



Speech by
Jeff Seeney

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

Hansard Wednesday, 22 August 2007

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (5.30 pm): I move—

That this Parliament ensure that, in the event of the amalgamation of Councils—

1. communities be allowed to appeal the decision to the Electoral Commission;
2. a no disadvantage test be conducted so that ratepayers can be assured that—
 - Rates will not rise above the CPI;
 - Council services will not be withdrawn or lessened; and
 - There will be no local job losses for Council staff delivering services.

I am aware that the minister for local government came into this House earlier today and introduced a bill which will, to some extent, curtail the opportunities to debate some of the issues that would have otherwise featured in this debate, but there is still a range of issues that we can debate that are not covered by that particular bill.

The way in which that bill was introduced this afternoon should be a complete embarrassment to the government and the minister, who slithered in here and introduced a bill that basically said, 'Oops, we stuffed up and we're going to back off.' There are a whole lot of other issues that are not in that bill. There is a whole lot more backing off to do, and in the course of this debate tonight we will certainly be illustrating those other areas where the government should back off. We will give the government a whole lot of other reasons to back down. Perhaps when we get to debate the bill that the minister introduced this afternoon he might like to include a whole lot of other issues in the form of amendments to that bill and we might get back to something that can be seen as somewhat fair and somewhat just, because it has been put many times in this debate that there is nothing about local government reform that is fair or just. It was a politically motivated revenge act from day one.

It is unfair and unjust to the communities that are involved, and those communities will never forgive the Labor government for this. They will never forgive the Labor government for the fact that they were not consulted properly in any form of natural justice, that their needs for the future were not taken into consideration, that they became just political pawns in a political game. But in the last couple of days the Premier and the local government minister have been fond of standing up and saying that they are moving on. Well, the elements of this motion tonight set out a more reasonable course of action for the government that wants to move on. This motion sets out some things that need to be done if local government generally in Queensland can move on. This motion sets out some things that need to be done to ensure that there is some element of fairness in the whole process. The motion that I have moved has two parts. The first calls for communities to be allowed to appeal the decision that was made by the Local Government Reform Commission. It sets out to ensure that those communities get a chance to put their case.

Let us just remember how these boundaries were drawn up. They were drawn up by a group of seven people who were hand-picked by the Labor government to give the result that it wanted. The commission was headed by Terry Mackenroth, who obviously went in there with an axe to grind. Those of us who were in this House when Mr Mackenroth was the former minister for local government know only

too well what his attitude to local government was and know only too well that there was a preconceived agenda about the whole process. But, irrespective of who was on that commission, nobody can stand here and claim that it got everything right in what was a very complex task. But that is what the government intimates when it accepts the boundaries that were decided by the commission lock, stock and barrel and gives no right of appeal, no right of submission, no point of discussion to the people who are most affected by it. It is worth remembering the way that this was announced: over there in the convention centre where the Premier like a magician swept aside the curtain and displayed the map of Queensland that somebody else had drawn that set out the future of all local governments in Queensland—no say, no consultation, no right of reply, no right to discuss.

It is worth noting that there are a couple of essential elements of natural justice. The first one is the right of consultation, and the government has backed down on that. I will not discuss that because it is the subject of a bill before the House, but the government has belatedly realised how important that element of natural justice is. The other element of natural justice is to have your case heard—to be able to have your case heard, put forward your argument. There are a number of councils across Queensland that deserve the right to have their argument heard. They deserve the right to put forward the argument that in their case the commission got it wrong. There are a couple of screamingly obvious examples, if you like, and there are a number of them.

There is one in my electorate—the shire of Taroom. The shire of Taroom is a naturally bounded area that has always been geographically and socially compact, but the new boundary splits the old shire of Taroom in half. There is absolutely no sense, no rhyme or reason, no explanation to divide a community and put the northern part of the shire into the new Banana Shire Council and the southern part of the shire into the new Dalby Regional Council—no logic, no sense, no justification for that decision at all. But the people of the Taroom shire get no opportunity to put forward their case. They get no opportunity to appeal. They get no opportunity—

Mr Beattie interjected.

Mr SEENEY: Will you talk to them, Premier? I challenge you here today: will you talk to the people of the Taroom shire and let them put their case to you about how ludicrous this particular boundary is? It is not about the broader amalgamation issue; it is simply about fixing up a mistake in the process. It is about allowing the opportunity for those mistakes to be recognised, because there is no reason why the whole shire could not have been put into the Banana Shire Council or the whole shire put into the Dalby Regional Council. It is simply another stuff-up—to use your words, not mine. It is a stuff-up that should be able to be rectified if the people of the Taroom shire can put forward a valid case and a valid argument.

There is a whole series of those types of mistakes. Let us look at the North Burnett Regional Council, where six councils have been combined into one. Those councils would like an opportunity to put forward a case that if they have to be amalgamated then a much better result is to amalgamate three shires into one and have two regional shires in the North Burnett, and that would make a lot more sense. But this government is denying those councils the opportunity to have that right of appeal, to put forward their case to have their situation reviewed.

I challenge the minister and the Premier, who sit over there and smirk without any care about the people who are affected by the arbitrary lines that were drawn on the map, to lower themselves enough to talk to these people. Let them put their case forward and let them have that right of appeal, if not to an independent commissioner then at least to you as ministers and decision makers, because they are consistently refusing to see them. I know that they have requested opportunities to talk to you and I know that you are continuing to deny them that opportunity. But the fair thing would be to allow those decisions to be reviewed.

The second part of this motion sets out a no disadvantage test that will test the veracity of the political nonsense that gets repeated in here day after day. It is easy for the minister to stand up and read from a prepared script that was written for him back in February some time about all of this nonsense about making stronger councils and stronger communities and preparing for growth—nonsense stuff, absolute nonsense! The real test is whether communities are going to be better off or worse off. So let us have a test that determines whether communities are better off or worse off. Let us have a test that is based on the essential elements of what local government delivers. Let us have a test that works out whether communities pay more rates or less rates. I can tell members that in my electorate once again—and there are examples everywhere—in the South Burnett councils there are constituents in the old Wondai shire who face a rate rise of 60 per cent if rates are averaged across the new regional shires, as they must have to be. There is no other way of doing it.

Let us have a test to see how much veracity and how much reality there is in the nonsense rhetoric that we hear in this place that the minister regurgitates from those prepared scripts. There is the issue of services, there is the issue of staffing and there are the stupid promises that have been made—the weasel words that the Premier uses about guaranteeing people's jobs. Let us guarantee people local jobs in their local communities and see whether their proposal stands the test then. It will not. I know what will happen.

All of those people will know what will happen. They will be offered jobs 200 kilometres away. They will be offered jobs doing something that they are not doing now. The meaninglessness of the promises that were made will very quickly become apparent once this issue is off the political radar. Let us have some reality to this. Let us put in place a test.

Time expired.