



Speech By  
**Stephen Andrew**

**MEMBER FOR MIRANI**

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Record of Proceedings, 17 August 2022


**APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL**

**APPROPRIATION BILL**

**Consideration in Detail (Cognate Debate)**

**Appropriation Bill**

**Health and Environment Committee, Report**

 **Mr ANDREW** (Mirani—PHON) (11.38 am): I would like to make some comments on the health and environment estimates report for 2022. As I outlined in my statement of reservation on the report, I have a number of concerns with the estimates process and whether it is properly fulfilling its function of providing transparency and accountability on the government's various policies and expenditure. This is particularly a problem for the committee concerned with health and environment which accounts for approximately 50 per cent of the government's total budget.

One day is simply not enough time, I believe, to do little more than skim the surface of either one of these portfolios. Both portfolios encompass a huge range of complex areas and each is of enormous importance to Queensland taxpayers and Queensland businesses in general. Individual committee members only get to ask three or four questions at these hearings, and much of the time available is wasted in political pointscore and drawn-out answers that do little but wind down the clock. There is no opportunity for members to ask probing or follow-up questions half the time, even though the chair does do as best he can to make sure. Mostly, therefore, only very general questions are being asked and there is no opportunity to thoroughly review the output groups within each portfolio.

Many critical areas within the health, science and environment portfolios are getting no attention whatsoever. There needs to be a lot more accountability and transparency around the whole process or else the whole exercise will become pointless. At present, the estimates hearing provides only a very cursory examination of the budget estimates for the health and environment portfolios. This lack of transparency from the government and its officials is reflected in many of the issues that were raised during estimates. One case in point involves the Queensland forensic services lab. Only after the *Australian* newspaper exposed it to the public did the government even admit there was a problem. The issues with the forensics lab were not something that the government should ever have tried to suppress. It is disappointing, therefore, that it took so long for them to finally admit it and initiate a royal commission into the problems.

Another case involved the government's increasingly common practice of awarding multimillion dollar contracts to companies without tender or adherence to best practice. I was disappointed with the answers I received to questions asked about the Aspen Medical contracts along with other services within the Queensland health portfolio during estimates. My first question asked whether Aspen Medical had been contracted to also provide services at the Pinkenba facility. I was given a cryptic response

from the director-general, who said, 'It is not open.' I took that to mean 'no' and only in hindsight did I realise it did not mean that at all. In fact, my question had been blocked with a non-answer. Since then I have seen a report in the *Australian* that said the leaked contract between the government and Aspen did in fact include a clause for Aspen to provide the same services at the Pinkenba facility. Whether that happened or not we do not know. Why could the director-general not have simply said that when I asked?

Other forthcoming answers came in response to questions about what other contracts Queensland Health had with Aspen Medical. I was told, 'We do not publicly release information around individual spends with particular providers.' These defensive answers to questions by government officials is extremely concerning. There is far too much stalling, blocking and feigning ignorance going on here. The Auditor-General, Brendan Worrall, has said he will be looking into the cost of the Wellcamp project and the government's use of confidentiality provisions. When he does, I hope he takes a look at the estimates and committee process as well. I believe there should be a lot more crossbench members involved in this process. We have asked before for a committee of crossbench members and also for some of them to act as deputy chairs and even chairs. Mr Deputy Speaker, I think we have spoken about this in the Legal Affairs and Safety Committee.

I do not want to be too critical, but at times during the estimates hearing it appeared as though secretiveness had become the knee-jerk response to opposition and crossbench questions. I found the same problem during the hearings in the environment and science portfolio. All mining projects in Queensland are required to provide a PRC plan. So why when I asked the minister whether this also applies to renewables did she tell me that it would be a matter for state development? I would have thought administering the Environmental Protection (Rehabilitation Reform) Amendment Act came under the umbrella of the environment portfolio. Again, it seems there is a lack of transparency in the whole process, and that concerns me the most. I do think we should have more people from the crossbench in those positions to provide transparency across the board.