



Speech by

**Jason O'Brien**

**MEMBER FOR COOK**

Hansard Wednesday, 5 September 2007

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## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT AMENDMENT REGULATION (NO. 2) 2007: DISALLOWANCE MOTION**

**Mr O'BRIEN** (Cook—ALP) (8.21 pm): I will have what he is having. I rise to speak against this sad, pathetic and confusing motion that has been brought before the House this evening.

**Mr Hobbs:** Tell us about the rally up there at Port Douglas.

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Mr Hoolihan): Order! Member for Warrego, you have been warned and you have been warned that you have been warned. You will be asked to leave if you continue.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** I will get to the rally. I will speak about that. I sat here the other night when we debated the Local Government Reform Implementation Bill until four in the morning. During that debate opposition speaker after opposition speaker lined up to put the boot into us about the meaningful and decent reforms that we have put into local government in this state. They banged on and on and on about democratic rights, the ability for people to have their say, the importance of people having referendums and how we have taken away their democratic rights. Then a couple of Sundays ago on the *Insiders* program I heard the Premier say, 'Yes, we were too heavy handed. We are going to change that. We are going to fix that. We are going to bring reforms into the parliament to fix that.' I thought that would have been welcomed by everyone. I thought that members on both sides of the House would have welcomed that. It takes a big man to admit when he is wrong, and that is what the Premier did. The minister has come in here and implemented the commitment that the Premier gave to make sure that councils are not sacked for holding that referendum. That was a good decision and a wise decision.

Now tonight we come in here and the opposition is trying to stop us from stopping people having referendums. I am really confused. There is some leap in the logic here. We are trying to stop those provisions that would see councils being sacked for holding a referendum and the opposition is trying to stop us from doing that.

I just cannot understand what the members opposite are trying to achieve today. Is the upshot of what they are saying that they think that councils should be sacked for holding a referendum? That may not be the intent of this disallowance motion—I am happy to concede that—but that is the consequence. That is the result. If this disallowance motion is agreed to, the consequence is that the statute stands and councils are still liable to be sacked if they hold a referendum. That is the exact opposite of what the members of the opposition were trying to do.

Where is the logic here? Where is the progression of coherent thought that gets us to this position? I am really struggling to get my head around it. None of the opposition speakers has been able to explain to me that logical progression. It is just simply beyond them. I think they are cutting their nose off to spite their face. I understand the members want to keep this debate raging. I understand they do not want to move on and that they want to make as much political mileage out of this as they possibly can. That is fair enough. That is their right. That is their privilege, and good luck to them. Go for it, guys. But what the members opposite are doing tonight is completely confusing. It is completely against everything else that they have said thus far, and it is quite strange. It is quite surreal.

**A government member** interjected.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** Yes, it is a stunt. Referendum or not, people have had a say. The member for Warrego talked about the rally at Port Douglas. Yes, that was a big rally. There were about 1,000 people there. They had their say. They were not silent. They were heard.

**Mr Seeney:** Why didn't you listen?

**Mr O'BRIEN:** Because I do not think they are right. I think that the reform is necessary. The Douglas Shire Council that the members opposite are trying to defend was really incompetent and that incompetence continues to this day. That council held a meeting today at which four of the seven councillors voted against supporting the iconic legislation which those thousand people were trying to protect. So no council deserves to be sacked more than the Douglas Shire Council, because it just continues—

**Opposition members** interjected.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** I am on the record as saying that that council should have been sacked. I thought it should have been sacked in December last year. Those 1,000 people want to make sure that their lifestyle is protected. That is fine. That is why we are bringing in iconic legislation. But now the four spoilers on the Douglas Shire Council are trying to oppose that as well.

There have been other ways that people have had their say, not just through the Triple S process that lasted for two years. Councils could have held referendums every other Saturday if they had wanted to during those two years of the Triple S process. There was a process during the deliberation of the reform commission by which people could have a say. In this House, since the reform commission has brought down its report and it has been adopted by the government there have been petitions presented and there have been protests held. I am sure all members would have received letters, emails, faxes—all sorts of communications—that have allowed people to have their say and to express their dissent to the local government reform act.

I concede that there is dissent out there. There are people out there who seriously oppose the change, and that is their right. They have been heard. There was another lot of protesters at this House yesterday led by Bob Ansett. Were they having a say? Have they been denied their democratic right? Have they not been heard? Of course they have been heard. But we do not agree. That is the difference. We think that change is necessary. The experience of amalgamations, such as the amalgamation of the Cairns and Mulgrave councils, has shown that bigger councils work better. They provide better results. Amalgamations provide economies of scale that allow councils to have some serious cash to run decent programs and to put in decent infrastructure. That has been the result of the amalgamation of the Cairns and Mulgrave councils. It takes time to get there, to bed down those changes and see the full benefit of those changes. But it does happen and it will happen right across this state. It will happen in every corner of this state where these councils have been amalgamated.

Those amalgamated councils will have large budgets. They will have more officers to deliver services—not just councillors playing politics but real officers doing real jobs, whether it is community development, economic development, laying bitumen or whatever it is that the community wants. People will get much increased capacity out of these changes.

I reject totally any assertion that people have been denied a say. People in the Douglas shire in particular have been heard loud and clear. We do not agree with them. We think that the changes will benefit that community that has suffered under poor governance for the past three years. We think that in the long run those communities will receive much better services.

The gist of what we have tried to do is stop affected councillors from using ratepayers' money to run referendums that will not change anything. There is nothing preventing, say, the member for Warrego from running a referendum. He can sit at a state school for a couple of Saturdays in a row and run a referendum. He can tick people off a roll as they come in. He can run a referendum if he wants to. If he is so passionate about running these referendums, he can sit at the state school at Port Douglas and hold a referendum. He can advertise it in the paper so that people can have more of a say, if that is what he thinks needs to happen. However, we are trying to stop affected councillors, who are the noisiest protesters about these changes, from using ratepayers' money to run referendums that will change nothing.

Essentially all that is happening is that councillors are coming into an election period and they are trying to raise their profiles. They are trying to be hairy-chested about their opposition to this change. That is all good. It is all part of a vibrant democracy. People exercising their right to free speech is all part of a vibrant democracy. I think about some of the things that the federal government has done that I would have liked to have seen referendums on: gun control, GST, the war in Iraq, green zones on the Great Barrier Reef.

**A government member:** Nuclear power stations.

**Mr O'BRIEN:** Nuclear powers stations. Should we have referendums on those things? I do not think we should. We live in a representative democracy. In this place we are the representatives of the voters of Queensland and we have had a say. We are going to implement local government reform. It is going to be one of the great reforms of this government. It is going to make communities stronger, it is going to make councils stronger and the people in the communities are going to get much better services.