



Speech by

**Hon. JUDY SPENCE**

**MEMBER FOR MOUNT GRAVATT**

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Hansard 11 November 1999

**COMMUNITY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

**Hon. J. C. SPENCE** (Mount Gravatt— ALP) (Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Minister for Women's Policy and Minister for Fair Trading) (3.59 p.m.), in reply: I thank all honourable members who participated in the debate. It is gratifying that the Opposition is supporting the legislation. The members of the National Party who spoke in the debate—the shadow Minister, the member for Callide, the member for Beaudesert and the member for Warrego—displayed their understanding of the issues with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait island councils. They acknowledged the difficulties that these councils face operating in remote communities and in attempting to grapple with accounting standards that have changed in recent years and also the complexity of the tasks that they face.

In particular, I acknowledge the support of the shadow Minister and indicate that we will be supporting the amendments that he will be introducing in this Chamber in good faith. I believe that they will improve the Government's capacity to introduce financial controllers into Aboriginal councils, and we are happy to endorse them. In his contribution, the member for Beaudesert spoke of the history of the legislation. He imparted a good understanding of the enormity of the task and the responsibilities of DOGIT councils in this State. I acknowledge the member for Beaudesert's concerns about the potential to commit future Governments to impossible infrastructure obligations. However, I have to say that he is wrong in respect of the community of Mapoon. This legislation gives us the ability to create a new council of Mapoon, 36 years after a Queensland Government went into the mission of Mapoon, forcibly removed the citizens of that community and put them on a boat to Bamaga, burning their houses behind them.

**Mr Schwarten:** They weren't straw huts, either.

**Ms SPENCE:** They were not straw huts. This was a decent community run as a Presbyterian mission. Many reasons were put forward as to why the Government of the day did that. It is reasonable to contend that the Government did not want to continue supporting yet another mission after the Presbyterians indicated that they wanted to pull out of that part of the world. That was the simple reason that they burnt Mapoon.

Sometimes it is important to take stock and think about what we are doing. That we are creating a new council of Mapoon means a lot to the few hundred people living in that part of the world. Over recent months they have asked, "Minister, why hasn't this legislation gone through? What are the problems? Who is opposing this legislation?" I tried to explain to them that these are the normal processes of Parliament and that their day would come. Today is that day. We are now giving them the power to take part in the local government elections next March as a fully fledged council in this State. I know that means a lot to those few hundred people. It is truly a measure of reconciliation on the part of this Parliament that today we have recognised that the actions of the Government 36 years ago were wrong and we are setting about righting them.

In response to the concerns of the member for Lockyer that the Bill is too broad and that we are giving the Government the power to create Aboriginal and Torres Strait island councils throughout the State, I will say a number of things. This is the same power that is already in the Local Government Act. Theoretically, the Government of the day could already create councils throughout Queensland. Secondly, the reality is that the Cook Shire came to this Government and suggested this idea. We did not have to drag the Cook Shire kicking and screaming with respect to this issue. This was its idea.

The political reality is that the Government would not create new Aboriginal and Torres Strait island councils unless it had the support of the whole community—both the wider community and the council that is giving up part of its land. This is the first time we have created a new Aboriginal or island council since 1984, when the community services legislation was introduced. It is extremely unlikely that we would do this again in the future. I hope that reassures the honourable member. I found many aspects of the speech of the honourable member for Lockyer disappointing. Philosophically, we are poles apart on these issues. However, I do not have sufficient time in this debate to respond to all of the issues that he raised.

I am pleased that the member for Tablelands supports the intent of this legislation and understands the importance of the accountability measures that we are introducing. I do not believe that his criticism of Murrandoo Yanner and Noel Pearson added anything to the debate today, and that would be best left for discussion in another forum.

I thank Government members for their contributions to the debate today. The members for Bulimba, Mackay, Mansfield and Lytton have all displayed an understanding of the legislation. They are on my legislative committee and I know that they have an intense interest in and concern about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues in this State. I thank them for their contributions.

Finally, I thank the members of my department who have worked on this legislation. The creation of the council of Mapoon has taken a number of years. Many good people have been making sure that this would happen and that the community was ready to accept it. I thank those people.

All speakers have mentioned accountability. We all agree that that is important in respect of Aboriginal communities. Some members acknowledged that sometimes we make impossible demands of these remote and small communities. Many of these communities are working from council chambers that are clearly unsatisfactory. I am proud that I was able to gain \$5m in this year's State Budget to rebuild some five council chambers on Aboriginal communities throughout this State. We cannot ask for an increasing level of professionalism if we are asking them to operate out of buildings where there are workplace health and safety concerns.

**Mr Lucas:** It's difficult to operate computer equipment in a shed.

**Ms SPENCE:** That is right. Reconciliation is not just about words or about changing laws; it is also about making a financial commitment to improve those communities. I commend the Bill to the House.

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