



Speech by

## John-Paul Langbroek

**MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE**

Hansard Thursday, 9 August 2007

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### LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IMPLEMENTATION BILL

**Mr LANGBROEK** (Surfers Paradise—Lib) (1.27 am): Today we have seen a remarkable demonstration from the Premier, who a couple of days ago said he would be here for 100 years because we do not have the ability to get rid of him. That is unbelievable arrogance from the Premier. The government is saying that when the local governments are made councils they will be far stronger and will be far more able to negotiate with the government. I can tell the House that when the Gold Coast and Albert councils merged there was no sense of any strength. In fact, the Deputy Premier and Treasurer today bagged the Gold Coast's preparation and plans for the desalination plant. So much for a stronger regional council that was able to achieve a lot more because it had been enlarged. It puts a lie to the argument. I can also tell the House that rates on the Gold Coast have certainly not gone down since we had the amalgamation in 1996. There will not be the efficiencies that are claimed and rates will not go down. This reform definitely represents a false dichotomy.

The Premier and local government minister have said many times that many of the local governments of Queensland are unsustainable. They have stated that, because a handful of councils are not financially viable—and I note the skewed analysis they have based this reform on—the state government should conduct a sweeping reform of the age-old council boundaries and build stronger councils for a stronger Queensland. We know this not to be true, as I just demonstrated in my earlier remarks.

Once again, this policy demonstrates the short-sightedness of the authoritarian Beattie government. This all or nothing approach has disenfranchised Queenslanders from all sides of politics. This all or nothing approach is unnecessary and, worse, it conceptualises the fine line between democracy and its binary opposite, tyranny.

It is quite clear where Queenslanders stand on the issue of council mergers. They do not want their local governments ravaged by the Brisbane-centric Beattie government. The Premier presides over the second biggest state in Australia. We would not find two towns the same over the length and breadth of Queensland. Every shire has its own unique character. Over the past year that I have been in this place, I have had the opportunity to travel to some of these places and meet the locals. As everyone knows, the differences between Toowoomba and Townsville, and Mackay and Mareeba, are more than geographical. I seek leave to incorporate the rest of my speech in *Hansard*.

Leave granted.

This bill seeks to carve up Queensland in a way that is going to destroy the diversity of this state. The Premier and his Local Government Minister have taken a marker to the map of the state and in a few strokes have overwritten more than a century of tradition.

The manner in which the Beattie Government is forcing council mergers has inflamed Queenslanders from Coolangatta right up to the Cape. Mr Speaker, over the past few months and certainly last week we have seen how passionate people are about their home towns. The anger in these communities such as Redcliffe, such as Noosa is palpable.

Thousands of people have taken their fight to our doorstep of Parliament because clearly their cries to the Premier and the Local Government Minister have fallen on deaf ears. But the Beattie Government cannot ignore the masses. Whilst the true test of a politician sometimes requires unpopular decision-making, we cannot forget the fundamental reason why each of us was elected to Parliament. Each one of us is here to represent our constituents. We are public servants. We are here to serve the interests of the

public. When constituents travel on a bus for eight hours to stand outside the Legislative Assembly opposing this change, they are clearly not being represented.

The Premier has publicly stated that the majority of Queenslanders support council amalgamations. I wonder on what basis our gallant Premier substantiates his claim. The people of Queensland are vehemently opposed to any move by the State Government to wipe out their local government, as is the Queensland Coalition and the Federal Coalition government.

Ten years ago the Goss Labor Government forced amalgamation upon the Gold Coast and Albert Shire councils. If the Local Government Minister wanted to look at streamlining local governments and was fair dinkum about this reasons for doing so his first stop should have been to the Gold Coast to consult with the Member for Robina, Ray Stevens about the proposal. My Coalition colleague was the first mayor of the Albert Shire and later became the mayor of the amalgamated Gold Coast City Council. He has experienced such sweeping reforms on a ground level and is better placed than anyone opposite to be the authority on the realities of forced amalgamations.

The Member for Robina has said that bigger does not necessarily mean greater efficiency. In fact, when I was canvassing my constituents on what they thought of the local government reforms I spoke with many who were concerned bigger councils would mean bigger bureaucracy. The experience on the Gold Coast shows that the cost of administering these 'super shires' is actually more expensive than the bill for running individual councils.

Despite the interests of Gold Coast and Albert residents, the Goss Labor Government imposed forced amalgamations on residents in the same despotic way the Beattie Government will dispose of local governments right across Queensland. Wayne Goss tried to justify his complete disregard for the democratic systems in this country with the same sycophantic arguments the Local Government has dredged up this time around.

The former Labor Premier, under the misguidance of former Local Government Minister Terry Mackenroth and no doubt his wannabe Prime Minister advisor at the time, pushed ahead with the amalgamation of the Gold Coast and Albert Shires, arguing that it would make council more economic and efficient.

Well Mr Speaker, experience is testament to the mistruth of these statements, the same ones driving this latest of great Labor failings in Queensland. Instead of diminishing the bottom line for administering local government in the southeast, the cost of administering this new entity blew out by \$70 million. \$70 million in 1996. Multiply that by 72, the number of new 'supercouncils' in Queensland, down from 156, and adjust it to today's fiscal terms. The potential cost blow-out is billions not millions—to borrow a line from the Health Minister.

Mr Speaker, the Premier's arguments about penny-pinching simply do not stack up. This move is not only going to cost tax-payers money, it is more likely than not going to spark rates rises as well. Because they certainly didn't go down with the new Gold Coast City Council I can tell you that now.

If the Local Government Minister had bothered doing his research he also would have discovered that the unceremonious forced merger of the Gold Coast City and Albert Shires did not in fact increase efficiency. Rather, it created more bureaucracy. Building their 'economies of scale' not only cost us \$70 million more than the combined price of running the council independently it also added time to the procedures. It takes a lot longer to get anything through council now than it ever did under separate shires, discounting population growth.

Merging these councils also had an irrevocable disenfranchising effect on residents. It's a lot more difficult for individual rate-payers to see their local representative or town-planner nowadays, and it is a near impossibility trying to influence council decisions.

Mr Speaker, if these reforms are rolled out across Queensland we will see a situation where constituents are having to travel for an hour just to see their local council representative—and that's assuming they even have a representative under the proposed undivided councils. Local government is supposed to be local. It's not supposed to be regionalised. That's why we have three tiers of government. That's why we have the state government.

There's absolutely no doubt in my mind that community services will suffer as a result of this Labor brainwave. Lex Bell, the former Member for Surfers Paradise and veteran Gold Coast City Council councillor and mayor described the forced amalgamation of the Gold Coast and Albert Shires as an "unmitigated disaster". And that's exactly what this bill will achieve.

As we have heard from the Member for Robina council staff and residents now face an enormous upheaval of their local government institutions. All this while the Premier and Local Government Minister sit back in the plush Executive Building offices making decisions they have no idea about the practicalities of. Queenslanders are entitled to the essential services provided by local governments. I would think they expect more from their state government than this self-serving, power-grabbing exercise that will destroy the last bastions of community in Queensland.

Despite the representation of non-government stakeholders on the review committee the final report cannot be apolitical because it satisfies Labor's agenda down to a tee. Beattie and friends have accepted the recommendations of the reform commission but they haven't accepted them carte blanche.

This is demonstrated by their scatty indecision about divided councils and undivided councils. First they wanted no divisions, now they're prepared to negotiate with councils. The Premier and Local Government Minister say this is because they are listening to the people of Queensland.

Mr Speaker, Premier Pete and his Minister for Local Government over there must suffer from an acute case of selective hearing because they have both failed to pick up on the very audible cries of councils and constituents all over Queensland who are disgusted with this autocracy. Sure, the Beattie Government is listening, but only when you're singing to the same tune. While Queenslanders are trying to fight this Goliath battle and chanting war cries against the State Government, the Premier, his deputy and their Labor mates are haphazardly divvying up Queensland all while dancing to My Sharona. It's a disturbing image.

The Beattie Government may not be listening but our federal counterparts on this side of the house are. Can I just say thank God someone's got some commonsense about this, because clearly the Labor State Government hasn't. The Federal Government has had to step in in order to give Queenslanders a right to an appeals process.

Apart from the abhorrent approach of this Beattie Government in forcing these reforms and imposing them on four million voiceless Queenslanders, the Premier—true to his union bully boy roots—has threatened those who do speak out and gauge the real sentiment of Queenslanders on council reform with hefty fines and redundancy.

Queensland, under this arrogant government, is becoming more and more a socialist state. That's the unfortunate aspect of the unicameral system in Queensland. Well Premier, you're on notice: Mr Speaker, they may have the power to call the shots and drive their agenda but sooner or later they will fail in the same spectacular way socialism did. Those opposite are hoping that

Queenslanders have short memories. Mr Beattie, you are underestimating the public furore over these reforms and it may well haunt you at the next election.

I would also like to put to the members opposite: where is Kevin Rudd in all of this? Where does he stand? We know he is dead-set against forced council amalgamations in Queensland, though he's a lot less concerned about the detrimental effect it will have on communities than he is about his own election chances I can tell you that. Labor's latest 'great white hope' has been silent on this issue from the beginning. I implore Mr Rudd, the would-be Prime Minister: show a little leadership and let's see where you stand on the issue. Queenslanders have a right to know what they might be getting themselves in for if they vote Labor at the next federal election. If he's anything like his conceited, state counterparts or the unionists, God help Australia.

In summation, I will leave you with a quote by Eleanor Roosevelt which conceptualises what we seek to lose out on in this bill. "The motivating force of the theory of a democratic way of life is still a belief that as individuals we live cooperatively, and to the best of our ability serve the community in which we live, and that our success, to be real, must contribute to the success of others." With this, the Local Government Reform Implementation Bill 2007, the Queensland Government is not working cooperatively with councils nor serving their constituents. And whilst this power-grabbing exercise might add weight to the Premier's pull, in effecting this legislation his government's success is at the detriment of not only local government but every Queenslanders. Today's the day community died in Queensland.