



Speech by

Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE

MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

Hansard 23 November 1999

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

Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE (Surfers Paradise—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (4.12 p.m.): I rise to join the debate on the Local Government and Other Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 2) to express some very grave concerns as to how the issue of the four-year term is being handled by the Government and by the Minister for Local Government in particular. During debate last sitting week on legislation to establish an ethics commissioner in Queensland, I spoke at some length about the cynicism that exists in the electorate about the perception—which is very often the reality—that Governments do not listen, that the political elite in this country have developed a very bad, very annoying habit of imposing their own views and their own will on the electorate and the subsequent backlash that we are continuing to see as a result of that. I would instance as another example of the people rebelling against the self-appointed political elite the outcome of the recent republic referendum. Some 60% of Queenslanders said, "No thanks, we will stick with the system that we have", rather than agreeing to the alternatives that were being proposed by those people who were increasingly out of touch with the general mood of the electorate.

We are seeing a continuation of that arrogance. We are seeing a continuation of that litany of error in the form of proposals by the Beattie Government without reference to the people of Queensland to change unilaterally the term of office for local government in Queensland from three years to four years. There are very strong and compelling arguments as to why we should have four-year terms. That is not essentially the issue. The issue is the process and the abandonment of process by this Government, its arrogance and its high-handedness.

If the Beattie Government as a matter of policy wanted to say to the people of Queensland that it thinks that four-year terms are a good idea, then by all means it should put that particular question to the people of Queensland and do so by way of a referendum on the same date as the local government elections. If a majority of Queenslanders express their democratic right and vote "Yes" to four-year terms, then the council and the councillors that we elect at the time of the next local government elections could serve a four-year term.

I think it is wrong, cheeky, arrogant, insensitive and typical of the Government that is learning nothing from the cynicism and scepticism that exist in the electorate to suddenly do a bit of a backroom deal with the LGA and then tell the people of Queensland that they are going to get a four-year term whether they want it or not. That is what I object to. The Government has bypassed the people who matter. The Minister for Public Works, the Minister for Local Government and the Premier are not giving the people in their electorates the opportunity to say "No". Once again, what we see—

Mr Reynolds: What about the backroom deals you have been involved in?

Mr BORBIDGE: I am glad that the fossil from Townsville interjects, because the fossil from Townsville—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order!

Mr BORBIDGE: The honourable member for Townsville, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier in north Queensland, is one of those people who said, "We know best: Australia should be a republic." He advocated a republic and he found himself out of step with 60% of Queensland. Government members are making the same mistake in respect of the clause in this legislation. I have no problem—

Mr Mackenroth: Do you think the public are happy with the British system they have got?

Mr BORBIDGE: The people have spoken.

That is an example of the actions of the political elite: "The people have voted, but they didn't get it right." According to the Minister, we should keep having a referendum until the people vote the way he wants. So the referendum becomes the "neverendum". That is the attitude of the political elite represented in this place by the Minister for Local Government and the member for Townsville.

Mr MACKENROTH: I rise to a point of order. The Leader of the Opposition claims that the people wanted the British system. In fact, in England they have five-year terms.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! There is no point of order.

Mr BORBIDGE: I am proud of the fact that in Australia we have seen the evolution of an Australian system that 60% of Queenslanders supported at the recent vote. I am proud of the fact that we have a good Australian at Government House in Brisbane. I am proud of the fact that, under our system of government, a Labor member of the Parliament who was an Ipswich copper could become Governor-General of Australia. I make no apology for that. That is the sort of system of government that honourable members opposite do not subscribe to.

I was distracted. I was drawing the analogy that the political elite—particularly those who occupy the Government benches in this place—have lost touch. I would have no argument whatsoever if the Minister for Local Government wanted to put to the people of Queensland a referendum for four-year terms for local government. That would not attract criticism from me, because it is not a political decision by the majority in this Parliament; it is a decision by a majority of Queenslanders. That is where this Government has got it totally wrong once again.

The situation is simply this: those opposite are, by an instrument of the Parliament, without reference to the people, extending by one year the term in office of elected officials who will come into office at the next local government elections. The people have had no say. No doubt, if those opposite had their way, they would do the same thing with regard to the Parliament. But they know that that is entrenched. They know that that has to go to the people. They also know that, on that particular issue, the last time the concept of four-year fixed parliamentary terms was put to the people in this State it was rejected by a majority of Queenslanders.

Mr Mackenroth: It was not fixed terms.

Mr BORBIDGE: I stand corrected. Four-year terms were rejected. What those opposite are doing today—that adds to my argument, and I thank the Minister for correcting me—is entrenching in law for local government what Queenslanders rejected by way of a referendum for the State Parliament, and did it only recently during the not-so-missed, late and unlamented period of the Goss era, or the Goss error, as it is described in certain quarters.

I make the point again: there are lessons to be learnt in modern politics. Every Government and every political party is going through the process. There is enormous discontent with the political establishment. There is enormous political discontent with incumbency—whether it is Victoria, Queensland or the Commonwealth. There is a feeling that a majority of Australians have never felt so disconnected. We have seen the creation of two Australias, of two Queenslanders. One of the ironies today is that, although Australia enjoys economic growth that is the envy of the Western World, increasingly that economic growth is being experienced only at the big end of town.

People in the outer suburbs, people in the provincial cities and people in the country have not shared equally the benefits of that particular economic growth or, for that matter, involvement in the political process. That has fuelled the politics of discontent. The politics of discontent is fuelled further when we have a Government that says, "I hope electors like the local council they are going to elect next year, because they are going to have them for four years instead of three. If electors do not like them once they vote for them, well, bad luck, because we think they're good for electors."

That is what this legislation does. That is what this Minister is doing. He is doing it in a manner that totally defies the very strong concerns that exist across Queensland about how Governments of all political persuasions somehow think that they know what is best for the people and the people do not matter. They are the concerns that I feel obliged to place on the record in this Parliament today with regard to this legislation.
