



Speech by

Paul Hoolihan

MEMBER FOR KEPPEL

Hansard Thursday, 9 August 2007

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IMPLEMENTATION BILL

Mr HOOLIHAN (Keppel—ALP) (11.43 pm): The Local Government Reform Implementation Bill is a bill which really should be welcomed by all Queenslanders as it is a recipe for strong local government in the 21st century. That evident truth has not worried anyone in the opposition. We have heard so much—and we will probably hear a lot more—diatribe and rot, but they know and will not admit that the actions taken are legal, correct and necessary. At the outset I congratulate the minister for his approach to this reform and his resolute action in the face of many actions by people in the community which were not only objectionable to most Queenslanders but verged on criminal activity. I also want to thank the Hon. Desley Boyle, the previous minister for local government, because it was on her watch that the Size, Shape and Sustainability review was implemented. She was the one who put this on its obvious course.

I want to have a word in the shell-like ear of the Leader of the Opposition: I do not have political masters. I am a member of, and very proud to be a member of, the Labor Party. I subscribe to the rules of the party and I answer to the people who elect me and whom I represent. Like the member for Rockhampton, I do not take my information from the media, the opposition or, as will be seen later, from the Livingstone Shire Council. I go out into the community and talk to the people who will benefit—the community organisations, places where ordinary people congregate like sports clubs. They are aware that their future lies in reform, and I will deal with my local councils in that regard later in this speech.

Claims have been and will be made ad nauseam in the House today that democratic rights of Queenslanders have been denied, but most of those claims are not based on truth or knowledge. Most opposition members obviously have no knowledge of what democracy really is and I would suggest to them that they put the word in Google if they can spell it and see what they come up with. Most of the claims seem to relate to a right to hold a referendum. That belief is ephemeral when we consider that that right was written into the legislation by a National Party government but the right could be overridden by the relevant minister if he or she did not accept the results. That actually was the next part of the speech which the member for Southern Downs conveniently omitted, although he was asked by the minister to quote the next section. Most of this is typical National Party jackboot tactics but actions which members will not speak about in this House.

It was also instructive to listen to the minister pointing out in this House to the National Party on a previous sitting day—and we heard this from the member for Pumicestone—that the opposition did not even support a 1988 referendum question which would have included local government as an arm of government in the Australian Constitution. The Beattie government recognised the wishes of Queenslanders and accepted the need for strong local government in the Constitution of Queensland and it is also recognised in the Labor platform. The recommendations are based on the independent findings of a commission and, contrary to a few of the allegations which were floated by the members for Nanango and Gladstone, I would hazard a guess that I and many members of this government have a deeper knowledge of rural and regional areas than a lot of the people who stand and try to condemn us. I say to you lot: grow up and act like adults!

I am amazed at the beliefs raised by people like the member for Noosa, who had some difficulty in telling us where Noosa is going to end up or where it is going. He seemed to claim that it will disappear, but

he shows his lack of reality and I can guarantee him that it will still be here in March 2008. In the Gladstone area the city had been stunted in its growth by the doughnut shire of Calliope. It is a special area for the Queensland government and money is spent there without any effort by the current member. I have had conversations with the Mayor of Gladstone, Peter Corones, whose council is continually frustrated by the actions of Calliope. I hope that he is interested in running for the mayoralty of the Gladstone Regional Council.

It should come as no surprise to this House to know that the member for Gladstone used to be on the Calliope council and she would oppose any decision which would impact on those she left behind. The deputy mayor is the president of the Central Queensland Local Government Association and has tried to misrepresent the wishes of the member councils of that association, which includes my area, in this whole debate. I said in this House on 7 August that Calliope ratepayers were the losers in an advertisement placed in the *Courier-Mail* by their councillors and signed by and on behalf of the Central Queensland Local Government Association. They had to meet the cost because no authority was given by the member councils for the spending of those funds. We heard today from the member for Gladstone about Calliope paying that. There was never any doubt that it paid it. The sadness of it was that the Calliope ratepayers were the ones who had that imposed on them.

We hear continual claims in this House that the National-Liberal Party are the natural supporters of local government, but I say to the various mayors and councillors, whether of continuing or amalgamated councils, that if you believe that you will also find fairies at the bottom of your garden. From the time of the failure of councils—and mostly through their own actions—to meet their obligations as agreed under the Triple S review, we have had an hysteria whipped up by the coalition in its endeavour to cover its lack of policies and to cause fear to Queensland people.

The claims of towns closing down, people losing jobs and schools closing are just spurious nonsense. People could have spoken to the member for Gregory about Stonehenge, which is a remarkable little community. He would tell members that this small community fluctuates according to whether a new family comes to town. This town has persisted because of the pride of the people who live there. Jericho shire has contained two towns, Jericho and Alpha, for many years and they have thrived. It is the people in those towns who have worked to keep their communities alive. The population of towns throughout Queensland fluctuate even with strong local councils and will continue to do so. One of the real effects of the fear campaign is that people who had concerns about employment in regional councils have gone out and obtained alternative work. Now that many of those councils will continue, they have the added problem that their actions have reduced their own council's workforces.

This bill gives the lie to the dishonesty peddled by the coalition and those mayors and councillors who have danced to their tune. On 8 May in Barcaldine we had a march and claims and counterclaims were made by ill-informed people about decisions that had not even been made. We had Shane Webcke visit and the doomsayers have continued to use him in advertising, but he should return any fees he has been paid. If members checked his enrolment they would find that he lives around Eatons Hill. He may own a hotel at Leyburn, but he does not live there. Support for the country from the country? Come on, Shane!

The member for Warrego particularly has been using fear to try to force financial support from councils to this campaign. He should hang his head in shame. He should also tell this House whether his son was the ringleader of the disgusting exhibition at Barcaldine where water and an egg were thrown at the Premier and the minister. The member for Warrego should also tell us whether he contributed to the script, because if he did he should hang his head in shame. Some mayors have apologised for the actions of the rent-a-crowd on that day as that is not the way that country people act.

It is not only those mayors and councillors but constituent bodies such as the LGAQ and the CQLGA that have peddled those fears. If anyone has received any electronic transmission from localdemocracy.com.au, they should check the domain register. They will find under the registry ID that that site is registered to the Local Government Association of Queensland under the registrar ID of R00015-AR on 23 April. Why does the site not just operate as the LGAQ?

We then had the spectacle on 8 June where a Kelsey Neilson, who I understand is a Boulia councillor, besmirched our Anzacs in calling for the desecration of our cenotaphs. To their everlasting shame, the LGAQ and the National Party supported this stance. Even the RSL condemned their actions.

Mr Johnson: That is not right.

Mr HOOLIHAN: The member has seen the advertising. Those people who have continued to wear red as a consequence of that campaign also deserve condemnation.

We have continued to be bombarded by these distortions and half-truths right up to the handing down of the commission's decision. After that decision, most councils knew what was proposed and they were supportive. Only a small number of mayors and councils who want to be the big frogs in little puddles have continued to peddle fear.

In my local area the Mount Morgan shire, through Mayor Gavin Finch, and Rockhampton City Council, through Mayor Margaret Strelow, and probably Fitzroy shire—although they are a bit ambivalent—were prepared to participate in the Triple S review. Despite that, Livingstone shire obfuscated and the review got nowhere. Self-interest reins supreme and the Livingstone Shire Council has continued with that attitude despite some very forward-thinking councillors on the Livingstone council who were supportive of reform. The mayor and his deputy have continued and still continue to endeavour to frustrate sensible proposals. Going from the latest email that was published by the mayor to local groups, that council deserves to be sacked under the new legislation.

We heard from the member for Rockhampton about people from all sides of politics supporting amalgamation in our area. Some of them are successful ratepayers and businesspeople who know the benefits of having larger entities. The mayor of Livingstone Shire Council was described as self-interested, but how do we really describe him when we consider that the Livingstone Shire Council anti-amalgamation advertising was paid for by a land developer? Why did Livingstone Shire Council want to stand alone as a rump when no person would have been able to afford to live there? Land development could then proceed apace.

Mr Johnson interjected.

Mr HOOLIHAN: I will take that interjection by the member for Gregory. I am way ahead of the race in that instance.

We now have a so-called community rally in Yeppoon to be held on Sunday where more community funds will be poured into the promotional antics of the mayor of Livingstone shire aided and abetted by the CQLGA. Quite clearly, the mayor of Livingstone shire has continued his breaches of the Local Government Act and he should be dealt with.

Amalgamation will give my whole region an opportunity to advance. The current proposals are welcome. I have never been against reform as I know that, despite some misgivings, it has worked well elsewhere. We have heard about Victoria, but nobody has mentioned that in the *Courier-Mail* on 30 July there was a report from the executive officer of that state's local government association that, 15 years on, the councils work well and there has been, in fact, an increase in employment in local government. That was on the reduction in the number of councils from 210 to 78. Only two of those councils have applied to stand alone, and I understand the number now stands at 80.

As we have heard from so many people who approached the debate from a realistic and truthful perspective, each town will still exist after 15 March. People will still live in those towns and they will be cared for by regional councillors who come from the same region and, hopefully, have the same love of the regions as the other people who live in those towns.

The Beattie government has shown its support for Queenslanders of all political persuasions since 1997 and it will continue to do so, because they put their faith in this government. As I said at the outset, this opposition cannot come out and say that local government reform is beyond the legislative capacity of this House, because it knows that it is not. It is beyond the opposition's capacity to understand. That is why it is such a disorganised rabble and deserves to be where it is. I support the legislation, I support the thrust of the reforms and I commend the bill to the House.