



Speech by

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION (INDIGENOUS REGIONAL COUNCILS) AMENDMENT BILL; LOCAL GOVERNMENT AMENDMENT BILL

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—Lib) (4.23 pm): I rise to speak to this cognate debate concerning local government in Queensland—the Local Government and Other Legislation (Indigenous Regional Councils) Amendment Bill 2007 and the Local Government Amendment Bill 2007. Much of the debate in the House this year has been consumed with local government issues sparked by the Labor government's move to dismantle local councils across Queensland in favour of a centralised bureaucratic system. The Queensland coalition is vehemently against forced council amalgamations, as I am sure Queenslanders are well aware. It is also quite clear where Queenslanders stand on the issue of council mergers. They do not want these sweeping changes to local government. Despite this, the former Beattie and now Bligh government have conquered local councils, endangering community in Queensland.

One of the bills before the House today reforms the Local Government Reform Implementation Act 2007 passed in this House in August. It is interesting that we find ourselves addressing these amendments, because if we were to have believed the former Premier the clauses this bill amends would have simply fallen off the statute books. On 21 August this year then Premier Peter Beattie attacked the opposition leader and member for Callide when he raised the issue with the government. Mr Seeney asked the Premier the legitimate and very relevant question of whether he would remove these provisions from the statutes of Queensland. Rather than answering the question truthfully and respectfully, the former Premier unleashed his attack on the opposition founded on inaccurate and misleading information. I refer to page 2641 of the *Hansard* where the former Premier said—

We have made it absolutely clear that that part of the legislation will not be enforced. It will fall off the statute books ... by itself by March next year. So it is over, it is finished, it is gone, it is done ...

The only thing over, finished, gone, done is the former Premier himself. The dictatorial provisions threatening councils which took any action to request, arrange, assist, facilitate or cause a poll to be conducted—a clause introduced at the eleventh hour by this arrogant government—survived this scandalous legislation and live on today in statute. Law does not fall off the statute books. You can fall off a horse, which metaphorically is what this government did in codifying these bullyboy clauses, but legislation does not fall off the shelf and that is why we are now being forced to revisit these laws. It was shoddily done and hastily cobbled together and now we are here rectifying the mistakes. The government has had to get back on the horse again.

The Local Government Amendment Bill 2007 will remove the offending provisions preventing locals governments from conducting polls about local government reform. This is obviously something the Queensland coalition strongly supports. The fact that these provisions were even contemplated by a supposedly democratic government defies belief. In Queensland and indeed Australia we live in an egalitarian society, one where people are encouraged to form and express their own opinions. We actively encourage citizens to convey their political thoughts on polling day. In fact, unlike some countries, one of

which we will be discussing during the Amnesty motion later tonight, Australia demands that its citizens exercise their democratic right to vote. The provisions this bill seeks to dispose of assault that very right, and the members opposite should be ashamed for advocating it in the first instance. You cannot outlaw democracy, which is what this Labor government tried to do. You cannot defend and promote a democratic system by taking away the very freedoms that make it a democracy in the first place. Thankfully, this bill restores the balance and reinstates for the record local governments' right to stand up to such an abominable assault on our democratic freedoms.

The second bill, the Local Government and Other Legislation (Indigenous Regional Councils) Amendment Bill 2007, seeks to amend a raft of acts to facilitate the forced amalgamation of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander local councils. Allegedly, the objective of the bill is to strengthen governance in the Torres Strait and northern peninsula and improve the efficiency and accountability of local government in far-north Queensland. The Queensland coalition refutes this claim. My colleagues and I do not believe that local government should be dismantled to achieve these objectives. I am fortunate enough to be on the Public Accounts Committee and at many meetings have listened to and shared the Auditor-General's concerns about the financial management of Indigenous councils. I share these concerns with the Auditor-General, the committee of the last parliament and this parliament and other members in this House, but I do not believe the problem is best fixed by getting rid of local government altogether in this area.

The problem with this bureaucratic, centralised, 'one size fits all' solution is that it completely ignores the inherent nature and culture of each of the individual communities in the Torres Strait and northern peninsula. I would suggest that we need a combination of support for them as individual communities but also to support them with people with suitable skills so that they can have sound financial management. These are the issues that the Auditor-General had constantly raised at our meetings. Other regional councils that were not Indigenous councils have also had troubles with audit time frames due to problems recruiting staff, and they are things that these Indigenous councils have had to deal with. When we debated the principal act I mentioned then that there are no two towns the same over the length and breadth of Queensland, and as shadow health minister I have been lucky enough to travel to more and more parts of the state and I can attest to the truth of this statement.

It is particularly true of far-north Queensland, where so much of our Indigenous culture and history is amassed. This bill, which facilitates the regionalisation of local government in these communities, ignores completely the individual, unique, historical and cultural aspects of the communities that will be affected by this bill. I acknowledge that those factors have to be balanced by rigorous fiscal arrangements, but I do not believe that that means dissolving or amalgamating all 17 councils.

As I mentioned before, the Queensland coalition is concerned about local government reform. We are passionate about bringing a sense of community back to Queensland. The Queensland coalition has a comprehensive policy on forced council amalgamations, particularly those affecting Torres Strait islands. Our *local voice, local choice* paper presents a considered, pragmatic, effective solution for better managing regional Aboriginal communities in far-north Queensland. A couple of these solutions deal with fiscal arrangements. If those councils had joint local government financial arrangements, it would bring the accountability that is so necessary to these communities but without amalgamating them completely and taking away so much of their identity.

I want to acknowledge the member for Warrego and my other coalition colleagues for the job they have done. They have been very vocal on this issue. The kind of thinking that we need in Queensland is the idea that government does not make Queensland the great place that it is but rather it is the people in the communities who make up this great state. Taking the axe to local communities will destroy some of Queensland's uniqueness, particularly in the culture-rich areas of the Torres Strait. For this reason, I cannot support this bill.