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Queensland to fast-track laws to crack down on climate protesters

Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk says the state is seeing 'major disruption' amid rolling protests by Extinction Rebellion

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The Queensland government has announced it will rush consultation on controversial proposed laws to crack down on acts of civil disobedience by climate change protesters.

The announcement comes amid rolling acts of disruption in Brisbane by members of Extinction Rebellion and has been met with concern from legal and environmental groups, who say the proposals infringe on people's basic civil liberties.

The proposed laws give police search and seizure powers where they reasonably suspect people are carrying locking devices, which are designed to prevent or delay the removal of protesters from public spaces. They also introduce new fines for the use of such devices.

When the laws were announced in August, the state government made claims - but has offered no evidence to support them - that activists were using devices "laced with booby traps" and "designed to harm".

The Queensland premier, Annastacia Palaszczuk, and the police minister, Mark Ryan, on Wednesday cited two recent actions by Extinction Rebellion protesters they believed were dangerous and put people in harm's way.

The include a man who chained himself to a railway on Wednesday morning and a man who dangled for several hours from the Story Bridge over the Brisbane River on Tuesday. The man who hung suspended from the bridge reportedly said afterwards that it would be "dangerous for the police to come and rescue me".

Ryan could not tell reporters whether the unique apparatus used by the protesters in each case would be covered by the new laws.

Palaszczuk said the state was seeing "major disruption" from the civil disobedience of climate activists.

"The use of these dangerous devices is not acceptable," she said. "My government will be asking (for) the hearings on these laws to take place as soon as possible. I want these laws in place by the end of this month.

"I don't think the people who are protesting at the moment are endearing themselves to families, to motorists, to people going about their ordinary duties or getting to and from work, and it has become unacceptable to use these dangerous devices.

"It's just getting beyond a joke now."

She also sought to defend her government's record on climate, citing a 50% renewable target as evidence of action. The state's approach is under heavy scrutiny because of its position on new thermal coal mines and its pivot in support of the coal industry after the federal election.

Public submissions to the state parliament's legal affairs committee on the new laws closed at midday on Tuesday and hearings had been scheduled for later this month. It is likely the hearings will now take place quickly next week, alongside a sitting of parliament, and passed before 24 October.



An activist from Extinction Rebellion dangles from the Story Bridge in a hammock as part of protests in Brisbane on Tuesday.
Photograph: Glenn Hunt/AAP

The committee has not yet published public submissions, but several groups have released theirs.

The Caxton Legal Centre said the state had not properly explained why the laws were needed.

“Until clear and compelling evidence of the justification for these new laws is made public we believe that the proposed amendments should not proceed,” said Bridget Burton, the director of the Caxton Legal Centre’s human rights and civil law practice.

“The proposed laws will extend police search powers and increase the penalties for breaches of the peace to up to two years imprisonment if introduced.

“By privileging powerful institutional interests over the human rights of individuals (the proposal does not achieve) the right balance in a society ostensibly based on freedom, democracy and respect for the dignity of all people.”

The Human Rights Law Centre said the laws infringe on Queenslanders’ human rights.

Alice Drury, a lawyer at the Human Rights Law Centre, said criminal laws must be based on evidence.

“The public is entitled to have all the facts when a government proposes a new law that undermines their democratic rights,” Drury said.

“Politicians should resist the knee-jerk response of criminalising conduct because it’s frustrating, and recommit to facilitating peaceful protest for the health of our democracy.”

The Queensland Greens MP, Michael Berkman, said the short-cutting of the committee process was a “disgusting betrayal of our democracy”.

“(Major political parties) keep taking massive donations from big fossil fuel. That’s why they’re shutting down dissent, that’s why these laws have really been introduced to squash peaceful protest.”

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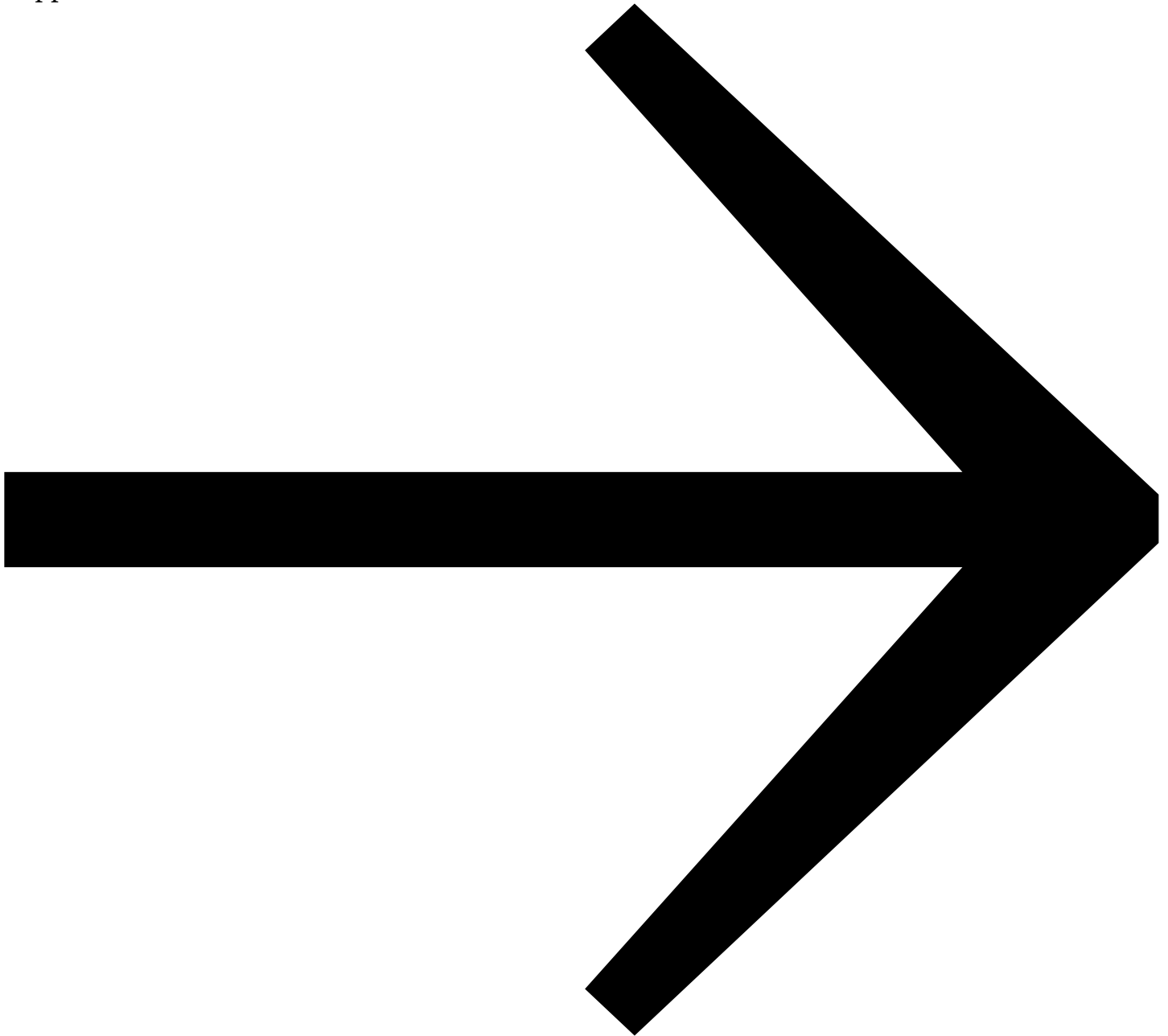
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