




Speech By
Patrick Weir

MEMBER FOR CONDAMINE

Record of Proceedings, 20 April 2021

COVID-19 EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr WEIR** (Condamine—LNP) (4.38 pm): I rise to make a brief contribution to the COVID-19 Emergency Response and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. The bill's intent is to extend the COVID related provisions due to expire on 30 April 2021 to 30 September 2021 in line with the Public Health and Other Legislation (Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Act 2021 and accounts for other temporary measures relating to local government. The LNP has previously supported all legislation brought before this House where exceptional circumstances have been created due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and support will be offered once more to ensure our state is kept safe. I do note, however, that the shadow Attorney-General on 1 December offered this caveat—

As I indicated, we will not oppose the bill, but equally the government should not expect a free ride on similar future bills. Emergency legislation passed at the height of a pandemic is no substitute for proper legislation and policy and better legislation subject to proper committee scrutiny and the careful consideration of this place.

The LNP will support the bill; however, the government should always be held to account no matter what the situation and especially in a world that calls for the use of extraordinary powers. The government subsequently needs to be ready to reverse these changes when the circumstances we face today are over or the threat subsides. Any decisions made should be part of the planned response for our state's COVID recovery with considerable regard for the broader implications of these decisions. During this pandemic exceptional decisions have had to be made—decisions no-one could ever have predicted. Our job as the opposition is to ensure these decisions are targeted and not ad hoc.

The Economics and Governance Committee received eight submissions from organisations and two from government bodies—the ECQ and the CCC—and public hearings heard evidence from nine organisations and two government departments. The Queensland Resources Council, Queensland Farmers' Federation, AgForce and the SEQ Community Alliance expressed concerns with the local government amendments and requested greater transparency in relation to any decisions made on rating procedures. The LGAQ supported the electoral amendments although they wanted clarification in relation to the adjourning of polls, questions surrounding how-to-vote cards and the giving of directions to scrutineers and candidates. Support was given for the measures to promote COVID-safe meetings by the LGAQ.

My concern lies in the powers given to local government through this legislation to increase fees and charges which have the potential to allow for significant rises to rates for landholders and business owners at a time when any increase is unaffordable. Landholders in 25 local government areas of Queensland received increases to their land valuations as of 31 March 2021. All of these local government areas are located in regions where primary production is a substantial contributor to the economy. Most of these increases have occurred in regions where drought has endured for years and in some cases almost a decade.

With over 80 per cent of Queensland still drought-declared, my concern is that these increases in land valuations have the potential to add to the already stretched reserves of these land owners. Not only are there increases for the entire drought-declared areas of Queensland but they are considerable. The Diamantina region, which has been drought-declared since 2013, had an increase of 145 per cent; Bulloo, 113 per cent; Central Highlands, Balonne, Barcoo, Isaac and Quilpie are all between 71 per cent and 85 per cent; and Blackall, Tambo and Charters Towers are over 50 per cent.

Whilst any landowner would be pleased to see an increase to the value of their asset, my concern is that if these large valuation increases are followed by a large increase in rates charges it would be a massive blow to these communities rocked by years of drought, rocked by COVID in 2020, with no tourists from New South Wales and Victoria heading north in the autumn, winter and spring due to the Queensland hard border closure, and rocked by decades of neglect by subsequent Labor governments.

Common sense and leniency need to be employed when discussions take place with local government officials regarding land valuation increases in council areas where an increase applies. To offset the impact of these large rises any increase to rates should be spread evenly over the entire term of the local government cycle and not delivered in its entirety when the next rating notice becomes due. Rain has fallen in many of these local government areas; however, we all know that it takes more than one or two events to break a drought as devastating and ongoing as this one has been. A large restocking program will take place once the grass and herbage regenerates. This all takes capital. Landowners and small business owners need all the help and consideration they can get right now—not more funds going out and no income coming in. As I said, we will be supporting the bill and look forward to the day when we do not need these measures and we can get back to some form of normality.