



Speech by

GORDON NUTTALL

MEMBER FOR SANDGATE

Hansard 23 November 1999

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL (No. 2)

Mr NUTTALL (Sandgate—ALP) (5.03 p.m.): It gives me great pleasure to rise in support of the Bill before the House this afternoon. It was disappointing to hear some of the rhetoric from the Opposition. I believe honestly that part of that is opposition for opposition's sake.

I note that in March 1991 the State held a referendum on whether we should have four-year terms for State Government. I understand the argument of Opposition members who say that they are not necessarily opposed to four-year terms but they are opposed to the process. However, it is a reality of life—and this is something that we have not heard so far in the debate this afternoon—that the Local Government Association has lent its support to the Bill. The Local Government Association is the peak body for all local governments. Therefore, I do not understand the Opposition's argument.

Prior to introducing this Bill, the Minister forwarded a letter not only to all councillors but also to all honourable members in the Parliament asking for their views on four-year terms. I have not heard a huge outcry from within my electorate. I have travelled with the Community Cabinet and taken deputations on behalf of the Premier. I have met councillors and local people in regional Queensland, and on no occasion has any member of the public or a councillor told me that they oppose the Government's introduction of legislation for fixed four-year terms.

What must be borne in mind in this debate is that we already have fixed three-year terms. The Bill before the Parliament this afternoon does not propose a drastic change.

Mr Nelson: It is only 12 months.

Mr NUTTALL: That is right. The fact is that we are seeking to extend the term for a period of 12 months only. The Opposition says that we should take the issue back to the people, but we are the State Government and we are elected to govern. We control the Local Government Act. It is as simple as that. If there was a huge outcry about what the Government is proposing, surely the members of this State Parliament, particularly those members who represent regional electorates that contain a number of councils, would have heard that outcry.

Mr Pearce: One letter.

Mr NUTTALL: Indeed. On no occasion have I heard any honourable member, from either side of the House, say that the people of his or her electorate do not support what we are proposing. I am rather bemused to now hear honourable members objecting to the legislation that is before the House this afternoon.

The Australian Constitutional Commission recommended that the Federal Government move to four-year terms only if the Government served a minimum of three years before calling an election. That issue probably has something to do with the reason that the State referendum failed in 1991. I do not believe that it failed because we were seeking four-year terms; I believe that it failed because we did not stipulate that we wanted to have either a minimum or a maximum term. Indeed, I think if a referendum on whether or not we should have fixed four-year terms for local or State Governments is held, there would be overwhelming support for the proposal.

Most of the States and Territories in this country have four-year terms. Every State Government bar Queensland has a four-year term and the Northern Territory has a four-year term. The only ones

that do not have four-year terms are the Commonwealth, Queensland and the ACT. Therefore, it is nothing radical or new to introduce legislation to allow councils to have fixed four-year terms. I know that some people have argued that it would be difficult to fill vacancies. A number of amendments are proposed by the honourable member for Warrego in relation to that point, but I really believe that they are just red herrings in the whole debate on whether or not we should have fixed four-year terms.

If honourable members look at the results of the referendum conducted in March 1991 in respect of terms for the Queensland State Government, they will see that the vote was a close one and that there was a majority of only some 38,000 for the "No" case. Again, I believe that was because the question was worded badly.

Mr Hobbs: The people got it wrong?

Mr NUTTALL: No, I did not say that. I said that the question was worded badly. The honourable member for Warrego should be mindful of what the then Opposition Leader, Mr Cooper, said about four-year terms. He stated—

"It is not so much four-year terms, but the Government's proposal to add another year to the life of future Parliaments while maintaining the ability to call early elections."

That is why the vote went down—no other reason. The honourable member for Indooroopilly—

Mr Hobbs: You are trying to reinvent history.

Mr NUTTALL: I am not trying to reinvent history at all; all I am doing is quoting what honourable members on the member's side of the Parliament said. On 23 November 1990, the honourable member for Indooroopilly stated—

"Four-year non-fixed terms"—

non-fixed terms—

"are widely recognised as the best way of ensuring stable and good Government. It is in accord with the Westminster system in which Governments rise and fall on the floors of Parliament."

In my view, even if this Bill stated that we would have a referendum, the Opposition members would oppose any question that we wished to put to the people; they would not agree with us on the wording of the question. We are seeing opposition for the sake of opposition. As long as they continue down the path of not showing any leadership or direction and not being prepared to make decisions for the good of the people of this State, they will continue to remain in Opposition. It is a sad state of affairs. When a referendum was held in 1991, they found reasons to oppose it, and they would do so today if we were to hold a referendum on fixed four-year terms for local government. The Opposition claims that it has the bush at the foremost of its thoughts. However, if that is so, why has no Opposition speaker said that this council or that council opposes fixed four-year terms? Why have they not given us some examples? They have not done so simply because the examples are not there—and that is simply because the Local Government Association, the peak body for councils, supports this Bill. It irks the Opposition when we manage to consult, get it right and bring in legislation that will be for the betterment of the people of this State, and local government in particular.

As has been stated in the debate, local government is close to the people. I agree with that statement wholeheartedly. People in all walks of life have a passion for local government. That is all the more reason for this legislation being supported. One would have thought that, if this were bad legislation and if local governments opposed fixed four-year terms, they would be knocking on the doors of State parliamentarians saying, "You should not be bringing in this legislation." The fact that they have not done so is a ringing endorsement for the legislation before the Parliament this afternoon which should be supported by all honourable members.
