




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR SOUTH BRISBANE

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RESIDENTIAL TENANCIES AND ROOMING ACCOMMODATION (RENT FREEZE) AMENDMENT BILL

Introduction

 **Dr MacMAHON** (South Brisbane—Grn) (12.30 pm): I present a bill for an act to amend the Residential Tenancies and Rooming Accommodation Act 2008 for particular purposes. I table the bill, the explanatory notes and a statement of compatibility with human rights. I nominate the Community Support and Services Committee to consider the bill.

Tabled paper: Residential Tenancies and Rooming Accommodation (Rent Freeze) Amendment Bill 2022 [1250](#).

Tabled paper: Residential Tenancies and Rooming Accommodation (Rent Freeze) Amendment Bill 2022, explanatory notes [1251](#).

Tabled paper: Residential Tenancies and Rooming Accommodation (Rent Freeze) Amendment Bill 2022, statement of compatibility with human rights [1252](#).

Queensland is in a cost-of-living crisis like we have not seen in decades. Across Queensland families are struggling to make ends meet with rising costs of rent, fuel and groceries and it is hitting renters and first home buyers the hardest. In Brisbane, in Bundaberg and on the Gold Coast, rents have soared by a record 20 per cent over the past year. Families are living in tents because they cannot afford a secure, affordable home. Pensioners are skipping meals because they cannot afford rising rents. Working people are sleeping in their cars because they cannot afford a rental property. The people who can least afford it are being hit the hardest and we are not at the peak yet. With inflation set to peak at around Christmas time, this government must act now before the housing crisis spirals even further.

Today I am introducing a bill for an emergency rent freeze over the next 24 months. Labor has let this become a housing emergency. This government is more interested in keeping up the profit margins for an investor's eighth property than they are in making sure that everyone has an affordable place to live. Right now our state's weak rental laws do nothing to stop property investors hiking up rents to eye-watering amounts. Maybe if the government had taken up calls for a cap on rent increases last year or for the mass build of public homes then we would not be in this crisis. The government has let this become a housing emergency. An emergency two-year rent freeze is crucial now to halt skyrocketing rents, to give the tens of thousands of renters across Queensland certainty and security, and to give the government time to put in place long-term measures to address the housing crisis.

This government's inaction has left us with Queensland kids growing up in tents and caravans while property investors make record profits. Our state's housing policies cannot continue to be geared towards ensuring the profits of a property investor's portfolio. Not only is this pricing families out of rental properties; it is artificially inflating property prices which is locking working families out of the housing market. Right now this government is willing to stick up for property investors with investment portfolios but it will not stick up for a single mum in Bundaberg who is facing eviction because she cannot afford another rent rise. This government will not stick up for a young couple in Acacia Ridge who are trying to buy their first investment property but who keep getting outbid by wealthy property investors.

In the middle of a housing emergency, we need this government to take leadership and show courage to stop out-of-control rents. Therefore, I urge this government to support the rent freeze bill that I am introducing today. The Residential Tenancies and Rooming Accommodation (Rent Freeze) Amendment Bill 2022 will freeze the rent of all Queensland residential tenancies at the amount agreed upon or advertised on 1 August 2022 for two years. Under the bill, if new tenants start a lease at a property after that date, the investor can only rent the property at or below the 1 August 2022 level. If the property is a new build, is a new entry into the rental market or was vacant on 1 August 2022, then the investor can only rent the property at or below the median rent for that postcode. If a property has been recently renovated but was listed on 1 August 2022, the rent must be the same as at that date. If the recently renovated property was vacant, the rental price must be at or below the median rent for that postcode.

Rents will be frozen for all residential properties for 24 months from the bill's commencement. At the end of the rent freeze period, rents will be capped so they can only increase by a maximum of two per cent every two years. This will give the state government time to pursue long-term solutions to the housing affordability crisis. The Residential Tenancies Authority will maintain a register of rents based on tenancy agreements and bond lodgement forms. Where the authority is not in possession of the rent applicable to a particular tenancy, the bill will require the investor to declare the rental amount.

When I first ran for South Brisbane in 2017, we heard thousands of stories from renters in the Queensland market and that has only continued. We have heard stories from South Brisbane and from across the country. I have doorknocked, hosted forums, conducted surveys, done personal advocacy and case work, and shared stories on social media. Those stories are why I have introduced this bill.

The data shows unprecedented rent rises in Queensland. According to SQM Research, this year rents in Brisbane saw the steepest annual increase on record at more than 20 per cent. A similar study of rents by Domain found house rents in Brisbane surged to a new record high of \$520 per week. Unit rents jumped to a new record high of \$450 per week, which is the steepest annual increase since 2009 at 12.5 per cent. The number of potential renters per listing has hit an historic high and is 77 per cent times higher than the five-year average. The same report found similarly steep rent rises in our state's regions. Last year Toowoomba house rents rose by more than 15 per cent while Bundaberg residents face rent rises of more than 22 per cent. The five-year data paints an even grimmer picture, with rents in the Central Highlands rising by more than 50 per cent and rents in Gladstone nearly doubling. Things are dire and without a rent freeze now things will only get worse.

In Queensland, housing is treated as a commodity. Houses are treated not as homes or as a basic human right but as a tool for investors to make money. Years of record-low interest rates and tax concessions such as negative gearing and capital gains tax discounts have driven record hoarding of properties by investors, pushing the house prices up to unprecedented levels. While the investors gather their millions in negative gearing, ordinary people ultimately pay as houses and rents have become more expensive. As long as we have a housing system that prioritises the profits of investments at the expense of mum-and-dad renters, we will continue to see a housing crisis, families evicted into homelessness and kids growing up in caravan parks. First-time home buyers and owner-occupiers will continue to struggle to break into the housing market and struggle with rising levels of housing stress.

Tenants will continue to struggle with skyrocketing rents. Rents have increased to historic levels over the past 12 months: Brisbane, 20 per cent; the Gold Coast, 24 per cent; Rockhampton, 15 per cent; Bundaberg, 23 per cent; the Fraser Coast, 19 per cent; and Toowoomba, 15 per cent. The members in this place might like to look at some of the ABS data to see just how many renters are in their electorates.

Those rent rises have coincided with an historic cost-of-living crisis. Inflation is set to tip seven per cent by the end of the year and basic things such as food, petrol and electricity are becoming more and more expensive. Rising interest rates, which investors are able to absorb, are hitting hard first home buyers and owner-occupiers. In South Brisbane and across the state we have seen rising levels of not just rental stress but also mortgage stress as owner-occupiers spend more and more of their income on housing costs. Meanwhile, wages have been flatlining for a decade. I compare 20 per cent increases in rents to the increase in wages, which have increased by just 2.6 per cent over the past 12 months—I repeat: 2.6 per cent. How are mum-and-dad renters meant to absorb these rising costs? What other costs will they start cutting? Will they cut coffee out with friends? Will they cut the cost of kids sport? Will they cut a weekend away with their family? Clothes? Food? Without a rent freeze, things are only going to get worse.

This is not the first time the Greens have tried to encourage the government to take any decent steps to address the rental crisis here in Queensland. Last year I introduced a bill to put a cap on rent increases, to put a genuine end to no-grounds evictions and to allow tenants to make minor modifications to their homes. Over 800 Queenslanders made submissions on this bill. Some MPs might

have seen submissions from their own constituents. They shared horror stories about poor conditions, about bullying and about facing homelessness due to rent increases. The bill was never debated. As a result, the housing crisis has only gotten worse. These measures were needed last year and they are even more urgent now.

If the Queensland government had genuinely listened to the hundreds of thousands of struggling renters, my office might have never met with a person I am going to call Sarah. Sarah is a single mum on a disability pension. For the past 16 years, Sarah and her daughters have been proud community members. As a low-income mum, Sarah struggled to make ends meet but her friends and community supported her to get by and she knew that her rental was secure. Her daughters flourished at school. Her eldest was looking forward to finishing grade 12 and potentially heading to university. Then, after nearly two decades in their rental home, with only a few months notice, Sarah's landlord decided to sell up. Sarah did what we all do: she started looking for other rentals. Yet no matter where she looked, there was not a single place she could afford. Places that maybe she could have afforded a year ago if she tightened her belt were now going for \$90 or \$100 more per week. The clock was ticking and the stress of finding a place started impacting her daughters' studies and their mental health. She tried to get into public housing only to have the department tell her that she would have to wait two years for a place because 'there is nowhere suitable for teenage girls to live'. Around her, those people who would usually help Sarah out—her friends, her neighbours, her community—were also getting pushed further and further away by property investors jacking up house prices and jacking up the rents.

If the Queensland government had genuinely listened to the hundreds of thousands of struggling renters, my office would never have had to write support letters for Denis and Mary. Denis and Mary are a couple who have been married for six decades. After years of hard work and spending days out in the sun doing manual labour, Denis retired. Despite their hard work and because of the difficulties life throws at so many Queenslanders, Denis and Mary were never able to afford to buy their own home. They loved their little rental and were happy to stay there until they could move into an aged-care facility; that is, until a property investor—a property investor who owned nine other properties—decided to increase the rent by \$80 a week. A week before this, Denis and Mary were the quintessential retired Queenslanders we can all hope to be one day—going out to the cinema, having friends over, taking their grandkids to the park. Overnight, Denis and Mary stopped doing these things. They stopped visiting their friends because they could no longer afford to maintain the car. They even ended up skipping meals so they could afford to pay rent—pay rent to an investor who owned nine other properties! Mary told me that she would often skip maybe dinner and lunch if she wanted to take her grandkids out for a meal.

The stories do not stop there. Every single day my office is approached by everyday Queenslanders who are struggling to find an affordable place to live, who are about to get evicted into homelessness, who are being threatened with eviction in the middle of a housing crisis because they cannot afford to pay a rent increase of \$100 or more, who are skipping dinners to pay rent, who have stopped sending their kids to kindy or who have to move away from their community.

These are the types of stories that every single MP in here will have heard. Every member in this place has had constituents come into their office, call them, email them and share stories like this. I know this because these constituents—these struggling mums, dads, pensioners and everyday Queenslanders—come to my office after these other offices have told them that there is nothing they can do to help. This week we have been contacted by a single mum in Darra. Last week it was a family in Pimpama and a family in Mount Gravatt and the week before that a family in Elanora. I say to the MPs who represent these people: you can help them. If the stories of your constituents sleeping in tents, getting evicted onto the streets or skipping meals to pay rent have kept you awake at night—I am sure these stories horrify you the way they horrify me—then you will vote for this bill. Vote to stop the rent rises; vote to stop the out-of-control rent spirals; vote to keep families in their homes; vote to give that struggling single mum, that elderly resident skipping meals and that family weeks away from living in a caravan a little bit of hope so they can go to sleep tonight with a secure and safe roof over their heads.

When I introduced our renters rights bill into parliament last year, we saw ministers and MPs argue against greater rights for renters on the basis that these measures would disrupt the property rights of investors. In response to heartbreaking stories from tenants about the conditions they were living in, the fear, the bullying and the insecurity, this is what MPs were sending back to their constituents. I quote from letters that were sent—

Elements of the Greens' Private Member's Bill ... including the proposal that an owner would not be able to end a tenancy at the conclusion of the lease, are in breach of Queensland's Human Rights Act and will lead to reduced supply in the rental market. The Palaszczuk government will ensure that laws provide a strong, balanced approach that protects the rights of renters and lessors, while improving stability in the rental market.

I ask the Palaszczuk government: is there stability in the Queensland rental market now? Has your so-called balanced approach worked? Has putting the property rights of investors ahead of Queensland renters produced the outcomes that you wanted? If you are seeking to do little more than window-dressing while investors get richer and tenants get screwed, congratulations: you have achieved your goal.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Krause): Member for South Brisbane, could you please withdraw the unparliamentary language?

Dr MacMAHON: I withdraw. If you actually intend to ensure safe, secure, affordable housing for every Queensland renter, you have failed. There is no stability for the tens of thousands of Queensland renters facing skyrocketing rents. There is no balance when the fear of eviction from a rent increase means that you are too fearful to pursue what meagre rights you do actually have. Thankfully, the Human Rights Commissioner intervened last year and put this ludicrous debate to bed. He said—

While much of the conversation so far has focussed on the property rights of property owners, there are also rights held by tenants which need to be properly considered—including their rights to protection of families and children, and freedom from interference with their home, which is protected under the right to privacy and reputation.

He said—

43% of renting households include children for whom housing stability, connection to community and access to schools is vitally important—and families and children are also entitled to protection under Queensland's human rights legislation.

In New Zealand, the Human Rights Commissioner has pointed out that a rent freeze is necessary to ensure citizens are not sacrificing their fundamental human rights to pay for rent. We need a similar approach here. This bill provides a way to ensure tenants' human rights are not trumped by private profit. This government could look to parts of Canada or Victoria, where rent caps and rent freezes were implemented during the pandemic. In places like New York, San Francisco, Berlin, Paris and Barcelona—right across the world—governments are implementing rent freezes and rent caps because they see that tenants are struggling and that the rent spiral needs to be stopped.

You can even look at the history of this country for an example of a Labor government successfully implementing rent controls. When the Curtin Labor government intervened in the housing market during the Second World War by fixing rents, it drastically helped with the rampant wartime inflation, gave security to tenants during an unprecedented crisis and allowed the government to find long-term solutions that created the social housing boom that remains one of the high points of the postwar era.

I would also like to take a moment to talk about Christine Butler's petition for greater action on mould in rental properties. Her petition now has over 2,300 signatures and rising. Christine and her family were forced out of their rental property on the Gold Coast after mould starting rising through the foundations and which the investor refused to remedy. Multiple different kinds of mould turned the house toxic and the family were forced to throw out most of their possessions. The family is \$12,000 out of pocket.

Lack of maintenance by investors is directly related to tenants' lack of security. If you are scared of being evicted at the end of your lease or being priced out of your home with a rent increase, speaking up for your basic rights to health and safety is often untenable. We need a genuine end to no-grounds evictions, direct responsibility for mould remedying in the act and a rent freeze to ensure renters' most basic right to a safe and healthy home is secured.

Given the gravity of this situation, I will also be moving that this bill be dealt with urgently. Private members' bills take six months to make it through the committee process and to be debated—if they get debated at all. I say to every member in here that Queensland renters do not have six months. The families struggling to find somewhere safe, secure and affordable to live right now do not have six months. The tenants on the verge of eviction, anticipating a rent rise, do not have six months. This bill needs to be dealt with by the Community Support and Services Committee as a matter of urgency. I will be moving a motion at the end of this speech, which I urge the House to support, so that I can seek to make this bill urgent.

At the conclusion of this speech I will be moving that standing and sessional orders be suspended so as to require the Community Support and Services Committee to report to the House on the Residential Tenancies and Rooming Accommodation (Rent Freeze) Amendment Bill by Friday, 14 October 2022 and consideration of all stages of the bill be completed by the House no later than 1 December 2022.

We are in a crisis. As members of parliament, every single member in here is hearing these stories. All evidence suggests that the crisis will get worse with inflation soaring by Christmas. Every person in this place needs to act now. My bill sets out a way to curb the rampant rental increases that are hitting Queenslanders hard. The rent is too damn high and this bill is a way to take action.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Krause): Member for South Brisbane, could you please withdraw the unparliamentary language that you have just used.

Dr MacMAHON: I withdraw.

First Reading

Dr MacMAHON (South Brisbane—Grn) (12.51 pm): I move—

That the bill be now read a first time.

Question put—That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Bill read a first time.

Referral to Community Support and Services Committee

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Krause): In accordance with standing order 131, the bill is now referred to the Community Support and Services Committee.

Leave to Move Motion

Dr MacMAHON (South Brisbane—Grn) (12.51 pm): I seek leave to move a motion without notice.

Division: Question put—That leave be granted.

Resolved in the negative in accordance with special sessional orders.