



Speech by
Jeff Seeney

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

Hansard Wednesday, 18 April 2007

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (7.40 pm): I wanted to pay due regard to the local governments in my electorate. My electorate is unique—not entirely unique but somewhat unique—in that I have 12 local authorities with whom I have worked very closely since I have been a state member, and of course my background in local government meant that I was very much aware of the work that local governments do. Within the Callide electorate there is the Banana shire, the Monto shire, the Eidsvold shire, Mundubbera, Gayndah, Biggenden, Kolan, Mount Perry, Murgon, Wondai and Kilkivan in the South Burnett and then there is the Taroom shire to the west. They are 12 shires that all represent their communities. While there is a degree of similarity, they are all very different. They are certainly all small shires. Banana shire is probably the biggest and Mount Perry is probably the smallest.

I am fairly well acquainted with the activities of those shire councils, and I am well enough acquainted certainly with the mayors and the councillors and the economic conditions of those shires. There is one thing that I want to make very clear tonight. I want to correct this assumption that I have already heard in this debate that somehow or other small shires are not economically viable. I can tell the House that at least two of those shires in that list that I read out that I am personally acquainted with have millions of dollars in reserves—millions of dollars and considerable millions of dollars in reserves. They have provided for their communities. They have met the expectations of their communities over a period of time and they have been able to accumulate millions of dollars in reserves. It is simply not true to suggest that somehow bigger local governments are more economically viable. The shires that I represent prove beyond doubt that small shires can be economically viable. One of the challenges that will face the minister and the reform panel that he has put in place is how they are going to address that issue of the dichotomy between successful small shires and relatively less successful larger shires.

The Premier stood in the House today and reeled off a list of mayors who supported the government's move yesterday. When one knows and understands local government, as I and the member for Warrego do, it comes as no surprise that there are a list of mayors and councils who will support the sorts of massive amalgamations that are being touted, because shires in the bigger cities like the idea of extending their boundaries and extending their spheres of influence and extending their areas and gobbling up some of the smaller shires. I noticed—and it was patently obvious—that there has been no support from any of the small shires across the state for what the government has done. They feel betrayed. They feel betrayed because they have entered into the Size, Shape and Sustainability process with the best intentions. I know that the shires that I represent have entered into the Size, Shape and Sustainability process with the best of intentions. They were working through a process, and they were working through a process with the intention of trying to achieve a sustainable outcome and a sustainable future for them and their shires and to do so within the parameters that they wanted to achieve and within the parameters of representing their particular communities. Because they have had that process brought to such an abrupt end, it is certainly understandable that they feel betrayed and they feel that the government has been less than honest with them.

I believe that the government could have done it differently. It is always beholden on the opposition to say what we would have done. I believe the government could have done it differently. I believe that the

government and the minister especially could have done it differently and maintained the faith with local government. I believe that there could have been a time limit drawn. There could have been a time frame imposed by which that voluntary process should have or could have or must have been brought to some conclusion so that that process could have been transparent and we all could have seen what the local governments could have brought forward from that process.

We are left in a situation now where the minister and the Premier have stood in the parliament and said that they have taken this particular action because there was nothing that was going to be achieved. Well, that is their opinion. That is an opinion that the minister and the Premier can express. We will never know whether that is an actuality or whether it is an opinion that has been arrived at because of certain political imperatives. I believe that local governments should have been given a chance. They should have been given a chance to bring that process to some finality. I acknowledge and understand the time limits that were involved in respect of the next local government elections, and local governments knew and understood that. There needed to be a decision made about how that process was going to interface with those time limits on the next elections, and local governments knew that. It was a subject of discussion everywhere I went in my electorate. Everywhere there were councillors it was a subject of discussion.

But I think that the decision that has been made to bring that process to an abrupt end and to override or to take away the opportunity that local government had to resolve this for themselves was unfair and unjust, but it has been done. It has been done and I know that it is irreversible. I know it is not going to be changed, so now we have to deal with it. We have to deal with the decision that has been made. We have to try—all of us—to ensure that we get an outcome that is best for the communities that we represent as state members and that provides a local government model that can be successful into the future.

There are big boots to fill, if you like, because in the area that I represent one cannot argue that the local government model that has been in place for the last 60 or 70 years has not been spectacularly successful. It has been spectacularly successful in building and growing the communities, building and growing the capacity of those communities, and building and growing the lifestyle opportunities for the people who are part of those communities. Anything that is put in place to replace the 12 councils—the 12 local governments that make up the Callide electorate—must pass what is usually referred to as the no disadvantage test. I would suggest that any proposition to amalgamate these councils and put in place any sort of a bigger regional council or some other model has first to establish that it can do a better job, that it can somehow do a better job than the local governments that have been in place for so long.

I was interested to see in the explanatory notes which accompanied the amendments the minister tabled that the objectives of the review panel are listed. I will refer to them, because I think it is critically important that we understand that they are legitimate objectives and that they have to be met. Any new model has to address the objectives exactly as they are listed. The explanatory notes state that the objectives of the review are to establish local governments that, firstly, facilitate optimum service delivery to Queensland communities; secondly, effectively contribute and participate in Queensland's regional economies; thirdly, better manage economic, environmental and social planning consistent with regional communities of interest; and, fourthly, effectively partner with other levels of the government to ensure sustainable and viable communities.

I will address those objectives one at a time. The first objective suggests that a new model is going to be developed that can facilitate optimum service delivery to the communities. If I look at that objective from the perspective of the communities that I represent and ask myself whether any sort of amalgamated council or regional council can ensure optimum service delivery, or some form of better service delivery to my communities, I struggle to understand how. A feature of the local governments within my electorate is the closeness that they enjoy with their communities. They are an essential part of the fabric of their communities. It is a relationship which I think members who live in large urban areas will always struggle to understand. They will probably never understand the relationship between people in smaller communities and the councils that administer those smaller communities.

The second objective is that the new model will effectively contribute and participate in Queensland's regional economies. The contribution that councils make to their local economies is incredible. It is almost immeasurable. In some cases, councils are the biggest employers in their local economies. The challenge for those who would suggest that there is some sort of better model is to outline how that better model is, first of all, going to facilitate better service delivery and at the same time contribute and participate in the local economies to the same degree as do the existing councils. It is very difficult to understand how that is going to be achieved.

The third objective is to better manage economic, environmental and social planning consistent with regional communities of interest. This is one area where I think a broader regional view probably does produce a better outcome. But the councils involved have already been addressing that issue. They have been cooperating with each other across what have become known as ROCs—or regional organisations of councils. They have been sharing the expertise that is necessary to achieve those better environmental and social planning outcomes. They have done so at their own behest and they have done so across

Queensland in a way that has produced some great outcomes. In my area, they have done so by sharing staff, by sharing expertise and by sharing planning schemes. As long ago as when I was in the local council—which is nine years ago now—we were sharing town planners to produce a consistent local town plan across the region. In the years since then there has been a lot more of that sort of shared activity across the areas.

The other objective that is listed is to effectively partner with other levels of government to ensure sustainable and viable communities. Once again, ensuring sustainable and viable communities has always been the first priority of the councils who represent those communities. I can readily understand how an effective partnering with other levels of government can be better achieved by bigger, more bureaucratic structures. But I cannot escape the conclusion that that has a heck of a lot to do with the decision that was announced yesterday and which has been forced on local councils. From a state government perspective, a large number of smaller, independent, often feisty mayors and councils is a lot harder to deal with. The idea that reducing the number of councils and replacing them with larger regional councils that are more bureaucratic and more like a regional government will make the state government interface easier to achieve is understandable.

Mr Fraser: There's the argument the other way—that they're stronger and a bigger thorn in the side of government.

Mr SEENEY: That that makes it more difficult for state governments to handle?

Mr Fraser: Certainly. That was the experience in Victoria.

Mr SEENEY: That is true, but I suggest to the minister that, if he had been to local government conferences and confronted 100-odd mayors all representing their own communities, he would know that they are a formidable force and difficult for any state government to control and direct. And so they should be, because that is an effective representation of the entire state. After all, local governments are often referred to as grassroots democracy. Having been in local government at that level, I know that it is. It is a very direct form of democracy. Everybody knows a councillor's phone number, everybody knows who their councillor is, everyone has a direct link with the decision maker and they are prepared to exercise that direct link. That produces an outcome that has a lot of positives.

I believe that the challenge for those members who seek to change this system is to demonstrate to the communities most affected that they are going to be better off. How that is going to be measured is also a challenge, because over the past couple of days we have heard much about protecting the ratepayers. Is the measure going to be the amount of rates that people pay? Can anybody legitimately assure the ratepayers in the shires contained within my electorate—in Monto, Eidsvold, Mundubbera, or Gayndah—that somehow a large regional council will produce for them a lower rate bill? If they can, that is a positive and it will go a long way towards engendering some support. Can the proponents of this change suggest that a large regional council will somehow add to the social fabric of those communities? I doubt it, but if they can then that, too, will be a positive.

I think there is an enormous challenge facing those who seek to change this tried and true system to demonstrate how another system is going to be better, because these councils have well and truly served the communities who have elected them for a long time. These councils are economically viable and, in some cases, almost embarrassingly so in terms of the amount of cash that some of them hold in reserve. They are an essential part of the fabric of the communities that have elected them. The communities will be incredibly poorer for their demise. The people who live in those communities will be poorer for their demise.

Time expired.