




Speech By
Stephen Andrew

MEMBER FOR MIRANI

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DEBT REDUCTION AND SAVINGS BILL

 **Mr ANDREW** (Mirani—PHON) (3.50 pm): I rise to speak to the Debt Reduction and Savings Bill 2021. According to the Treasurer's introductory speech on the bill, Queenslanders will 'realise substantial financial savings' and see evidence of the Palaszczuk Labor government's 'measured and responsible plan to invest today to pay down the state debt into the future'. Nothing could be further from the truth.

When asked at the committee hearing to provide a detailed breakdown, Treasury listed the cost savings it expects to gain from the bill's measures. The savings given include: \$300,000 from the integration of the Public Safety Business Agency within QPS and QFES; \$700,000 per annum from integrating Building Queensland functions into the Department of State Development, Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning; a vague 'hundreds of thousands' from changes made to public notice advertising; and \$1.6 million from the integration of the Queensland Productivity Commission function into Treasury and integrating the NDIA into the Insurance Commission.

Treasury told the committee that direct savings would equate to \$3 million per year. Every tenet of best practice accounting and sound economic decision-making has been tossed overboard with this bill—and for what? A paltry \$3 million per year over four years when Queensland's interest bill on its debt is \$3 billion and rising. Nothing in this bill makes sense, but the government's figures around this whole business make the least sense of all.

I am very concerned with many of the measures included in the bill. My biggest concern relates to chapter 1 of the bill which will convert the operations of Queensland's Titles Registry Office into a newly formed corporate entity known as Queensland Titles Registry Pty Ltd, ACN 658 568 101. The registry will be bundled up into the Debt Retirement Fund structure and managed as a trust as part of Queensland's Future Fund.

In this bill there are many delegations, subdelegations and transitional provisions to wrap your head around. My one real takeaway from it all was that nothing about the whole deal will provide either transparency or accountability to the people of Queensland. Clause 40 of the bill in particular specifically abolishes one of the core democratic principles of our system of government: the right to judicial review. Loss of the right to judicial review is of serious concern to anyone who holds dear democratic principles in this state, as I do.

Under clause 40(3)(b), any decision of an official in accordance with the subdelegated powers they will exercise under clause 33 'can not be challenged, appealed against, reviewed, quashed, set aside or called in question in any other way, under the Judicial Review Act 1991 or otherwise (whether by the Supreme Court, another court, a tribunal or another entity)'. This is an extraordinary delegation of the Crown's power to a non-government entity—an entity operating completely outside the usual checks and balances of our democracy.

Several conveyancing lawyers I have spoken to about this bill have expressed concerns about increased risk of fraud and threat to personal data security under the corporatised monopoly geared towards making a profit. Under corporatised ownership, the information will be subject to persons

employed under immediate security classifications and guidelines, working and residing at an unknown place, possibly beyond our legal reach. This is very frightening. Such blended datasets are a major area of business growth in many areas. Property information is a prime example of blended datasets. The richness of data and potential retail opportunities of the data generated by the registry will be a goldmine. The database is currently held in safe hands—protected by authorised public servants within the many arms of government, committees of parliament, the law and the judiciary, and OIC may audit or investigate any suspicious behaviour or activity with or without recourse to the courts. Ownership of the registry should remain with the government. The data in the registers is Queensland Crown copyright and must stay in public hands. It is key data for government, citizens and the economy generally.

Another concern I have is that the corporatisation of an essential service like the registry could easily lead to a significant increase in costs around buying and selling property in Queensland, despite what the government claims. The government has said that prices of regulated services will only go up in line with the consumer price index and that the government will have step-in powers. However, some of the peak bodies have their doubts, with one survey respondent saying—

We have seen with the gas industry that it is easy to get increases beyond CPI. The private operator can also introduce new products or re-brand existing products and in which cases price increases will be able to exceed CPI.

We only have to look at what has happened since essential public utilities like electricity and water were corporatised to see how quickly the profit motive trumps public interest. Big questions need to be asked about what resources, services, infrastructure and enterprises should be in public hands and what should be at the mercy of international markets and large foreign multinationals and banks. More generally, the corporatisation of Queensland public services goes to the central function of the state. It undermines the legitimacy of democratic government by handing over state powers to corporate profiteers.

It pays to remember that this is not the first time valuable assets have been transferred to the QIC. Queensland's toll road portfolio was sold to the QIC by the government about 10 years ago for \$3 billion, only to see the QIC cash in and sell it to the Transurban consortium for more than \$7 billion a few years later. Who is to say that a similar flip will not be on the cards down the track, especially given the extremely lucrative nature of the state Titles Registry office with all its rich datasets?

Other provisions in the bill remove the requirement for statutory advertising and notices to be placed in printed newspapers and allow the advertising to be placed on websites. Again there is a lack of transparency behind the decision. This will diminish even further the public's knowledge of what government is doing, especially given the increasing restrictions on access by the general public to Queensland newspapers' online sites.

For those in regional areas there is a major concern with these provisions, particularly over government transparency around sensitive area-specific decisions on land use, mining leases and other planned projects. Under the new online laws, departments and corporations could easily opt to bury the notices online in some obscure government website or behind a paywall that will mean they remain hidden from general view. The so-called exemption from advertising in regional publications is in fact nothing of the kind. The clause simply allows regional publications to place the ad in print publications in addition to the mandatory online requirement.

I also oppose the proposed amendments to the Medicines and Poisons Act in relation to tattoo inks and pigments. There has been no credible science or evidence presented that warrants the bill's proposed action. There are no peer reviewed studies over a prolonged period that indicate any public health risks. No departmental standard has been presented to the industry. Nor has there been an explanation of how to comply with the vague compliant analysis certificate. The ramifications for the economy and the community are likely to be massive and are a clear breach of fundamental legislative principles.

The potential for these changes to push a legitimate regulated industry underground cannot be ignored either. One small business operator from Brendale said that he had significant concerns that the tattoo industry in Queensland will be destroyed as a result of the provisions in this bill. Another previously thriving small business in Queensland is to be destroyed on the whim of a technocratic state that has provided no evidence or peer reviewed studies to substantiate its claims that tattoo ink is now considered a deadly poison and should be banned.

I am also very concerned with the bill's proposal to abolish the Queensland Productivity Commission and the Office of Best Practice Regulation and integrate their functions into Queensland Treasury and the Queensland Competition Authority. The bill's proposal to abolish and re-form these agencies under Treasury will restrict greatly their commissioners' ability to undertake independent reviews and provide frank and even critical advice to the government on policies and practices post implementation. In the process, once again transparency will be the loser.