



Speech by
Jeff Seeney

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IMPLEMENTATION BILL

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (2.39 pm): The Local Government Reform Implementation Bill is probably one of the most dishonest pieces of legislation that I have ever seen come before this House. No doubt the dishonest drivel that we have heard already from the government benches will be repeated time and time again in this debate. It is one thing to come into this House and debate philosophical differences, debate how we should do things and debate how we all should fulfil our basic role of making things better for our constituents and we can sometimes have differing opinions about that, but this legislation before the House today does not do that for our constituents. This legislation is fundamentally unfair, unjust and just not right.

I say to all the government backbenchers who will stand up here and repeat ad nauseum the false claims that are being made without any foundation that they need to examine their consciences, because it is just unfair, unjust and just not right. That is why the government has gone to such incredible, extraordinary lengths to ensure that the people who are affected by this legislation do not get a chance to voice their opinion in a formal way. That is why the government has gone to such extraordinary lengths to ensure that the debate in this parliament is rushed through as quickly as possible before the full impact of this legislation can be understood.

I support the extensive remarks of my colleague the member for Warrego in his role as shadow minister for local government. He certainly understands local government. He knows what local government is about. He put forward a very creditable case in his address. I certainly commend those members who are yet to speak the words that he spoke. The member's knowledge and experience stands in stark contrast to some of the ridiculous claims the minister has made and his total lack of understanding of local government.

This whole process of which this legislation is the culmination has been dishonest from the start. One of the most outrageous parts of the government's strategy has been the attack that it has levelled constantly at councillors and mayors who serve their communities, in many instances in a semivoluntary role, and who have done so for the better part of their lives. The other day I addressed a meeting at which I said to the councillors and the mayors who were assembled that there was not one person in the room who would not have been financially better off if they had never gone near local government. That is typical of so many councillors and mayors right across Queensland—people who have served their communities for so long for so little remuneration and, through the government's process, they have been attacked and called bloated politicians. Today, I want to extend to those people the credit that they deserve. I want to extend to them the recognition that they deserve. I want to wish them luck and all the best as they set about implementing the more outrageous parts of this legislation in the months ahead.

As I said, this whole process was dishonest from the start. It was based on a QTC report. That report was misused in the most outrageous and dishonest way. There was a complete misuse of the terms 'weak' and 'very weak'. A whole case was constructed that somehow or other councils were weak and very weak and on the point of financial collapse. But when we looked at the detail, as so many people did not bother to do or did not have the opportunity to do, we saw that the terms that were used in that QTC report had a

very different meaning from what we and people in the street would assume that 'weak' and 'very weak' meant.

The QTC report itself made the comment very forcefully that the biggest issue that was contained in the results was accumulated depreciation and how councils have been forced to handle accumulated depreciation since the introduction of AAS27 accounting some years ago. That level of detail did not interest the minister and it did not interest the government. It seized on the classifications of 'weak' and 'very weak' and used those terms to justify some sort of political agenda that I believe has been long held dear to the Labor Party in Queensland for a whole range of reasons, some of which my colleague touched on.

At this juncture and in the public debate that has eventuated since then we, the councils themselves and the Queensland Local Government Association have established very clearly that there is no imminent financial collapse facing local government in Queensland. There is no major financial problem facing local government in Queensland. All the nonsense rhetoric that we hear from the other side about making councils stronger has no basis in fact at all. Some of these councils that are being amalgamated have millions of dollars in the bank, no debt and have operated very successfully for many years. Even one of the two councils that received the lowest rating of 'distressed'—Murgon council, which is in my electorate—has zero debt. Yet that council is somehow touted as the reason behind this whole process. The government has been fundamentally dishonest and fundamentally unfair from the start.

This process is driven by a political agenda that has lain dormant in the Queensland Labor Party for years. The Queensland Labor Party has fundamentally hated local government for almost a generation. Before I came into this place, I was in local government. I was mayor of a local shire and I know the attitude that is instilled within the Queensland Labor Party—that it somehow needed an opportunity to get square, to take the 'local' out of local government. This is a power grab. It is about taking power away from the communities. It is about taking the 'local' out of local government. With these changes that are proposed, local government will change fundamentally from a process that is about local voices having a local choice to a bureaucracy that can be controlled, that can be infiltrated by people with an agenda. I believe that that is what this is all about.

The case that has been constructed to support and justify amalgamation is dishonest and unfair—and it has been that way from the start. The unfairness and the injustice has been highlighted by the extraordinary lengths to which the government has gone to try to prevent councils from having a say and from conducting polls. Who would have ever imagined that in Queensland, in Australia, in the democracy that we all hold dear, a government would legislate to stop a council consulting its community? Not only that, today we see another amendment introduced into the parliament to extend that horrendous provision. Not only does the government want to stop a council from consulting its community; now it wants to stop the council encouraging, or facilitating, or asking somebody else to consult the community. It is a horrendous jackboot type of approach that has no place in our democracy. Irrespective of what we think about this particular issue, irrespective of what political agenda drives us, this sort of approach is a disaster for all of us.

Today, I have encouraged those communities—and I do so here again on the public record—to defy this outrageous law, to defy this outrageous amendment that the minister has introduced today, and to do so in huge numbers on a campaign of civil disobedience that will ensure that this sort of outrageous legislation is unworkable. It is totally unworkable and the only approach to take is to defy it because of the ridiculousness of it that is obvious to everybody who understands. I say to the minister, if you think you can enforce this law, if you think you can enforce this amendment in the communities that I represent, then you are in for a shock. You are in for a shock, because the day you come up to lock the mayor and the councillors out of our council, you will have thousands of people out—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr English): Order! Leader of the Opposition, you will direct your comments through the chair.

Mr SEENEY: The day that the minister comes up to lock the mayor and the councillors out of the shire chambers in the town that I live in, he will find that there will be thousands of people there. The day that he rings the local police sergeant and tells him to go and somehow stop the mayor and councillors from going into the shire office, he will find out about the impracticalities and the impossibilities of the nonsense jackboot approach that he has adopted. It is a clear indication of his inexperience and his total lack of knowledge of what local government is all about. I would suggest that he, too, is a political pawn in a game that is being driven by an ideology that he knows very little about.

This process has produced some disastrous results for people right across Queensland but none more so than for the people that I represent. In my electorate I have 12 councils. They were the basis of the communities—councils like Wondai, Eidsvold, Gayndah, Mundubbera and Taroom. They were the very framework on which the community built itself and they were the framework that enabled the communities to function. They were part and parcel of the fabric of the community. 'Community' used in that context is a concept that members opposite who live in Brisbane cannot even begin to understand. But it is the

precious thing that so many people have tried to fight to protect over the last few months and which they will continue to protect.

In some cases eight councils are proposed to be amalgamated into one—for instance, the Darling Downs Regional Council. In my electorate the North Burnett Regional Council will have six councils amalgamated into one—six councils and six communities with no centre at all. It takes 3½ hours to drive from one end to the other. It completely takes the concept of 'local' out of local government. Those communities will no longer have a local government. They will no longer have a local government. They will be administered by bureaucrats because it will change the nature of local government and it will change the nature of those people who can serve on those local governments, and those communities will forever be the poorer.

There is one case in my electorate that is probably the worst example in this whole debacle that has been foisted on Queensland communities. I refer to the Taroom shire. Supposedly, shires were not going to be split in half. Only two regional shires have been split in half that I am aware of. One is Tiaro and the other one is Taroom. To split the shire of Taroom in half shows a complete lack of understanding of any local issues or any local dynamics at all. There is no natural boundary through the middle of the Taroom shire. It has in itself a geographical boundary in that a series of ranges ensures that the Taroom shire exists almost like an island. To cut it in half and say that one of the towns in the Taroom shire—Taroom—should be in the Banana shire and the other one, Wandoan, should be in the Dalby shire is an absolute outrage. To use the divisional boundary in the old shire as the shire boundary shows a complete lack of understanding of how that boundary was ever arrived at. It has fundamentally split that community, and I think it is one of the most absurd examples of what happens when this sort of process is undertaken without any consultation, without any local involvement and without any care at all for the future of those communities. The Banana shire will be amalgamated with the northern end of the Taroom shire to make the Banana Regional Council. That in itself would probably be workable, but it would have been a lot more workable had the whole of the Taroom shire been involved in that regional shire.

In the north Burnett six shires will be amalgamated into one, as I mentioned before. I think that will be a totally unworkable situation, and there will be many other examples across the state. We have places like Charters Towers and Barcaldine, the Isaac Regional Council, the Emerald Regional Council, the Roma Regional Council and the Longreach Regional Council—all huge areas that will be almost totally unworkable. They will certainly be totally unable to establish any sort of local presence or local government or be able to ensure that those communities continue to exist in the way that they did.

The shadow minister has outlined what we will do. I think it is important that the people who are currently fearful for the future of their communities know that there is a solution. They are fearful for the future of their communities because they know what the impact will be of these amalgamations. They are the people who marched on the streets of Brisbane. Some 15,000 of them marched on the streets of Brisbane. An extraordinary number of people came here to march. There are people who came to Barcaldine who protested loud and long about the impact on their councils.

The case that I think should bring home the point to the minister and to anybody else in this parliament who has a heart or a soul is the bus loads of women and children who spent 26 hours on a bus to come down here to stand outside the Executive Building with their placards for an hour and a half in an attempt to get their message across to a minister and a government who refuse to listen. How on earth can that sort of protest be ignored? How can a government possibly not take notice of people who are so motivated to fight for the future of their communities? How on earth can the government continue to deny those people a say in the future of their communities?

That is the position that this legislation leaves us in. It is not so much that a process of amalgamation will take place. I need to put on record—and we have said this from the start—that there is no doubt there are places in Queensland where amalgamation of some councils would produce a positive outcome. Those councils were moving towards that end through the Triple S process—a voluntary process that they themselves had put in place and that they themselves were working on. That would have produced an outcome that they and their communities could have gone forward with. It would have produced an outcome that would have addressed all of the problems.

For some time now councils right across Queensland have been working on a regional approach to the major issues, a regional approach to employing officers and a regional approach to town planning. They were achieving the benefits of a regional approach and still maintaining the benefits of local input and local community representation. Some councils had put an enormous amount of effort into the regional organisations of councils, or the ROCs as they were called. This government has totally ignored all of that effort and all of the effort that went into the Triple S process. The government has thrown all of that out and has gone for a dictatorial, jackboot approach which cannot work unless it has some support from the communities upon which it is going to be visited. That, I think, is the tragedy.

There is probably little doubt that this legislation is going to be passed, given the political realities of this place and given the complete reluctance of Labor backbenchers to think for themselves or to make any sort of judgement about the legislation itself. But the great tragedy is that this process is going to produce anger, upset, frustration and rebellion that will go on for a long time. It is going to tear the heart and soul out of small communities and it will have an enormous impact on individuals and families. When members on that side of parliament have long forgotten about this legislation and have gone on to something else that their political masters have directed, those individuals and families will have to deal with the consequences of this legislation, and the communities that they make up will have to deal with the consequences of this legislation.

This proposal has always been about communities. The protest movement and the anger that we have seen demonstrated and that I know the government has not been able to understand has always been about communities. It has not been about politicians, as the minister and the Premier try to cynically claim in their quick television grab. This legislation has a devastating impact on communities. It has a devastating impact on families. It impacts in a most unfair and unjust way, and the basis of it was dishonest from the start. If ever there was a piece of legislation that it saddens me to see come into this parliament it is this one, because I know it is so unfair and unjust. I know the anger and the determination that there is in Queensland communities to fight this legislation.

I also know that the consequences of this legislation will be felt by many people for a long time to come. We will oppose this legislation at every opportunity in this House. We will use every avenue available to us in this House to oppose this legislation. We will use every opportunity to support the communities and the people who will be impacted by this horrendous piece of legislation. We will do that for as long as it takes to ensure that some justice is returned to Queensland communities.