



Speech by

ANDREW McNAMARA

MEMBER FOR HERVEY BAY

Hansard 7 March 2002

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AMENDMENT BILL

Mr McNAMARA (Hervey Bay—ALP) (9.03 p.m.): I rise to oppose the bill before the House. I wish to take issue with some of the arguments that have been advanced by some members in relation to the alleged rights of politicians, which I suggest completely misses the point. Some members have stood in this place and proclaimed blithely that local government is an excellent training ground for state politics and that councillors should not have their natural career paths blocked. What rubbish! They should go and ask the people what they think about those arguments. The member for Darling Downs did. He knows and he is on the record saying how much people hate their councillors abusing their trust. They certainly demonstrated how they felt about it at the last state election. Seventeen sitting councillors were nominated and only one, the member for Kawana, was elected. So much for the alleged excellent training ground. So much for the natural career paths.

The people want all elected representatives to serve their terms. I know that the member for Nanango has a bill before the House that seeks to penalise members who resign from this place, and I will not debate that issue now. But I will say that, although I think the honourable member's bill is too harsh and not well thought out, I note that the sentiment behind her bill is that there is a strong public view that elected representatives should serve their terms of office.

Let me assure the House that this is the very, very strong view of the many people in my electorate to whom I have spoken about this issue. It was illustrated bluntly in the election held on 17 February 2001. The National Party endorsed Hervey Bay's then Deputy Mayor Randall McLellan as its candidate at the last state election. Councillor McLellan had been re-elected easily in his division at the 2000 council elections. But those same constituents were mortified that the bloke who they had just voted to represent them on the Hervey Bay City Council for a four-year term had, barely nine months later, announced his intention to betray their trust and seek a different job. They were furious and my phone rang hot with people telling me just how angry they were and shocked that they had been betrayed by Dr McLellan.

A government member: What party did he stand for?

Mr McNAMARA: He stood for the National Party. They were not interested in any natural career path arguments. People were not interested in any argument that local government was an excellent training ground. What happened on 17 February 2001 is not a matter of opinion or argument. The people of Hervey Bay gave Randall McLellan 17 per cent of the primary vote. He came fourth. This is the guy who romped home—romped home—in the election for division 3 just 11 months previously. At that time he enjoyed a high and positive profile as the then sitting deputy mayor. This is a seat that the National Party used to hold on the primary vote. So what went wrong? Precisely the same arrogant and self-centred arguments that have underpinned the thinking that we have heard from the opposition side of the House in favour of this bill. The people of Hervey Bay were not interested in politicians' career paths. They do not see the election to council as a line on someone's CV. They see it as a commitment, a trust between the electors and the elected.

The National Party thinks that local councillors make good ready-made candidates. That might have been the view of the public once, but it is not any longer. Those who doubt me should test my position by asking themselves this question: how do they think a candidate for local government would go if he said to the electorate, 'I want to be elected to council because it is an excellent training ground for state politics and I see my career path as going into state politics at the first opportunity even if it is

only a few months away.' How do members reckon they would go? The fact is that I do not know of anybody who has ever tried that argument, which suggests that no-one thinks that that is a good idea.

I am opposing this bill because it is opposed by everyone I have ever spoken to who is not a sitting councillor. There are 25,000 voters in my electorate, of whom nine are members of the council. I am sorry if some of those nine voters may feel that their so-called natural career path is being blocked, but I have no doubt that if they serve their terms and then choose to contest a state election, they will receive due credit for the experience that they have gained on the council and people will remember what they have done while on the council. But the public do not see elected council office as a training ground for state parliament. That is a hopelessly out of touch view of party apparatchiks who have not noticed that the public has been belting parties and councillors who treat them as mugs.

So I say to those supporting this bill: ask yourselves, 'Is a bill that primarily serves the interests of wannabe politicians and political parties looking for ready-made candidates in the interests of their electorate?' To those Independent members who are supporting this bill, I say: ask yourselves if there is not just a fair bit of retrospective self-justification in backing these self-serving arguments about career paths and training grounds. They should ask themselves if they have been backed on this issue by anyone who is not a sitting councillor, or a party machine loyalist, or a friend who just cannot bring themselves to look them in the eye and say, 'Mate, that is rubbish.' They should ask themselves how many of their constituents would vote for a council candidate who said that they planned to jump ship after the election if they got a better offer. Finally, they should ask themselves if honesty in politics does not demand that elected representatives should be encouraged to enter politics intending to complete their terms.

I do not support sitting councillors being barred from running for other levels of government. Far from it! Nor do I think they should be penalised with the cost of a by-election if they resign to contest an election for another level of government. But the existing legislation does not prevent any councillor running for a seat in parliament. What it says is what the public wants: if a councillor has decided they want a job somewhere else, do the right thing and resign so that someone who wants to serve on the council can do so.

Members should ask themselves how they would go in any other area of employment if they went to their existing employer and said, 'I know I have just signed up for a four-year contract but I have decided I want to work somewhere else, but I would like to keep my job here on full pay. While I am applying for this new job, I want you to keep paying me. If I get the new job, you will be up for the cost of finding my replacement. If I don't get the job, I just want to settle back in, no questions asked.' How many private employers would cop that?

In case anyone doubts my bona fides on this matter, let me tell the House that I would not put up with this sort of behaviour from myself! On 30 June 2000, I terminated the partnership in my law firm because, as a candidate for political office, I could not give my firm my full commitment, I could not give my partner my undivided attention and I could not give the firm my full-time efforts. From 1 July 2000, I worked 20 hours a week as an employed solicitor. I terminated the partnership and worked a 20-hour week as an employed solicitor to give me the time to campaign. From Christmas 2000 until the election, I ceased employment completely in order to devote the necessary time to campaigning.

I assure the House that the many electors I spoke to on this issue during the campaign were affronted at the concept of someone being paid by ratepayers to do a job for them on council while they were in fact out on the streets, doorknocking and campaigning for a different job at a different level of government. Ratepayers and residents in Hervey Bay were irate that the high office they had bestowed on their councillor should be treated as a mere stepping stone, a convenient campaigning platform and, most insulting of all, a cushy fall-back position in the event of electoral failure. That might have worked once, but no longer. The people will not cop it, and nor should they. If a councillor has decided they want a different job, so be it; but the public will demand that they resign and clear the decks. The current legislation reflects the clear, overwhelming public attitude. The public are adamant that such candidates not further compound the breach of trust by moonlighting on the campaign trail for a different job.

In conclusion, I believe that many good people with local government experience will continue to be elected to this place. However, they will get here honestly and not by treating electors with disdain. They will serve out their terms and then run without conflict. I have listened to the arguments of those supporting this bill, but I consider that the interests of sitting councillors and political parties pale into insignificance against what I am completely convinced is the overwhelming public opinion on this issue. Accordingly, I will be voting against the bill.
