



Speech by

Jason O'Brien

MEMBER FOR COOK

Hansard Thursday, 9 August 2007

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IMPLEMENTATION BILL

Mr O'BRIEN (Cook—ALP) (3.33 pm): I rise to support the Local Government Reform Implementation Bill 2007. When this bill is passed later today 84 councils will be subject to amalgamation in Queensland, with 23—over a quarter of them—in my electorate. I said it in Port Douglas on Sunday and I say it again today: I want more. With two houses in the Commonwealth parliament, two in all state parliaments except this one and a system of local government, this has to be one of the most overgoverned countries in the Western world. While some people may argue that it also means we have stronger democracy as a result, I question whether having more politicians and more bureaucracy necessarily results in better democracies. What results is inertia, duplicity, buck passing and the most irritating political games imaginable. I am sick of it.

We are all Australians and we should be Australians first and foremost. Our federated system of government remains the last bastion of macro-economic reform. We need clearer lines of responsibility, less bureaucracy, more streamlined processes and, most of all, less politics and more action. Put simply, this House should be silent—just like the one down the hall. It is a museum—a testimony to the way we did things in colonial times before we had things like aeroplanes, telephones and other modern equipment. So are the current local government boundaries.

I hope this bill is a stepping stone for greater reform, much greater reform. This bill will make strong regional councils which will have real capacity to deal with state and federal governments not just in terms of lobbying but, more importantly, in terms of partnering with them, matching their resources and working together on areas of shared interest. In the long run, I hope they take over many of our responsibilities which can be better delivered at the regional and local level. That is what really needs to be done in this country, and anyone who has anything to do with the mechanics of government knows it.

The problem, however, is that we cannot even get simple change or, even in the case of having an Australian as our head of state, symbolic change. What we get is vested interests trying to protect their patch without any regard for the bigger picture. The bigger picture in Queensland is that we are being swamped with growth—economic growth and population growth. Smaller councils do not have the capacity to deal with that growth. They cannot attract the planners they require and they get bullied by developers and their lawyers, who sometimes have more money than the council itself, into approving things they wanted to consider more fully.

I turn to some of the specific matters related to the changes in my electorate. The first thing I want to do is bust the myth that those opposite are trying to perpetuate that every amalgamated council is against the change. In the northern peninsula area on the very tip of Cape York Peninsula there are five councils. Four of those councils have grabbed the bull by the horns and decided their future lies together. Those councils are Injinoo, Umagico, New Mapoon and Bamaga. Only Seisia has been forced to the table and I think we will be able to allay its concerns. I will talk about its concerns in a moment.

First I want to say to the four councils, councillors and CEOs who have agreed to this amalgamation, thank you. When others have panicked they have been brave. When others have found fault they have found the challenge and risen to it. When others have predicted the worst they have planned for the future

of their communities. I say to those mayors and CEOs—Tex Nona and Bill Dalton in Injinoo, George Mara and Noel Balasingham in Umagico, Jesse Sagaukaz and Dalasa Yorkston in Bamaga and Colin and Merv Bond in New Mapoon—well done. The minister should strike a gold medal as big as a frying pan and issue it to them and their councillors. They are real leaders.

Seisia's concerns surround the ongoing ownership of strong, profitable enterprises it has established over many years. Many of the other 15 Torres shire councils share this concern and, to be fair and honest, so do the four councils on the NPA that have been amalgamated. These are legitimate issues but should not be the deal breaker. There are ways and means of sorting these matters out both within this legislation and the Torres Strait (Community Services) Act. I am confident we will find a way forward to the satisfaction of local communities with regard to these matters.

Some Torres Strait community leaders such as Torres Strait Regional Authority chairperson, Toshie Kris, and Island Coordinating Council chair, Margaret Mau, have expressed concern about the changes. The problem the government has is that many of the island councils have poor financial management records. In fact, according to the latest Auditor-General's report only four councils have received fully satisfactory results in the last round of opinions. They are Warraber, St Pauls, Poruma and Iama.

Clearly these councils should hold their heads up high. Regrettably, they must suffer the same consequences as those councils that continually fail to account properly for their use of public funds. At the end of the day, this point seems to have been lost on the opposition spokesperson for local government. The finances of many of these councils need cleaning up. What he has in effect argued is that the government should keep sending taxpayers' money to organisations whether they spend it assisting their communities with service delivery or whether they give it to themselves in loans that never get paid back. I do not care if these people are my constituents or not; that is simply unacceptable, and how the opposition can say we should carry on regardless is unfathomable and demonstrates how unfit it is to occupy the treasury benches.

The argument has been put that the decisions we are making today will kill off island culture, and I want to totally repudiate that assertion. Island culture has existed long before community councils or, for that matter, parliaments. In fact, if there is anything that is killing off Ailan Kastom it is those councillors who lend public money to themselves while people scream out for better services and infrastructure. There has been a movement supporting greater autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders over their own affairs that has existed since colonisation. I support this move. Let us have no misunderstanding though: there can be no autonomy without accountability. There will be accountability under the changes before the House today.

Today the Queensland Labor government puts the Torres Strait on a pathway to autonomy that will continue to build momentum. I have said this before and I say it again: I want to see more amalgamations. I want to see the future Torres Strait Island Regional Council that will be established here today amalgamated with the Torres Shire Council and eventually take over the responsibilities of the Torres Strait Regional Authority. I want to see the Torres Strait have one peak body, one line of accountability, one strong united voice. Then the region will have the institution and capacity to seek the autonomy its people so desperately desire and deserve.

Before I came into this House over three years ago I spent a four-year term on the Cairns City Council. In my seven years of public life nothing has been more difficult than fronting the rally at Port Douglas on Sunday protesting the amalgamation of the Douglas shire with Cairns City Council. In my heart of hearts, I wish things had not panned out this way. Notwithstanding this, the council has been the master of its own destiny. It has more resources and opportunities than most shires in this state and certainly all other shires in my electorate. I truly believe that could it have governed itself in a way that the government and, more importantly, the community expected it would have survived. At no stage in the last three years has there been any concerted effort to work together in the common interests of the community.

Nevertheless, there are communities of interest between Cairns and Port Douglas that the reform commission and the government have deemed to be significant enough to warrant amalgamation. Most importantly, the council areas have the same two large industries underpinning the regional economy—tourism and sugar production. The reality is that there is conflict between these two industries. The burgeoning tourism industry requires more accommodation to meet demand and affordable housing for its workforce. This puts pressure on the sugarcane industry that is fighting to keep the smallest mill in Queensland working. I do not know the answer to that quandary. I do believe that the answers are not confined to the current boundaries of the Douglas shire.

The government is acting to protect the concerns of people in the shire. Divisions will be introduced to ensure that people get a local voice. Iconic places legislation will be introduced to protect the components of the planning scheme which add to the unique lifestyle enjoyed in the area. This will protect the Daintree lowland rainforest and keep the high-rises off Four Mile Beach and other parts of the planning scheme the community deems important. The communities of Mossman, Port Douglas and other small towns will not disappear; they will continue to grow, continue to prosper and the strong spirit so evident at the rally on Sunday will not die. Instead, it will be supported by a larger budget with better corporate

governance and capacity. I also want to quickly comment on the reform commission's recommendation that the government seek to normalise the town of Weipa. This will require the government to negotiate with Rio Tinto to make the transition. I hope these negotiations begin soon and happen quickly so that Weipa can become the great Queensland town it is destined to be.

I have seen all of this before. When the old Cairns City Council was amalgamated with the Mulgrave Shire Council, many people predicted that the sky would fall and over 30,000 people signed a petition to try to stop it. Now, seven years later, you would not find a soul to say the amalgamation was a bad thing. I said a few weeks ago that I will not be governed by fear. If the price we have to pay for decent, modern local authorities in this state is my political hide, then so be it. If that is the price we have to pay to get better services of government in this country, then so be it. I will not sit here and count the days until my super rolls in. I will use my time here to support the changes that continue to plan for our growing state and the people who reside in it. I commend the bill to the House.