



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR NANANGO

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IMPLEMENTATION BILL

Mrs PRATT (Nanango—Ind) (3.20 pm): I rise to speak to the Local Government Reform Implementation Bill 2007. As all members know, this bill will see the amalgamation of 157 councils into 73 and will reduce the number of local government representatives from 1,250 to 526. I have watched the city based members shaking their heads and yelling out throughout this debate, and we have only just started. They have been stating that their shires do not feel the same way as the rural and regional shires. I ask: how the heck would they know? Have they gone out there and asked them? Why are they so afraid to ask properly through a referendum? Is it because the few they have talked to were perhaps the minority? By not asking the people through a referendum they do not know and cannot purport to know how the majority feel. Therefore they can stand in here and say anything they like.

This debate will go late into the night and sniping from government members will also continue late into the night simply because many on this side of the House do not agree with what the government has done nor the way it is doing it and are passionately defending the rights of their communities. The old adage, 'Methinks thou protesteth too much,' applies very well in this particular instance, and those shouting across the chamber should be very aware of that statement.

The government will win this debate. There is absolutely no doubt that it will win this debate. It has the numbers. We would therefore think that it would have the good grace to let those who disagree with its point of view express their view, as they have the right to express the view of their people. There is no graciousness in the amendments which the minister unceremoniously brought into the House today which say that mayors will be sacked if they take up the offer of the Prime Minister. If the shires want to take up the Prime Minister's offer and waste federal government funds, let them. This government keeps saying that they are going to waste the money. It is federal money, so let them waste it. If the shires want to waste that money, it will put on record exactly what the people think, and the people want to have a say. If the vast majority are on record as opposing this legislation, this amalgamation which the government says is needed will merely prove that this government, which purports to be a government for all Queenslanders, does not care what those very same people think. However, it does care about local government to the extent that it is prepared to sack councils if it finds out that they have conducted a poll. How big is the government? Not very big at all. Will it also sack the members of this House who poll their electorates? It may as well start with me because I have put it out there and I am polling my electorate. If it wants to sack me, it can go right ahead.

Some major concerns raised in this dramatic slash of shire personnel are the loss of identity and grassroots representation. Government members are not very big people, are they? They cannot take anyone saying anything against the government. The government is not 100 per cent right. It is wrong as many times as the opposition. Its members should just grow up, listen and be prepared to hear what others have to say.

Although there is an amazing amount of emotion surrounding this move to amalgamate, the lack of community knowledge about the reason behind this forced amalgamation causes a lot of people out there great concern. The Size, Shape and Sustainability process was working towards achieving a similar outcome. Some shires were working towards amalgamation, albeit perhaps not fast enough, but the

government feels not enough of them were embracing the concept of amalgamation. The process was not happening fast enough for this government. So this move to force amalgamation was rushed in. It could be deduced—and many councils, councillors and the community have—that the Triple S process was merely a diversion to keep local governments occupied while the government worked out how it could ram this down people's throats.

This government states that it knows what is good for the people living in shires outside cities in rural and regional Queensland, yet there are members in this House who are party to government decisions who do not even recognise the issues we face. These same people are constantly making decisions which impact negatively on our communities, and we see it here again too. These same members are failing all Queenslanders by not allowing those impacted upon by the decision to have a say at all and trying very hard to shut up anyone who tries to put their point of view across.

Then on Tuesday we saw the height of hypocrisy. The Premier stood in this House and ranted at John Howard stating that he should go to the polls and let the people have their say. That was in response to John Howard, the Prime Minister of this country. John Howard said—

What the Beattie government is doing is riding roughshod over the wishes of the people of many parts of Queensland. We are not trying to compel a ballot in every shire and every council area. We are saying that, if you want a vote, the AEC will conduct it and we will pay for it.

Let the people of Queensland decide.

Howard wants the people to have a say. Is it playing politics? Of course it is. We are not all dumb. More than likely he is but he was stating exactly what the people of this state want: a say on amalgamation. What about it, Premier? If you are so keen on the people having a say, what happened to letting the Queensland people have their say on this particular issue? I have heard so much hypocrisy in this place, but that particular statement on Tuesday would have to be the worst case ever.

We have heard statements such as, 'Like a red rag to a bull,' 'The bush is bleeding,' and, 'Small towns are losing their voice'. We have heard members on this side of the House outline the efforts that people went to—mothers, kids, dads, shire councillors—to try to bring to the notice of their city counterparts and the government exactly how it will affect them. Those terms are emotive terms and they are hurled around whenever we talk of this amalgamation, but they describe very clearly what is happening. The word 'amalgamation' is today's equivalent of the first four-letter word we can possibly think of, and people see only a negative side to the merger of local governments. Why is that? Because they were not properly informed. They were not properly informed of the reasoning behind it, how it was going to occur and what the impacts were going to be on them. There is fear of the impact on the communities, and it is a real fear. Most people in this place did not recognise the effect that the removal of one small bank branch would have on a very small town. It closed it down. So I can imagine very few in this House being able to understand the effects that removing a local shire council is going to have. People will move to where the work is. It will impact on schools, shops and every other facility in that town. It will have a domino effect like you cannot imagine, but we have lived through it. So do not tell us that we do not know what we are talking about because we do and so do the people out there who are impacted upon on a regular basis. Towns literally fade away. People voted for this—

A government member: They are not!

Mrs PRATT: You come to my area, mate, and I will show you a thing or two. He should pull his head in because he does not know what he is talking about.

People voted for this government; that is true. It was voted in once again with a huge majority. So there is no doubt this legislation will pass and that will only be on the vote of the government. I do not blame just the government for the negative laws and bad legislation; I lay a lot of the blame for the government's dictatorial attitude and for having a Premier and government members with egos bigger than outdoors on the coalition, which continues to unravel and become not only an embarrassment to themselves but a non-event to the people of Queensland. When the coalition get their egos under control they might start to fight in a positive way for their constituents and the people of Queensland. When you do get your egos under control then and only then will the reins be pulled in on a government out of control.

Smaller towns fear missing out, so at the very least divisional representation must apply. I hope all shires where there is a need or even a perceived need take up this option. In large areas in rural and regional Queensland, the towns are far apart and divisional representation is essential. It allows representatives to be elected from the various towns and not, as is often the practice in some areas, from just the major town. Those councillors do not know the local areas, the local roads and the problems as well as those who live in those particular towns.

People do have a real fear of the impact of this amalgamation. They have a lot of questions. The major one is: exactly what are the benefits of this amalgamation? Maybe if the government had gone out, done the work, taken the time to educate the people as to the positives and negatives of this particular legislation instead of rushing it in there might not have been such a big backlash. It is fear of the unknown

which makes people strike out, and people are striking out. There are a lot of people in this House who will not be here after the next election. I am pretty sure that a lot of them will be those now on the government side.

Howard has offered councils referendums if they want them. But by admission of the Deputy Prime Minister, Mark Vaile, no matter what the result is of the local referenda the federal government will not override the state government. All these polls would do is show exactly what the people think. They have the right to a say. There is nothing wrong with a Prime Minister standing up and giving the people a voice. Whether or not it is for his own political interest I do not care. The people deserve a say. The people have a lot of questions, Premier. The community consultation and/or information offered to explain the amalgamation was negligible, if not nonexistent. I must ask: will there be a no disadvantage test applied to the amalgamation? I bet not.

Four new regional councils will cover the Nanango electorate. One is the South Burnett Regional Council, which will see the shires of Wondai, Kingaroy, Murgon and Nanango combined. The number of councillors will be reduced from four mayors and 33 councillors to one mayor and six councillors. Minister, I hope that they will be full-time councillors because they will have a big job.

It does not include Yarraman, which would seem to be a logical inclusion in the South Burnett as it has always been classed as part of the South Burnett. Currently in Rosalie shire, Yarraman will become part of the Toowoomba Regional Council, along with Toowoomba city, Cambooya, Clifton, Jondaryan, Millmerran, Pittsworth and Crows Nest. The number of councillors will be reduced from the current eight mayors and 61 councillors to one mayor and 10 councillors. To not include Yarraman in the South Burnett typifies the basic failure of those entrusted to draw up appropriate boundaries. They do not know the area. They did not consult sufficiently. Yarraman was always on the outer reaches of the Rosalie shire, but to make it part of Toowoomba is just downright ridiculous. It is like Toowoomba being the top of one's head and Yarraman being the very smallest part of the big toe nail. Yarraman has no like interest with Toowoomba. Rosalie Shire Council had already been talking to Crows Nest to amalgamate. These councils know their areas and know their like interests. They had done the appropriate research and communicated with the people. They, unlike this government, were following a due and proper process.

Somerset Regional Council will combine Kilcoy and Esk shires. The number of councillors will be reduced from the current two mayors and 18 councillors to one mayor and six councillors. North Moreton Regional Council will see the current shires of Pine Rivers, Caboolture and Redcliffe combined, reducing their councils from the current three mayors and 23 councillors to one mayor and 12 councillors. To date there has been mixed reaction to this amalgamation. Some passionately hate the idea, others see some benefit but they are not very sure, and there are others who could not care less because they take no interest. But one thing they all agree on, however, is that they want information that imparts some knowledge and not simply the fact, which they know, that councils have not been changed for 100 years.

This legislation is not fair to all local government. If we must have it—and it appears we must—then the boundaries need to be tweaked. They need to be appropriate to the communities. The people have had no say. I cannot and will not support this amalgamation of local government. I soundly condemn the bill.