




Speech By
Michael Berkman

MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

Record of Proceedings, 22 May 2024

**RESIDENTIAL TENANCIES AND ROOMING ACCOMMODATION AND OTHER
LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL; MANUFACTURED HOMES (RESIDENTIAL
PARKS) AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (7.17 pm): In this cognate debate I am going to largely limit my comments to Labor's rental reforms. I will start by saying that I think it is quite generous to actually call them rental reforms when really all we are doing is tinkering at the edges. This bill bans rent bidding, which is itself a practice that has only become prolific because of the desperate state of the housing crisis. The bill also allows renters to make reasonable modifications, it increases notice periods for access to the property and it mandates fee-free rental payment options. These are all small but good reforms. Notably, they are all changes that the Greens proposed in 2021. I will go to that question quickly of fee-free rental payments.

Some real estate agents require tenants to make payments through apps that can charge processing fees as much as four or five per cent of the usual rent. That may not be a surprise to the Labor and LNP landlords in the building but it shocked me. That means a typical couple renting an apartment in Brisbane at the median price and made to pay through one of these apps would have paid an extra \$3,000 in rent since we tried to mandate this very same change almost three years ago. If Labor had supported this proposal back in 2021 instead of three years later, they could have saved renters thousands of dollars, but they did not. They squibbed on it back then and they are squibbing on meaningful reform again now.

This bill does nothing to address the fundamental power imbalances between renters and landlords. This is why in relation to the Residential Tenancies and Rooming Accommodation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill I move—

That the words 'now read a second time' be deleted and the following words be inserted:

'be considered once the government commits to legislating a freeze on rent increases, a long-term cap on rent increases, and commits to giving renters a guaranteed right to a lease renewal'

I take no pleasure in suggesting that the very modest reforms in this bill be delayed until we get some meaningful reform, but these are very important issues. Rent controls and a genuine right to remain are too important to be left for kicking the can down the road, especially in the face of a potential LNP government in October. We heard a bit of a wet lettuce retort from the member for Greenslopes about rent freezes. He referred to the Per Capita think tank report, but he neglected to mention that the report says that rent freezes might be troublesome because in Queensland our protections for renters are so weak that renters have no right to remain, which puts them at jeopardy.

In circumstances where rents have risen three times faster than inflation over the past few years, I do not think that you can say with a straight face that there is not an argument for freezing rents to let wages catch up. Wages have been close to stagnant for a little while now. They certainly have not increased at a rate of 45 per cent or 47 per cent over the past few years. A temporary rent freeze will narrow that gap somewhat. It is an important step that the government should be taking.

The Per Capita report that the member for Greenslopes referred to gives us some very interesting figures about what rent caps have actually done when they have been implemented. The ACT government put rent caps in place that, over the year to 2023, resulted in a 1.9 per cent decline in rents while the rest of the country saw increases of over 10 per cent, but far be it for the member for Greenslopes to try to give a complete picture. Much of his efforts focused on the Greens because he knows he is in trouble as his party keep neglecting renters. They will keep neglecting renters at their own peril.

There is no doubt that Labor could cap rents today. We know that is the case because the manufactured homes bill, which we are debating at the same time as renters' rights, caps rents for people in manufactured homes to CPI or 3½ per cent, whichever is the higher. I do not think that is good enough. It is not good enough for people living in manufactured homes and it is certainly not good enough for any other renter, especially when they have had successive years of ludicrous rent increases. However, at least it would be a start.

We have heard from ministers that the justification for the changes to manufactured homes legislation is fundamentally that rents have risen faster than wages. That is no less the case for the 1.7 million renters in Queensland. I will say it again: in the last three years, rents have risen three times faster than wages. We have seen different figures of 45 per cent to 47 per cent increases in rents over those few years. It is clear: Labor cannot claim that it is not possible or that there is some barrier to putting rent caps in place. They cannot claim that they will not work. I will send the member for Greenslopes a copy of the report that he referred to so sparingly. It is there. It is plain and simple. It is in their own legislation. Clearly, Labor seems to think that some renters deserve the protection of rent caps but other renters do not. The 38,000 people who live in manufactured homes deserve a rent cap but the other 1.7 million renters get nothing—zilch.

Before everyone gets carried away saying that the Greens have no credibility, I say what rot. The amount of time both sides of the House spend in here talking about us demonstrates how scared they are of losing seats to the Greens at the October election. It is not just us saying this. QCOSS agrees with our position. Tenants Queensland agrees with our position. QCOSS gave evidence that, in as many words, similar protections must be provided to renters to provide increased housing security and affordability.

The so-called rent caps that the government is introducing through this bill are almost laughable. As the member for South Brisbane indicated, when they passed their yearly limits on rent increases we told them that it would jeopardise the security of renters even further. That has now had the predictable effect of incentivising landlords to evict their tenants after six months so they can jack up the rent. We told them it would happen and they ignored us. QCOSS told them that it would happen. TQ told them it would happen. It has taken 14 months for them to get their act together and reverse these changes. How many hundreds of tenants have been evicted because of Labor's sloppy legislation over those 14 months?

We really have to point to the housing free marketeers here. They say that we cannot mess with the housing market, but look where a free housing market has got us. It has got us to the point where people are literally one rent increase away from eviction and where people are being turfed out into a rental market that offers nothing. Today my team had a look and the cheapest two-bedroom rental they could find anywhere in my electorate was 470 bucks a week, which is more than anyone on a JobSeeker payment or similar will get.

In terms of the right to renew, again, the government's claim was mind-boggling. They take us for fools if they claim that they have ended no-grounds evictions. Every tenant is susceptible to being evicted at the end of their lease. That is not an end to no-grounds evictions. Going back to the Per Capita report, they said that allowing no-fault evictions was one of the key things that should be addressed in our housing market. Will the government end no-grounds evictions? Now is their chance. They squibbed on it before, but they have to do it now.

You cannot do one without the other. Rent caps cannot work if you do not have a right to remain and a right to remain is worth nothing if your landlord can jack up the rent as much as they like to effectively make it unaffordable next time around. We have to work on both of these issues to address this undeniable power imbalance between renters and landlords. If the government are not going to do it now, if they are not going to make these changes, then they will lose seats and they are going to lose government. They have to accept that more than one-third of Queenslanders are renters and they are neglecting them day in, day out.

I cannot finish without acknowledging that the Labor government is now parroting the *Courier-Mail* and the LNP's lines by blaming the government-made housing crisis on immigration rates. That is disgraceful. It is nothing more than a dog whistle. It is despicable that those on the government benches are comfortable using migrants as a scapegoat for their own abysmal failures. It is not migrants who have failed to keep pace with the need for social housing and who have spent generations bowing to the demands of the property industry; it is this government. Instead of again waiting for years to apply our policy, please, for renters across Queensland, just do it now.

(Time expired)