



Speech by

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COMMUNITY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Dr PRENZLER (Lockyer—ONP) (3.30 p.m.): I rise to speak on the Community Services Legislation Amendment Bill. Before I begin, I would like to say that I am somewhat hesitant about giving my full support to the Bill. Even though I agree with the majority of the proposed amendments, there is an area of considerable concern which I will shortly address.

The major focus of the Bill is to facilitate improvements in the financial accountability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait island councils. I commend the Minister for this approach. I must say that this is very commendable and long overdue. For decades, Aboriginal and island councils have been the subject of limited financial accountability, often using grant money and other moneys for purposes other than those originally intended. A common example in some communities is the provision of interest-free loans—using council funds—to pay the debts of community members.

The Auditor-General raised those concerns via audit reports, highlighting the fact that, in the past decade, Aboriginal and island councils have had inadequate or non-existent accounting records. There has been nothing in place to ensure that expenditure was incurred only for purposes related to the lawful functions of the council.

It makes me wonder why this lack of accountability and obvious misappropriation of public funds was allowed to continue for so many years before something was done about it. We are talking decades here, not just one or two years! It seems to be another case of turning a blind eye when it comes to the special treatment that is often given to indigenous Australians.

But this is not the issue of my concern. What concerns me, and One Nation in general, is the amendment that will provide power in the Act to establish new Aboriginal and island councils. It is claimed that this very open amendment is necessary as it is intended in the future to establish an Aboriginal council for the Old Mapoon community.

From my understanding, Aboriginal and island councils cannot be established in an area already governed by a local government authority. In the case of the Old Mapoon community, the Cook Shire Council currently governs the area and it will need to change its boundaries to exclude the area for which the Aboriginal council will be established. I ask the Minister: because this amendment is so broad, what assurances can she give that regulations will not be introduced to establish Aboriginal and island councils in areas other than the Old Mapoon community?

What assurances can the Minister give that the redefining of Aboriginal and island council areas will not extend into existing local government authority boundaries to the detriment of non-indigenous residents in those areas? It may well be beneficial for the Cook Shire to cede an area to form the Old Mapoon council, but we need to see a mechanism put in place which prevents the formation of native council areas against the wishes of existing shire councils and against the best interests of the community.

According to the Queensland Parliamentary Library research note No. 4/99, Aboriginal and island councils discharge the same functions as mainstream local government authorities. However, they are differentiated for the following reasons: the nature of Aboriginal and island councils as "people" councils, incorporating close family ties and a strong sense of community; the diverse range in community populations; the remoteness of the communities and the limited banking and mailing

facilities that they have; the limited resource pool within each community from which to draw council staff, including the absence of staff skilled in the production of accurate financial data and the inability to access professional advice and assistance when facing accounting problems; the difficulty for councils to apply accounting standards which are foreign to the Aboriginal and island culture; and the inexperience of staff to run various council enterprises.

Referring to those reasons—in particular the last three points—how can the existence of these councils be justified? Perhaps the real question is: why cannot the functions of mainstream local government authorities be expanded to accommodate the needs of indigenous Australians. Why do separate councils have to be established to service the needs of only 2.2% of the population?

It is no secret that One Nation opposes the segregation of services for Aborigines and non-Aborigines. To be quite frank, the more one researches the issue, the more one learns about the abuse of taxpayers' money being poured into Aboriginal-specific programs. These are not programs that can be accessed by all Australians; they are programs that can only be accessed by 2.2% of the population.

Millions of dollars of public funds are being spent on these programs each year. According to the information I received from the Parliamentary Library, over \$1.2 billion of State and Federal funding is allocated to Aboriginal-specific programs per year. That is a huge amount of money that is being spent on services that probably already exist for the Australian community as a whole—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. It is a huge amount of money that could be allocated to other areas of need, such as better education and better health facilities for all these areas.

Let us not forget the fact that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders can access all mainstream services. They are not excluded from accessing the service in the way that non-Aboriginals are excluded from accessing Aboriginal services. This promotes divisiveness and is a major disincentive to the noble aim of a nation united.

I can accept the theory as to why Aboriginal and island councils came into existence in the first place—to service the needs of indigenous Australians residing in that area. However, it is an irrefutable fact that local government authorities established all over Australia are there for the same reasons. We already have an establishment with aims and objectives to service the needs of people residing in each council area.

We already have skilled and qualified people employed who are familiar with council operations and accounting practices and standards. Why does a separate entity have to be established to service the needs of only indigenous Australians? Why cannot local government authorities be structured to service the needs of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders? Why does a separate and exclusive system of services have to be established for indigenous Australians when services are already in place for everyone?

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, population estimates identified 23% of Australia's population as being overseas born, with the majority of immigrants coming from New Zealand, the United Kingdom, China, Hong Kong, South Africa, Vietnam, the Philippines, India, Taiwan and Bosnia. As 23% of our population is overseas born—with the majority coming from Asian countries—is the next step going to be the establishment of Asian councils or Asian services to look after the specific needs of our immigrant population?

How can this Government say that it is community-minded when all it is intent on doing is segregating the community? We constantly hear of reconciliation, but how can one reconcile when one segregates at the same time? It does not make sense, and it does not make sense to the majority of Queenslanders. In fact, it angers them to see their taxes being spent on the establishment of services which they cannot access because of race—especially when areas such as public health and education are in desperate need of funds.

I urge all members of the House to reconsider the implications of the legislation, which is based on race. We are here to service the needs of all Australians. It is about time that all segregation stopped. I will be supporting the Bill because it focuses on a necessary improvement, namely the facilitation of improvements in the area of financial accountability. That will certainly improve the situation. I thank the Minister for raising the issue.
