




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR GREGORY

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTORAL AND OTHER LEGISLATION (EXPENDITURE CAPS) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr MILLAR** (Gregory—LNP) (3.16 pm): The Gregory electorate covers nine local government areas and part of a 10th shire as well. In many ways, it is the level of government that my constituents have the most dealings with and it is fundamental to sustaining our quality of life in rural and regional Queensland. In other words, it is a big deal.

Of course, Queenslanders know how this Palaszczuk Labor government fiddled with the councillor complaints system to the point where it broke. We saw an outstanding local leader in Central Queensland, Margaret Strelow, a former mayor of Rockhampton, resign in protest at what was widely seen as her being targeted by the Labor Party that she once loyally supported. Then we saw Councillor Sean Dillon, Mayor of the Barcaldine Regional Council, investigated for doing his job and, as it turned out, being right about how to deliver COVID vaccines in the Barcaldine shire. We saw the OIA, which is responsible for overseeing the councillor complaints system, so under-resourced that complaints were left hanging over councillors' heads and overshadowing council elections.

Mr Saunders interjected.

Mr MILLAR: I take that interjection. I am not making it up. Those are facts. Who can forget when Labor tried to introduce compulsory preferential voting for local government elections in 2019? The backlash from both the local government sector and the ratepayers of Queensland was so severe that the Palaszczuk government was forced to abandon the plan at the last minute. They removed the provision during consideration in detail when the bill was debated in this House. Such a provision offended Queenslanders because they do not want to see party politics creep into local government.

The LNP has been consistently supporting councils' collective positions on their voting systems. I am concerned about how this bill's provisions around third-party expenditure will unfold on the ground. When we cap expenditure for candidates we need to pay real attention to campaigning by third parties, at both state and local government levels. It is at the local government level that third parties such as unions can potentially capture elections and, by doing so, capture the local council.

The committee's third recommendation has crucial importance to today's debate. The committee recommended that the department consider conducting a review of the bill's operation within 12 months of the 2024 local government elections and that the key findings of the review be published. I will emphasise that by saying it again: that the key findings of such a review be published. The government is rightly famous for the number of reviews it undertakes and its reluctance to publicly release the findings. I believe a review after the 2024 local government elections is absolutely imperative and, as such, it should be part of the legislation.

The type of review is as important as the timing. I do not think it should be a departmental review where ministerial spin doctors can get to edit the report before publication. Such a review should be conducted by the parliamentary committee itself, with any and all submissions published on the

parliament's website and public hearings held. The publishing of submissions is vital so that ratepayers can see both what is happening in their shire and whether that experience was shared by ratepayers and other shires.

As I said in my opening remarks, we cannot forget when the Palaszczuk government in the dead of night—with less than 20 minutes notice—completely changed the voting system for state elections. Given this shameful record, I am not surprised that this legislation contains a handy little provision which will allow the state government of the day to change the definition of 'electoral expenditure' by regulation alone, with no oversight from parliament or its committees. Mark my words: this is not accidental or incidental. It is a provision which will allow the state government of the day to manipulate the system to benefit its candidates and its preferred groups.

In its submission to the committee the Queensland Law Society also expressed this view, saying that the ability to change the definition of 'electoral expenditure' by simple regulation does not have sufficient regard for the institution of parliament. There would be difficulties for the media in even reporting such manipulation of the system because there would be no capacity for a body such as the Electoral Commission of Queensland to investigate the effect of such a change. This brings me to the second recommendation of the State Development and Regional Industries Committee report. It states—

That the Minister include training on electoral expenditure caps in the training and professional development requirements for councillors and local government candidates.

While this bill does much to bring the conduct of state government and local government elections into alignment, every member in this House knows firsthand that it is a complex and complicated system. In local government elections we are hopefully attracting candidates from right across the community of ratepayers, representing a range of occupations and concerns. In order to attract quality candidates representing ratepayers, candidates need to know that they can safely navigate within the system. They cannot feel that it is so complicated that they put their personal reputations at risk by even standing as a candidate. Training of candidates is therefore vital in sustaining quality local governments in Queensland.

The Electoral Commission of Queensland in its submission expressed confidence in its ability to provide the necessary training to candidates and parties but also made it clear that its confidence was based on the assumption of additional full-time-equivalent staff and adequate budgetary resourcing to accomplish that. This is absolutely vital and it should form a key area for the review of the impact of this system after the 2024 local government elections. Even with a solid educational program in place, experience shows us that candidates and third-party campaigners are going to need guidance during the conduct of campaigns. We do not want to see a situation where they have nowhere to turn for guidance without risking prosecution or needing funds to pay for the legal advice. This could be easily resolved if candidates or groups of candidates were able to take their intended campaign materials to the Electoral Commission of Queensland for preapproval and prequalification of what constitutes electoral expenditure and what does not. Not only would this reassure political candidates that they can navigate this system without risking reputation or prosecution, it also means that the Electoral Commission of Queensland would not have to deal with a backlog of requests for rulings during the conduct of an election campaign.

Lastly, I would like to highlight the potential politicisation created by this bill of the four large, undivided councils of Gladstone, Noosa, Mackay and Toowoomba. There is an effect of tying the expenditure caps to the number of electors. In Toowoomba, because there are 115,000 electors, a local government candidate has their campaign expenditure capped at only \$30,000, but the geographic reality is that those electors are spread across an area equivalent to nearly three state electorates. In those electorates each independent candidate would be able to spend up to \$90,000, but if there was one in each electorate that would be \$180,000. Clearly, this creates a major incentive for local government candidates to form teams to pool their electoral funds in order to get sufficient coverage of their electors. Sadly, this is the thin edge of the wedge that will inevitably see those councillors become politicised. I think that is regrettable. There are members of the House who can speak to this better than I can, but I would like to put on the record that most Queenslanders deplore any further politicisation of local government.