




Speech By
Charis Mullen

MEMBER FOR JORDAN

Record of Proceedings, 5 March 2026

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT (EMPOWERING COUNCILS) AND OTHER
LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Ms MULLEN** (Jordan—ALP) (8.09 pm): The good old days of the old Albert shire council! Give me strength! I rise to contribute to the Local Government (Empowering Councils) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill—this oh so urgent legislation that we must pass tonight. The Queensland opposition supports in principle the objective of this bill, recognising the vital role of Queensland's 77 councils and empowering them to achieve the most effective operating environment so they can best serve their communities and all Queenslanders. However, the opposition holds concerns that, whilst this bill claims to empower councils and streamline regulation, certain elements will, in practice, weaken integrity, transparency and accountability across local government.

Local government is the level closest to the people. Councils manage billions of dollars in public assets, make decisions that shape our communities and directly affect the lives of Queenslanders. With that proximity comes enormous responsibility and with that responsibility must come robust safeguards. However, throughout the committee process concerns were consistently raised that the proposed bill winds back many of these safeguards and of particular concern are the considerable changes which have reduced or removed independent oversight mechanisms, weakened conflict of interest management and reduced disclosure standards. These changes will have far-reaching implications that impact on Queenslanders' perception of local government integrity and threaten the protection of public confidence in governance. We heard this explicitly from the Crime and Corruption Commission in their submission—

The CCC considers that the Bill, if enacted, will wind back some of the significant integrity and transparency measures which were enshrined in local government laws in Queensland. The CCC considers this approach to be inconsistent with its Belcarra report recommendations and the public interest in ensuring good governance and mitigating corruption risks in local government.

Operation Belcarra was not a trivial matter. Following the 2016 local government elections the CCC investigated 111 allegations, ultimately focusing on 55 allegations involving Gold Coast, Moreton Bay, Logan and Ipswich councils. They undertook 115 interviews, interrogated 40 witnesses at public hearings and made 31 recommendations. As we know, following the Belcarra report further investigations ensued which led to corruption and misconduct offences being brought forward against elected representatives and council officers.

Conflict-of-interest laws exist for a reason. They ensure that when councillors make decisions they do so in the public interest, not for personal gain, not for political convenience and not under undisclosed influence. As a member representing an area that has seen corruption take hold of its local council in recent memory, it is very concerning to see this LNP government ignoring the advice of experts and of stakeholders, elevating the corruption risks and creating more transparency gaps. This bill winds back important safeguards recommended by the Crime and Corruption Commission to prevent corruption and restore public trust. It narrows definitions, it weakens reporting obligations and it reduces avenues for independent review. In effect, it asks councillors to mark their own homework. If we have learnt anything from past integrity failures it is that transparency and independent oversight

are not bureaucratic burdens, they are the price of public confidence. When definitions become looser and oversight weaker, disputes do not disappear; they multiply. They move from transparent processes into courtrooms, into media cycles and into community mistrust. Councils will bear the reputational damage, councillors will bear the personal risk and communities will bear the consequences.

The bill also removes the prohibition on councillors with conflicts influencing decisions outside formal meetings. This will enable lobbying of staff or fellow councillors behind closed doors. The Office of the Independent Assessor noted—

We see an integrity risk in the removal of the current influence provision for conduct outside statutory meetings.

It also increases challenges for council officers who may be briefing elected representatives knowing they have a direct conflict, something that was raised, of course, by the Local Government Managers Australia. Empowerment is not the absence of rules. Empowerment is clarity, empowerment is certainty and empowerment is knowing that decisions are made under a system that protects both elected representatives and the public they serve.

The other interesting provision in this bill is that it will remove a councillor's existing right to return from compulsory leave and resume their role if unsuccessful in a state election instead of vacating the office entirely.

A government member: Hear, hear!

Ms MULLEN: What a complete about-face from the LNP. I cannot believe they can actually keep a straight face about this and yell, 'Hear, hear!' In 2012 the then local government minister, now Premier of Queensland, could not wait to remove the provision in the Local Government Act that required councillors to resign before contesting a state election. At the time he said it was a ridiculous situation, a matter of equity. It is clear that it is not ridiculous anymore in 2026.

Let us go back in history. I want to correct the record in relation to what was said by the member for Mermaid Beach. It was actually Nita Cunningham who introduced those laws back in 2001 when the then Beattie government put those laws through requiring councillors to resign when running for state elections. I want to quote someone who I never thought I would ever want to quote in this House. I want to quote the words of the then member for Callide, Jeff Seeney, who at the time was completely outraged by this proposition. He said in this very chamber—

This legislation sets a new benchmark. It sets a pattern for avoiding fair contests. It seeks to limit the contest.

He goes on to say—

In addition, the government is not prepared to go out into the Queensland electorate and face a fair contest come election time. It is trying to nobble the field. It is trying to take out anybody who has half a chance, anybody who it thinks might have a bit of an advantage or anybody with a good chance of contesting a seat against their somewhat dubious and doubtful candidates.

How times have changed, yet perhaps the sentiment remains the same. I also found it quite curious that when the government announced these significant reforms that were being brought forward through this bill, it seems they forgot to mention this particular provision in the legislation. Indeed, a number of delegates to the LGAQ annual conference in October last year told me they could not recall the Premier announcing this measure in his keynote address to the local government sector. In fact, it also curiously seems to have fallen off the media release announcing these reforms. There was not one reference. Surely it was not because the government knew that the majority of Queensland councils are opposed to this or the fact that it goes directly against the LGAQ's policy position, or that it is not in keeping with the government's much-vaunted Equal Partners in Government agreement. No, I am sure that is not the reason the government stayed so quiet—in fact, silent—on this provision in the bill. The only thing that has changed is the Premier's political self-interest. This hypocrisy underscores a deeper concern that this bill is not a principled reform of local government but a politically convenient recalibration of the rules.

Consistency matters in governance. Integrity frameworks must not be reshaped according to who benefits at a particular moment in time. If we truly want to empower councils we should be strengthening the very mechanisms that protect them from corruption, from undue influence and from accusations of impropriety. We should be enhancing training, improving transparency tools and ensuring independent oversight bodies are adequately resourced. It risks sending a message to the community that lessons from the past have been forgotten, that safeguards painstakingly built after integrity crises can be dismantled with the stroke of a pen.

Finally, I turn to these last-minute amendments that the minister foreshadowed. There is so much foreshadowing going on in parliament at the moment by this hapless government. What is clear from a cursory read is that these amendments could really have been named the 'Schinner special'. It is clear from reading them that these tabled amendments dramatically restrict council's access to key decision-making documents within Brisbane City Council committees and it ensures that non-committee

councillors, including Brisbane Labor councillors—surprise, surprise—are being locked out from important documents, even when the decisions affect the entire city. Councillors are elected to represent residents across Brisbane, yet these provisions will prevent them from fully understanding the basis of major decisions. What is very clear is that these amendments create a 10-year exemption under right to information laws for committee information.

An opposition member: Wild!

Ms MULLEN: It is absolutely wild, I will take that interjection. Locking out not only the councillors but also the public as well. What is clear is that the Lord Mayor of Brisbane has obviously bullied this hopeless, weak minister into doing his bidding for him, helping him to hide and cover up significant briefing material and documents from the Labor opposition and the people of Brisbane.

Mr Dick: What's to hide?

Ms MULLEN: I take that interjection: what is it that they want to hide? Local government is too important to be treated lightly. The decisions made in council chambers affect roads, water, planning, community services and the economic future of our regions. Queenslanders deserve confidence that these decisions are made under a framework that is strong, independent and, importantly, transparent. Empowering councils should mean strengthening confidence, not weakening safeguards.