



Speech by

JEFF SEENEY

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

Hansard 17 May 2001

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (5.36 p.m.): I rise to oppose this legislation and to support the comments that were made by the shadow minister, the member for Warrego. At the beginning of my speech, it is worth noting that this is yet another piece of legislation that was on the *Notice Paper* back in November when the parliament was unceremoniously closed down to avoid the public scrutiny of what was then a developing inquiry into the activities of members such as the member for Lytton.

The presence of this legislation in this parliament today is another illustration of the dishonesty of the Labor government. It is another demonstration of the dishonesty of the Premier. Last year, the Premier said that the parliament had completed its workload and did not need to meet for that last week of the 49th Parliament. This legislation is one of a long line of legislation that was dropped off the list when that parliament was closed down unceremoniously so that we could not ask questions about members such as the member for Lytton. At that time, this legislation was on the *Notice Paper* as legislation to be debated. Yet very early in the life of this parliament, here it is back in this chamber to be debated. In that respect, this legislation illustrates the dishonesty of the Labor government and the dishonesty of the Premier.

This is dishonest legislation. It is dishonest to its core. It is dishonest in its intent. Everything that the then Minister for Local Government—not the current minister—who introduced it into the last parliament said when he was introducing it was dishonest in regard to that part of it that deals with local councillors having to resign from their positions before they nominate as candidates in state government elections. I feel a bit sorry for the current minister, because I know only too well that she has inherited this dishonest piece of legislation from her predecessor. In that respect, she has well and truly been sold a pup. Unfortunately, the minister is the one in the hot seat, and she is the one who is going to bear the responsibility of this legislation in local government circles throughout Queensland.

Both the minister and I were involved in local government. Both the minister and I still have lots of contacts in local government. Both the minister and I know the way in which the passage of this legislation is going to be greeted in local government circles. Both the minister and I know that her carriage of this legislation through this House will diminish considerably the standing and respect that she has, quite rightly to this date, established in local government circles. That is a shame. I genuinely feel somewhat sorry for the member for Bundaberg, the Minister for Local Government, in that her personal standing in the local government sphere will be diminished by the fact that she has carriage of this legislation.

In local government circles throughout Queensland, this legislation has become known as the Terrymander. That sums up what it is and it sums up its dishonesty. It is an effort by the former Minister, Terry Mackenroth, to gerrymander the electorate. We have a government that is becoming extraordinarily sensitive to criticism and extraordinarily sensitive to any sort of inquiry about its activities. We saw that in the House this morning. It has become a characteristic of this government.

However, this legislation sets a new benchmark. It sets a pattern for avoiding fair contests. It seeks to limit the contest. The government is not prepared to face up to the right and proper scrutiny of this parliament, which is one of the very functions of this place. We have seen so many examples of that in the last week or so in the parliament. In addition, the government is not prepared to go out into the Queensland electorate and face a fair contest come election time. It is trying to nobble the field. It is

trying to take out anybody who has half a chance, anybody who it thinks might have a bit of an advantage or anybody with a good chance of contesting a seat against their somewhat dubious and doubtful candidates.

If this government was confident in its ability to contest those seats, it would acknowledge the points that have been made by every local government, the Local Government Association and the Urban Local Government Association. They have all made the point that every electorate deserves to have the best chance that it can to get the best candidate that it can at election time. That is the point that is being made by every community up and down Queensland. This government does not want that to happen. It wants to be able to nobble the field and make it difficult for people who have established a leadership profile in a community and, therefore, would be considered to be frontrunners in the group seen as the best candidates for an election. They want to take them out.

The logic that the government uses is twisted and dishonest. Quite simply, it is dishonest. When introducing this legislation, the former minister talked about the cost to local governments that this legislation was going to save. That is demonstrably untrue. Nobody can sustain that argument and the evidence of that is available. Let us look at what happened at the last election. Had the government had the courage to come into this House in the last week of the 49th Parliament, in the first week in December, instead of trying to protect the shonky member for Lytton—

Mr LUCAS: I rise to a point of order. That comment is offensive and untrue. I ask for it to be withdrawn.

Mr SEENEY: I withdraw. I certainly do not want to upset the precious petal.

Had the government been prepared to come into this House during the last week of the 49th Parliament in December last year and pass this legislation as it had the power to do, this legislation would have applied at the last election. Right now, quite a number of local governments would be facing the cost of a by-election.

Mr Purcell: No they wouldn't.

Mr SEENEY: Yes, they would. Considering the number of candidates who would have been forced to resign, those councils would have been facing the cost of a by-election. Right at this moment, the ratepayers would be trying to work out how to pay for the by-elections out of their current budgets. That is what would have happened. Because this government did not have the courage to come into the House in the last week of the 49th Parliament and put this legislation through, those local governments have been saved the cost of that process. That example alone totally destroys the argument that was put by the previous minister and leaves the current minister in a somewhat embarrassing situation. That is the undeniable fact of the situation and it is impossible to sustain the arguments that were put by the former minister. They were spurious arguments at the time. History and the passage of time have proven them to be so. The current minister faces quite a conundrum when she stands to sum up the debate and tries to defend the sort of nonsense that her predecessor unfortunately left her with. Again I say that I feel somewhat sorry for the member for Bundaberg.

I wish to comment on the address made by the member for Redlands. He said that this legislation would make councillors earn their pay. On behalf of all my friends and colleagues in local governments up and down Queensland, especially those in rural and regional Queensland, I must say that that is offensive and ignorant. The comments of the member for Redlands in the House today show his ignorance of the situation in local governments up and down Queensland, especially those in rural and regional Queensland.

Not one councillor in rural and regional Queensland—and some of them have served lifetimes in those positions—would earn a fraction of the money that they could have earned considering a person's normal earning capacity. No-one with half a brain could suggest that those councillors do their jobs for the money. That is absurd, it is offensive and it demonstrates the ignorance of the member for Redlands and so many of his compatriots on the Labor backbench. They do not have a clue about the real situation in local government in rural and regional Queensland. The member for Redlands said that this legislation will make local councillors earn their pay, but they get paid an absolute pittance.

I was the Deputy Mayor of Monto shire before I was elected to this place. When I was first elected to the Monto Shire Council, we were paid \$80 a day in sitting fees. I had to pay somebody \$120 a day to drive my tractor at home. That sort of example is very common. I know mayors of shires in Queensland today who earn \$10,000 or \$12,000 for their efforts. The job of mayor for any shire is so close to being a full-time job that one does not have time for anything else.

For this ignorant young upstart to stand in this House and say that this legislation is going to make those people earn their money is an absolute affront to people who have given service to their communities and to the state of Queensland for the better part of their lives. I put on the record that, on behalf of those people who cannot come into this House and defend themselves, I take offence at those statements. I know that the minister knows that that sort of statement will be insulting to many of

the people whom we both regard as friends and colleagues in local government circles throughout the state.

There is another challenge that I would like to issue to ignorant upstarts like the member for Redlands, and that is: why is this legislation not extended to the natural recruiting ground of the Labor Party? Why is it not extended to that group of people who have never earned their money? I am talking about the infamous union reps—the infamous union organisers, the people who always have their hand in someone else's pocket, the people who live by garnisheeing other people's wages. Why isn't this legislation extended to them? That is the natural recruiting ground of the Labor Party. Why aren't they required to stand down so that they earn their money? That would be a first. That would be the first time any of them ever earned their money.

There is no comparison between the parasitic existence of a union organiser and the community service existence of a mayor of a shire. It cannot be compared. Why does this legislation not cover those people? Where is the logic in the spurious arguments advanced by the member for Redlands? No doubt quite a number of other enlightened members on the speaking list will advance them as this debate progresses. I am sure the member for Logan will progress those types of ignorant arguments as well, because he does not have a clue either. I know from his contributions in this House that that is the sort of spurious and ignorant argument that we will hear from so many of these Labor backbenchers.

This is dishonest legislation. It is about trying to nobble the field come election time. In rural communities especially, anyone who has had any sort of experience in a leadership role usually ends up as a local councillor. It is a tremendous training ground for any sort of representative role. It is a great training ground for the role as a state member. There are other training grounds. I would not suggest for a moment that we have to make that progression. I would not suggest that we have to be a local councillor before we qualify to stand for state election. There are other roles that I think very adequately prepare people to contest a state election. But foremost among them is serving on the local council.

To suggest that those people who serve on a local council somehow should be impeded from nominating for state representation totally ignores the reality in rural and regional Queensland especially. I think it is very different in Brisbane and in those councils where councillors are employed full time on salaries. To some extent—and only to a small extent—some of the arguments that have been advanced do have some degree of integrity in those situations where the councillors involved are in salaried positions. But it is totally impossible to sustain the logic of the argument when we apply this piece of legislation to rural and regional Queensland, where the great bulk of local governments are and where the great bulk of local council representatives make the transition from local government to state government.

This is dishonest legislation about nobbling the field. It is about taking out people who would be the natural frontrunners at election time. In that respect, this House should reject it and reject it soundly, just as it has been rejected by the Local Government Association, the Urban Local Government Association and every council in Queensland.

In my remaining minutes I wish to refer to the absurdity of the minister's claims about public consultation in her second reading speech. From memory, I think the former minister claimed that he had received 21 or 22 submissions—and the current minister repeated the claim—but he left out all of the submissions that he got from the councils. They did not agree with him so he said they did not count. Can the minister confirm that she received 51 submissions from councils? The former minister said, 'Leave them out. They don't count. We will just talk about the other 22.' Of those 22, 13 agreed with the minister—12 of which he wrote—and nine of them did not agree with him. On the basis of that he said, 'We have consulted with the public and there is public support for this legislation.'

Mr Hobbs: The Speaker even put in a submission.

Mr SEENEY: Yes, he was one of the ones who signed the submissions that the then Minister for Local Government wrote. How ridiculous and absurd! If they are going to do this sort of thing they should at least be fair dinkum about it and say, 'We've got the numbers and we're going to nobble you.' He should not come in here and say, 'We've had public consultation and I've got 13 submissions for it and nine against. Therefore, the public of Queensland are in support of it.' He might just as well say, 'I've got 51 submissions against it, but I'm not going to count them, because they don't agree with me.' How absurdly ridiculous is that sort of notion?

That is the level of dishonesty that we have seen in the debate on this legislation. A good example of how much notice is being taken of the public opinion on this legislation is the degree to which the former minister has conferred and taken note of the opinions expressed to him by the Local Government Association, by the Urban Local Government Association and by every council throughout Queensland. He has totally ignored them. That is because he knows that this legislation is dishonest,

he knows that the logic of his argument cannot be sustained and he knows that he has the numbers and power to force this legislation through this parliament and nobble the opposition.

Time expired.
