



Speech by

Mark McArdle

MEMBER FOR CALOUNDRA

Hansard Thursday, 19 April 2007

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr McARDLE (Caloundra—Lib) (6.17 pm): I wish to start by congratulating the shadow spokesperson for his contribution to the second reading debate yesterday. In particular, I congratulate the member on giving the history of the Triple S process. He stated that it started in September 2004 with the LGAQ promoting discussion among its members and continued unabated until 17 April 2006—a period of some 18 months. In that 18-month period we had the LGAQ and most councils—if not all councils—throughout Queensland and this government, this minister and his predecessor working in conjunction to progress the Triple S process into a finite document setting out a process to be implemented. We have now found that that 18-month period and all the hard work of the LGAQ, the councillors, their staff, community members and many others involved in that process has been torn up. It has been thrown asunder. That work has come to nought. Importantly, I believe that that process has cheated the LGAQ, local government and the members of the community who were so heavily involved in this process of a fundamental right to have a say in their own future.

I refer to the media release by Paul Bell of yesterday, which states—

'For the past 18 months, 117 councils have been working within a state government-endorsed process, known as Size, Shape and Sustainability, to review how best to deliver services to the local communities,' he said.

'Councils have recognised the need to review their operations, how they structure themselves and how to employ smarter and more contemporary business processes such as shared services and regional alliance models,' he said.

'More sustainable and efficient local government has always been the goal.

'This process was initiated by councils and—up until today's totally unexpected announcement—had been supported by the state government.

'Locally-elected councils, in partnership with their communities, were to be given opportunities to determine their future.

'The government has now ripped this opportunity away. Gone is any opportunity for collaboration and self determination by local communities.'

Nothing could be more accurate. Nothing could be more accurate than that the past 18 months have been a complete and utter waste of time by the LGAQ. In that period of time they were goaded, they were cajoled, they were enthusiastically encouraged by this government to continue the process and all the time, as the member for Cunningham astutely put it, there was no intention by this government to implement the Triple S process. It was merely a charade, a farce, because it was terrified that if it went to the election in September 2006 with this hanging over the heads of the people of Queensland it knew it was in for a large hiding.

The minister really has to explain why he allowed the local government, the LGAQ, the local councils, the councillors, their employees and the communities to believe that he and this government were going to give them the right of self-determination, or at least the right to be part of a process, and why he failed at any point along that process prior to 17 April to alert them to this government's change in policy, this government's change in direction, and why this government left them completely out in the cold.

This government often states that it acts in the best interests of the community. Unfortunately that cannot be sustained by historical fact. The Sunshine Coast has now been advised of the northern

interconnector pipeline—a pipeline that will draw water from Baroon Pocket Dam and other water sources across the Sunshine Coast at the level of 62 megalitres per day. But of course the government continues to deny—however it is a fact—that that pipeline is at this point in time only one way. It will draw water from the coast; it cannot—and there are no plans in the foreseeable future—draw water back to the Sunshine Coast. There is, in effect, a policy of 'just in time'. What 'just in time' actually represents is anybody's guess. No-one within the department can tell me what drought conditions are required to be on the Sunshine Coast before water will be drawn back to it to sustain the population base.

The Traveston Dam is a second clear indication of this government's inability to provide for the community. Whilst all around are making it clear to the government that it is unsustainable—that it cannot be maintained in the area in which it is to be built; it is simply unable to hold such a large structure—this government continues to flounder in the hope that the people of Queensland are going to swallow this rather bitter pill.

The fact that the government allowed itself to get into the deplorable state that it has with the water supply in south-east Queensland is one more indication of this government's inability to provide for the community of Queensland. In addition, the road infrastructure arrangements across Queensland, particularly on the Sunshine Coast and in the south-east corner, are one more example of this government's inability to care for and plan for the needs of the community. Why should Queenslanders believe that this process should be of any further benefit to them when compared to recent historical fact?

A number of government members referred in their speeches to local government being a creature of state government and controlled by it. By using such terms as 'creature' and 'control', the role of local government is made subservient to that of state government. It simply takes away the amenity associated with being a local government councillor or being involved with the operation of a council on a day-to-day basis.

Local government is one of the most important levels of government in this state. It provides for the day-to-day necessities of the people whom the councils represent throughout the city or the shire. There is no doubt in my mind that there is a need for the people of this state, when looking at whether amalgamations should occur, to be informed of all the facts on which they should make their judgement but they should also be asked what their judgement is going to be. They should have a say in exactly what the future of their area should be. That is what being in a democracy is all about. When we are talking about significant changes that will sweep across the state, to leave out the people whom it will impact the most is a dereliction of the obligation of this government and of this parliament.

The Premier today made reference to the report by the Auditor-General. He referred to page 7. He claimed that the paragraph he referred to showed categorically that the Auditor-General in his review found the current regime of councils unsustainable. He did not, however, read the following paragraph, which states—

The Local Government Association of Queensland, the Minister for Local Government, Planning and Sport (the Minister) and the Department of Local Government, Planning, Sport and Recreation are working conjointly to address this issue through the 'Size, Shape and Sustainability' initiative which outlines a number of models for voluntary structural reform across the sector. I acknowledge their work in this area and believe that this initiative is an important step to encourage councils to consider options for resource sharing that could help improve their efficiency and effectiveness and assist in overcoming the financial and asset management concerns raised in this report.

The Auditor-General in that document at one point states clearly that there are problems with councils. He then endorses in the very next paragraph the Triple S approach as being an initiative that he believes will solve the problems, but that process will now not be completed as a consequence of an action by a government that has not explained why after 18 months it destroyed the work of all of those bodies. It has destroyed and ripped out the heart of local government and local councillors and has thrown their work away. The minister has to explain why he does not believe that the LGAQ and the process put in by train by his government sustained over 18 months suddenly is not worthwhile and why he failed to deal with the LGAQ and advise them accordingly.

I conclude with this one final statement: the people of Queensland are impacted upon by the most far-reaching changes to local government that we have ever seen. They have a right and they demand a right to a referendum after being informed of all the pros and cons of amalgamation.