



Speech By
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MEMBER FOR TOOHEY

Record of Proceedings, 10 February 2026

ELECTORAL LAWS (RESTORING ELECTORIAL FAIRNESS) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr RUSSO** (Toohey—ALP) (3.36 pm): I rise to speak on the Electoral Laws (Restoring Electoral Fairness) Amendment Bill 2025. This bill should alarm every Queenslanders who cares about integrity, transparency and trust in our democratic institutions. I have reservations about this legislation and the bill.

For decades Queenslanders have learned the hard way that when private money gets too close to political power the public interest is the first casualty. This is why Queensland Labor has led the nation on integrity reform. This is why, following the damning findings of Operation Belcarra, Queensland introduced some of the strongest political donation laws in the country—lowering disclosure thresholds, real-time reporting and a clear prohibition on property developer donations. These reforms were not ideological; they were practical. They were evidence based and, most importantly, they were designed to restore public confidence after a long history of corruption risk in this state. The bill tears at the very fabric of that framework.

The Crime and Corruption Commission, the state's peak integrity watchdog, could not have been clearer. After reviewing this bill, the Crime and Corruption Commission stated that it represents 'a significant departure from Queensland's robust political donations framework' and is 'out of step with reforms introduced to manage risks associated with political influence, and perceptions of it'. When the Crime and Corruption Commission says that a bill increases corruption risk, governments should stop, listen and rethink. The government did none of those things. Instead, the Crisafulli Liberal National Party government has doubled down on a bad idea—one that increases the role of private money in politics at exactly the wrong moment in Queensland's history.

Let us be very clear about what this bill does. It lifts donation caps by changing the cap period from an electoral term to a financial year. In real terms, that change quadruples the amount that can be donated over a four-year period. A single donor could give \$19,200 to a political party, \$28,800 to an independent candidate and \$28,800 across endorsed candidates of the same party. This is not a technical amendment; it is a fundamental shift in how our democracy is funded.

It is important to say this clearly: property developers play a legitimate and necessary role in our modern society. They build homes, create jobs and help meet the housing needs of a growing state. This debate is not about demonising an industry. It is about recognising the real and well-documented risks that arise when those who stand to benefit most from planning and development decisions are permitted to financially support the very decision-makers responsible for approving them. The concern is not developers as a class but the conflicts, real or perceived, that place public trust at risk.

The bill re-opens the door to property developer donations, an industry that the Crime and Corruption Commission has repeatedly identified as posing one of the highest corruption risks in Queensland. This is not theoretical and it is not speculative; it is based on decades of evidence, investigations, prosecutions and public inquiries. History is precisely why Queensland banned property developer donations in the first place, yet this government wants Queenslanders to believe that those

risks no longer exist. At the same time it is concentrating more planning power at the state level, issuing more ministerial infrastructure designations, expanding state facilitated developments and gearing up for the largest infrastructure build in Queensland's history in the lead-up to the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The Crime and Corruption Commission explicitly warned that the risks created by this bill will occur during this very period. They are their words, not mine.

Who is responsible for planning, infrastructure and development decisions in Queensland right now? The Deputy Premier and planning minister, Jarrod Bleijie. One minister with expanded powers overseeing billions of dollars of development while this bill seeks to increase the flow of private money into politics should concern every member of this House.

The Australia Institute was asked a simple question during the inquiry: were they aware of any jurisdiction that is weakening donation laws? The answer was an unequivocal no. In fact, South Australia is moving in the opposite direction and banning private donations altogether. New South Wales is maintaining its ban on property developer donations. Queensland under this government is the outlier. This was a choice made by the Attorney-General and Minister for Integrity, the Hon. Deb Frecklington. It was a political choice that flies in the face of advice from the Crime and Corruption Commission, the Australia Institute, the Corruption Prevention Network, the Centre for Public Integrity, the Queensland Law Society and numerous individual submitters.

The government will no doubt argue that this bill simply creates fairness because unions are permitted to donate while property developers are not. The comparison does not withstand scrutiny. Unions are membership-based not-for-profit organisations that exist to represent the collective interests of their members, not to secure individual commercial advantage from government decisions. In contrast, property developers often have direct, project specific financial interests before ministers and councils. Treating those two entities as equivalent ignores the very corruption risks that Queensland's donation laws were designed to address. Integrity reform is not something you water down when it becomes inconvenient. It is something you strengthen, especially when corruption risks are rising, not falling.

This bill also creates dangerous loopholes at the local government level. It allows property developers to make donations for purposes not related to an election. The Crime and Corruption Commission warned that this vague wording could permit donations for administrative purposes such as staffing, thereby freeing up other funds for campaigning. This is a back door by any other name. It directly contradicts the intent of the Belcarra reforms. The Crime and Corruption Commission also warned that having different rules at state and local levels will create confusion, uncertainty and noncompliance. Again the government ignored that advice.

What is perhaps most alarming is not just what is in the bill but how it was developed. We understand that the Attorney-General did not consult the Crime and Corruption Commission before introducing it. The Electoral Commission of Queensland confirmed it had not met with the Crime and Corruption Commission despite these laws flowing directly from a Crime and Corruption led inquiry. What is even more concerning is that the Electoral Commission of Queensland has already commenced implementation work—drafting materials, adjusting systems—before the parliament has debated or passed the bill. This is disrespectful to the House and it undermines confidence in the process. The committee process itself was deeply flawed. It was introduced before Christmas, and with submissions closing on 2 January there was a single public hearing and limited time.

Finally, this bill goes further still, reducing prisoner voting rights from a three-year threshold to 12 months. The Queensland Law Society has warned that this change is unsupported by evidence, risks breaching human rights and may be constitutionally invalid under the High Court's decision in Roach. This bill, in my words, is a mess. It increases private money in politics, it weakens hard-won integrity safeguards and it ignores expert advice.