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Palaszczuk cites incident 14 years ago to justify crackdown on climate protesters

Queensland premier says activists had devised traps using gas canisters but police have records of only one such incident, in 2005

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The Queensland premier, Annastacia Palaszczuk, justified the state's rushed crackdown on climate change protesters by citing an incident that occurred in the state more than 14 years ago.

In announcing the new suite of laws in August, Palaszczuk claimed that activists had laced so-called locking devices with traps including "even butane gas containers so that anyone trying to cut a protester free will be injured or worse".

The claims have been repeated and described as recent events, despite there being no evidence to support them, by multiple media outlets since.

Inspector Shane Williams, a police officer considered an expert on attachment devices used by protesters, was asked at a public hearing on Friday whether he was aware of incidents involving butane or other gas canisters being added to such a device.

He said to his knowledge such an incident had only potentially occurred once, in 2005.

“The person attached to the device (was asked) is there anything that may harm the police or harm them and they said aerosol cans,” Williams told the inquiry. He could not confirm whether aerosol cans were ultimately found in the device.

“That’s the only example I can give you, it was from 2005. When we wrote the training package we included aerosol cans in it for that reason.”

The state’s legal affairs committee is held an 11th hour hearing in Brisbane on the proposed laws, which target the disruptive tactics of climate change protesters. As the hearing took place, police arrested another 125 people in Brisbane - one of the largest mass arrests at a demonstration in the city since legendary “right to march” protests in the 1970s.

At the outset of the hearing, the Queensland union movement said the laws were a “slippery slope” that could easily target striking workers or suppress the activities of trade unions.

The Labor government’s proposals have created considerable unease within sectors the party which has a long history of supporting the right to peaceful protest and the broader union movement.

The acting general secretary of Queensland council of unions, Michael Clifford, told the inquiry that individual unions were worried the laws would infringe on their right to protest.

“We don’t think these sorts of laws should be rushed through the parliament,” he said. “We think these sorts of laws should be dealt with in a thoughtful, considered way.

“The other concern for the union movement is that these laws are a slippery slope. The union movement has a proud history of protest to defend its members’ rights, to progress its members’ rights. It doesn’t take a lot of imagination to see how these laws could be amended to capture the sorts of activities that union members are involved in.

“This bill opens the door for a much more dangerous set of arrangements for working people across the state.”

The proposed laws give police search and seizure powers where they reasonably suspect people are carrying locking devices designed to prevent or delay removing protesters from public spaces. They also introduce fines for using such devices.

Palaszczyk, and the police minister, Mark Ryan, have repeatedly justified the proposals on public safety grounds and made claims - not supported by evidence - that devices used in recent protests were designed to cause harm.

On Friday the Queensland human rights commissioner, Scott McDougall, released a strongly worded statement opposing the bill.

“It would appear that the proposed laws targeting devices that are not inherently dangerous are actually directed at avoiding the disruption caused by peaceful acts of civil disobedience rather than addressing public safety,” McDougall said.

“Protest rights are not absolute, however they can only be limited where it can be demonstrably justified, such as in the interests of public safety or to maintain public order.

“However, there has not yet been any opportunity to publicly scrutinise evidence about the use of [locking devices] to assess the necessity and proportionality of proposed laws, and in

particular to consider why existing criminal laws are inadequate.”

Bridget Burton, the director of human rights and civil law practice at the Caxton Legal Centre, said existing laws captured the sorts of protests that have occurred recently in Queensland.

“We are very concerned that this bill treats disruption and inconvenience that is related to protest as though it is violence,” Burton said before the hearing.

“There have been no known instances of violence occurring as a result of these protests. What we do have is large disruption.”

The Queensland Resources Council’s policy director, Andrew Barger, said the laws were necessary and that the council had previously attempted to lobby the government on the “manifest inadequacies in the existing legal framework”.

“Essentially our argument is that the laws as they stand at the moment provide an insufficient deterrent,” Barger said. “We have organised campaigns designed to exploit ... legal loopholes.

“There are examples ... where the use of an engineered device to amplify risk creates a delay and that delay is clearly being designed to create an economic loss.”

Police, the resources council and rail network operator Aurizon said the actions of protesters in industrial settings, such as on rail lines, were dangerous.

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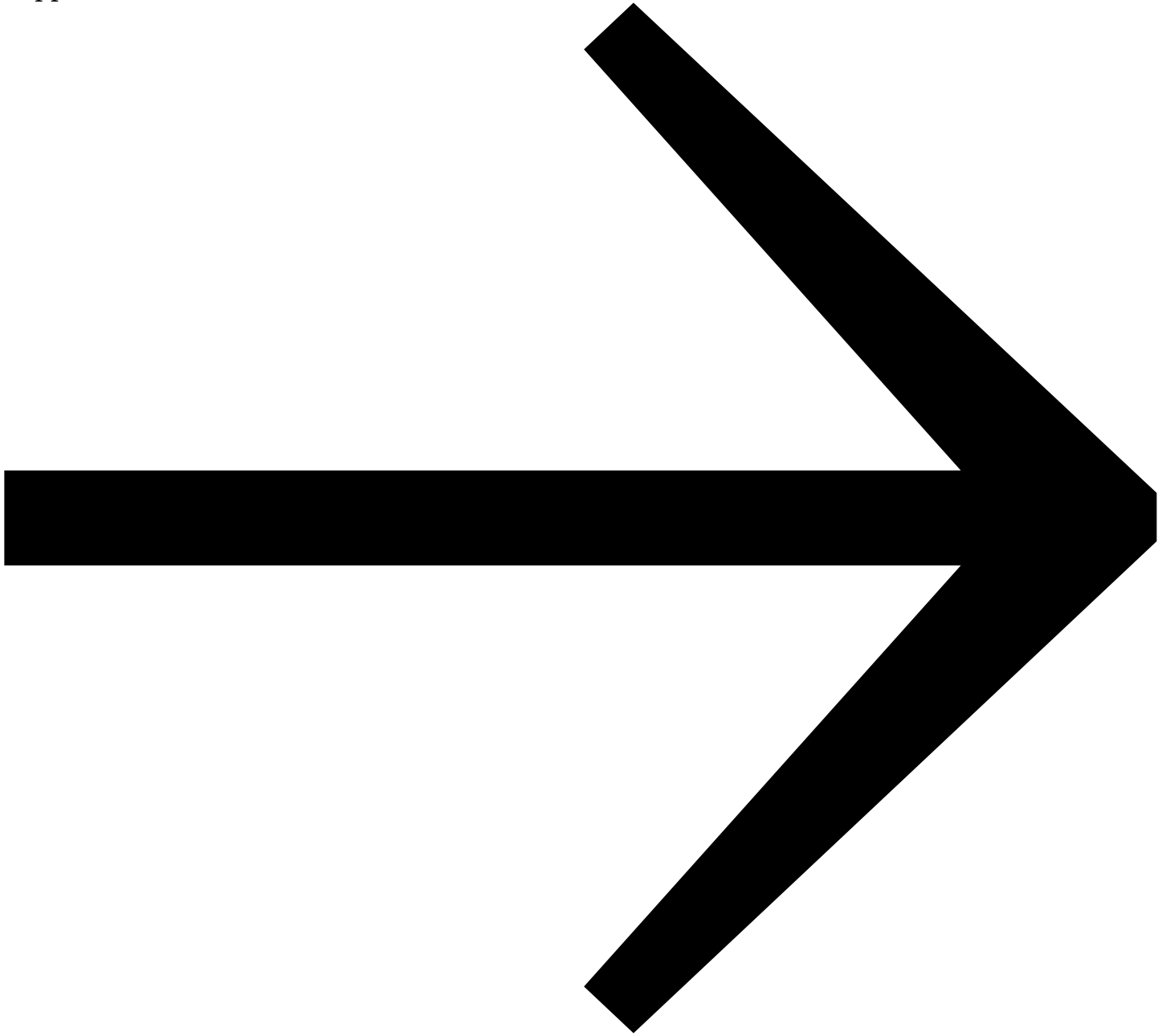
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