



Speech by

## Lawrence Springborg

MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS

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### LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

**Mr SPRINGBORG** (Southern Downs—NPA) (4.38 pm): I rise to express serious reservation and opposition to much of what has been introduced by this government in recent days with these local government amendments. No-one has experienced more vividly or more graphically than me the consequences and the heartache of amalgamations of local government in their area.

I remember in the early part of the 1990s the Goss government, as part of a process of local government boundary reform, engaged in the division of communities across Queensland by forcing amalgamations. The electorate of Southern Downs or the electorate of Warwick, as it was then, did not escape that process undertaken by one of the minister's predecessors. I think I am the only member in this place who had four local government areas that were forced to become one. The Warwick shire was created out of the old city of Warwick and the shires of Glengallan, Rosenthal, and Allora.

It took a long time for the community to heal after that process. The honourable member for Cunningham shares some of the Warwick shire with me and knows a great deal about that area. I think it is fair to say that there has not been a complete healing in some areas. There is no doubt that there were winners and there were losers. I can tell any member on the government side who stands up and says that an economic rationalist process of forced amalgamation delivers all sorts of winners and every child player gets a prize that that is not the case. It is in no way the case.

When I drive into the small community of Allora now I find that the heart and soul of that community is missing. Its heart and soul used to be its council. The heart and soul used to be the council office. That community has lost a sense of direction. It has tried hard to build a sense of identity and encapsulate a sense of identity without its council, which was the pinnacle and focal point of that community. I think the members of that community did reasonably well, but they have certainly struggled in recent times.

Whilst the effect on places like Killarney, which was in the Glengallan shire, and Delveen and Leyburn, which are in the Rosenthal shire, was probably not as manifestly profound because their shire council chambers were basically on the outskirts of Warwick city, they still felt that they had missed out on something. However, the effect on those areas was nowhere near as profound as the effect on Allora. Within Warwick itself most people were very supportive of the move and would argue that it has been successful. It is fair to say, again, that there were winners and there were losers.

The mayor of Warwick shire made the point to me when I was talking to him yesterday that it took 1½ council terms to basically forge an administration following that amalgamation process. What we saw was a wasted opportunity as the members of the new council found their feet.

**Mr Lucas** interjected.

**Mr SPRINGBORG:** No, Minister, I make the point that it is often very difficult to unscramble an egg. We also had to work through the problem of the de-amalgamation referendum provision. More division and more concern was brought about because a lot of people thought, 'We do not like this but how can we actually gain the essence of what we had before if we go through a de-amalgamation process?' Whilst one area voted to de-amalgamate at the referendum the others did not, so consequently de-amalgamation did not take place. All I am saying is that we have to understand what local government is all about.

I have listened in this chamber this afternoon and on the monitor in my room to government speaker after government speaker and they are basically motivated by some form of retribution against local government. They have not got up to speak without attacking somebody, without tipping a bucket on somebody, without attacking those in local government of their own political ilk. That is the fundamental difference between the coalition side and the Labor side in this parliament.

The thing I have noticed in the time that I have been in this place is a fundamental difference between us and Labor in the way that we approach local government. It is not unusual to come into this place and listen to Labor members day after day bagging their councillors and bagging their councils in some form of political retribution. They hit them for being Tories. Even if they are not Tories they do it. The honourable member for Keppel attacked one of his mayors and councils today. I think Mayor Ludwig is actually of the Labor ilk. The honourable member for Bundamba raised some questions about Ipswich City Council. I understand that most of the people on that council are Labor.

In my electorate I have a mayor and councillors from all sides of politics. In fact, one of my councils is headed by a woman who ran against me as a One Nation candidate and an Independent. She finished second after the distribution of preferences in subsequent elections. On not one occasion have I not worked cooperatively with that mayor. On not one occasion have I gone out there and belted that mayor or in any way questioned or impugned what she has done as the mayor. That is the fundamental difference between us and Labor. I think there is a real disrespect and failure by those in this government to understand local government.

I want to make a comment about the minister. I have made some interesting observations since he has become minister. He might find some of what I have to say offensive and some of it mildly complimentary. I think the minister is technically extremely competent in the way that he has conducted himself in his portfolio. I think he is well briefed. I think technically he handles issues very well. However, I do not think that the minister has a genuine understanding of or feeling for the essence of local government. There is a difference. One can know a lot about something but not know the essence of something.

It is like reading about Scotland. One can think one understands Scotland without actually going there. It is like a person reading about going down a mine shaft in Mount Isa and thinking they know what it is like, but until they have been down there they do not know what it is like. There is a difference between knowing about local government technically, being well briefed and being technically competent and actually understanding the essence of what makes local government work.

My concern is that none of those opposite have a fundamental understanding of what they are seeking to do here. I watched with great concern as the Premier came in here the other day and tore up the Triple S process. That was a process which local government in Queensland proactively and properly engaged in for at least a year. They spent an extraordinary amount of money, time and effort in seeking to achieve outcomes. I have no problem with amalgamation, I have no problem with boundary changes, but they need to be done cooperatively.

Within my electorate the towns of Goondiwindi and Waggamba were actually heading towards an amalgamation. They were going to do that cooperatively. There was an issue within my electorate about what was going to happen with regard to Inglewood. That is a justifiable concern which I will touch on in a moment. Those towns are feeling that they have been taken for a ride. They have been absolutely hoodwinked. They have been subjugated by the most insane and, I think, virulent political process that one could actually imagine. The people in those areas used to ask me, 'What is this whole Triple S process all about?' I told them that it was about forced amalgamations. I said, 'The government wants you to do the job for them. If you do not actually do what they want you are going to cop it anyway. They will deny it before the state election and they will actually do it straight after.' That is precisely what has happened with this process.

The other thing that concerned me was the way the Premier got up in here the other day and impugned the right of any shire council that has fewer than 5,000 people to exist. This displays a fundamental misunderstanding of the geographical size and nature of Queensland. I find this surprising from a government that goes into the COAG process each year and argues that given Queensland's geographical diversity and decentralised nature it needs some degree of special consideration. It fundamentally fails to consider that in terms of its responsibilities for the administration of local government.

Let us look at the size of some of these councils. It is not just the population but the geographical size of the councils which is important in terms of how we manage and operate them. Aramac has 740 people. The other day the Premier said that some of these councils do not have 5,000 people. There was sniggering from the government side. Today the Premier stood up and said that when the shadow minister, Howard Hobbs, was mayor of Tambo it had only 700 residents. There was more sniggering. Again there is a fundamental misunderstanding of how local government works. Aramac has a population of 740 people

but has a geographical area of 23,361 square kilometres. Boulia has a population of 555 people and a geographical area of 61,000 square kilometres. Bulloo has a population of 468 people and a geographical area of 74,000 square kilometres. I am rounding up and rounding down to the nearest 1,000.

The Cook shire, which is the largest geographical area of any shire in Queensland, has a population of 4,157 and a geographical area of 117,000 square kilometres. Diamantina, arguably the most sparsely populated shire in all of Queensland, consists of 95,000 square kilometres and a population of 305. McKinley has an area of 41,000 square kilometres and a population of just over 1,000. Murweh has an area of 41,000 square kilometres and a population of just under 5,000. Paroo shire has an area of 48,000 square kilometres and a population of 2,100 or thereabouts. Quilpie has a population of 1,079 and an area of 68,000 square kilometres. If the government wants to say that a shire is not viable and not big enough unless it has a population greater than 5,000 people, then we will have to have a shire that basically goes from Winton to Cameron Corner to Quilpie. How can we service something like that? That is going to have to be repeated right across Queensland. Those opposite do not have a fundamental understanding of how these places operate and the expertise that goes with it.

We have heard a bagging one after the other from government members in here today about what local government councillors actually earn and how that is unjustifiable. If we had an independent remuneration commission, let us see what would happen with those salaries if we cut the number of councils in Queensland. Some of them are going to double. Let us not forget this: the majority of councils in Queensland are actually predominately made up of councillors who are part-time and get nothing more than meeting fees of a couple of hundred dollars a meeting. That costs virtually nothing. According to the parameters laid down by the Premier the other day, 88 councils in Queensland out of 157 are going to go immediately because they do not even meet the 5,000 population test! Not only that, he basically said that all of the others are going to get some degree of change. There is no clearer demonstration of what this is all about than the anti-council and the anti-local government rhetoric which we have seen pouring from members in this parliament today, and it disturbs me absolutely.

We also have to consider what the Goss government did in this state in the early part of the 1990s with regard to smashing up regional services and tearing the heart and soul out of areas. Those opposite argue not to have an economic rationalist base. Yesterday reference was made to one newspaper article after the election of Mr Beattie in 1998 where he said that we were going to have a socially rationalist process, not an economically rationalist process after the One Nation wave of the time. The government has repudiated that with this process even though day after day somebody stands up and says that these things are unviable. On the government's own indications, the Citytrain network in Brisbane is unviable. The Brisbane bus network is unviable.

**Mr Lucas** interjected.

**Mr SPRINGBORG:** The Brisbane bus network is unviable if we want to look at it on the technical basis of the way things stack up financially. The reality is that they are extraordinarily viable because of the social benefit that they provide in a range of ways because of the opportunity for people to be able to get to work, social opportunities and sporting opportunities that in turn cut down the congestion on our roads—all of those sorts of things which are an absolute must. You can make anything look crook if you want to look at it on the basis of some sort of economically technical argument.

**Mr Lucas** interjected.

**Mr SPRINGBORG:** We have heard the bleating here from the member for Lytton, who is happy to have subsidies and happy to have support when it suits him but not in other cases. Let us look at the case of the Inglewood shire, for example, in my electorate which is going to face being carved up and was probably going to be carved up prior to the abandonment of the Triple S process in this parliament by this government. As one mayor said to me the other day, 'We could technically take it over but we don't necessarily believe that we would be able to run it in the same way.' It survives on 37 per cent, I think, funding from the minister's main roads department, and it does its job very well. As one mayor from a much larger shire said to me, 'Really, so what at the end of the day, because what happens is they do it well and they actually sustain a community?' What happens when the administration of those council areas is affected and they lose 50 council workers? That affects the school and affects a whole range—

**Mr Lucas:** Rubbish!

**Mr SPRINGBORG:** It is not rubbish! It has happened!

**Mr Lucas** interjected.

**Mr SPRINGBORG:** It is not rubbish!

**Mr Lucas** interjected.

**Mr SPRINGBORG:** It is not rubbish!

**Mr Lucas** interjected.

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Mr Moorhead): Order! Honourable members will direct their comments through the chair.

**Mr SPRINGBORG:** Through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, the minister simply misunderstands that there is going to be a shift in where those people are located from one to the other, because there might be an outpost there but—

**Mr Lucas:** Not from Inglewood to Cairns.

**Mr SPRINGBORG:** From Inglewood to somewhere else, because the kids of those roadworkers will be based somewhere else. Those kids of the administration officers are going to be based somewhere else. We have heard all of this esoteric technical academic rubbish before in this place. I heard it from the minister's predecessor David Hamill in the early part of the 1990s and look at the right royal mess he made when he started closing railway lines and the social consequences that he beset on this state as a consequence of that. He said that there was not going to be a problem. Well, there was a problem and it manifested itself politically all the way to the top here in Queensland. The government may isolate the political problem that is caused from this—it may attempt to isolate it—but it will never ever escape from the social dislocation and the social upheaval that will be the consequence of these policies, because they are going to be very, very profound and they are going to be very, very grave.

I have already heard talk in my electorate of putting the likes of the Warwick Shire Council and the Stanthorpe Shire Council together. They cooperate well, but anyone who actually lives there understands that that is like putting oil with water. Both mayors will tell you that and both communities will tell you that. There are some things that are a community test where unless one lives there they can never really feel it and they can never really understand it. If one looks at the job ahead of the seven local government boundary commissioners which have been appointed, they are not even going to have time to travel. They are not even going to have time to properly understand. Frankly, from what we have seen of this government, the decisions have already been made and the submissions which will be received will be nothing more than tinkering around the edges. One mayor said to me, 'The submissions will be no more than tinkering around the edges. The boundaries and the other changes are going to be profound.' They are going to be absolutely cataclysmic.

One mayor told me the other day that they are about to start to negotiate the issue of contracts with their employees because they are going through the next part of the EBA process. Those employees are already starting to ask, 'What's going to actually exist here? What's going to exist here?' as they go through that process. Whilst the boundaries might be in place for the next local government election, the administrative structures will not be in place. As I said in the case of the Warwick shire, we actually saw that it needed 1½ council terms for it to be properly functioning and put into place. To anyone who says that there is going to be efficiency out of this and that there is going to be less bureaucracy, dream on! Dream on, because where there have already been these amalgamations there is a far greater administrative and bureaucratic system in place because the first thing they do is expand the consolidated administration office. Instead of having one technical services officer, they have a whole range of them and also assistant ones along the way. So they have a whole bureaucratic structure which becomes far more costly and less cost effective.

I challenge all honourable members over there who do not believe this to sit back in five years time and have a look and then say if I am wrong. If the figures show it, I will be happy to say that I am wrong. I have been through this experience and I know precisely what happens. Those opposite will find that the changes out of this are grotesque, are profound and are not based on any sort of fundamental fairness. This government has already set aside the process of referendum. That is something that this government has not supported—there should have been a referendum in the case of an amalgamation so that the community itself has a degree of ownership over that. That has been put aside because this government is scared of the verdict of the local community about what they feel about their future. Instead, the government is going to impose a decision on them. Why is the government scared of those ratepayers and what they want to say?

Time expired.