



Speech By
Andrew Powell

MEMBER FOR GLASS HOUSE

Record of Proceedings, 15 March 2022

POLICE LEGISLATION (EFFICIENCIES AND EFFECTIVENESS) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr POWELL** (Glass House—LNP) (11.28 am): I too rise as a member of the Legal Affairs and Safety Committee to make a contribution on the Police Legislation (Efficiencies and Effectiveness) Amendment Bill 2021. As the previous speaker, the member for Caloundra, acknowledged, I too acknowledge my fellow committee members led by our chair, the member for Toohey, but I also acknowledge Renee Easton and the members of the secretariat who do a fantastic job of supporting us and assisting us collect all the various submissions from stakeholders across the state who take an interest in legislation.

To be fair, as the member for Caloundra said, this was one of the least controversial pieces of legislation the committee has dealt with for some time. Having said that, still there were a number of submitters who raised concerns on various aspects of the bill. I focus my attention on where the member for Caloundra left off, that is, the amendments to the Weapons Act 1990, as I believe they will have the most relevance to the people of Glass House.

It is fair to say that I, like a lot of members who have rural components to their electorates, am often called upon by my constituents to assist with weapons licensing matters and to deal with the Weapons Licensing branch within the Queensland Police Service. In nearly all instances those issues are eventually resolved in a timely manner. The intent of these amendments is to hopefully bring a level of efficiency that will see an improvement in the processing of licensing matters within that branch. It is also fair to say at the outset that these amendments probably have not gone as far as many stakeholders and constituents of Glass House would have liked. We would love to see—I will come to this towards the end of my contribution—a far more efficient process and one that does not get bogged down in bureaucracy and does not seem to take inordinate amounts of time. There are things in these amendments that are raising concerns among the peak bodies representing firearm owners that may give that branch more scope to drag their heels when it comes to weapons licensing.

Clauses 32 and 33 of the bill proposes to extend the three-month temporary possession period to six months. This provides unlicensed owners with an appropriate time to address the reason for temporary storage. Some of the reasons may be a person's weapons licence expires—often because they are waiting for a renewal—it is suspended due to court or serious health matters or it relates to the administration of a deceased estate. That last one is one that has popped up a number of times through my Glass House electorate office. That provision is to allow an extension to occur before administrative processes are reinstated.

Whilst most stakeholders support this extension of time, the Shooters Union is concerned about the impact this amendment will have on service standards for issuing licences and that higher fees may have to be paid by the licensees. The Shooters Union stated—

Sometimes, temporary storage will be with a licensee's friend or family member. Currently, when that 3 months period expires, the firearms must be surrendered to a licensed firearm dealer for storage, which involves a fee which can vary from dealer to dealer according to individual commercial arrangements. Weapons Licensing Branch has 42 days after expiry to decide an

application for renewal of a licence and after that period, the person is unlicensed and must also surrender their firearms to a licensed dealer for storage. With 8000 licences outstanding, some of which must be the result of late renewals and the amendment proposing an extension of storage to 6 months and licences not even being assessed until 5 months have passed, it would seem that the service standard for the issue of licences by Weapons Licensing Branch is already far exceeding the 3 months temporary storage requirements.

This really is a case of is this legislation the tail wagging the dog. Are we bringing this in because of inefficiencies within the Weapons Licensing branch rather than addressing the inefficiencies? I echo the concerns of the Shooters Union. I understand why this provision is being brought in, but let it not become the new service standard for the Weapons Licensing branch. They need to be meeting the 42-day requirement. If they do that, they will get through the backlog of 8,000 licences awaiting renewal and hopefully the temporary storage changes will not be required. The Firearms Dealers Association expressed similar concerns as did the Shooting Industry Foundation of Australia. The feedback was fairly consistent.

The QPS acknowledged that there has been an increase over the past 18 months in the time it has taken to process licences. They stated that it was due to a variety of factors, including recruitment and the effects of COVID-19 on the workplace as well as a significant increase in the number of applications being received. The committee took on board the comments made by the various stakeholders and the QPS. As a member of that committee, I will continue to keep an eye on this and will report back to the minister based on feedback I receive from my constituents. We will certainly be keeping an eye on those standards to ensure that they are not slipping and that it is not giving the Weapons Licensing branch a further excuse to delay.

Other amendments provide civilian technical officers with the ability to issue evidentiary certificates for the Weapons Act 1990. Stakeholders were concerned that civilian technical officers will not have the skills or expertise required to undertake such a task. We put that to the Queensland Police Service. Their response was that the provision provides the commissioner with the ability to appoint police officers and Public Service officers with the necessary experience or expertise as approved officers for the Weapons Act and that a copy of that document must state the classification of the weapon to be signed by the police officer or Public Service officer and must include their qualifications and experience. With that in mind, the committee will take a wait-and-see approach to see whether the stakeholders' concerns play out. It is clear that the QPS acknowledges their concerns and is making efforts to address them.

Another amendment enables approved licensed firearms dealers to retain and deal with an anonymously surrendered firearm or prescribed thing. This is important when people bring forward weapons during an amnesty. It provides the ability for firearms dealers to deal with that. Again, whilst there is some support for this amendment there were concerns that it does not go far enough. There was conflicting feedback from stakeholders in terms of how this could potentially be dealt with. Weighing all of that up, the Queensland Police Service responded that what we are looking at here is a reasonable and balanced risk approach. I see both sides of the argument. I am willing to take that as something the Queensland Police Service is monitoring closely, but we will be keeping an eye on it.

As I said earlier, a number of stakeholders went to great lengths to say that the amendments to the Weapons Act do not go far enough. I come back to my comments that clearly what is occurring is an inability to meet existing service standards and existing legislative requirements within the Weapons Licensing branch. There is no question about it, COVID has thrown a curveball at many departments and line agencies dealing with customers in the front office. Having said that, there is now an opportunity to address some of those inefficiencies and improve the way weapons licences are processed. If there are continuing bureaucratic or regulatory impediments around how that is being done then let us bring the legislation back and have another look at it. Let us first look at whether the practices and policies are in place within these offices to allow them to do what they have been tasked to do and that they have sufficient resources to do what they have been tasked to do.

There is nothing more frustrating for a law-abiding firearm owner than to be mucked around by five months of bureaucracy. It makes many of them feel like they are being treated as criminals. We know they are not. In the Glass House electorate the vast majority are rural property owners. They are using firearms for their own farming practices but also to keep pests under control. They do not want to be treated as criminals. They do the right thing. They want their weapons licence renewed efficiently. Let us not let these legislative amendments make that slip out even further. Let us address the root cause.