



Speech by

JOHN MICKEL, MLA STATE MEMBER FOR LOGAN

Hansard 17 May 2001

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr MICKEL (Logan—ALP) (8.46 p.m.): If anyone ever wondered, or if anyone ever needed any proof as to why the National Party recorded a 40 per cent swing against it in Surfers Paradise, we have just heard it. Members opposite cannot even stay consistent for one day. What did we vote on earlier today? The pecuniary interests register as part of the principles that would uphold this parliament! The member's voice was not heard anywhere.

Mr Johnson interjected.

Mr MICKEL: Yes, the member is vocal tonight; but when it counted, where was he? He sat there mute and absurd.

Mr Johnson interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member for Gregory will direct his comments through the Chair, and I ask him to restrain himself somewhat.

Mr MICKEL: Tonight we have heard from the National Party about the pecuniary interests register. Those of us who know a bit about Queensland's history know why that was introduced: because there was a crooked National Party government in the eighties. What we have heard tonight is another version of Russ Hinze revisited.

Mr HOBBS: I rise to a point of order. I find those words totally offensive and ask that they be withdrawn. They are the crooks over there—trying to get this legislation through.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member will resume his seat. I now warn the member that if he takes another spurious point of order, I will warn him under standing order 123A. There is no point of order.

Mr MICKEL: Mr Deputy Speaker, I do not know why you brought the member to order. We agree with him; we find Russ Hinze offensive, as well.

The point is that this is the second time we have seen this reversion to the old National Party government. Those not in the last parliament missed the performance in which the honourable member for Gregory wanted to bring back the gerrymander. Of course, this is the night of the member for Toowoomba South, who has been a member here for 10 years. He reminds me of what Arthur Calwell had to say to Danny Minogue. They could not work out what to do with Danny Minogue, so Arthur Calwell sent him down to the convents. He came back and Arthur Calwell said to him, 'How's it going, Danny?' and he said, 'Well, Arthur, they're all praying for you but nobody's voting for you.' That is what I say to the member for Toowoomba South: we're all praying for him, but nobody's voting for him!

The bill before the House tonight brings local government into line with every other level of government in Australian parliaments. I have always believed that local government is an important tier of government. It is the third level of government. It should be recognised in the Australian constitution. Unlike the member for Gregory, in every proposed amendment to the constitution I voted to bring that into effect. I might add that this proposition has always been opposed by the Liberal and National Parties, who stand up and say, 'We're all about local government.' They are, right up until they have to vote for it and support it in the constitution.

There is a feeling today—and it is echoed often times in speeches in this parliament—about a loss of local identity in the face of rapid growth of cities and a feeling of loss of local control caused by globalisation. I am told that at a luncheon in Brisbane several weeks ago held by the former Prime Minister of New Zealand, David Lange, this feeling of wanting to turn back to localism is now being reflected in the New Zealand levels of government, because former members of the national house of parliament are now seeking election to local authorities because of that feeling of returning to the community. The growing importance of local government in Queensland is no less profound. Over the past 20 years there has been a growth in responsibility for local government as power is devolved locally. At the same time the salary package—

Mr Seeney: Who wrote this?

Mr MICKEL: I am not worried about who wrote it; I am worried about who is going to read it back to you, my friend.

At the same time the salary package for councillors and time devoted to council has grown considerably. In Brisbane city it has been a full-time position for decades. In Logan city it has matured from a part-time job with fees—

Mr Seeney interjected.

Mr MICKEL: If they ever put a price on your head, my friend, I wish you would take it.

Mr Seeney: Do you stand in front of the mirror practising that?

Mr MICKEL: My visage in front of the mirror is far better than yours, my friend. They say man sprang from the apes, but when I look at the member for Callide I recognise that some did not spring far enough.

In Logan city it has matured from a part-time job with fees for attending committee meetings to what it is today—a full-time position with a salary of more than \$60,000, a car, a mobile phone, secretarial support and about \$100,000 in discretionary funding for council divisions of how many people? Some 9,000 people! It is a complete and absolute disgrace. It has also grown in that time from a three-year term to a four-year term to aid long-term planning. In essence, it now equates in salary with other levels of government and the length of term exceeds those of the state and federal parliaments.

Following last year's local government election there were sharp salary rises of up to 15 per cent. They were approved in the Pine Rivers shire, the Redlands shire, Redcliffe, Toowoomba, Logan, the Gold Coast and Ipswich, where the mayor now receives \$125,000 and councillors \$64,000. I do agree with the honourable gentleman for Callide on this: councillors of small shires and rural shires are paid less, but during the dinner adjournment I got it on very good authority as to why this was the case. A visit to the Monto council to undertake a work value case on the performance of the honourable member for Callide revealed that the job is worth a pittance. I am hopeful that if they revisit it in view of the honourable gentleman's absence it might come up a bit.

No-one begrudges these types of salaries if councillors are fully committed to honouring their promise to work full time during the four-year term. Yet even with the salary increases and a four-year term, 19 councillors nominated for state government election this year, less than one year into a four-year term! It is their democratic right. We hear about how great they are and all that sort of thing. According to the member for Gregory, the rest of us have no money and should not be here based on that performance. If we are poor, there is no place in the sunshine with the member for Gregory.

Mr JOHNSON: I rise to a point of order. I did not say that at all. I ask that that be withdrawn. I find it offensive.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Fouras): I ask the member for Logan to withdraw.

Mr MICKEL: I will withdraw, but a lot of people would have found the remarks of the honourable member opposite offensive. The point is this: 19 councillors stood for state parliament less than a year after they were elected to local government. We were told, 'Oh, they're wonderful.' Only one got elected. That is how wonderful they were. One got elected! Given this increased term and package, there is one aspect of democratic sanction that is missing. If people want to run for another level of government, it is their democratic right to do so, and we would encourage anybody to do that. But if they are already an elected representative, they owe it to those people to open up their seat if they want their old job back. Having indicated to people that they have had enough, there is no way they should just slide back into it.

What I am saying happens within councils. If a councillor wants to run for mayor at a general election, what do they do? They have to resign their division. They risk all in running for mayor—risk it all! Are those opposite saying that the mayors of this state are no good? That is precisely how they become mayor. If a state member or Crown employee, even one on leave without pay, wants to run for federal parliament, they resign their occupation or their seat before the close of nominations. I will quote the following for the benefit of the House—

Why shouldn't the principle of not being eligible for one taxpayer-funded position if you already hold another also apply to local government councillors, as it does with State parliamentarians who aspire to greater things?

Anyone entering parliament should do so free of the excess baggage of any long-term cronies they may have acquired along the way, not to mention the point that any councillor who wishes to enter State Parliament obviously no longer wishes to represent people on local government issues and should therefore resign.

Those opposite disagree with that. I would be interested if the member for Lockyer disagrees with it though, because I am quoting from 'To the Editor' in the Lockyer *Star* written by G. A. Wessling from Gatton, representing the local view. The local views in Gatton are not much different from those in Darling Downs, Nanango, Logan or anywhere else if taking a straw poll, because people do not believe local government representatives should nominate to run for higher office and then slide back into their old job if unsuccessful. Equally, section 221(f) of the Local Government Act 1993 under 'General Disqualifications' states that a person is not qualified to be or become a councillor if the person is a member of the Australian parliament. In other words, if a member wants to go from state government to the local authority, what do they have to do? They have to resign. Don't we want quality people in local government, people who have had experience at the state level? Isn't that the argument?

Ms Stone: Training.

Mr MICKEL: Yes, training and all those other things. I am saying that their resignation is not an insurmountable obstacle. If a person wants to move on they can, but they must resign to do so, just as we have to. If it is good enough for every other level of government, it is good enough for local government. Even local government employees take leave without pay to contest local government elections. As I said, resignation is not a serious obstacle. Resignation from state parliament does not prevent people seeking to be elected to the federal parliament. John Fahey did it. Kelvin Thomson and Bob Sercombe are current examples in the federal parliament. Are they not quality enough or good enough? What about Bob Menzies. He went from the state parliament. What about Barry Jones? What about Steele Hall?

Mr McGrady: What about Bob Katter?

Mr MICKEL: I was saving the best till last: Bob Katter. I think even the National Party were glad to see Bob Katter out of here. Even Joh Bjelke-Petersen was prepared to resign when he wanted to run for Prime Minister after he visited Disneyland in 1987. The Minister for Local Government and Planning resigned as mayor before contesting the state election in 1998. I am glad that the Minister for State Development has come into the chamber, because he resigned from a number of statutory positions prior to the 1992 election. I know he did, because I was given the task of asking him to. Likewise, I resigned, as I know many other members of this House did. Equally, I know that the member for Cunningham resigned his position as CEO of the Toowoomba Show Society to concentrate on the one task, that was, campaigning for this year's state election.

This is in stark contrast to the unprincipled stance of two Logan city councillors who were candidates. Both of them, one in Woodridge and the other in Springwood, are currently chairs of council committees. Neither of them was asked to resign or stand aside by their council, and they did not volunteer to stand aside from their positions whilst candidates. They continued to use full council facilities to campaign full time.

I refer to the case of Councillor Grant, a so-called Independent, who in the Woodridge by-election urged people to vote for anyone but the Labor Party. He is one of those sorts of Independents. I am an independent, too. I just happen to be an independent who votes with the government. There are a whole lot of independents opposite who always vote with the opposition. We are all independents.

The point is as follows. I mentioned before that the councillor had a discretionary community benefit fund. As of March 2001 Councillor Grant had spent \$5,420. But in the period from 23 January—that is, after the state election was called—to the day before the state election, Councillor Grant approved \$2,000 to community groups. That is almost half of his allocation for the year. He did not stand aside but continued to spend the money.

There is another allocation. It is an allocation we have not been able to get information on from the Logan City Council. It is a doozey. There is about \$100,000 in it. It is called the divisional improvement fund. When I tried to get that information today out of Logan City Council, guess what? I could not get it. I could not get it because we had already asked about the smaller one.

I call on the Logan City Council to make the processes regarding all of those funds transparent so that we can see what those councillors got up to when they took the unprincipled position of not even standing aside and continuing to use council funds as a slush fund to make sure they were elected—as they did, I know, in the Ipswich City Council.

It is this abuse of council position that makes people cynical about politics. It is essential that council funds and the funds allocated to councillors for their duties are not used for campaigning for election to other levels of government. This legislation is the only effective means of preventing that

from happening. The honour system with respect to council resources was not upheld and never has been upheld by Logan councillors who contest state or federal elections.

For this parliament to operate democratically, there must be equality of opportunity for all candidates. Schoolteachers, nurses, public servants or policemen who stand for election take leave, often without pay. The member for Surfers Paradise said that that must be a terrible imposition. I can tell him that it is. It is an imposition that I and a whole lot of us who have families, who did not draw a salary and who had to meet campaign expenses dealt with.

Do members think that anybody was going to employ us in our previous positions? Not a chance! If the member for Woodridge had lost, the incoming member would not have picked her up. We are not asking for anything other than what the member for Woodridge and the member for Waterford did anyway prior to their election. Leave me out of it. That is exactly what we are prepared to do, because we think it is worth doing.

It was said that local government is a training ground. What utter rubbish! The issues today are far more important—subdivision proposals, installation of recreational activities, siting of residential areas near industrial areas. All of those things need full-time representation. I do not want somebody running around on training wheels, trying to decide these important issues that affect people. Training! We can all remember the now member for Callide standing out there at Monto, burning the previous Treasurer in effigy.

Mr Seeney: Hanging him.

Mr MICKEL: Hanging him in effigy. What was that training for? Urban guerilla warfare? Was he seeking a position with the PLO or something?

It is tremendously disrespectful to councils to have people with half an eye on the job and a blatant political agenda. It destroys the partnership there should be at all levels of government. How can you work with somebody who is out to undermine you every inch of the way and who has a \$100,000 slush fund there to kick things along with? Currently these people can cause disruption without people having a say as to whether they should return to their jobs. Under this provision, the people will have an opportunity to exercise their democratic right to say something to the people who have crossed their hearts and said they would be there for four years but ratted on them less than a year later. I want people to have a say about that behaviour. I want people to have a say about that conduct. If those candidates get passed by the people, then good on them. That is their democratic wish granted.

I do know this: over dinner tonight a whole lot of people from the Liberal and National Parties and Independents came up and said to me, 'I won't be voting for you, but I hope you get this legislation up.' On that happy note, I urge all honourable members to vote tonight for decency, because the honour system in Logan City Council has never worked. We cannot try to bring decency to that sort of system. The only barrier we can put in the way of these people is the barrier they do not want to face up to, that is, the people—the people at election time, having a say about their conduct.

This is not just happening in Logan City. We have heard tonight that it is happening in the Darling Downs and Nanango. I also quoted a case in Lockyer. It is all there. The only ones who are opposing it are those who suffered a 14 per cent swing against them in Surfers Paradise and now speak for seven per cent of the electorate and 14 per cent of people statewide. Who are we going to listen to? The folks in the majority—the real people—or these unrepresentative minority groups sitting opposite?
