




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR BANCROFT

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QUEENSLAND PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION BILL

 **Mr WHITING** (Bancroft—ALP) (7.30 pm): I rise tonight to speak on the Queensland Productivity Commission Bill 2024 before us. As we have heard, it is clear that this commission will not be independent, not be transparent and not be accountable. We heard what the member for Bundamba said in the hearing on this. He said—

Have I missed anywhere in the bill where I could find the words 'independence' and 'transparency'? Are those words in there and I have just missed them?

I think that sums up what this is about. 'Independence' and 'transparency' are not in this bill and they are not part of this commission. Clause 3 may mention independent advice, but there is almost nothing in this bill to back that up.

The Treasurer said earlier tonight that it would be accountable and independent because of clause 38(3) and that is that the Treasurer cannot actually direct the content of any of their work. That is the only part of the bill they can turn to if they want to claim independence—the only part of the bill. However, that one clause is no foundation. When you look at what else is in the bill, there is nothing about publishing directions to the commission from the Treasurer and nothing about needing to table any of their work in parliament. All the commission needs to do is publish it on a website three months after the Treasurer has sat on that report. There are no lines of reporting or accountability to parliament. There is nothing about independence because the Treasurer needs to control this commission. As we have said, he will command it. He can give it any direction he feels is reasonably necessary. He can command that they give him advice or information within any timeframe and he can attach conditions to that command. The commission can only do research or release information as commanded by the Treasurer.

Let me reiterate what these commands can be under section 37. The commission must give notice of their intention to do research. The Treasurer can approve or refuse this research. The Treasurer can amend the research proposal. The Treasurer can command the commission not publish their self-initiated research. Whichever way we look at it, the information must go through the Treasurer. The people appointed to the commission have to come through the Treasurer. He is the funnel through which every candidate going to this commission must be appointed.

As an example of the lack of transparency surrounding this commission, we know there were two government statements, on 14 November and 28 November, which outline many of the reasons they think they need this version of a productivity commission. During the hearing we asked for this modelling. They could not or would not provide it. That modelling is one of the foundations or the reasons for this commission, yet it remains hidden, and that is modelling done by Treasury. It is very clear that this commission is not an independent body. As the shadow treasurer said, it is a personal plaything of the Treasurer. It is his own private think tank to command.

The question is: what can the Treasurer do with this body he personally commands? The answer is: nearly anything he wants it to do. It can conduct inquiries into any economic or social issue. In fact, I believe that could encompass nearly every aspect of Queensland life we could imagine. It is pretty broad. This is his own personal think tank that is able to examine anything to do with jobs, schools, hospitals or work conditions, for example.

We discovered during the hearing that this commission can even be directed by the Treasurer to review new or existing legislation. That was made explicitly clear by Treasury officials during the hearing. That was their opinion. The question is: what is the point of having committees of parliament to examine legislation if the Treasurer's own think tank can actually do it? Would that report by the commission on new or existing legislation be tabled in parliament like committee reports are? Would they be done before new legislation is actually debated? I think we heard Treasury say that such a review would be complementary to the parliamentary processes, but it is clear they can replace or shunt aside some of the work of a parliamentary committee with this body.

One of the other things we looked at is that the Treasurer can direct this commission to administer regulations. That is in the bill. Which regulations are they? We do not know. Clause 9 says that the commission can administer, monitor or review regulatory matters. The question is: what does this mean? Can they be in charge, for example, of workplace regulations? The Treasury officials we talked to during the hearing said they initially had the same questions. When we asked the Treasury officials whether they could administer any kind of regulation, they admitted these are matters to be decided by government. That is right; it is up to the government to determine how they use this regulatory power.

Mr Crandon: The difference, though, is we are open and accountable and you never were in a decade. There's the difference, open and accountable—not you.

Mr WHITING: It is very interesting to hear these interjections from the other side. Many of the members opposite have made many promises and commitments. It occurred to me tonight that the government will be able to wriggle out of those commitments and promises if it puts this Productivity Commission onto the job: 'I'm sorry. We've looked at it. We can't do this project or that project.' I heard the member for Maryborough talking about the road projects he has promised and committed. There is a lot of work there. If the Productivity Commission gets on to the job of what this government can actually afford, I would be hesitant to say he is going to deliver those. That is a word of warning for members opposite about how this Productivity Commission could be used.

One of the things we note is that there is not much in this bill about productivity. The QCU pointed out that the functions of the commission do not relate to productivity; it is only mentioned meaningfully a few times, as the member for Cooper has already outlined. These same concerns were reflected by the Institute of Public Affairs. If productivity is not going to get a look-in, one of the things we know is that the LNP will want to use this commission at the command of the Treasurer to target the wages and conditions of workers in the construction industry. There is no doubt about that. That will be their job: to drop the hammer on the wages and conditions of workers in the construction industry. There is already this extraordinary expectation that the government will use the commission to do exactly this.

One witness made the incredible statement that the commission will be 'a policy tiger to deliver change across government'. It is no secret that they are going to go after construction. This witness said the construction industry needs a 'daddy' figure and strong regulation. The news is that the Treasurer, through this commission, is going to be that 'daddy' figure for the construction industry.

Mr Mander: And what a good daddy he is!

Mr WHITING: There are many things to unpack there, but I am not going to go into that. I think that says more about the member for Everton than anything else.

In conclusion, I will repeat some of the comments we put in our statement of reservation. The commission will not be independent, it will not be accountable, it will not be transparent. It will be a hammer controlled by the hands of the Treasurer doing as he commands. It will have unfettered remit to inquire into any aspect of Queensland life. It will be able to go beyond conducting inquiries and providing advice and move into the space of policy creation and implementing the LNP Crisafulli government's agenda.