



Speech by

Fiona Simpson

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

Hansard Thursday, 9 August 2007

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IMPLEMENTATION BILL

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (8.29 pm): Politics, not economics, is the driving reason the Beattie Labor government is pushing through this dictatorial legislation to forcibly amalgamate local governments without giving the people a say. If it were about economics the councils with buoyant and financially sustainable governments would not be facing forced mergers. If it really were about economics, this government would be able to supply us with a cost-benefit analysis. It has not supplied us with a cost-benefit analysis because it has not done a cost-benefit analysis. No competent business would enter into a merger arrangement with another without undertaking its own analysis of the benefits and the costs and deciding whether it was in their net benefit to move ahead. They would also carefully consider the new structure and that process of transition. There is no evidence as to a carefully considered process of transition or cost-benefit analysis because this Labor government did not have a plan of reforming for economic benefit or social benefit; it had the intention of dramatically altering the political landscape of Queensland.

I have listened to a number of Labor backbenchers and ministers and it is clear from the venom they have towards local government and the hatred they have of local councillors operating at the grassroots level that there is more than an element of paternalistic revenge in imposing their will upon the community rather than listening to the voice of the community about how they want to be governed at the local government level. Why is this government not giving the people a choice by way of referendum for the future boundaries and the future way they are governed at the local level? The government is not doing it because it has a political agenda to radically alter local government in this state. It is an agenda more about trying to bring party politics in at the local government level. It is an agenda to break the structures of very active and engaged communities which have been successful in leveraging that voluntary community labour and integrating that with active local government.

For those members who move around the state, as I know my colleagues on this side of the House do, when we see communities thriving despite sometimes having structures which do not compare to some of the largest councils in this state it makes us ask, 'How do they do as well as they are doing?' It is precisely because they have an engaged community, active local leadership and something that punches above their weight which is doing something regardless of the impact upon their local pocket. For a lot of people in local government throughout this state it costs them to be involved.

Ironically, as councils get larger, as they become larger bureaucracies and as councillors receive greater remuneration, it is a greater challenge for local people to feel a connection with their local council. The diseconomies of scale that come once a local government goes over a certain size are evident in other states. But one of the greatest victims of forced council amalgamations into megacouncils is the loss of that level of community engagement.

I realise that in this House one of the disadvantages which the wider region of Queensland has is that there are 36 seats based in Brisbane. Thirty-four of those seats are held by state Labor MPs. This is one of the most Brisbane-centric state governments we have ever had. It is a Brisbane-centric state Labor government. I believe Brisbane is a great city but it is not representative of all of Queensland. This is one of

the reasons that the effectiveness of communities which engage with their representatives is enhanced when you have a local community, a local council and people able to have an impact through a local voice.

We do not want a Brisbane city model imposed upon other regions of Queensland. It is good for Brisbane—they have had it since 1925—but it is not local government and not typical of what would work in other parts of Queensland. There must be respect for local communities. I think one of the greatest tragedies—and I notice Labor members laughing about this—was seeing those young mums travel more than 24 hours on the bus with their children. It makes you want to weep. I can still see Labor members laughing about this. Brisbane Labor backbenchers have no compassion for the fact that their seats and their areas are very different from other parts of Queensland. Let us respect that.

Brisbane is a great city but why impose a city-centric vision on different parts of the state which have a different vision for their communities and which are actively involved in trying to get the best for their communities? Seeing those young mums would make you want to weep. According to Labor members opposite—who are still laughing and carrying on in the parliament as I speak—are those young mums who travelled for over 24 hours in a bus with young children somehow misled in their concept of what is going to happen to their community? Do Labor members seriously believe what I have heard in this parliament today and tonight that people who have gone to those extraordinary measures are somehow out of touch with their communities and that Brisbane based ministers and bureaucrats know better than they do about what is best for the future of their community? Do they seriously think there is something in it for them? They are not even employed by their local government. They are not local councillors; they are concerned people in the community.

This Labor government does not want to give these people a chance to have their say. They do not want to give people a voice by allowing them to have a referendum and say what they want for the future of local government. I challenge this Labor government, if it really believes that this is in the public interest, to take the public with it and be willing to give the people a voice and a vote in a referendum. We know that change occurs in all communities, but where forced change which is imposed by government happens from a city-centric point of view the potential for damage in the long term, particularly throughout a vast and diverse state such as Queensland, is significant.

In Victoria we saw 11,000 jobs lost with forced council amalgamations. I have heard this lie from the Labor government that there will be no job losses. Then we heard modified polispeak: 'We have secured the jobs for three years,' and then I guess it is all in the mix again. The reality is that what they are talking about will be merged council arrangements where jobs will not be secure. There will be three years of limbo for some as they wonder what will become of their jobs, but they will not be protected just because they are under a state award.

Mr Fraser interjected.

Miss SIMPSON: What will happen and what the minister does not understand—and this is what those young mums were desperate for the minister to hear and he did not care—is that when the centre of people's employment is changed to potentially hundreds of kilometres away or further, or when they find out after three years that the merged council no longer wants them in that community—it may not happen overnight but it will happen—as those families leave those communities that is the difference between having a hospital, it is the difference between having teachers in a school, and it is the difference between having a community with a network of sustainable services.

We saw the centralised model of health service delivery in this state that was implemented by this government and it failed. There are now fewer birthing centres throughout rural and regional Queensland thanks to a very decentralised model of health service delivery. If we look at this Labor government's model of other centralised service delivery, we once again see many other areas of reform. If this were really the great reforming Labor government, it would have reformed health so that we had more services throughout Queensland, not fewer services, particularly for the women of Queensland who now have fewer birthing services than ever before.

Mr Hobbs interjected.

Miss SIMPSON: We first saw regionalisation under Goss and Kevin Rudd.

Mr Hobbs: And what did we get?

Miss SIMPSON: More bureaucrats and fewer services. Then we saw the next model under Beattie. Once again, there was more centralisation and fewer services. What did we see with the Ambulance Service? Labor said it reformed the Ambulance Service. What did we get? We had a stripping away, once again, of locally based community groups who were involved, integrated and running those services. Labor said, 'No, we're going to reform it for you.' What did it do? It created bureaucracies and centralised power, and we now hear horror stories of people being unable to receive timely services. This is a Labor government that says it is reformist, but its type of reform has a pattern of destroying locally based services.

It is ironic. I cannot think of one local government that has caused the death of its citizens because of a lack of adequate administration. Yet this state Labor government has caused the death of citizens by poor administration—in the Ambulance Service, in the Health service, in the Child Safety service. That is the greatest damnation Labor members will have on their hands. How dare they say they have the right to reform local government when they cannot even reform themselves.

Mr Rickuss: History will be unkind.

Miss SIMPSON: History will be unkind. One of my best friends lost her husband 12 months ago when an ambulance failed to turn up after 30 minutes. This was a young man who was having a heart attack. That form of maladministration—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr O'Brien): Order! The member will return to the matter before the House.

Miss SIMPSON: With respect, Mr Deputy Speaker—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: No, no, no! There is no 'with respect'. You will return to the matter before the House.

Miss SIMPSON: The issue here is that Labor's reforms have literally killed people in this state. Labor does not have a track record which would lead us to trust it with local government. Labor's reforms have literally killed people in this state, and that one example that I mentioned is unfortunately not an isolated one. This so-called reforming, brave government that says it is taking tough decisions has failed to take the decisions which are necessary to deliver the services to people throughout this state—the basic level of services they require, to know they can receive a well-resourced, well-staffed and timely Ambulance Service, that they can have regional and local community based services in their hospitals that will sustain them.

I will move to the Sunshine Coast issue, and I acknowledge my colleagues who spoke about people's concerns about losing their right to have a say. As I and many of my colleagues have said, when change is put to the people they should have a right to determine their future. I support the right of the people to determine their future. Some local governments throughout this state indicated they wanted to move to a process of change, but they did not want this Labor government to take away their right to have a say.

A 2006 report by the School of Economics at the University of New England on South Australian council amalgamations also proved that some of the issues and challenges that local governments face are not reformed by amalgamation. This report said there was 'damning evidence on the inability of amalgamation to improve the financial standing of councils in the state'.

There are communities that are having significant costs shifted down on them from state government legislation and they will face challenges. To simply and naively say that a forced council amalgamation process without adequate resourcing from this government to help them through that time of transition will somehow be of benefit to the community is just deceitful.

I challenge people to remember this. When rates rise in their communities because of forced amalgamation and rushed, unplanned changes, remember that it was this Labor government that did this. When communities cannot access their local councillor because the councillor is covering a larger area or the communities may only have minor representation compared to what they had before, remember that it was a Labor government that brought that to their community. For those parts of Queensland where there is a more fragile balance of sustainability which is based particularly upon a critical mass of population, and when families leave those towns over the years due to council workers leaving because they are no longer locally employed, remember that this was done by a Labor government.

Queensland has traditionally been a decentralised state. It has actually been the strength of this state that we have had a network of vibrant communities. One of the concerns is that, as the population pressure along the coast and particularly in south-east Queensland has grown, this Labor government has failed to understand that one of the answers to the pressure in some areas is in fact strengthening the regional services so we actually maintain that decentralised network of vibrant and sustainable communities. Queensland is different and we should be proud of the fact that we do have a diversity of regions. They are not all the same. One solution does not fit every community. Communities that are engaged in their future are the healthiest of all.

One of my concerns is that this process of forced council amalgamation—where people have had their rights stripped away and they cannot have a say in their future—will mean that we run the real risk of people in the future saying, 'Why bother?' They will become more disengaged and less involved in their communities and local governments, rather than more involved. There is already a degree of cynicism about other levels of government and whether people's voices have an impact. If that is taken away at a local government level, it will only breed a greater degree of cynicism.

A move to centralised power rather than developing community based capacity shows ignorance of what our communities really need. We need communities that are engaged and which are leveraged way

beyond the dollar value. I urge this government to look at the examples of other states where forced amalgamations have caused local communities to lose jobs and they have failed to address those issues that do challenge councils, their ratepayers and their lifestyle.

Let us not forget again those young mums who travelled on this bus that came down to Brisbane. They were speaking for their community. I acknowledge them and salute them for that. Let us also acknowledge all those others who have gathered at rallies around this state over the last few weeks. They were also speaking for their communities. Really, this government should have given them the right to have a say. The government has lost the respect of many people who may have been Labor voters. It has lost the respect of people. The people do not believe that this Labor government will address those issues that do challenge communities. We need the support of the government, not their absolute arrogant, paternalistic answers which take away the rights of people to have a say about how their future is determined.