



Speech by

Jason O'Brien

MEMBER FOR COOK

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr O'BRIEN (Cook—ALP) (3.56 pm): I rise to speak in support of the bill. This is progressive and landmark legislation that seeks to change the face of local government in Queensland forever. I represent the most northern and remote electorate in this parliament. My electorate covers 31 local government areas in their entirety as well as two more in part. In addition—

Mr Choi interjected.

Mr O'BRIEN: Yes, but I counted them properly. In addition, the township of Weipa is in the Cook electorate. Although it is not an authority under the Local government Act, the Weipa Town Authority attempts to act like a normal local government, given some of the constraints placed upon it by Comalco's mining operations.

The Cook electorate covers about 34 councils in an area the size of Victoria. Some of the councils are in a good financial state and provide good governance, service delivery and strong communities; some are not. It can be expected that all of them will face the reforms proposed in this bill with a fair degree of nervousness. I am happy to admit that I am nervous about the prospect of forced amalgamations. With so many councils, councillors and council workers in my electorate, many of them are likely to fight fiercely to protect the representation of their small communities. There can be no doubt that it is easy to be a big fish in a small pond. It is much harder for these people to think regionally and strategically in order to enhance service delivery to their constituents.

I am quite proud of the fact that I have served a term on the Cairns City Council. Most people would be aware that the Cairns City Council is an amalgamation of the former Cairns City Council and the Mulgrave Shire Council. These two entities were amalgamated in 1995 and enjoyed a five-year term. I became a member of the council in 2000, somewhat against the tide when the Unity team gained a majority on the floor of the council.

Let me put on the record here tonight and let me be clear and unequivocal: I am not a fan of Councillor Kevin Byrne, the mayor of Cairns. I cannot stand his development-at-all-costs approach, which is destroying my home town. I cannot stand the loss of character that his council has inflicted on Cairns. I cannot stand the lost opportunity to create a world-renowned tropical city which respects its natural environment with complementary architecture and building design. I cannot stand his inability to at least listen to alternative points of view.

I do, however, respect the fact that he honestly and vehemently campaigns on a conservative agenda and is popularly elected on that basis. I do respect the fact that under his leadership Cairns City Council is an efficiently run organisation delivering, by and large, effective basic services to residents. The reality, however, is that it is its size that has enabled the Cairns City Council to become effective. It is having some decent economies of scale that allows it to provide a much wider range of both civic and social services. I wish the Cairns City Council would provide more social services, but again this is a political decision for which those councillors are accountable at the ballot box.

The point I am making here is that there have been many opposition members asking what benefit will be derived from the reforms currently before the House. The answer is that they gain, through

economies of scale, an ability to provide a wider range of services that a smaller council could not possibly provide. A number of members such as the member for Gladstone have expressed concern that small communities will miss out on resources under a larger structure. Again this has not been the case under the amalgamated Cairns City Council. Small towns like Babinda have fared well in terms of service delivery, and the way it pans out is that the larger centres end up cross-subsidising the smaller ones. A larger council may provide a sports officer, youth officer or arts officer that a smaller shire could never afford. Or, alternatively, it may provide an additional planner or engineer who would work to benefit all parts of the shire or city.

I have no doubt that it is going to be hard to convince some councils of these benefits. For example, the northern peninsula area in my electorate, situated right at the top of Cape York Peninsula, has five separate council areas, all with populations less than 1,000 people and all within 10 kilometres of each other. Now to outsiders that seems completely illogical and inexplicable. To the locals, however, there are simple, historical and cultural explanations to explain why each one exists.

Injinoo is the community where most of the traditional owners of the area now reside. Seisia and Bamaga were established just after the Second World War following extreme tidal inundation on Saibai Island. New Mapoon was established in the late 1960s following the forced removal of people by the National Party led government from their homelands just to the north of modern day Weipa in 1965, I think. Umagico was originally established in the 1960s by families from Lockhart River but has changed in recent times to include families of traditional owners as well. Umagico and Injinoo councils have started to discuss amalgamation under the Size, Shape and Sustainability process, but these discussions were preliminary at best.

There are some tensions between the two Torres Strait and the three Aboriginal communities. These tensions are often exaggerated and just as often used for political purposes but nevertheless are real and will create significant tensions if these five councils are forced to amalgamate into a single entity, which I think they will be. The reality is that, living so close together and despite their different histories and cultures, the fate of the five communities is entwined. One cannot thrive without the support of the other and if one falters it will bring down the others. What I hope is that great effort and care is taken to sit down with these councils to explain the benefits of amalgamation and how they can continue to maintain their separate cultural identity.

There will be other important questions that will need answering, especially in Indigenous communities. Questions around land tenure arrangements continue to plague community progress. Whether amalgamated councils are better equipped to deal with these complex matters to benefit both residents and traditional owners will be an important test determining whether the reform measures are working in these communities.

It is these tenure arrangements that are preventing a private housing market from existing in most Indigenous communities, but it is likely that the provision of public housing will dominate the conscience of councils. How the arrangements affect the building of new public houses and the allocation of these houses will become a hot topic of debate once the final boundaries of the new local authorities are determined.

The lack of a rates base in Indigenous communities remains a difficulty for council viability. If an Aboriginal council is amalgamated with a mainstream council, the new body will certainly be looking for some guarantees that the current state government financial assistance grants level previously provided to Indigenous councils continues until some solution is found to this quandary.

Some small Indigenous councils have built up very successful businesses over the years. Aurukun council runs a store, guesthouse and canteen, amongst other things. What happens to these types of businesses under the new regime will also require delicate negotiation and explanation. As I said earlier, Aboriginal and Islander councils play an important role in maintaining cultural identity and I hope there is a place under the new regime for this to continue.

I am conscious of the fact that I am starting to sound like an opposition member—most of whom just come in here with problems and very little in the way of solutions. I have no doubt that increasing the size of some of these councils will assist them to find economies of scale and provide better services to their communities. It is going to be a hard sell. We will confront a fear campaign by those opposite and by councillors desperate to protect their power base, but I will not be governed by fear. What the minister has proposed makes sense and will deliver greater services more efficiently as it has every time it has been undertaken. I commend the bill to the House.