Speech By

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ELECTORAL LAWS (RESTORING ELECTORIAL FAIRNESS) AMENDMENT BILL

Second Reading

Ms BUSH (Cooper—ALP) (4.12 pm): Every time I head into an election I get the experience of standing alongside Greens volunteers for two weeks at the pre-poll and listening to them recite the statement that the Greens do not accept corporate donations. We all know that that is not true, but that is a story for another day. At every election I am also able to respond to that statement with confidence knowing that Queensland has—or had—the toughest political donation framework in the nation, and that is because Queensland's electoral laws were built deliberately over time through successive Labor governments that understood that public confidence in democracy depends on strong rules, clear boundaries and transparency.

It was Labor governments that banned political donations from property developers, recognising the unique risks that arise when private interests intersect with planning and development decisions. It was Labor governments that ensured strict donation caps applied over an electoral cycle, not manipulated year by year, and it was Labor governments that included real-time disclosure so Queenslanders could see who was funding political campaigns in real time. These reforms were not ideological; they were practical and evidence based and introduced in response to serious integrity risks that were identified by Queensland's own Crime and Corruption Commission. This bill dismantles that framework in one sweep. It weakens donation limits, reopens known corruption risks and strips democratic rights from more Queenslanders, with disproportionate consequences for women, for First Nations people and for those with a disability interacting with the criminal justice system.

The first major change in the bill is the dramatic increase in political donations. By shifting donation caps from an electoral cycle to financial years, the bill allows donors to contribute more funds during a parliamentary term. The practical effect is to multiply the amount of private money flowing into politics during that election cycle. This is not a minor technical change; it fundamentally alters the balance of influence in our democracy and moves Queensland in the opposite direction to reform elsewhere. Other jurisdictions are tightening political finance rules and tackling head-on how to reduce the influence of wealth on democratic outcomes. The Labor government in South Australia has now removed political donations entirely, yet here, at a time when Queenslanders are under intense cost-of-living pressures, this parliament is being asked to prioritise legislation that enables politicians and political parties to raise and spend more money. Against that backdrop, expanding the role of private money in politics is not just tone-deaf; it completely undermines the trust that people have in our political institutions. Integrity and affordability are not separate concerns. When people believe political decisions are shaped by money, confidence in government erodes and good economic policy becomes much harder to deliver.

The second major change is the removal of the ban on property developer donations. I want to be clear that this is not about demonising property developers; it is, in fact, the opposite. Property developers play a legitimate role in Queensland's economy. They build homes, deliver infrastructure

and employ thousands of people. The ban that was introduced by the former Labor government was never about vilification of any one industry; it was about recognising a structural corruption risk and removing it for everyone's benefit, including developers. Development is uniquely exposed to discretionary government decision-making—planning approvals, zoning changes, infrastructure sequencing and ministerial interventions. That exposure creates heightened risks of actual or perceived influence. Those risks were laid bare during Operation Belcarra.

The Crime and Corruption Commission commenced Operation Belcarra after serious concerns about conduct in Queensland's local government elections and it identified widespread noncompliance and systemic weaknesses that created actual and perceived corruption risks, particularly where political donations intersected with development applications. The CCC's recommendations were designed to remove those risks before they arise, protecting communities, decision-makers and developers alike. In its submission on this bill, the CCC warned that aspects of the proposed changes represent a significant departure from Queensland's robust political donations framework and are out of step with reforms introduced to manage risks associated with political influence and perceptions of it. The CCC also cautioned that these changes are being proposed at a particularly sensitive time as Queensland enters a period of intense development pressure in the lead-up to the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Constituents of mine have raised serious concerns over this government's tearing up of longstanding planning frameworks in order to fast-track the proposed Victoria Park stadium. The government has overridden local planning instruments, environmental protections and community consultation processes that exist precisely to balance development with neighbourhood amenity, cultural heritage and environmental values. We have seen, by the government's own admission, the effective sidelining of multiple pieces of planning legislation to create an uninterrupted pathway for this project, with almost no regard for the impacts on surrounding residents, small businesses, green space or First Nations cultural significance.

This same government that has centralised planning power, weakened safeguards and adopted a rushed, top-down approach to Olympic infrastructure is now proposing to allow property developers to donate directly to political parties and candidates, including senior ministers with direct or indirect oversight of Olympic delivery bodies. That includes the Deputy Premier, whose portfolio intersects with the very agencies responsible for coordinating Olympic infrastructure and development considerations. Queenslanders are entitled to ask the simple question: what safeguards does this bill contain to ensure the corruption risks identified by the Crime and Corruption Commission are not realised in precisely these circumstances?

The CCC has warned that reintroducing property developer donations during a period of intense development pressure heightens the risk of actual or perceived undue influence, yet this bill offers no convincing answer as to how the risks are going to be managed. When a government demonstrates a cavalier approach to planning safeguards, prioritises speed over scrutiny and adopts rhetoric that consistently elevates the interests of the powerful over the rights of affected communities, it is not enough to rely on disclosure forms and after-the-fact penalties. Integrity systems exist to prevent temptation before it arises, and this bill dismantles those protections at the very moment that Queenslanders need that type of protection.

These are the serious warnings from Queensland's independent corruption watchdog, yet the committee did not allow the CCC to appear at the public hearing. That decision should concern every member of this House and every Queenslander out there who cares about integrity. Why would a government refuse to hear directly from the very body responsible for safeguarding the integrity of our democratic society? Strong integrity laws do not punish developers; they protect everyone from pressure, suspicion and reputational harm, and this bill removes those.

The third major issue is the expansion of prisoner disenfranchisement. This bill removes the right to vote from people serving sentences of one year or more. That change is neither proportionate nor justified. It is also not gender neutral in its impact. Women in prison are overwhelmingly incarcerated for low-level, poverty related and nonviolent offences. Many are primary carers. Many are survivors of domestic and family violence and sexual violence. Many have been criminalised through homelessness, mental illness, addiction and coercive control. A one-year sentence does not indicate rejection of civic responsibility; it often reflects profound social and economic disadvantage. Removing their right to vote does not strengthen respect for the law; it severs one of the last remaining civic connections women in prison retain, making it that much harder for them to transition out of prison.

Queensland has long recognised that civic participation supports rehabilitation and reintegration and this bill abandons that principle. It also fits the broader pattern of policy choices that have fallen hardest on Queensland women, weakening economic security, reducing access to services and now stripping political voice from some of the most marginalised women in our state.

I want to talk for a moment about process because process matters, particularly when the rules of democracy are being rewritten. This bill was introduced late in the year. Consultation was conducted over the Christmas and New Year period. Scrutiny was shallow; key stakeholders were sidelined. These reforms were not taken to the election. Queenslanders did not vote for weaker donation laws, expanded corruption risks and disenfranchisement. When governments change the foundations of democracy they must do so transparently, carefully and with consent. That standard has not been met.

Queensland once led the nation on electoral integrity because it chose strong guardrails over convenience and transparency over interference. This bill dismantles those safeguards. It expands the role of private money into politics, reintroduces risks into Queensland that we had already acted to prevent and removes democratic rights from people who already live at the margins, in particular women. It does so without a mandate, without meaningful consultation and without heeding the warnings of Queensland's very own corruption watchdog.