



Speech By
Ann Leahy

MEMBER FOR WARREGO


Record of Proceedings, 30 March 2023

STATE DEVELOPMENT AND REGIONAL INDUSTRIES COMMITTEE

Report, Motion to Take Note

Resumed from 23 February (see p. 272), on motion of Mr Whiting—

That the House take note of the State Development and Regional Industries Committee Report No. 28, 57th Parliament, *Inquiry into the Independent Assessor and councillor conduct complaints system*, tabled on 14 October 2022.

 **Ms LEAHY** (Warrego—LNP) (3.03 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate on the State Development and Regional Industries Committee report No. 28, 57th Parliament, *Inquiry into the Independent Assessor and councillor conduct complaints system*. I want to thank the committee members for their input into this report. I also thank the mayors and councillors who came forward with submissions and presented at the public hearings. The report itself references the fear and hesitation of many local government councillors. It says that the apprehension and the fear amongst councillors about the councillor conduct system impacts on how they interact with the complaints framework and it is leading to unnecessary overlegislation of the system. The fear is real. Some submitters had sleepless nights before appearing at this inquiry. It is appalling to see how the Labor government has treated elected representatives in local government, and women feel that fear the most. Let's face it, the committee report lays bare the broken integrity body that is preventing elected local government representatives from doing their jobs for their communities.

With 40 recommendations, I would call this an overhaul of the Office of the Independent Assessor and the councillor conduct complaints system. The system is not working in the best interests of local government and it is costing valuable ratepayer funds. The report lays that failure bare. It finds that 'the system needs to more closely and efficiently align with the intent of the legislation and public interest' and that 'each body can improve its processes in order to contribute to a better functioning councillor complaints system'. The most prominent issue raised was dissatisfaction with the length of time taken to resolve complaints. The true cost to ratepayers of these failures will never be fully calculated. It is somewhere in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Some examples are that it has already cost the Gold Coast \$200,000; Mount Isa City Council, \$200,000; and in Rockhampton it cost a by-election for a new mayor and councillor. What has the ratepayer received for this expenditure? They have got nothing. It has wasted ratepayers' money. Surely ratepayers deserve better from this Labor government.

Not only have there been costs to ratepayers but significant delays are occurring in the complaints system. The report states 'it was universally agreed that the delay to the resolution of complaints was unacceptable'. The report goes on to identify the source of these delays. The president of the Councillor Conduct Tribunal indicated they were 18 months behind in cases. There is an old saying that justice delayed is justice denied. The practice reforms identified in the report can and should be implemented without delay.

In relation to the recommendation regarding social media, I would like to publically acknowledge and thank Mayor Sean Dillon of Barcaldine for his courage in standing up for free speech and bringing this issue into the public eye. It is now incumbent on the government, especially the minister for local government and Deputy Premier, to heed and implement these recommendations. I reiterate the call from the deputy chair of the committee, the member for Lockyer, for a progress update to be provided to the committee every three months on the implementation of the recommendations. They should not just sit there and gather dust. Those recommendations need to be implemented. A lot of them do not even require legislative change. This is needed. There are far too many examples of where this Labor government is slow to act. I commend the member for Lockyer, the deputy chair, for making sure there is a benchmark to look at how those recommendations are being implemented.

Unfortunately, this government ignored the pleas of local government until it became an embarrassing problem of free speech on the front page of the *Courier-Mail* like we saw in the case of the mayor of Barcaldine, Sean Dillon. Queensland local governments deserve so much better. They need to see the recommendations from this committee report implemented sooner rather than later.