



Speech by

Hon. Kevin Lingard

MEMBER FOR BEAUDESERT

Hansard Thursday, 9 August 2007

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IMPLEMENTATION BILL

Hon. KR LINGARD (Beaudesert—NPA) (8.47 pm): Beaudesert and Boonah shires are generally recognised as the two shires which are most severely affected in this amalgamation exercise. The premise for this exercise was to form stronger councils. Beaudesert was strong. It had a great urban rate base in the north, around Park Ridge, with the rural areas of the south. Boonah was about to celebrate 125 years of strong development. There was no desire or need to amalgamate. The catalyst was supposedly to make the councils stronger.

In looking at the simple facts of the forced amalgamation of Beaudesert and Boonah shires into what will now be the Scenic Rim, the basic facts are these. Beaudesert shire loses 40,000 residents living in the fast-growing northern urban areas. It picks up 10,000 residents of the very rural areas of Boonah, Kalbar, Peak Crossing and Harrisville. The result, especially when we are trying to form a stronger council, is a net loss of 30,000 people—30,000 people who are basically urban area development.

The commission's comments were that all this will now form a financially weak council. They said that in their report. Their desire is to form a stronger council, yet the report states basically that what they have formed is a council with 30,000 fewer people—30,000 fewer urban people—and a council which they say will be financially weak.

Mr Rickuss: What is the area?

Mr LINGARD: I will talk about the area. All this against the stated desire to strengthen councils. All this against massive shire neighbours. The neighbours of the new Scenic Rim council will be Ipswich, massive; Brisbane, massive; Logan, massive; and the Gold Coast, massive. Yet here sits a shire which is now to be financially weak, according to the commission, with 30,000 fewer people in the urban area.

Boonah and Beaudesert have 740 council employees. They have now been told that 300 employees will not be required. So 300 will not be needed in the new Scenic Rim Regional Council. Ipswich, with an expanded council, will clearly want all of their workers; they will not want any extra workers. Logan, with an expanded area, will not require any other workers. So there are 300 extra workers who clearly, over the next few years, must find a new job.

The Beattie government guaranteed that there would be no net job losses, no forced redundancies or relocations as a result of these forced amalgamations. For a Beaudesert Shire Council worker living at Rathdowney it is a two-hour trip to Logan City. That is the nearest place he could be re-employed. Clearly, such an employee will have no option but to relocate somewhere. Hundreds of people will not be required to work for the Scenic Rim Regional Council. These people will have to travel great distances to their places of employment, depot or office if they want to remain in their home town.

The government has supposedly given assurances that staff will be retained for the next three years, but what will happen then? Whilst jobs are guaranteed, positions have not been guaranteed, nor have the localities from where these local government employees will work. There will be major disruptions for families. How can the government guarantee that some staff will not lose their jobs in the long term? How will the new Scenic Rim Regional Council, with half the population and twice the liabilities, be able to support essential services? I am unable to see anywhere else in the state where this process has been so blatantly gutted as Beaudesert shire or the Scenic Rim shire.

If an employee takes a redundancy I believe they will be greatly affected by the federal government's new rules which came into effect from 1 July. These new rules state that employment termination payments cannot be rolled over into a super fund. This will leave the local government employee greatly disadvantaged through no fault of their own. If an employee takes a reduction in salary this will have a severe impact on the level of benefit the employee will receive from the defined benefit fund. There are 6,000 local government employees in Queensland in this fund.

Why did we allow the South East Queensland Regional Plan? Why did the government make every council complete new integrated planning schemes? These processes cost the two amalgamated councils of Beaudesert and Boonah millions. How could Premier Beattie be genuine about the entire process when the review by the commission decided to create a financially weak regional council? I repeat that again and again. How can the government say that it was setting out to form stronger councils? How could it take councils like Boonah and Beaudesert and form what the commission says will be a financially weak council? How can it say it is not going to be a financially weak council when it has taken 30,000 urban people from Park Ridge, an area which is clearly going to grow and grow massively—I will provide the figures—out of Beaudesert shire, which had a prosperous future and considering the rate base on the northern end of the shire obviously it was looking forward to a great future? Beaudesert loses the high-growth area north to Logan but picks up the rural shire of Boonah and in so doing Beaudesert takes on an extra \$5 million in debt. Boonah cannot be expected to have the rate base or the projected growth rate of the previous northern part of Beaudesert shire. It is not claimed that it has. It has tremendous urban growth which will continue to occur but nowhere near the massive growth that was occurring in the northern areas of Flagstone, Logan Village, Yarrabilba when it was built and, of course, Park Ridge.

What this new council will be forced to face is all the difficulties which supposedly were the reasons for forced amalgamation. How can this new regional council be expected to remain viable? The present Beaudesert shire—I refer to the member for Lockyer's interjection—has an area of 2,884 square kilometres, but the Scenic Rim Regional Council will increase it to 4,356 square kilometres. This is an increase of nearly 50 per cent in area. The increase brings with it a matching increase in roads, bridges et cetera and the costs which have been a major problem for the present shire. It is a major problem for Beaudesert. It is a major problem for Boonah. The present shire has a population of 62,246, but the Scenic Rim Regional Council population will drop to 34,659, a decrease of 45 per cent. Half the number of residents will have to pay for about one and a half times the roads and bridges alone.

The commission estimates only 12.5 per cent growth of population by 2026—that is 4,400 people. As I have said, the government has already gutted the new Scenic Rim council and yet by 2026 there is only an increase of 4,400 people. Compare that with what is to be given to Logan, an area of 635 square kilometres with a present population of 38,252 to increase by 2026 to 106,605. The new areas of Yarrabilba, a new township of 50,000 people; areas of Logan Village; the whole area of Jimboomba; the area of Flagstone; and the area of Greenbank are all gone from what was once upon a time a very strong and prosperous council. With a population approaching 70,000 for the previous Beaudesert shire and an operating budget of around \$60 million, Beaudesert shire had a great future with the economics to fund major projects. It has all ended in a puff of smoke.

For instance, southern Beaudesert shire has approximately 100 or so very old small timber bridges, most of which are in poor condition, a number with load limits and needing replacement. They will cost tens of millions of dollars to replace and maintain. Add to that the timber bridges in Boonah shire and we have a real problem. There is also the future of the Bromelton industrial area. Is there some obscure process in place to see this area remain in limbo for the next 20 years? What is the Beattie government's plan for the inland port?

My other concern is that the commission continues to say that areas like Mount Tamborine asked to stay in Beaudesert shire. What it said when it was originally asked was that it wanted to stay in Beaudesert shire; it did not want to go to the Gold Coast. But if it was asked now it would say that it did not want to stay in the gutted Beaudesert shire. It originally wanted to stay in Beaudesert shire if Beaudesert shire stayed the way it was with the strength of the northern areas. If members went to Mount Tamborine now and asked people whether they wanted to stay in the Beaudesert shire, with the knowledge that a new shire was to go to Rosewood which included the southern rural areas of Beaudesert—with 98 per cent before saying they wanted to stay with Beaudesert shire—after the new boundaries I would not be surprised if less than 50 per cent wanted to stay. They can now see strength in the Gold Coast rather than staying in an economically weak Beaudesert shire.

The commission is saying now that Mount Tamborine asked to stay with Beaudesert shire, similar to Peak Crossing and Harrisville which originally said they wanted to stay with Boonah. Yes, they wanted to stay with Boonah if Boonah stayed with Beaudesert—the whole of Beaudesert, an economically strong Beaudesert shire. But what has happened is that Beaudesert has been gutted and it would be quite obviously more simple for the Peak Crossing and Harrisville people to stay with Ipswich. That is only common sense.

Once again the commission turns around and says that Mount Tamborine asked to stay where it put them. It says Peak Crossing and Harrisville asked to stay where they are now. That is completely misrepresenting the situation because it is quite clear now that having seen the gutted Scenic Rim Regional Council, Mount Tamborine and Beechmont would have had much more success going down towards the Gold Coast, and Peak Crossing and Harrisville would have had more success going towards Ipswich.

It is nonsense to say that because Boonah shire is being amalgamated into a bigger shire it is satisfying any of the objectives of the reform commission. The fact is that it is creating a weakened shire and grouping massive needs into a little pocket of south-east Queensland. It has whacked this little Scenic Rim shire—very much a rural area with virtually no urban growth and no prospects until 2026—in amongst the massive councils of Logan, Brisbane, Ipswich and the Gold Coast. I cannot see anywhere else in the reform process where a shire has been gutted. It simply defies all logic. Why amalgamate councils like Pine Rivers, Redcliffe and Caboolture to achieve financial strength on the one hand and in the same process create a weak shire called Beaudesert Regional Council, where the name has already been changed to Scenic Rim Regional Council, with a population of just 34,000?

To be consistent, all of Boonah should have gone to Ipswich, all of Beaudesert should have gone to Logan and all of the Beaudesert hinterland should have gone to the Gold Coast. What could be the motivation and how could this happen? It is obvious that the land use planners, the Office of Urban Management and their political masters, were in control of the Local Government Reform Commission and the infrastructure engineers were not even consulted.

We all know Terry Mackenroth's attitude towards urban sustainability. It is similar to that of the Deputy Premier. They say urban crawl will not continue. It is quite obvious that this government has set out to blatantly control the development of areas such as Park Ridge and Coomera and control urban sustainability so that they bring development back into the city. I have spoken about this before in this House. I have spoken about what is happening in Perth where they blatantly say that they have to control the development of Perth. They will not allow development to go further north or south because the government cannot control the financial infrastructure that is required.

When the Public Works Committee went to Perth, they said to us that we are going to have the same trouble in Queensland. Unless we control the development in the area north and south of Brisbane, the government cannot afford the infrastructure. When we came back we wondered what they were talking about. If we go to Melbourne and look at what is happening around Docklands, we see that they are doing exactly the same thing. Sydney is doing exactly the same thing, too. Now we see that this government is trying to control the development to the south and to the north and bring it back into the inner-city areas.

It is those people who have the philosophy of no more urban crawl who are affecting many of our decisions. I agree that obviously many people want to live in the urban areas around Boonah and Beaudesert. I know that if that continues we probably will have strong concerns about infrastructure. But that thinking has affected this plan. This is about the regional plan and about the urbanisation and infilling of the north of the existing Beaudesert shire. It is an end to unfashionable, low-density residential living in the eyes of neo-urban planners and the realisation of the urban footprint.

This is a perfect example of what I believe is an arrogant and dictatorial government making undemocratic decisions about something which will affect and impact negatively upon the jobs and the way of life of many thousands of country folk. I believe this amalgamation proposal will go a long way to completely shattering the morale and self-esteem of these communities which are already suffering from the effects of drought.

One of the other indirect problems I see is what might happen with hospitals. Beaudesert and Boonah both have two significant rural hospitals. I have spoken many times in this House about what is happening with Beaudesert Hospital. It is a magnificent hospital with 40 beds but the whole maternity section has been closed down. It is a brand-new hospital with absolutely no maternity services. The attitude of the bureaucrats is that all these people around Beaudesert can come into the city. Of course they can come into the city; we know that. But we all know what it means for a woman who is about to have a baby and her family: they have to travel into Logan for all the prenatal services, postnatal services and for the birth of the child, especially when there is a brand-new hospital with 20 maternity beds sitting there that is now used as a conference centre and storerooms.

The other night I mentioned in the House the X-ray units at Boonah hospital. I said that Fuji is putting in the new X-ray services. The Boonah hospital had been closed for three weeks to allow this X-ray machine to go in. They spent \$7,000 of their own money and they restored the rooms completely. Fuji was supposed to complete the whole project on Monday. Fuji has not done it. For anyone who has anything to do with this JNet service, there are 70 hospitals around Queensland which have this new X-ray equipment going into them. I said that the old equipment had to be put back on Monday and they had to use the temporary services.

You would not believe it, but the minister has come out in the news today when asked by the ABC if I criticised Queensland Health when I said it was not good enough that this had happened and the minister said, 'The patients at Boonah can go to Ipswich Hospital.' That was his reply to the ABC host: the people of Boonah can go to the Ipswich Hospital. That is the trouble. If we allow bureaucrats and ministers to continue this process, every school in these rural areas will be closed because it is easy to put kids on a bus and take them into a central area; it is easy to close the Boonah hospital and take them all into Ipswich. Ipswich has magnificent services, but you still have to get people from Boonah to go there. There is this situation at Beaudesert which has a magnificent new hospital sitting there virtually vacant except for older people waiting to get into nursing homes. It is sitting there vacant because bureaucrats say that it is easier to take people to the hospital at Logan. What we are seeing now is centralisation occurring. Many bureaucrats have this attitude of, 'We don't need to continue these services in country areas; we can bring these people into the city.'