




Speech By
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Record of Proceedings, 29 November 2022

INTEGRITY AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

PUBLIC SECTOR BILL

 **Mr MICKELBERG** (Buderim—LNP) (7.21 pm): I rise to speak to the cognate debate on the Public Sector Bill 2022 and the Integrity and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2022. I might start by briefly observing, as others have, the fact that these two bills are being debated in cognate to avoid the proper scrutiny of parliament. That tells Queenslanders everything they need to know about how this Palaszczuk Labor government views the subject of integrity.

This Labor state government closed the book on integrity a long time ago, so much so that it has not implemented in full the recommendations made by the Bridgman or the Coaldrake reviews. The Premier promised she would implement all of them, but how many cabinet documents have been released within 30 days since then? The answer is none. This Labor state government has not implemented the changes yet because it knows that if and when it does implement such changes the flimsy foundation, built on deceit, dodgy deals, ministerial incompetence and failures of leadership, will all come tumbling down.

I want to briefly echo the words spoken by the Leader of the Opposition: we must empower our public servants. Queenslanders rely on public servants to deliver the services they need—important services. These employees need to feel supported by ministers and ministerial staff, not intimidated. The government should listen to public servants. They are the ones on the ground hearing from Queenslanders and dealing with Queenslanders every single day. The government would run far more effectively if their employees were not so scared of them.

Instead of focusing on how the state government, and by extension public servants, can better serve the more than five million people who call Queensland home, all we hear from those opposite is a refrain blaming an LNP government, which at the next election will have exited office nearly 10 years before. Those opposite like to focus on the past because they have no plan for the future. Those opposite like to focus on the past because they need to distract from their failures to deliver for everyday Queenslanders. They like to focus on the past because this third-term Palaszczuk state government is tired, bereft of ideas and led by a Premier who has checked out. As Albo says, 'Governments don't get better in their fourth term'—and isn't that the truth!

To state the obvious, the Public Sector Bill does not do much to address the current cultural issues running rampant through the Queensland Public Service because this bill is only acting on a primary recommendation made in the Bridgman review from four years ago—four years ago! The LNP supported stage 1 of these reforms, but a lot more damage and destruction and political interference has happened since then. Perhaps if all of Mr Bridgman's recommendations were enacted when they were made four years ago there would have been positive change for employees within Queensland's Public Service. Instead, like always, the state government took the slow option, dragging it out, hoping the problem would go away. It is a familiar playbook.

It has taken a full-blown and very public integrity crisis for this tired, third-term Palaszczuk Labor government to act. It is no different to the cynical manner in which the state government are using the integrity amendment bill to look like they are serious about making changes and restoring integrity, but it is just that: this entire charade is so the state government look like they are doing the right thing by Queenslanders when they really could not care less. Queenslanders know, though, that this government cares more about how they look than how things really are.

Queensland's public sector is made up of hundreds of thousands of hardworking employees who just want to do their job and do it well. I would have thought those opposite would agree with that contention. Unfortunately, as has been said a lot lately, the fish rots from the head. The Public Service is being hampered by interference from the top down, described in the Coaldrake review as 'an atmosphere of fear'. Ministers are more interested in their political survival than the survival of everyday Queenslanders.

We know from the Coaldrake review and firsthand accounts of whistleblowers that many employees across departments are warned to sanitise their advice and recommendations to align with the position which suits political outcomes set by Labor ministers. It is a classic case of government ministers creating an environment to ensure they can claim ignorance. Rather than seek advice that allows them to better deliver services that Queenslanders deserve, ministers seek advice that suits their own selfish political objectives.

There are so many integrity failings that have afflicted this Labor state government since 2015 that some are easy to forget. Who can forget the mangocube saga, where a foolish minister who should have been sacked—but who still sits on ministerial leather because of a premier who is incapable of enforcing the most basic standards of behaviour—was condemned by the CCC?

Mr Power: You weren't even here.

Mr MICKELBERG: What about Labor lobbyists working out of William Street during the election campaign and then handsomely benefiting from the Labor government they helped elect? I hear those opposite say, 'You weren't even here,' excusing the behaviour of a minister who is incompetent, a minister who was described by the chair of the CCC as 'foolish'!

Those opposite ignore the problems that afflict Queenslanders every day because they want to play politics with these issues rather than address the substance of the issue. If I were a backbencher on the Labor side, I would be holding my ministers to account for their failings—ministers like the Minister for Transport and Main Roads, who is foolish and incompetent and whose failings affect Queenslanders every single day.

What about the Jackie Trad debacle? What about the state government cynically changing the electoral system—the entire bedrock of the Westminster system—to benefit themselves with 18 minutes notice? What about the bullying and victimisation of the former integrity commissioner or the former state archivist, whose only offence was to speak out against this government's failings which hurt every single Queenslanders every single day? It is a laundry list of failures and abuses of power, but why should Queenslanders even be surprised when that kind of behaviour is in Labor's DNA?

I have spoken many times in this parliament about the need for a more effective right-to-information process. If this government wants to talk about integrity and transparency then it can start with fixing the mess that exists in the Office of the Information Commissioner. It is stated as clear as day in the Coaldrake review that 'one of the more frequent concerns raised during consultations has been that of perceived overreach of ministerial staff'. Professor Coaldrake goes on to say, 'One senior executive captured the concerns by describing "attempts to suppress public records and subvert RTI processes".' There is the problem in black and white.

To give just one example, I submitted an RTI request in April 2021—19 months ago—and it is still not finalised. My request was for critical information relating to the running of the Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service and serious allegations from whistleblowers of bullying from the top down. It has hit roadblock after roadblock.

The public servants came to me because they were not being supported by their employer, who was the problem. After waiting 19 months for a result on my RTI, it is clear that the government's current process of delay tactics is now being used to hide crucial information from the public. Keeping these matters secret is preventing real change in our health system. We know from the Coaldrake review that records are being deliberately suppressed in an attempt to dodge RTI requests and that the Information Commissioner's role is influenced by the culture of government—a poor culture of government. The only reason I can think of for the information not being released in the case I have articulated is that the documents are damning and highlight a culture of bullying and intimidation that is embarrassing for the government from the top down. The delays to my RTI request reek of a cover-up by Queensland Health

and the government. Government ministers and their staff must stop interfering in the right to information process by trying to prevent their dirty laundry being aired. Transparency drives accountability, which is something this government would clearly benefit from.

This particular RTI request of mine is just one example of what is happening across government departments right across Queensland and how it is impacting public services. The Office of the Information Commissioner would be far more effective in helping members of the public and agencies in creating positive change if the Premier and ministers would just back off and let them do the jobs they are empowered to do.

While I am on the issue of cover-ups by government ministers, let's talk about data or the lack thereof. The issue that is most obvious and of most concern to the public is in health. Data representing the performance of each Queensland hospital and health service is released months after the fact, which does nothing to inform Queenslanders or improve patient outcomes. Perhaps the Minister for Health needs a reminder that data is not just numbers on a page. Each number represents a patient—a Queenslanders in need of help, a Queenslanders left waiting in the back of an ambulance at their local emergency department, a Queenslanders languishing on a waitlist for cataract surgery or, even worse, patients deteriorating on a waitlist for a waitlist who still have not even seen a doctor. Data matters because Queenslanders' lives matter. If this government was genuinely committed to openness, transparency and accountability, they would publish data in real-time just as the LNP has committed to. Such an approach will drive change and better outcomes for Queenslanders. Let's be clear that that accountability should apply to ministers as well.

Health is not the only department with dramas, and although I only have a limited time left I will say that it is as if every single minister has ordered their department to make accessing information and data as difficult as possible. Queensland government websites are incredibly difficult to navigate, and this government has demonstrated through its actions that it is not genuinely committed to openness and transparency.