

Second Reading Speech

University of Tasmania (Protection of Land) Bill 2024

Speaker, I move that the Bill now be read a second time.

This Bill, the University of Tasmania (Protection of Land) Bill 2024, delivers on our commitment to prevent the University of Tasmania (UTAS) from disposing of land at its Sandy Bay Campus without the approval of both Houses of the Tasmanian Parliament.

The University of Tasmania is an essential Tasmanian education institution.

In fact, as Tasmania's only university, UTAS remains a critical tertiary education facility at the heart of our ability to grow our economy, run our institutions, deliver professional expertise to the marketplace and educate our children.

Many Tasmanians have strong relationships with the University, including as students, alumni, employees, business connections and supporters of family members, who attend or attended the University.

I attended UTAS, as have many in my family both now and over three generations. Many in this chamber also attended UTas, and have participated in the broader cultural and intellectual life supported by the University's community engagement activities.

I am confident that many in this House have their own personal connection to the University of Tasmania in some way.

The University has a long history in Tasmania, with campuses located in all regions of the state. The Southern Campus includes the Sandy Bay Campus, which is built on land gifted to the University of Tasmania under the University of Tasmania Act 1951.

Campus locations and plans for the future of those sites, have the capacity to significantly benefit the social, cultural, and economic welfare of the Tasmanian community. We recognise that there will always be a divergence of views, some positive, other to the contrary. This is fundamentally the basis upon which we are charged in this place with negotiating to ensure the best solution is found.

By getting it right, aligning investment with workforce development demands particularly in STEM, we can deliver future career opportunities and lift Tasmania's economy.

Speaker, 'home is where the heart is'. I believe that this saying is quite apt considering the history of the university at Sandy Bay – a place synonymous for greenery, water views, a beautiful campus and proximity to the CBD.

The Sandy Bay campus is the ‘heart’ of UTAS, and its presence provides strategic benefit for students, the local community and the university itself. Campus life has long been a party of the university experience. We should be proud to have a wonderful university right on our doorstep providing career and economic benefits for Tasmanians and those further afield.

Our decision to support retaining the Sandy Bay Campus and its reinvigoration is not about the ‘here and now’, it is predicated on a strategic vision – one which sets the goal of securing a bright future for our great state.

That is why, as part of our 2030 Strong Plan for Tasmania’s Future we committed to introduce the legislation we are considering here today. This Legislation allows for the scrutiny, through the Parliament, of any proposed disposal of land at the Sandy Bay Campus.

This arrangement strikes the right balance between protecting the public interest and allowing the University to get on with their core business – which is educating young Tasmanians.

University Accord

Speaker, we value the importance of continuing to provide the best higher education experience possible for all Tasmanians. While today’s Bill provides a transparency measure regarding the disposal of the Sandy Bay Campus, we will continue to work with the

Australian Government recommendations coming from the Australian Universities Accord to ensure we meet Tasmania's future education needs.

UTAS and STEM

The Tasmanian Government understands that our important science and technology sectors offer great potential for economic growth together with global work opportunities and that ICT leadership is essential to bridge the digital divide for all Tasmanians.

We all want Tasmanian students to have access to the most contemporary tertiary education opportunities.

Equally we understand the need to meet workforce demands in the STEM sector both now and into the future. This is precisely why we are acting to address this issue.

Tech sector, innovation, science and digital economy jobs are good jobs - they have potential to form the basis of national and global careers.

By reimagining and enlarging the offerings at UTAS Sandy Bay, the University will be well positioned to provide modern, fit-for-purpose tertiary education facilities complete with contemporary courses for the modern age. Investing in courses and academic staff is essential.

This is precisely why a STEM-led future at Sandy Bay makes sense.

UTAS are also consulting with their expert STEM staff to understand how to deliver the best possible STEM education experience for our students, for our teachers and more broadly our community to ensure we cater for our future needs.

A STEM future requires investment, investment from the University and from the Commonwealth Government.

This idea of upgraded STEM facilities is not new. They have been on Infrastructure Australia's radar since 2017. STEM facilities are not cheap. To say such a thing would undermine the criticality of their place in the evolving world of STEM whether it is technology, space, science, engineering, medicine or research to name just a few. Imagine the possibilities we could achieve right here for future generations, with access to global careers from Tasmania.

This is Tasmania's education future – this is why STEM is so important.

The Bill

This Bill will require that the land at Sandy Bay currently held by the University of Tasmania, and gifted to the University in 1951, cannot be disposed of except with approval from both Houses of Parliament.

That is, if the University wishes to sell the land, or indeed lease the land for a term of 99 years or longer, both Houses of Parliament would have the opportunity to scrutinise this and ensure the right decision is made for all Tasmanians – not just those residing in the immediate proximity.

We respect the right of the University to establish new facilities in the Hobart CBD, and elsewhere if it wishes, this arrangement strikes the right balance between protecting the public interest, and allowing the University to get on with its business – which is providing higher education.

Last week, the Government acted in good faith by circulating, for wider comment, our proposed changes to legislation governing lands held by the University of Tasmania.

I regret to say that, since that time, we have seen quite a bit of misinformation about both our position, and that of the university.

We should all be united in this House, indeed in both Houses, for the prospects of Tasmanians. It is time to come together across the chamber in support of education, our university and the students of Tasmania.

That is why I would like to utilise this speech as an opportunity to correct some of the misconceptions that we have recently heard.

At the last state election, we promised to:

1. Keep the University of Tasmania at Sandy Bay; and
2. Ensure that any proposed sale of university lands require the approval of both houses of Parliament.

Despite what some may say, we have kept UTAS at Sandy Bay; we have kept it there and now we support reinvigorating the campus. Earlier this year, the university revised its strategic plan to focus on STEM development at Sandy Bay. In other words, UTAS has remained - and will remain - at Sandy Bay. Full stop.

The amendments, circulated last week, propose the repurposing of some, defined, university lands. Specifically, the university has proposed, whether explicitly or by virtue of rezoning, selling off two parcels of land above Churchill Avenue to fund their STEM vision. In other words, there is a proposal, and this Parliament will consider that proposal.

I recognise that keeping your election promises and engaging in due process and consultation are foreign ideas to some across the chamber.

I fully appreciate that the opposition would likely prefer that we either consider the interests of only the few, not the many, or handball this important decision to the next generation.

We are the Liberal Party; we are a government that governs for all Tasmanians and in the best interests of Tasmanians; and we will deal with this issue in this time, and in this place.

The future of Tasmania is not a decision for next week, or for that matter next year. It is important right now.

These STEM facilities and enhancement of the UTAS Sandy Bay campus is a pressing issue for our entire community. Tasmania needs, no – it deserves, STEM facilities at our university. Without support for this Bill and said amendments Tasmania will not have the facilities it needs until well into the 2030's, putting us decades behind the other states.

This really matters because we know that so many jobs and the competitiveness of our existing industries are dependent on science and technology.

While a majority of my speech today has been about the substantive Bill, but also addressing the amendments as circulated, I believe we have been open and transparent in the fullness of disclosure here and in the broader public domain.

I note that I have spoken of said amendments of which I will be bring forth with further detail upon moving them.

Speaker, to echo the words of the famous scientist Sir Isaac Newton, an individual who would have only dreamed of the day generations had the opportunity to have futures in technical fields, “I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.”

We have the opportunity to support Tasmanians to discover the endless possibilities that STEM has in store – without a STEM-led future at UTAS Sandy Bay, Tasmanians could end up merely wondering ‘what if’.

I commend this Bill to the House.