



Speech By  
**Tim Nicholls**

**MEMBER FOR CLAYFIELD**

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Record of Proceedings, 1 September 2021


## **APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL**

### **APPROPRIATION BILL**

#### **Consideration in Detail (Cognate Debate)**

#### **Appropriation Bill**

#### **Legal Affairs and Safety Committee, Report**

 **Mr NICHOLLS** (Clayfield—LNP) (11.59 am): This year's estimates process again highlighted the reality that there is very little time for a thorough investigation of the expenditure of over \$1.13 billion in the portfolio areas of Attorney-General, justice, women and the prevention of domestic and family violence. I have no problem with the chair of the committee. I thank those members of the committee from the non-government side who afforded me the opportunity to ask questions. Within the agreed time limits there was only the odd interruption to my questions by government committee members and, quite frankly, they were easily dealt with.

The reality is that it is an extremely limited time for the examination of all the statutory bodies of which, as the committee sets out, there are more than nine. Included in those nine are: the Public Trustee; the CCC; Legal Aid Queensland; the Queensland Human Rights Commission; the Legal Services Commission; the Queensland Family and Child Commission; and the Electoral Commission of Queensland. There are quite a number of bodies. Time allowed for questions of these bodies was 90 minutes and that time was divided equally between non-government and government questions. Again, I acknowledge the chairman was fair and reasonable in his allocation of the time for questions. In effect, we had 45 minutes to question those bodies, some of which have had serious questions over their operation and activities and consequent expenditure of public funds. That is obviously very limiting.

The second session was similarly limited, as it had to be, because of the need to deal not only with the Attorney-General and justice aspects of the minister's portfolio but also with the important portfolio areas of women and the prevention of domestic violence. My colleague the member for Whitsunday will address those issues. By any measure, this is extremely limited and means a substantial amount of the expenditure in this vote is not scrutinised as it ought.

As a result, we directed our questions to expenditure and operations of the Crime and Corruption Commission. Regrettably, answers to some questions were incomplete, including the CCC expenditure on the investigation into the Logan City Council and the Moreton Bay Regional Council. Questions taken on notice to be answered at a later time unfortunately could not, according to CCC, adequately explain the expenditure on those investigations. The chair of the CCC could not update the committee on investigations underway into the appointment of former under treasurer Frankie Carroll, one assumes due to sensitive operational issues. We await the outcome of that investigation, hopefully in the near future.

We also learned during the course of the examination that the CCC's purchase of the Nexis case management system is plagued with delivery problems and notice to suspend the contract has been sent to the vendor. There is \$2 million plus tied up in that system. It seems this is another instance of IT systems promising much, delivering far less and causing more wasted money on the part of taxpayers.

Of necessity and due to time limits, important questions to other bodies could not be raised. That, as I said previously, is unfortunate.

In the second session I sought details of the costs of the failed prosecutions in the needles in strawberries case, the Logan City Council councillors case and the Moreton Bay Regional Council case. Somewhat incredibly, it seems that the DPP cannot quantify how much has been spent on these failed prosecutions—a situation that would be absurd in any private practice. This has been a substantial expense involving many hundreds of hours of DPP time and resources. It seems remarkable that there is no reliable estimate of costs.

It is important that this expenditure is accounted for because the waste or misuse of public money means it is not going to other services that are needed. In this regard, it is apparent that the government has no plan to deal with what has been described as the crisis in legal aid funding, especially for private practitioners. The Attorney was unable to offer any reassurance that rates for legal aid, which have not changed since 2018, will be reviewed. The danger in this is that fewer private firms, barristers and expert witnesses will offer their services and that will increase the burden on the hardworking officers of the Legal Aid office and, importantly, it will limit access to justice.

Having said that, I joined with the Attorney-General in commending the work of the courts and the department in ensuring the courts have continued to function quite effectively during the current pandemic. There are two exceptions. That is the delays being reported in the Coroners Court. While funding for the triage team has been extended and there is an additional registry team, there is no doubt the delays are continuing and the Attorney could not give any reassurance that those delays will be relieved any time soon. QCAT is similarly operating under a substantial burden of underfunding, although the announcement of extra funds to appoint additional members is welcome. The reality is that a jurisdiction set up to resolve matters quickly and inexpensively is hamstrung in its ability to do so. In passing, I note the retirement of His Honour Justice Daubney as president of QCAT and thank him for his service.

The Attorney-General admitted that her ministerial staffer being used as part of the Premier's private TV station, while not affecting funds in the department, is regrettable.

*(Time expired)*