




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR CAIRNS

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT (COUNCILLOR CONDUCT) AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr HEALY** (Cairns—ALP) (11.54 am): I cannot hear anything outside! It is wonderful in here. I rise to speak in support of the Local Government (Councillor Conduct) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. Local government elected representatives play a vital part in the support and development of their communities. As such, it is imperative that they operate with integrity and good governance in everything they do, just as we do. There is an expectation out there from the community. I do not think anything in this bill is outside of those expectations. It is essential that a fair and rigorous system is in place to support their function and ensure they operate with compliance and probity in every situation. The Independent Assessor and councillor complaints systems fulfil this role and task. At the end of the day, it is an essential part of an overall role that they play.

It is only right and proper that such systems that are in place are appropriately reviewed and amended from time to time to reflect and keep up with best practices and performances. We have heard members of the committee speak to this. Like many in this chamber, I deal with a lot of councils on a regular basis. They have all indicated the same outcomes. It is absolutely vital that we ensure we keep on top of this and modernise it and that we make sure it is relevant and, more importantly, very much appropriate.

The State Development and Regional Industries Committee has done an outstanding job of consulting with a wide range of submitters and witnesses. Its work has ensured that a fair and sensible approach has been established to recalibrate the councillor conduct framework. It is important to acknowledge that the changes that have been made have occurred as a result of a rigorous and thorough process of consultation. The bill before us does just that with its implementation of 19 of the 40 committee recommendations. This is a matter of supporting continuous improvement and of maintaining a fit-for-purpose complaints and conduct framework that is relevant for all Queensland councils. This aspect is especially important when considering the customs and cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander councillors and the challenges faced by many smaller local government areas, where a very different population in representation sizes can present unique governance situations.

As the Assistant Minister for Tourism Industry Development I can say that, in travelling around this great state of ours—and it is vast—the challenges are significantly different in the Far North, particularly if you are looking at the cape or the Channel Country, from the challenges in the city. Passing this bill and making changes to these protocols is essential, but we have to make sure we take all of those other factors into account.

The primary objective of the Local Government (Councillor Conduct) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill is to recalibrate the councillor conduct framework to make it more effective and efficient and to ensure that only matters of substance and in the public interest proceed to the Councillor Conduct

Tribunal for determination. The bill does this by implementing the government's policy in relation to 19 recommendations of the committee's report No. 28 of the 57th Parliament titled *Inquiry into the Independent Assessor and councillor conduct complaints system*.

I want to run through some of the key factors here, but, as I have said, I have spoken to many councils on this. They all recognise that there is room for improvement. That is why I make the point that this needs to be an ongoing process. We have acknowledged that and we will continue to make it better and better. I think that is made very clear in the committee's report.

The bill introduces a preliminary assessment process that the Independent Assessor must undertake to determine how best to deal with a complaint about councillor conduct, including a time limitation for accepting the complaint. Other points to note include that the bill provides that the CCT may be constituted by not more than three members for a hearing and only one member to deal with administrative or procedural matters for hearings. I see this as making the outcomes a little more time efficient.

The bill permits the Independent Assessor to withdraw an application made to the Councillor Conduct Tribunal, in whole or in part. It also removes the CCT's function of investigating suspected inappropriate conduct on behalf of local governments. I will not be going through all of them, but it is important to recognise that some of those provisions make a far better and a cleaner, more efficient system. The member for Mount Ommaney touched on this, and I want to reiterate it: the bill establishes compulsory training requirements for councillors. This is absolutely essential. Understanding the processes and the procedures is fundamental in the utilisation in ensuring better outcomes.

The bill also makes further changes to the councillor conduct complaints system, which is part of that process. They include: limiting the system's application in relation to former councillors; further clarifying and enhancing the councillor conflict of interest requirements; and, amongst others, modernising local government advertising requirements which we think is obviously pretty important.

As I said earlier, broad support for this amendment was outlined by several local government representatives at the public hearing in Gladstone, as well as submitted by the LGAQ, Councillor Tate and the Isaac Regional Council. The LGAQ submitted that it appreciated the changes, noting that this would 'ensure that the councillor conduct system doesn't become a political weapon against individuals which is critical in maintaining the confidence of the sector and the integrity of the role of the OIA and the CCT'. I think that really covers it when you are talking about industry support.

In closing, it is critical to again acknowledge the pivotal role councillors play in their communities, with Queenslanders expecting high standards of conduct from their leaders at all levels. A robust independent framework for councillor conduct and complaints is essential to uphold public confidence in local government, enhance sector capability and deliver positive outcomes statewide.

The committee, along with numerous participants, embraces the proposed amendments in the bill. These changes aim to refine the councillor conduct framework, making it more effective and efficient, ensuring that only substantive matters in the public interest proceed for determination.

Since the committee initiated its inquiry in 2021, there has been noticeable improvement in the operation of the councillor conduct complaints system. Testimonies from the multiple inquiry participants affirm this very positive shift. Sustaining this progress is paramount, as I have said. Therefore, it is recommended that the relevant parliamentary committee, alongside its ongoing oversight duties, conducts a review of the councillor conduct system in the upcoming parliamentary term to guarantee its intended operation.

I want to acknowledge, as I have said before, the hard work of the committee and the strong support of the secretariat. I commend the bill to the House.