



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

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RURAL BANK BRANCH CLOSURES

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (11.14 p.m.): This week Westpac Banking Corporation announced that it was going to close three bank branches within the Callide electorate. The Westpac branches at Moura, Mundubbera and Gin Gin are all set to close in a continuing reduction of banking services in rural areas. This policy of all major banks to continue closing bank branches in country areas has had a devastating effect on rural communities across the State. Just about every community has felt the sting of lost bank branches. It is very unfortunate, to say the least, that the communities of Moura, Mundubbera and Gin Gin are to be similarly affected by this latest deplorable decision by the Westpac Banking Corporation.

It is obvious that Westpac has learnt nothing from the backlash and the damage done to its public image by the continuation of this policy of stripping country towns of their bank branches. It has learnt nothing about the growing anger that this continuing policy engenders. Many rural towns have faced similar closures by the major banks, but Westpac has been the leader, and the anger and the frustration felt in each case remains strong and heartfelt. Westpac's actions are deserving of universal condemnation.

The closure of any bank branch is a devastating blow to a country town's morale. The loss of service opportunities for the bank's former customers is bad enough. Those service opportunities can never be replaced by electronic banking, information technology or in-store services. The loss of jobs and job opportunities in the community is even worse. The loss of those jobs must, and always does, contribute to the downward spiral of economic activity in the town as the population declines and other services are lost. It is a pattern that is all too familiar to those of us who live in rural Queensland.

Regrettably, the options open to Governments to prevent this betrayal of rural communities are very limited indeed. There is nothing any Government or individual member can do to prevent or reverse the bank's deplorable decision to close country branches. Banks, after all, in the end, are private companies. These decisions are taken by managers who seem to sit in splendid isolation in Sydney or Melbourne. The options for the affected community to fight the closure of their bank branch are also limited—very frustratingly limited. The banks seem to have perfected the deplorable strategy of refusing to talk to the community at all once they announce their decision. As the member for Fitzroy said last night in this Chamber, they lock themselves in their vaults and will not talk to anybody. They invariably refuse to attend public meetings or enter into any meaningful discussion to explain or justify their decision to close any particular bank branch. They display an arrogance that only serves to heighten the anger of the people whom their actions affect.

In the case of the latest round of branch closures, Westpac indulged in a farcical public consultation process in the weeks leading up to the closure. It was obvious to me that a decision had already been made to close those branches and that the so-called consultation was simply a pathetic attempt to deflect criticism and a pathetic attempt to divert community leaders from expressing the anger of the people they represent.

Westpac can be assured that it did not work. I make it very clear that, to me, to all community leaders in central Queensland and to all reasonable people in Queensland, the Westpac Banking Corporation stands condemned for this latest betrayal of rural Queensland. I urge all residents of Moura, Mundubbera and Gin Gin to support the financial institutions that are prepared to support those

communities. I urge all residents of Queensland generally to support the banks and the building societies that stay in our communities and to support the financial institutions that support the people.

I also take this opportunity to strongly urge all the major banks, and Westpac in particular, to cease—or even reverse—this deplorable program of branch bank closures and show some loyalty and commitment to the people and the communities who have supported the banking institutions for so many years and to show some understanding and compassion for the effect that this policy is having on country towns throughout Australia.
