




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

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QUEENSLAND PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION BILL

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (11.54 am): Deputy Speaker Krause, I cannot go any further without wishing you a very happy birthday.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Krause): Thank you, member for Maiwar.

Mr BERKMAN: I rise to make my contribution on the Queensland Productivity Commission Bill. As others have said, this bill will 're-establish the Productivity Commission that will undertake inquiries and research and provide independent advice to the minister in relation to economic and social issues, regulatory matters or legislation, having particular regard to productivity, economic growth and improving living standards in Queensland'. Wow! That is a lot.

The Queensland Greens do not oppose the establishment of the Productivity Commission. In fact, when the previous Labor government rolled the productivity and regulatory review functions of the former QPC into Treasury as part of the Debt Reduction and Savings Bill we spoke out against it. We raised concerns that the move deprived us of the Queensland Productivity Commission's independence by making the government itself responsible for doing analysis and preparing reports that scrutinise government activity and inform decisions. In simple terms, we need more independent scrutiny of government, not less.

While the commission will ostensibly be independent of government, that does not prevent the LNP from stacking it with a commissioner or board members who will make the kinds of recommendations that favour the LNP and its corporate mates. The Queensland Council of Unions pointed out in their submission that this—

... does not appear to be a productivity commission at all. Rather, it appears to be a statutory body established to provide centralised policy and legislative advice on any government business and inquire into any matter the Minister, or Government, may determine.

The QCU also observed that there is a risk the commission will be used to 'circumvent existing statutory review or parliamentary processes to consider legislation or regulations'.

Many others have gone over the very real concerns about ministerial control and approval requirements so I will not labour that point any further. We have heard a lot from other members in this debate about productivity not being some kind of abstract economic principle. Productivity refers to how efficiently inputs like labour, raw materials and capital are used to produce goods or services. I would suggest that, while it might be measurable and reportable, it is in fact a pretty abstract economic principle and indeed what one might deem to be productive and efficient is in itself quite a subjective thing. The dominant economic metrics that are used to justify the power of big business, the enormous wealth of billionaires and the rapidly growing divide between the very wealthy and ordinary people are far from objective.

Conventional concepts of productivity or efficiency prioritise activities that generate profits, often at the expense of those who sustain communities, care for people or protect the environment. Such social impacts—like declining living standards or housing security or environmental impacts, for that

matter; little things like the global climate and biodiversity crisis—can be minimised and bundled together and euphemistically written off as externalities. If an industry externalises its costs on the environment and community or forces workers to do more for less it will appear more productive. Some lines on an economist's graph will go up, even if the long-term costs far outweigh the short-term gains.

Meanwhile, the things that truly enrich our environment, our communities and our other lives—things like raising children, caring for the elderly, sustaining communities or preserving the environment—are undervalued or ignored in productivity metrics because they do not directly contribute to profit making. A nurse rushing between patients due to understaffing is seen as more efficient and more productive than one who has time to provide proper personalised care. A worker who does unpaid overtime to answer emails, skips breaks and takes on extra tasks is seen as more productive than one who works reasonable hours and has time for family, hobbies or rest. Is a society where people are too exhausted to enjoy their lives more advanced, more productive or preferable?

Public libraries, local parks or community centres can be readily dismissed as unproductive because they do not generate much cash flow or profits, and they contribute negligibly to GDP or GSP; yet these are the places where people meet, socialise and build relationships. When they are replaced by supposedly more productive commercial developments, social bonds weaken and loneliness grows.

In many neighbourhoods, rising workloads and long commutes leave people with very little time to interact with their neighbours and their communities. The informal networks that once existed—whether that is helping a neighbour, watching someone else's kids or simply sharing a conversation—slowly disappear. These networks, however, do add tremendous value to our lives where they exist, but they are essentially invisible in economic thinking and benchmarks.

A person working multiple jobs to make ends meet may be counted as highly productive in economic terms but, if they have no time to spend with their children or community, what does that say about the priorities of the system? When economic growth is pursued without primary regard for human wellbeing, we end up with a system that sacrifices what actually matters for the illusion of progress or productivity.

Very early advancements in technology led to an optimism that productivity gains would allow workers to work less while retaining a comfortable wage and high living standards. Instead, and even more so in recent decades, workers' wages have stagnated while the rich get richer off the back of the increased productivity of labour. According to the Australian Council of Social Services latest inequality report, in the last five years 47 per cent of all new wealth created in Australia accrued to the wealthiest 10 per cent. That is very nearly half of the wealth accruing to the wealthiest 10 per cent. The bottom 60 per cent of households—a substantial majority—accrued only 14 per cent of this newly created wealth. Let's be clear-eyed about this. Productivity does not equal equality. Productivity does not equate directly to any values that we might hold as a society or as individuals.

I have had my reservations about some of the work of the Productivity Commission for these reasons and more in the past, but I am interested to consider what it could do in this new form. A productivity commission that is genuinely interested in improving living standards for all Queenslanders could dedicate its time to myriad exciting solutions to some of the biggest problems facing Queensland—issues like the growing divide between the very wealthy and ordinary people, the climate and environmental crisis created by corporate profit seeking, and the erosion of our social fabric.

First of all, it could provide advice about the implementation of a four-day working week in Queensland in response to our long increased productivity. It could use the 100:80:100 model recommended by the 2023 Senate inquiry into work and care. This is a model where employees retain 100 per cent of their salary while reducing their hours to 80 per cent and maintaining 100 per cent productivity. How good would it be for workers to have more time to spend with their families and friends, taking the time to rest and play, and investing in the vibrancy and cultural life of their communities?

Next the commission could research what is needed to not just fully fund our state schools but explore other opportunities to eliminate the stratification of Queensland's education system and ensure that education caters to the diverse needs of all Queenslanders including those Queenslanders with a disability.

The new commission need not stop there. Coles and Woolies have both been posting record profits while exploiting workers and farmers and hiking up prices for shoppers. Under its regulatory advice functions, the commission could advise in relation to breaking up corporate monopolies and ending price gouging. What about investigating the benefits of increased investment in active and public transport to reduce congestion and greenhouse gas emissions, and improve public health and community connection? It could plan a rapid end to new coal and gas projects while providing a just transition for workers to safeguard not only productivity and living standards for future generations but their very capacity to survive on a livable planet.

Despite the commission's apparent aim of improving living standards for Queenslanders, you can guarantee that the LNP's idea of productivity is not one that will suit the vast majority of people experiencing housing stress, wage stagnation, skyrocketing grocery prices and poor working conditions, but it will work for the same big business interests that the LNP always favours.

In closing, we have to ask the question: even if we see some good work come out of the Productivity Commission, will it be listened to? I will remind the whole House that in 2019 the commission carried out an inquiry into imprisonment and recidivism and found that increasing rates of imprisonment correlated with increasing rates of recidivism despite overall crime rates falling. It made some great recommendations around drug reform, particularly drug decriminalisation and legalisation for low-risk drugs. Those recommendations were completely ignored. None of those recommendations have been taken up. Let's see what the LNP has to offer.

(Time expired)