




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR COOPER

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ELECTRICAL SAFETY AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Ms BUSH** (Cooper—ALP) (3.42 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the Electrical Safety and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. I start by thanking the committee for the work they did on it. Even though they did not reference us, I will reference the chair and the government members who contributed to the committee work as well as the non-government members, the members for Kurwongbah and Aspley. I want to thank Hansard and the secretariat for all of the work they did and the 10 submitters who made a contribution to what was a really important committee inquiry. They gave us a lot to think about.

The Labor opposition supports the continued reform of Queensland's electrical safety framework. In fact, it is in safe hands because of the iterative changes that Labor governments have made to this framework. Electrical safety laws exist for a very simple reason: electricity is essential to everyday, modern life, but when things go wrong the results can be catastrophic and fatal. Strong and robust laws are essential for the safety of workers and everybody throughout the state. Across Queensland, electrical workers, safety inspectors and energy providers carry enormous responsibility every day to keep people safe in their homes, in their workplaces and in public spaces. I want to put on the record my thanks and appreciation for the work that they do. We know that a lot of work is going on with building homes and upgrading infrastructure. They carry an enormous burden and personal responsibility, and I want to put my appreciation for them on the record.

The reforms before the House today deal with two really quite different and distinct matters. The first relates to clarifying and strengthening parts of Queensland's electrical safety framework. The second relates to changes to the Work Health and Safety Act which affect how workers and their representatives access safety information. Labor's position reflects those two different components of the bill. We support the electrical safety amendments, but we do question whether we can support the government using this bill to weaken workplace safety protections.

The electrical safety amendments are generally appropriate. There are a number of amendments in the bill that provide clarity and certainty in the electrical safety framework. We believe that these are sensible and proportionate amendments, in particular the issuing of defect notices by electricity entities such as Ergon and Energex, who regularly identify unsafe equipment when inspecting electrical infrastructure. They might go onsite and notice damaged switchboards, faulty wiring or unsafe installations, and when they identify those issues they need to issue the defect notices requiring rectification.

This bill will confirm and validate what has been a longstanding practice and will make sure these notices are clearly supported by legislation. This reflects a practical safety mechanism that has, in effect, been operating for many years. The reform ensures those defect notices remain enforceable, including retrospectively. Ultimately, that type of reform protects lives and prevents injuries, fires and deaths. The opposition supports those amendments because they strengthen the tools used by electrical workers and regulators to protect the public.

The bill also relocates the regulator's powers to prohibit the sale, installation or use of unsafe electrical equipment from the regulation into the act itself, including the ability of the regulator to issue unsafe equipment directions, prohibiting certain equipment where safety risks exist. Again, this is proportionate and appropriate reform. Relocating those powers from the regulation into the act will provide greater legislative clarity and stronger regulatory oversight and will allow the regulator to respond to emerging risks. We will support those.

The bill has some areas that we would question. It does contain amendments, as the shadow minister has outlined, to the Work Health and Safety Act that remove a proposed mechanism that would allow health and safety representatives to request certain notices directly from the regulator. The purpose of those reforms was straightforward. It was to allow health and safety representatives and union officials who were permit holders to request copies of improvement notices, prohibition notices and non-disturbance notices that were held, sourced and managed by the regulator. In other words, it would give workers access to timely and relevant information about safety risks in their workplaces.

There are some practical situations where this can often come up—for example, if a new contractor takes over a project after a company has collapsed and the company does not hold that information; where safety records are missing; where workplace records have been destroyed by flood or fire; or where an employee refuses to provide the relevant notice. In those cases, they would be required to go back to the regulator to get access to the relevant and accurate information. We can see that the ability for worker representatives to obtain information from the regulator could be the only practical way to identify serious hazards quickly.

This provision, which is in new section 155A, is yet to commence. It has not been enforced. It was recommended following the 2022 review of the Work Health and Safety Act. It is interesting that the government has declared this to be an urgent bill, but this reform is not in force at the moment. How could it be declared an urgent bill? Why would it be moved so quickly, and why would they guillotine debate today? As a member of the committee, I do not see the argument for that. All this motion does is deny members an opportunity to talk about something we all would have liked the chance to talk about.

Workplace health and safety representatives are workers who step up to help ensure their colleagues go home safely at the end of every day. The proposed provision would have given them a simple administrative pathway to request relevant notices from the regulator. Without it, representatives will have to rely on employers voluntarily giving up that information or, as the committee heard, pursue it through a right-to-information request, which we know can be slower, more complex and costly. When we are talking about workers' lives, we do not want to be adding administrative burdens. It is a real risk that workers will be left without critical safety information when they need it most. When it comes to workplace safety, timing is everything. Delays in accessing that information could mean delays in addressing risks, which could be risking lives.

Also concerning to the committee was the lack of consultation around these changes. The opposition notes that workers, unions and other stakeholders were not meaningfully consulted prior to these amendments being introduced. Instead, the government has relied wholly on the committee process to undertake that consultation process. While committees play an important role in that, we all know, particularly when we are talking about making changes to a workers' safety framework, that a lot of time and a lot of consultation with relevant stakeholders is needed. Workers' safety rights deserve much more than tokenistic consultation; they deserve genuine engagement with people who know what they are talking about.

Submissions to the parliamentary inquiry did raise significant concerns about removing those protections, yet the government is proceeding with it anyway, so that consultation has really not yielded any actual outcome. Unions and workers' representatives argued that the section would ensure timely and independent access to safety information. Even the Queensland Law Society noted the importance of sharing safety information with those responsible for responding to workplace risks.

This issue goes to one of the most fundamental principles of workplace safety—that workers have the right to know about hazards that might affect their health, their safety and even their lives; that they have the right to access information; and that that information is central to the ability of workers and their representatives to identify risks and to raise concerns and, if necessary, to stop unsafe work.

It is the opposition's view that weakening that access undermines a system that is designed purely to ensure that we keep workers safe. For that reason, while Labor supports the electrical safety elements of the bill, we question the changes that do undermine workers' ability to access critical safety information to protect their colleagues on the job. Of course we are always going to uphold and fight for a modern and responsive electrical safety and workplace health and safety framework, but not at the risk and sacrifice of workers' safety.