




Speech By
Ray Stevens

MEMBER FOR MERMAID BEACH

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STATE PENALTIES ENFORCEMENT (MODERNISATION) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr STEVENS** (Mermaid Beach—LNP) (12.32 pm): It is another sitting week and another SPER bill hits the House. The \$1,200 million—I repeat: \$1,200 million—blowout in fines and penalties owing to Queensland taxpayers lays squarely at the feet of the Queensland Labor Party and their ill-advised decision to sell the rights to infringement notices to a private operator. We have seen bill after bill brought into this House by the Labor government, which is trying to contain the blowout in uncollected penalties but with virtually no diminution in the monolithic debt owed to the Queensland taxpayers in sight.

I refer to the comment of the member for Logan that when we came into government we were unable to reduce the massive SPER debt of \$700-odd million at the time, as I recall, that Labor had run up. However, there was no capacity because of the setup that they had put in place by selling assets—more Queensland assets sold by the Labor government! That was the problem for the Newman government in that particular period. This bill fiddles around the edges of recouping some of that money. As a party we would support all attempts to reduce the debt, even if those feeble attempts resulted in very little change to the debt figure owed to Queensland taxpayers. However, we cannot support other sneaky measures in the bill, which I will refer to further in my speech. I guarantee that over the next 2½ years, until the 2024 election, we will see that debt figure rise, particularly in view of the tough economic times ahead with rising inflation and rising interest rates that will force more people into the bad decision of not paying their infringement penalties. Labor could not manage a tuckshop financially, let alone put Queensland into a positive position financially.

However, there is one provision in the bill that I am totally uncomfortable with. It is the removal of the RTA board's independence when it comes to holding renters' bond money and passing control of that almost \$1 billion worth of rent payers' money to a tricky-fingered Labor government that has demonstrated it will use deceit, dodgy accounting evaluations and any non-disclosable financial dealings to avoid a ratings agency downgrade because of its indiscriminate large-scale borrowing shattering the Queensland balance sheet.

I note that today the Treasurer rose with a letter from his Treasury saying there is no difference in the assets and liabilities balance sheet. Oh der! I happen to be an accountant. When you have an asset that is other people's money there is a liability to pay that money back. However, there is a trick to this and it is all about the income level that this level of funding in government hands will create. It may give them capacity in the ratings agencies' eyes to pay back more money that they are owed in terms of their debt. It is not about the balance sheet as such, as the letter is purported to show, although I have not seen it yet; it is about the income that they hope to derive from the billion dollars in the Labor Party balance sheet.

The last Premier to suffer a ratings agency downgrade of Queensland's financial position was Anna Bligh, who was unceremoniously dumped at the next election by the greatest majority ever seen in this House. The architect of her financial demise was boy wonder treasurer Andrew Fraser. This Treasurer is desperate not to add his name to the history of failed Labor treasurers.

Mr POWER: Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to a point of order. Having examined the bill through the hearings process, I cannot see the relevance of the speech of the member for Mermaid Beach's speech to this bill.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Bush): Member for Mermaid Beach, I ask you to come back to the long title of the bill.

Mr STEVENS: If the member for Logan had waited, I was coming to the analogy: if it smells like a cook up and it looks like a cook up and there is no justifiable reason for the government to take over the Robbie Schwarten inspired RTA, it seems that Treasurer Dick is up to his less-than-honest thimble-and-pea tricks again to avoid the ratings downgrade. I withdraw.

Mr DICK: Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to a point of order. I take personal offense at those words.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Thank you, Treasurer. I believe the member has withdrawn.

Mr STEVENS: I withdraw. It is no wonder that the Treasurer is now referred to in financial circles as 'Tricky Dickie'.

Mr DICK: Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise on two points of order. Firstly—

Mr STEVENS: I withdraw.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Mermaid Beach, take your seat while I take the point of order.

Mr DICK: The first point of order is that I find those words personally offensive and ask that they be withdrawn. The second point of order is on the clear abuse of the processes and standing orders of this parliament by saying unparliamentary words and then seeking to immediately withdraw them, knowing that they are unparliamentary. I would ask you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to take appropriate action against the member for his clear, blatant and flagrant disregard for the standing orders of this parliament.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Bush): I will take advice on that. Member for Mermaid Beach, I agree that you will need to withdraw in terms of that comment being both personally offensive and unparliamentary. I caution you to refrain from engaging in that behaviour again in this speech.

Mr STEVENS: I withdraw. This smells like another 'great, get ready for sale titles office financial giggle' where the valuation of government assets that were not and will not ever be sold puts \$7½ billion on to the government's asset side of the ledger, aiding to hold back the tide of a ratings agency downgrade over Labor's \$130 billion of debt. The valuations were never disclosed by the duplicitous government as they were probably based on—as we find out a little bit later—somewhere between a 50- and a 100-year valuation. It is ludicrous to say what will happen in 2072. We do not know how this Treasurer sleeps at night knowing that he deliberately deceived and calculatedly overstated this Queensland government's financial position to the people of Queensland. As the—

Mr DICK: Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to a point of order. I take personal offence at the words that I am deliberately deceiving the people of Queensland. I ask the honourable member to withdraw.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Mermaid Beach, the minister has taken offence. I ask that you withdraw.

Mr STEVENS: I withdraw. There will be a day of reckoning when the economy of Queensland turns down and when this Treasurer's fumbling and fiddling around the financial position will be exposed for all to see. Does the Treasurer note that inflation in Queensland is now upwards of five per cent and that the rising interest rates that will go with that as the year comes on will put enormous pressure on the financial position of Queensland?

It beggars belief that in 2016 the RTA had accumulated reserves on its investments of \$43 million, around four per cent of the rental bond moneys of \$1 billion. Just as the COVID outbreak trashed financial markets around the world, the Treasurer's feeble excuse for taking over the administration of the RTA's investment portfolio was that its reserves had fallen to minus \$42 million and that the government had to give a letter of comfort guarantee to the RTA's funds. That equates to around an eight per cent drop on funds invested in a devastating worldwide financial crisis because of COVID. To give the House a comparative drop in market value of shares, let us take one of the country's top blue-chip investments, the Commonwealth Bank. In July 2019, the period we are comparing the RTA drop in finances to, Commonwealth Bank shares were \$83. When COVID hit in February 2020, they fell 36 per cent, to \$53, but bounced back in July 2020 to \$72, the corresponding 2021 period to the RTA's investment portfolio. They were down that year by 13 per cent, which makes the RTA's drop of eight per cent look meagre in comparison.

By the way, Commonwealth Bank shares today are around \$100. So the Treasurer's fabricated excuse for taking over the RTA's investment portfolio fails on every account. One can only deduce that the reason for the Treasurer hijacking the RTA board's remit has more to do with the wobbly balance sheet than protecting the interests of renters throughout Queensland. I acknowledge the member for Coomera, my financial adviser on the share market, who gave me those facts and figures.

It was conspicuous that the RTA board and administration failed to provide a submission to the Economics and Governance Committee and did not choose to attend committee hearings. This silence obviously indicates their disagreement with the proposed changes. Again, they join the conga line of frightened and threatened public servants and board members too intimidated by this integrity shattered Labor government which takes no prisoners when it comes to revenge and reprisal. It was also notable that consultation was deemed by this Labor government to be not necessary, which is in stark contrast to the Premier's hollow promises to be open and accountable in all of her government's actions.

Open and accountable has now degenerated into cover-up and being falsified by this Labor government. History will prove that this Palaszczuk period of governance over Queensland's finances is the biggest economic disaster for Queensland in its 157 years of existence.

In closing, this latest attempt at disguising the true state of play of Queenslanders' finances from rating agencies and Queensland taxpayers is a great big example of how this government will say anything, do anything and hide everything to stay in power and how Labor mates are living on jobs for the boys. The end is nigh and October 2024 cannot come quick enough.