



Speech by

Hon. Desley Boyle

MEMBER FOR CAIRNS

Hansard Thursday, 9 August 2007

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IMPLEMENTATION BILL

Hon. D BOYLE (Cairns—ALP) (Minister for Child Safety) (3.45 pm): I offer my respect and congratulations to the previous member who spoke in this debate, the member for Cook. His electorate is indeed lucky to have a man of such intelligence and commitment who was able to so eloquently speak about the future of the Torres Strait and the Aboriginal communities as well as the urban centres in his electorate.

I speak to the House this afternoon as the member for Cairns more than as the Minister for Child Safety. The bottom line in terms of local government reform and its effect on Cairns and the surrounding area of far-north Queensland is that we will have more clout. The region will be stronger for the reforms and will be better able to make our needs and our voices heard in Brisbane and in Canberra. As one of a number of local members from that region and as a former councillor on the Cairns City Council, I know that there is strength in unity and that through the plethora of local governments and arrangements that we have had up there we have not had the strength and the force that we will have now with bigger, stronger local governments. I will mention some in particular.

I was pleased indeed to see the recommendation from the independent commission's report that Yarrabah stay as it is presently. The Yarrabah shire council is doing a great job. It has made huge improvements over the last several years and this is an opportunity for it to continue to roll out its new level of sophistication in local government service of good community representation and community building and to simply focus on that for now. I think that is indeed a good recommendation and I support it. So far as Johnstone Shire Council and Cardwell Shire Council are concerned, the recommendation to amalgamate them was expected. It was predictable. There were some who thought that the commission may in fact put the three southern shires together—Johnstone, Cardwell and Hinchinbrook. That was not its decision, and I accept that as I accept all of the recommendations that it has made. I was particularly pleased, however, to see the bringing together of the four shires on the tablelands. For too long the tablelands has been splintered through small councils that, I am sorry to report to the House, have competed with each other, hardly communicated with each other and that have been resentful of each other and resentful of the size and power of the Cairns City Council. All of this effort and time spent looking within and fighting within has meant that they have not united and dealt with the real enemy.

There is no doubt that the Mareeba Shire Council is primarily to blame for the lack of good cooperation and working together on the tablelands. Still Mayor Mick Borzi in his most recent submission to the minister for local government said that the Mareeba shire has no connection to the other tablelands shire. That is patently absurd. In fact, he persists in looking at one foot of the elephant as though it is indeed the whole. This is a tremendous opportunity now for the tablelands. Yes, I understand that some people up there have been attached to their existing systems and that they have history and memories and that they are sad to let them go. But it is nonetheless a huge opportunity for the tablelands to become what it should, and that is one of—if not the—key agricultural precincts in Queensland.

With such a fine climate and with such high rainfall, they are uniquely positioned if only they can work together as one to offer tremendous economic opportunities for the future. Additionally, there are wonderful communities that can advertise a lifestyle that so many other Queenslanders would only dare to

dream of. Most importantly, they will, as one combined shire, have the opportunity to really influence government, to be a major player alongside the Cairns Regional Council, making sure that the government centres south hear their message.

The recommendation that the Douglas shire move into the Cairns Regional Council came as a surprise to me. It is not something that I had expected, but on consideration and despite the very many pleas for assistance and requests to overturn the decision from those in the Douglas shire who have contacted me directly or by email I think it is the right decision. The council, I know too well, has been more than inept. The past three or four years has been a dreadful period of embarrassment for many of the residents of the Douglas shire. As the previous minister for local government, I knew that very well as a result of various complaints from numbers of people, including some still on the council, who called for the council to be fired and who made the suggestion themselves that maybe Douglas shire should be amalgamated with Cairns.

I am aware, however, that it is not, as some are suggesting—Mike Berwick and others—that it has just been an unfortunate period of instability on the council. It goes much deeper than that. I was also environment minister and dealt very much with the concerns about the precious Daintree and the majority view on the council that much more development than would have been wise should have been allowed. In the process of the consultations about that, I know that the divisions on the council actually represent real divisions of opinion right across the Douglas shire—that they are not as one about protecting the tourism industry, that they are not as one about protecting the amazing Daintree, that they are not as one about anything, for that matter. Therefore, the divisions have kept the council stultified and, in fact, this has required the state government to intervene.

Some of the emails requesting that we overturn the decision about the Douglas shire have dared to say, 'It is only we in Port Douglas in the Douglas shire who will look after the amazing environment that is the key drawcard to the tourism industry.' What nonsense. The level of government that has looked after the Daintree has been the state government. How short indeed are some people's memories. The planning scheme was threatening to allow excessive development in the Daintree. It was only through state intervention that that did not occur. It was only through state intervention that we saved the Daintree. As it turns out, it was only with state money that we bought back the properties that were so very precious.

In fact, it was the Hawke and the Goss governments who first put \$32 million on the table to save the Daintree. However, as the years went on, and thanks to the poor performance of successive councils, there continued to be unwise development in the Daintree. It was time for a new planning scheme and the council could not—or would not—pull it off. The arrangement that was then brokered by Mayor Berwick was that the state would provide \$5 million for the further buyback and that was to be matched by \$5 million from the council and \$5 million from the Commonwealth government. Neither the local government—Douglas Shire Council—nor the federal government came up with their \$5 million. In fact, the Beattie government financed the whole arrangement of \$15 million in order to protect and to buy back those sections of the Daintree. So I remind the residents of the Douglas shire that their safety in terms of protecting the unique, amazing and internationally famous environment that they have and therefore the very basis of their tourism industry and their comfort lies with the state government, not with their existing council or, for that matter, any council necessarily of the future.

Nonetheless, I am pleased that one of the very difficult agitators during the period of us working out how we could protect the Daintree has sent me an email absolutely supporting the action that we are taking by including the Douglas shire in the Cairns Regional Council. Her email states—

Dear Desley

Just to let you know I completely support the Beattie Government on the amalgamation strategy. I feel this will be better and the rate payers and residents will benefit in the long run.

I completely support the Douglas shire being amalgamated and think the shire will be better off.

After three and a half years of what we had as a council I didn't care if we amalgamated with the moon.

Kind regards Dixie Phillipot

I will attend quickly to some general matters about the reform. I stand by absolutely our government's decision to accept the independent committee's recommendations in full. To have done otherwise would have destroyed the very integrity of the process that we had implemented whereby we as state politicians stood aside from deciding the boundaries. It is right and proper that local government politicians stand aside from deciding their own boundaries, too. Therefore, while I might have been surprised about Douglas shire, that other members may even disagree with some of the recommendations, that we accept the recommendations holus-bolus is quite correct.

I recognise, nonetheless, the sadness and the fear particularly of some small communities in western Queensland who worry about their viability and their identity. I say to them that identity is not about boundaries. I ask them to look at Maleny. It has been part of a much larger shire and it has maintained magnificently its unique identity. So, too, with the new arrangements will Port Douglas and Noosa.

What about viability? In fact, I think hiding away from the rest of the region and trying to cling to the past is not the way to make a town that is threatened in terms of its economic future stronger. By being part of a stronger, bigger council with more money available and with better decision making those towns will have a better chance at a viable future than they have presently. We have an opportunity here for mayors and for councillors of the future who can show true strength for their regions, who have vision, leadership and an ability to think strategically and an ability to take up the cudgels of the imperative of economic development for their regions.

I have to say that I have been dismayed by the number of mayors who have not been equal to the challenge—mayors who I knew during my period as a minister for local government who absolutely support the amalgamations but who have not had the courage to say so publicly, who are still ‘Wink, wink, nudge, nudge, we know you have to do this’ and who are out there campaigning as populists supposedly to defend their existing boundaries and saying ‘Woe is us’. I will not name them, of course. There are some other mayors who have been more honest with their communities and I pay my respects to them.

I am proud of my government on this score. If we were indeed a Labor government that was worried only about votes then we would not have done this, because a lot of us are going to be heavily impacted by angry people in our electorates who will not have forgotten by the time of the next state election. If we were really just worried about getting our Labor mates elected in Canberra then we would not be doing this. We would not have caused them the difficulty and the trouble that potentially may impact also on their election later this year. We are a government that is proving by its actions that it is here to make the hard decisions, that it is making a historic decision to provide a stable future for local government in the state of Queensland.

I give my respects to the minister for local government and planning and to the director-general of the department of local government and planning and all his staff. I also give my congratulations to them, presuming the outcome of this debate this afternoon.