Speech By

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ELECTRICAL SAFETY AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr RUSSO (Toohey—ALP) (5.20 pm): I rise to speak on the Electrical Safety and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2025 and to place on the record my support for the electrical safety reforms it contains while also making it clear why the opposition cannot support the amendments to the Work Health and Safety Act 2011 that have been inserted into this legislation. The Queensland Labor opposition is generally supportive of the electrical safety aspects of this bill, which maintain the original intent of protecting Queenslanders from electrical risks. Ongoing reform in this space is essential. The way Queenslanders use electricity today is vastly different from when the Electrical Safety Act was first introduced. New technologies, new systems and new risks mean our framework must continue to evolve. Labor has always taken that responsibility seriously. We have a strong record in electrical safety, including reinstating the electrical safety commissioner after it was abolished by those opposite. When reforms generally improve safety outcomes we will support them. That is exactly what we are doing here.

This bill provides a clear and explicit legislative basis for a longstanding and well-understood practice: the issuing of electrical equipment defect notices by electricity entities. For decades, providers like Energex and Ergon, as well as electrical safety inspectors, have issued notices requiring unsafe electrical equipment to be repaired or replaced. That happens every day across Queensland in relation to unsafe switchboards, damaged outlets and faulty installations. These notices prevent injuries, prevent fires and save lives. Ensuring those notices have a clear head of power in legislation is not controversial; it is responsible governance. For that reason, the opposition supports those amendments. We also support the changes that strengthen the regulator's ability to prohibit the sale, installation or use of unsafe electrical equipment by embedding those powers directly in the act. Again, this is sensible, proportionate and necessary.

That is where our support ends. While this bill contains sensible electrical safety reforms, it also contains something else entirely: a deliberate and unjust attack on workers' rights. Let's be clear: this government is trying to hide that attack behind otherwise reasonable reforms. This is not just a safety bill; it is a Trojan Horse. Buried within this legislation are amendments that remove the right of health and safety representatives and workplace health and safety entry permit holders to request critical safety information from the regulator. That right matters. It goes to the most fundamental principle of workplace safety: the right to know about risks. Without that knowledge, workers cannot protect themselves.

This was not some radical or extreme proposal; it was a practical reform designed to ensure workers and their representatives could access important safety information when it is not available through normal workplace channels. Let's be honest: workplaces are not always perfect. There are situations where contractors collapse and records disappear, floods or fires destroy documentation or employers simply refuse to cooperate. In those situations, access to regulator-held information may be the only way workers can understand the risks they face.

What is this government doing? They are removing that access not because it does not work and not because it has been abused—they never even gave it a chance. This provision has not yet commenced and it has not been tested. There is no evidence it would create any burden, yet the government have moved to repeal it anyway.

We are told this is about efficiency and administrative burden. When opposition members asked for evidence—processing times, workload estimates and examples of misuse—there was nothing. There was no data, no modelling and no justification. It is just another decision that has been made first and justified later, if at all. Departmental officers could not answer basic questions and matters were taken on notice. When responses came back, they failed to address the issues raised. That should concern every member of this House. If a government cannot explain why it is removing a safety protection, it should not be removing it.

The government has also suggested that people could simply submit right-to-information applications instead. Let's call that what it is: a delay tactic, a costly process and a bureaucratic barrier. Workers should not need to lodge a right-to-information application to find out if their workplace is safe. That is not efficiency; that is obstruction. It is workers who will pay the price. This change does not exist in isolation. It forms part of a broader pattern. We have already seen this government require 24 hours notice before workplace health and safety permit holders can enter sites and roll back practical powers to worker representatives. Each change chips away at protections. Each change limits transparency. Each change makes it harder for workers to identify and respond to risk. Taken together, this is not reform; it is regression.

There has also been a complete failure of consultation. Workers were not consulted. Unions were not consulted. Key stakeholders were not consulted. Instead, the government has tried to claim that the parliamentary committee process is an adequate substitute. It is not. Consultation is not something you do after the decision has already been made; it is something you do before. This government did not consult; it dictated. When dealing with workplace safety, that is simply not good enough.

We also know what is coming next in this debate. The government will try to dress this up as something to do with the CFMEU. Let me be absolutely clear: the reform was not CFMEU-specific. It applied to all workers and all workplaces. It was Labor governments, both state and federal, that took decisive action to place the CFMEU into administration and restore integrity. There is no justification for using that issue as a smokescreen. When the government talk about the CFMEU, they are avoiding the real issue: taking rights away from every worker in Queensland.

At its core, this is about a simple question: do workers have the right to access information about risks in their workplace? On this side of the House the answer is yes—always. Without that information, workers cannot make informed decisions. They cannot raise concerns. They cannot stop unsafe work. They cannot protect themselves. These are not abstract principles; these are real-world protections that save lives. Removing them weakens safety and reduces transparency. It empowers those who would prefer that information remain hidden. If you make it harder to access safety information, you make workplaces less safe. It is as simple as that.

Let me be clear in closing: the opposition supports the electrical safety reforms in this bill. They are sensible. They are practical. They reflect longstanding and important work that keeps Queenslanders safe. I will not support a bill that uses those reforms as a cover to undermine worker protections. We will not support a government that removes rights without evidence. We will not support a government that refuses to consult. We will not support a government that claims to care about safety while quietly dismantling the tools workers rely on for safety. One cannot claim to stand for safety while voting to take safety information away from workers. That is why Labor opposes these amendments. That is why we will continue to stand up for Queensland workers in this chamber, in our committees and in our communities. Safety at work should never be negotiable.