



Speech by

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PEOPLE'S HOUSE BILL AND REFERENDUM FOR AN UPPER HOUSE BILL

 **Mr CRIPPS** (Hinchinbrook—LNP) (8.38 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the cognate debate on the People's House Bill and the Referendum for an Upper House Bill. In March this year during the debate on the report of the Review of the Parliamentary Committee System Committee I said that the recommendations in that report represented a fundamental shift in the way the parliament of Queensland would operate. I observed at the time that since the Theodore Labor government abolished the Legislative Council in 1922 the Queensland parliament had suffered from a structural weakness that had resulted in a lack of accountability and a limit to the ability of the parliament to scrutinise the executive.

One of the cornerstones of the great system of representative and responsible democracy which Queensland has inherited from the Westminster parliament was bicameralism. That system included an upper house that was charged with reviewing legislation passed by the lower house as a check and balance on executive power. At various times some parliaments in other countries founded on the Westminster tradition at both national and provincial levels have discontinued the use of second chambers for a variety of reasons. That move was usually associated with the establishment of a vigorous committee system so that the accountability and scrutiny function of the single remaining chamber was enhanced to compensate for the loss of the upper house. That had not occurred in Queensland until the recommendations of that report were implemented, which are now operating in this parliament.

In the parliament of Queensland the new committee system has enhanced the accountability and scrutiny mechanisms that were substantially diluted by the abolition of the Legislative Council in 1922. The responsibilities of these committees relate directly to and inform the work of the Legislative Assembly, and their consideration of legislation—which in many ways is the work of the new committees—is now at the centre of the work of the parliament. By any objective measure, the new system has not been in place for long enough to assess its operational success and it should be given that opportunity.

I am a very strong supporter of the Westminster system and the concept of parliamentary sovereignty in that system. The enhanced role for all parliamentarians in the proceedings of the Legislative Assembly—government, opposition and crossbench—as a result of these reforms, which includes the proceedings of parliamentary committees, is a positive thing for accountability and scrutiny. Therefore, while I continue to lament the loss of Queensland's second chamber in 1922, I acknowledge that these reforms have restored some of the accountability and scrutiny functions of the parliament that have been inadequate and lacking and have curbed executive power in the parliament since the Theodore Labor government abolished the Legislative Council.

Now I turn to specific provisions of the two bills. The People's House Bill proposes to reinstate the upper house of the Queensland parliament by appointing 45 mayors from local government authorities to review legislation divided upon in the Legislative Assembly by not fewer than five members. The bill proposes that the 45 mayors consist of the Lord Mayor of Brisbane, the mayors of the 43 largest local government authorities and a single mayor to represent the 29 smallest local government authorities. The

explanatory notes accompanying the bill make the claim that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and regional and rural Queenslanders will enjoy increased representation through the mayors of the local government authorities appointed to the proposed second chamber. The obvious shortcoming of this claim is that the bill proposes to appoint only one mayor from amongst Queensland's 29 smallest local government authorities. When you consider the local councils in this group, which are listed in part 3 of the bill, it is immediately apparent that all of those local councils are ones representing Indigenous Queenslanders and the most rural and regional Queenslanders. As such, the claim made by the explanatory notes accompanying the bill is inaccurate. The provisions of the bill do not reflect its explanatory notes.

The trouble with this bill is that, while it makes a claim to provide enhanced representation for Indigenous Queenslanders and rural and regional Queenslanders, it also tries to avoid proposing a second chamber of all 73 mayors representing Queenslanders in all local council areas across the state. In that scenario, the Lord Mayor of Brisbane, who represents over one million people, would have the same voting capacity as the mayor of Mapoon, which in 2010 had a population of 276. I can only assume that the bill proposes such a framework because it seeks to make a gesture towards representativeness in an attempt to establish some credibility. The bill well and truly fails the test.

The provisions of the bill are a crude attempt to put forward a proposal to restore a second chamber, but the proposal is hopelessly compromised between the practical imperative of representativeness and appealing to the desirability of enhancing the representation of Indigenous Queenslanders and rural and regional Queenslanders. In doing so, the bill achieves neither of those objectives. What would be the real outcomes of passing this bill and appointing 45 mayors to a reconstituted second chamber of the Queensland parliament? I put it to the House that increased political party involvement in local councils would be one of the first things that would occur, and certainly I am not convinced that that is a desirable thing in this state beyond the extent to which it currently occurs.

Each member of this House represents an electorate of roughly equal numbers of electors, being about 30,000 voters, with populations of between 45,000 and 50,000 overall. I doubt any member of this place would deny that their dual roles as a parliamentarian and a local member of parliament are anything other than a full-time job. Amongst the mayors of the 45 largest local councils that this bill proposes to favour with appointment to a reconstituted second chamber, there are at least 17 mayors who lead councils with populations of more than 45,000 people. As the duly elected leaders of those local government authorities, I would similarly expect that those mayors would consider theirs a full-time job. Yet this bill proposes that, in addition to leading their communities, those 45 favoured mayors ought to be responsible for reviewing legislation that has been divided upon in this House by no fewer than five members. Amongst them would be the Lord Mayor of Brisbane, representing over one million people; the mayor of the Gold Coast, representing over 500,000 people; the mayors of the Moreton Bay and Sunshine Coast councils, representing more than 300,000 people each; and the mayor of Logan, representing more than 280,000 people.

The proposition in this bill is that, instead of diligently serving the ratepayers of their councils and administering the substantial responsibilities of those local authorities, those 45 mayors ought to periodically assemble in a room adjacent to this one to consider legislation already passed by this House. I am certain that the ratepayers of Queensland's local councils would prefer their mayors to be concentrating on their mayoral responsibilities rather than moonlighting as members of a second chamber in the Queensland parliament.

One statement in the bill's explanatory notes that I will acknowledge as accurate is the observation that the relationship between the state government and Queensland's local councils is at an all-time low after very poor treatment of local authorities and local communities by this state Labor government. However, the damage done by Labor's policies in that regard will hardly be addressed by placing 45 mayors in an upper house of the Queensland parliament. It will only be addressed by re-establishing a relationship of mutual respect between Queensland's local councils and the state government, which is an objective that a future LNP government is determined to achieve.

The objective of the Referendum for an Upper House Bill is to place the provisions of the People's House Bill before the people of Queensland at a referendum to coincide with the next local council elections on 21 March 2012. If one does not support the provisions of the People's House Bill—and I do not for the reasons that I have already outlined—it stands to reason that one would not support placing a flawed, compromised and crudely conceived proposition before the people of Queensland at a referendum, when surely on that day they will be doing better work if they are concentrating on electing the most appropriate leaders to their local councils for the next four years.