treasury.

Anything that is coming from within the Treasurer's own department will be put through all the necessary political filters so that it says what they want on the other side. I know that from my experience as a public servant previously. Anyone else who has any experience working in the Executive knows that that is the case. I will turn to an example from the Productivity Commission's work.

I think probably most of us in here would remember the final report that the Productivity Commission released following its inquiry into imprisonment and recidivism. There were some really important findings in that report. It was an incredibly detailed report and made valuable recommendations around the expanded use of restitution and restorative justice, improved use of remand, improved rehabilitation and reintegration, targeting of prevention and early intervention, expanded diversionary options—the list goes on. They were really useful recommendations.

The ones that I was particularly interested in at the time, and the sorts of recommendations that will not in any universe come out of any kind of Treasury analysis, looked at proposed reform of drug laws here in Queensland. The QPC recommended—

The Queensland Government should adopt a more effective approach for managing the supply and use of illicit drugs. This approach should aim to:

...

- establish effective regulatory approaches to manage drug use and supply

The next recommendation states—

Under an overarching policy of legalised and regulated supply and possession, the Queensland Government should:

- For lower harm drugs, introduce a staged approach to reform:

These are really bold recommendations. I am going to step through them. They are—

- Stage 1: Decriminalise the use and possession of lower harm drugs
- Stage 2: Expand health support and drug treatment services to reduce drug harm
- Stage 3: Design a regulatory framework for the supply of cannabis and MDMA
- Stage 4: Legalise use and regulated supply of cannabis and MDMA
- Stage 5: Subject to evaluation of evidence, extend reform to other lower harm drugs.

Can anyone here imagine Treasury making recommendations like that based on the detailed analysis that QPC is positioned to do based on all of the expert evidence that feeds into their inquiries? It is just not going to happen. They also included in this review other research that showed clear popular support for the decriminalisation of cannabis. More than 75 per cent of the population sees this as a reform that should be taken. More than 50 per cent of the surveyed population said that similar reform was warranted for MDMA. Following these recommendations would have allowed the state government to take \$4.3 billion out of the black market. If you want to talk about debt reduction and saving measures, how about what could be done with \$4.3 billion?

I make these observations with all the respect in the world for the public servants to whom these responsibilities will be transferred. I know they will do their best. I know that, while it is often difficult to give frank and fearless advice, that is the duty of public servants and I am sure they conduct themselves towards that end. But there is no doubt that any kind of research like this would be stymied on its way through the minister's office.

I want to speak very briefly on the opposition amendments because I cannot just let them sit. It is just farcical to introduce amendments that propose to simply change the name of the bill. It is a joke and a bad joke at that. If they want to be taken seriously as a real political force here, honestly they can do a little better than that.

Given a lot of the discussion here I will take the lead of government members as well. I cannot miss this opportunity to address the Dorothy Dixier I can serve myself. Looking at debt reduction and savings, am I aware of any alternative approaches? Yes, we are well aware of the approach that the LNP took to savings and debt reduction, and again I refer to my time in the Public Service in the office of climate change through the Newman years. It did not exist as the office of climate change for very long. It disappeared almost overnight. I got to share this story with the member for Glass House recently, because he at that point, as the minister for the environment, was the one responsible for disbanding not only the department of environment and resource management broadly but specifically the office of climate change. I suppose in some respects I have the member for Glass House to thank for the opportunity to leave the Public Service under Newman, to move on to work in the community legal sector for a number of years following that, and ultimately to be elected to this place and share those stories of the Public Service.

I do not pretend we could expect any better from the opposition in terms of their approach to debt reduction and savings, but we ultimately need to be more ambitious. We need to look more seriously at where we can raise more revenue from big mining, big gas, big banks and big developers in

Queensland. We have said this time and again. Until we start looking to those most wealthy of industries in this most wealthy of states, Queenslanders are going to feel underdone and we are going to continue to look to underwhelming approaches like this \$3 million in however many pages of legislation.