

Legislative Council
Hansard
Wednesday 2 September 2026

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The President, **Mr Farrell**, took the Chair at 11 a.m., acknowledged the Traditional People and read Prayers.

SHORT STAY LEVY BILL 2026 (No. 13)

Second Reading

[7.24 p.m.]

Ms WEBB (Nelson) - Mr President, I rise to speak on this short-stay levy bill, which has been such an interesting one to hear from members on. I very much appreciate the considered and detailed contributions of a number of members so far. It's been really useful to have such a forensic examination of the bill and I think there's been a lot of important questions put on the record, concerns raised and further information sought, that I'm very much looking forward to hearing the response from government on. It's quite striking when you see a bill that generates such a lot of questions and concerns raised, and also quite a flurry of potential amendments flagged and put for consideration should we get to committee stage. It says to me this bill's probably a bit messy, given how that's all played out to date, in relation to this Chamber's consideration of the bill. I think that's also been reflected in the narrative that's been part of the members' contributions here, Mr President. I think there's been a really clear articulation of the fact that the genesis of this bill was an election commitment made, and I'll speak about that a little bit more, but when that's the genesis of a piece of policy that then has to become a piece of legislation you're often in for a rocky road because often things that are promised in an election are not necessarily well-considered, well-developed policies, evidence-based, clear in their intent, clear in the rationale for how they may be implemented. And then you see a bit of a scramble to bring to fruition that promise made in an election through a piece of legislation which by its very nature must be well-considered, must be very particular and detailed in outlining how it's going to be delivering the particular policy intent that requires legislation to be given effect to and it is where things can come a cropper.

I think it's been particularly interesting, and it has highlighted and I think this has been part of the narrative coming through in contributions today too. It's highlighted the fact that there is an absolutely incontrovertible lack of clarity about the intent of this bill, much as the government might make assertions about now what their intent is there is still an absolute lack of clarity really about it. I think that's because, of course, as an election announcement made, the intent of that announcement was to win votes. Quite frankly, that's absolutely the genesis of this policy and the bill that we see before us. The intent was to win votes, so it just needed to sound good as a media grab and bite on the day. It just needed to sound like it might be something that appealed to average Tasmanians out in the street as a reasonable thing to do. It had to present well as a social media tile or grab.

Mr Hiscutt - TasInsure?

Ms WEBB - Indeed. We see this played out time and again with election announcements

that really aren't anything more than thought bubbles. They're nothing more than populist preening really from parties who are putting themselves forward trying to win votes but not doing that from a position of well-established policy, well rationale, good evidence-based policy that's been based on clear principles that they're delivering on that distinguish them from other candidates putting themselves forward for election. It's really just 'what's going to grab attention in a way that might win us votes', and that's a shame. There really is no basis for making policy that's going to deliver effectively for the Tasmanian community in a cohesive long-term way.

That's where I think the genesis was of what we now see to be a fairly messy situation by all accounts, listening to members do their analysis, make their detailed sort of forensic, sort of pulling apart of what this bill may or may not do, what it is intending to deliver or not intending to deliver, what consequences it may have for different industries and sectors within the Tasmanian community, what impact it may have for different regions around our state. Really, the full kit and caboodle around this bill is a lot of uncertainty, Mr President.

Having said that, for me, if we're going to talk about a piece of legislation and a piece of policy that relates to the short-stay accommodation market, my wish would be that we would be talking about a piece of legislation and policy that was there to deliver an improvement in our absolutely catastrophic housing crisis in this state at the moment because we talk over and over again in this place about the shameful situation we have here with this catastrophic failure of our housing market, particularly our private rental market in this state. We see a race to the top of rents because of excessively low vacancy rates that are so far below market failure, it's a joke really but it's not a joke because it's people's lives, it's people's wellbeing and health and livelihoods and access to a reasonable life in this state that is the victim of this situation we find ourselves in.

We have a vacancy rate that has been well under 1 per cent for a long time. It's been 0.5 per cent for a long time now too, I believe. We know that a viable vacancy rate for a healthy and viable private rental market is 3 per cent and we haven't come within a bull's roar of that I think for close to a decade now probably.

We absolutely should be talking as a priority and the government absolutely should be turning its attention in a policy and legislative sense as a priority to solving our catastrophic housing crisis and we should absolutely be focusing our attention in that space into the private rental market and into the impact that short-stay accommodation has had on that market because that is absolutely unquestionable that that impact has been there and it is a key factor in driving the problematic situation we have now with this absolute market failure for private rentals.

While that is and should be a priority for us, this bill has absolutely nothing to do with that, even though it's a short-stay levy bill and you think short-stay accommodation might have something to do with that. It doesn't. The government has even sort of backed away from suggesting that it does because they have talked about the fact that it's not really designed to deliver any particular impact through into the private rental market. The government has suggested that it may have some impact into the space because it may mean that some operators of short-stay accommodation properties may return their properties to the private rental market as a secondary impact here, but it's not their intended impact.

There's no modelling on that. We don't really know what to expect in that space. If that was the key intent of this policy in this bill, we would be absolutely designing it differently. If we wanted to incentivise that outcome, we would do it differently to this and we would be

careful to understand and model and know what the expected impact was in returning particularly whole properties to the private rental market via a policy and legislative mechanism. It's not what we have got.

The government claims that primarily the intent of this bill and this policy is to raise revenue which is quite a nonsense in a way. Again, it's just a gesture. It's a fairly hollow and slight performative gesture because realistically of all the things that we could choose to do in this state to increase our state-generated revenue, this wouldn't be the thing that should be at the top of the list. It's minimal for a start, even with the fairly shaky projections about what it might generate in the way of revenue. That's a blip. It's loose change in the pockets of our state budget, Mr President.

We should absolutely be having a conversation about increasing revenue. That conversation is still being avoided by the government. They're still pretending that they won't be raising taxes on anyone, whereas this is a tax but it's a bit of a silly one. It's a very minimal one. It's not one that's going to do much at all to solve our state budget problem. We can't even pretend that it would do that. We're told by the government that the fairly minimal revenue it will raise is going to be potentially directed towards first home buyer support. I think it was the member for Pembroke or Montgomery who pointed out quite rightly that there's nothing in the bill that says that must happen. There's nothing in the bill that absolutely holds the government to that -

Okay, many members have said this, and I'm repeating it.

Mr Hiscutt - Sorry to interrupt.

Ms Rattray - Any advances on those two?

Ms WEBB - Going, going, gone.

We've got that as a stated commitment from the government, but the bill doesn't deliver that either; it delivers the money basically back into the public account. In fact, if it does end up raising more revenue than maybe planned to be spent on first home buyers' schemes and supports within the particular financial year anyway, the surplus will be going back into the public account, not going to deliver further first time buyer support that year, which seems a shame, really. It is sort of a gesture towards hypothecation without really being hypothecation of this tax. There's plenty of problems around the concept of hypothecation anyway. We haven't really even had that conversation properly and we're kind of going halfway towards it here. This is, I guess, emblematic, really; it's illustrative of the mess that this particular policy and bill is, where it goes halfway to doing nothing, really.

It doesn't raise much revenue, even though apparently, from the government's point of view, that's the primary purpose of it. Revenue is being put to a particular area of housing support, first home buyer support, which is demonstrably not the priority area in terms of helping to solve our housing crisis. In fact, questionably it's absolutely an area that can, on its own, increase problematic outcomes in our housing situation here in the state because it can lead to inflating prices. It can lead to putting up the value of housing and the amount that first home buyers are ultimately going to be paying for their property or their land and development, the land and build package.

It's astonishing to me that the government absolutely purposefully, in the face of all evidence that tells them where the support is needed and all evidence tells them the support is needed in the private rental market and in the social housing space, we've got a social housing

waiting list of over 5500. That's the number of applicants, that doesn't represent the number of people who are waiting and acknowledged as requiring social housing support. That's just the number of applicants. It's measures beyond that 5500, even though the 5500 is horrifying enough and is at record high, I believe. Social housing is needed. Private rental market solutions are needed, and this delivers neither of them. Instead, the government is going to pump this extra money or put this money towards first home buyer support, which may, at best, house, and I think this was also the member for Montgomery, perhaps 22 new first home buyer properties that it might generate. Somebody else said that.

Mr Gaffney - That was me.

Ms WEBB - Oh, there you go, Mike. I'm sharing it around. I've listened to everyone. I just haven't quite kept it straight in my mind because I didn't note it down who said what.

Mr Hiscutt - I'll claim it.

Ms WEBB - I'll just say 'a contribution' from here on in. We're helping a fairly modest number of first home buyers potentially with this into a market, but it may also have an inflationary effect on prices. So, really, it's giving with one hand and taking with the other.

I think this is entirely concerning in relation to this bill. I think the government's been shown to be quite a fraud on this, really. It's been exposed and I think we've now seen a distinct pattern in policies that have been announced as election commitments which are purely designed for that one purpose, which is to attract attention and votes in a momentary sense and headlines and nice social media content in the moment during an election, that are entirely not fit for purpose to be brought forward then as a real policy and to be legislated into place. We've seen that with this. We've seen it as by interjection, someone mentioned before TasInsure. We've seen it with numerous others. We've seen it with instances where promises are made to fund particular organisations that should never have had promises made to fund them without having to go through a competitive tender process to ensure that they were in fact the most appropriately equipped organisation to deliver the service that was being funded.

The intent of this bill is problematic and the impact it's going to have in delivering what the government states is its intent, to raise revenue, is questionable and potentially quite minor. But, what we have heard, from stakeholders in the community contacting us ahead of its being debated in the Chamber and from the briefings we've had from a range of stakeholder groups in our consideration of this bill, is the enormous concern they have about a whole range of detrimental impacts it may have on our communities, certain industries, certain regions of our state, and especially on tourism operators in the state. We have heard that, while the intended impact and outcomes of this legislation are unclear and questionable in their merit, we may be looking at something that has the potential to do distinct damage to areas and industries of our state that we would prefer to support, rather than damage.

I was quite interested to hear from the stakeholders who were able to point to all the potential discrepancies in who would be wouldn't be captured by the legislation. In how it would apply to certain areas of our tourism economy and not others. It did seem fundamentally flawed, unfair and poorly designed, even though I know members here - members in the other place in the first instance - put forward some amendments to try to address some of these matters. I know members in our Chamber have some amendments ready, should we get to committee stage, to again try to patch up some of the discrepancies and some of the potential flaws in this.

I don't know that we're necessarily going to be able to paper over all the cracks with amendment wallpaper. I don't know that that's available, and it's even hard to tell when we do it in this fashion, whether the amendments we're bringing to try to fix government stuff-ups will be free of unintended consequences themselves. It's very difficult to do that because when you're doing it in the heat of the debate process through the Chamber, we haven't necessarily then been able to go to consult on the amendments. That is no reflection on the members who are bringing them, who have gone to their best efforts, I think, to put forward really well-considered and thoughtful amendments for our consideration. So, it's not a reflection, it's simply a reflection on time and scope available to do the appropriate, I guess, policy work, and particularly consultation, that should sit there, so that we can all have confidence in it. None of this is news to members in this place, I know, but when you feel like you have a pretty disjointed and problematic bill and you're trying to fix it with some fairly significant amendments, there's always a sense of hesitancy and concern there for members.

I feel that this is an interesting bill for me because on the face of it, it should be about a topic that is of key interest and concern to me, a key priority for me, which is thinking about how we fix an absolutely shockingly harmful situation in our housing crisis in this state, particularly for vulnerable Tasmanians. That's a priority. Yet this bill that, on the face of it should probably be about that, isn't anything to do with it. It seems to do with things that won't be delivered on anyway in the long run. It's not going to raise much money overall. The money it does raise is going to an area that really shouldn't be the priority area that is delivered more support. Quite frankly, the government, if it's choosing to support first home buyers through particular programs, it already does that to some extent. It's already allocating money out of the budget to do that. So, I presume all this does is switch in for other money from the public account that currently goes to those programs, switches this revenue in and switches the other revenue out to other -

Ms Thomas - Pay debts.

Ms WEBB - Well, maybe to pay down debt, maybe to try to patch up other shockingly underfunded services that are there.

Ms O'Connor - Stupid spending decisions.

Ms WEBB - I'm not sure even that we end up with more support for first home buyers out of this. We might just end up with the same level of support, just funded a little bit differently and freed up a little bit. A very modest amount of money to go somewhere else. If we're paying down our debt \$11 million at a time, then goodness, gosh, I feel for our great, great, great grandchildren if that's the way we're going about it via this levy. If it's the only thing being put forward by this government as increased revenue, that's a pretty pessimistic outlook for us all.

It's not clear to me that there's really a net positive out of this fairly shonky piece of legislation that we're considering. It is clear to me that there are high levels of concern about the impact it might have on regions of our state in particular that rely on tourism and particular sorts of operators in those regions. That whole area of concern doesn't seem to have been given appropriate consideration by the government. They've been able to give us nothing that models what that's going to look like or to alleviate the concerns of those regions or those sectors in those regions. It's not clear to me, and I know other members have spoken about this, I'm not going to try to remember who.

Mr Gaffney - We're here to help.

Ms WEBB - It's not clear to me what the administrative costs will be for the government and whether really those are going to outweigh the revenue that's generated anyway. I think this in this instance, it was the member for Launceston who said that right back at the beginning earlier in the day. If people in our public service are having to administer this off the side of their desks within current resources, realistically that's going to have an impact somewhere. You can't pretend the administration of this isn't going to have a cost. The balance of that is not clear to me at all.

It's not clear to me who will actually be bearing the cost of this levy. I know that the government has claimed in various spaces that it is going to be mostly paid by interstate and overseas visitors. Well, my understanding is a fairly high proportion of usage of short-stay properties in Tasmania is undertaken by Tasmanians. I'm certainly somebody who has used short-stay accommodation in the state on a fairly regular basis. There's a fair chance a reasonable portion of this levy is going to be paid by Tasmanians, I would think. So, to pretend that it's going to be people coming from outside the state to the levels that the government's claiming I think is questionable, unless they can show us some modelling about that. It's not clear to me really who's bearing the cost of it.

There's one thing that seems to be super clear and that's that the short-stay platforms, the big platforms that are going to be holding this levy collected for a pretty reasonable amount of time before they have to remit it through to the government are likely to make a motza, I would assume, by holding this money somewhere and accruing interest on it. I think in that sense, perhaps the most clear outcome of this piece of legislation is that it's going to deliver corporate welfare yet again to big multinational companies.

Ms Thomas - No wonder they support it.

Ms WEBB - Exactly right, courtesy of this government and this piece of legislation. That wouldn't surprise me at all, if really when it comes down to it, the key benefit that we can tangibly identify from this is that big multinational booking platforms are going to get free money because they're going to be able to hold on to the levies collected, get the interest that's collected -

Ms Forrest - For a whole year initially.

Ms WEBB - For a whole year initially, and pocket that before they remit it back through to the Tasmanian government. To me that's just corporate welfare yet again, like a gift to massive corporations. It's nothing to do with benefits to the Tasmanian people. It's nothing to do with the public interest in our state. It's nothing to do with addressing the urgent challenges we face in housing, in health, in education - all the things that this government should be spending time and attention on and legislating to solve and improve. This is nothing to do with those things and that's quite shameful, I think.

So I'm pretty down on this bill. You may have guessed, you may have had an inkling, Mr President, I'm not impressed at all by this bill. I don't even think particularly it deserves to go through the committee stage, quite frankly. If it does get voted through to committee stage, it'll be interesting.

Ms O'Connor - That's a big call -

Ms WEBB - It is.

Ms O'Connor - to let a bill that the House has passed get into committee here.

Ms WEBB - We can all have our views on it, member for Hobart. We can all have our own views on this. I'm just putting it forward that I'm not necessarily convinced that it even warrants that. I think there are all sorts of reasons the other place may have passed this bill. I know that, potentially, there's a bit of a lack of spine there about being criticised about things, but maybe in this place we don't have necessarily as much concern about that because we're not trying to contest government, so there you go. How lucky for us, we can speak truth sometimes that others can't.

On that, I have found it really helpful to listen to other members contributions on it. Should we go through the Committee stage I'll be very interested to have the discussions around amendments as they're put forward, even should all amendments with merit pass, I still don't know that this is a bill that, to my mind, would warrant support in the end, so I'm just being very clear and upfront about where I'm standing on it at this point. Although I've relatively completed my contribution, I'm looking to the Leader because I'm imagining that we might be at a stage we might want to adjourn debate for today and come back to this. Would that be right, Leader?

Ms Rattray - It would absolutely be right, honourable member, and I invite you to do so if you've concluded your contribution.

Ms WEBB - Thank you.

Mr President, having, I think, spoken to the key things I wanted to highlight here without being forensic as other members, thank goodness, have been on our behalf and created a good parliamentary record on this bill, I would now move -

That the debate stand adjourned.

Debate adjourned