



Speech by
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MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (2.31 pm): Last Friday saw the biggest demonstration in Brisbane since the Vietnam war. Between 12,000 and 15,000 people marched to protest against the government's proposal to force amalgamations on councils. All of those people know the devastating effect that this proposal will have on their communities, just as the people who demonstrated in Barcaldine the week before and in Port Douglas a couple of days ago know the devastating effect amalgamation will have on their councils.

Those 15,000 people who marched in Brisbane came from communities fairly close to Brisbane. They came from places such as Noosa, Redcliffe, Pine Rivers, Beaudesert and Boonah. They were also joined by bus loads of people from far-flung communities who wanted to offer their support—from as far away as Aramac and Isisford. All over Queensland communities are under threat from a proposal that will devastate them. This government continues to show an uncaring and arrogant attitude towards those people.

The whole process has been designed to shut out any consultation, any consideration of the communities, any opportunity for the community to have their say. The process has been devoid of democracy from the start. Not only that; the government has gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure that councils are not able to consult their community. Councillors and mayors are being threatened with retribution—personal retribution in one instance—to prevent them from consulting their communities. In stark contrast to the huge amounts of money that this government spends on polls and advertising to try to justify and promote their political decisions, it is prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to prevent councils from doing that.

Of course, the big question is why. Why on earth is this government in such a rush to destroy local government, to destroy local communities? Why is there such a rush to force this legislation through the parliament this week to bring to an end 100 years of local government? I think in this House we have well and truly illustrated that there is no impending financial catastrophe about to hit local government. The argument has been dishonest and misleading from the start. The QTC documents have been used dishonestly and have been misrepresented in an attempt to try to justify this argument. Despite a massive advertising budget, they fail to do so.

This whole issue is about local communities. It is about local people who are concerned about the future of their communities and who want a say in their communities. I have said in this House a number of times that local government is not about politics and it is not about politicians; it is about local people having a local say; it is about a local voice and a local choice. I think the architects of this proposal fundamentally fail to understand the local government issues and they fundamentally misunderstand the course on which they have embarked.

There are some horrendous examples of what is being proposed and some examples that really illustrate the massive impact that amalgamation is going to have. Probably the best example is what will happen on the Darling Downs where eight councils will be merged into one. Seven small communities will

lose their representation as their councils are forced to merge with the large urban mass of the Toowoomba council. Out of those eight councils, the community will be allowed to elect six councillors in total to somehow provide representation to that huge area. That is simply unworkable. Last week in Highfields I met with a group of 35 or 40 mayors and councillors. They are only just starting to deal with the enormity of the task that lies in front of them to try to make some sense of the practicalities that they have to address between now and next March.

There are other ridiculous examples such as the one in my electorate that I want to mention. Taroom shire has been effectively cut in half by this proposal. The northern part of the Taroom shire has been put into the Banana regional council. The southern half has been put into the Dalby regional council. Taroom is geographically encompassed by a circle of ranges. That natural boundary forms the boundaries of the Taroom shire. It is a financially strong shire. It has a great community attitude and a great community feeling. To cut that shire in half and allocate half of it to one regional council and the other half of it to another regional council is something that the people of Taroom just cannot comprehend.

Taroom lies in the middle of the Surat Basin. The mining development that was spoken about this morning in parliament will happen around Wandoan and Taroom. It will happen in the area where this so-called new boundary will run. The new boundary will cut the Surat Basin development in half. It is just completely absurd. It contradicts completely all of the stated aims. All of the repeated claims that the Premier and the minister make are not borne out in fact.

Another good example is what has happened to Beaudesert shire. The Beaudesert shire has lost all of the growth areas. It was one of the more financially strong shires of the state. It has lost all of the growth areas to Logan City. The rest of it has been amalgamated with the Boonah shire. So we end up with a Beaudesert shire that is weaker than it was originally. That is in complete contradiction to all of the stated aims of the process.

I believe the people involved in local government now need an opportunity to put their case. They need an opportunity to have the more outrageous parts of this proposal heard by somebody who will care and who will listen. It is simply just not arguable that somehow or other the commission has drawn these boundaries and everything is right about them. Of course there needs to be some sort of right of appeal. There needs to be somebody who will review the decision—somebody who will listen, for example, to the people of the Darling Downs and the people of Taroom and allow them to have their case heard. The people of Noosa should be able to put their case to somebody, because the minister is clearly not listening, the Premier is clearly not listening, the government is clearly not listening.

While it is probably not going to happen that we are going to go back to the situation that we had before, there is an urgent need to review some of the more outrageous parts of this proposal. It is something that I believe has been cloaked in dishonesty from the start. It has been a political agenda from the start. We are not going to get any fairness or any justice from the politicians who have been involved in that political agenda from the start. This has been a political agenda—an ideologically driven agenda—that has taken absolutely no notice of any of the submissions that were made in that farce of a process that led up to it.

We now need some sort of review process that allows shires like Taroom, Noosa, Isisford, Blackall, Barcardine and Aramac to put a case forward to have their particular situations reviewed. They know that this is a one-off opportunity. They know that once their communities are destroyed and the community fabric is unravelled, it will be very difficult to re-establish it. They know how important that is. That is why 15,000 people came to march in the streets. It was the biggest protest march since the Vietnam days. It puts everything else that has happened since I have been in this parliament to shame. Since the Beattie government has been in power we have seen protest marches on a fairly regular basis, but nothing comes close to matching what we saw on the streets of Brisbane last Friday.

Even given the size and scale of the march, in my view it pales into insignificance when compared with the effort made by the women and kids who spent 26 hours on a bus to come down here yesterday, stand outside the Executive Building and protest. They spent 26 hours on a bus. What motivates people to do that? What motivates people to spend 26 hours on a bus with their kids to come here and try to get their point of view across to the government? I can tell the House what motivates them. It is their concern for their communities. They are frightened about the future of their communities. They know that the impacts of this proposal will be profound on their communities and they are prepared to fight for the future of their communities.

The women of the communities are the ones who understand the concept of community. They understand the value of community. They understand that once it has gone, it is very difficult to recreate. They are prepared to put in that sort of effort. Members of the government should notice that effort. They should understand it and comprehend it. They should care about it, because this morning in the parliament it has been shown that there is no care in the government's response.