



Speech by

Hon. PETER BEATTIE

MEMBER FOR BRISBANE CENTRAL

Hansard Tuesday, 17 April 2007

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Local Government Reform

Hon. PD BEATTIE (Brisbane Central—ALP) (Premier and Minister for Trade) (9.44 am): Queensland's system of local government operates in a realm which was established more than a century ago. Today's Queensland—the new Queensland—is a very different place. We live in a fast growing and highly prosperous state that requires a more efficient, robust local government network. As we all know, there are an additional 1,500 Queenslanders every week who put pressure on the infrastructure and the services that are provided not just by local government but by state and federal governments as well. We presently have a system that was largely drawn up over 100 years ago and today continues to reflect a different time—before the advent of modern technology, modern transportation and modern communications.

At present Queensland is taking a leading role in the debate about federalism, and so we should. A key part of our nation's government is local government and today is an historic day in our state as my government seeks to address the nationally pressing issue of local government sustainability. Today the government begins a wide-ranging process of structural reform to bring our local government system into the modern age and to ensure that ratepayers throughout Queensland are receiving the very best from the councils they elected. I am announcing today that Queensland's councils will undergo a sweeping restructure which will result in the most significant reform and consolidation of local government in the state's history. This comes after a critical assessment of the voluntary Size, Shape and Sustainability program—a scheme prompted by local government itself—which indicated that voluntary reform is unlikely—

Mr HOBBS: I rise to a point of order. Mr Speaker, I bring to your attention that this matter is in a bill before the House—the Local Government and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. I believe that the Premier is speaking about the same subject.

Mr BEATTIE: With respect, nothing I am talking about is contained in the bill, but perhaps it will be.

Mr SPEAKER: There is no point of order.

Mr BEATTIE: I am announcing that Queensland's councils will undergo a sweeping restructure which will result in the most significant reform and consolidation of local government in the state's history. This comes after a critical assessment of the voluntary Size, Shape and Sustainability program—a scheme promoted by local government itself—which indicated that voluntary reform is unlikely to be achieved by councils themselves before the March 2008 local government elections.

This same process showed that 43 per cent of councils in Queensland are either weak, very weak or financially distressed. This is not sustainable. Our reform process will likely involve amalgamations and boundary changes. To achieve this, the state government will establish the Queensland Local Government Reform Commission. The commission will be chaired by former electoral commissioner Bob Longland. He will be supported by six additional commissioners: former local government ministers Terry Mackenroth and Di McCauley; the former president of the Queensland Local Government Association, Tom Pyne; the

former Queensland Liberal leader and former member of the EARC committee on local government reform, Bob Quinn; the chair of the Queensland Treasury Corporation, Sir Leo Hielscher, will also be a commissioner; and as well the former electoral commissioner and director-general of local government and planning, Kevin Yearbury, will be an administrative commissioner. The commission will also establish an Indigenous reference panel to help consider the future structure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander councils.

The reform commission will be given a strict three-month time frame to make recommendations on amalgamations and boundary changes to government. This will allow time to have reform in place before the next local government elections, which will be held in March next year. Put simply, it would be irresponsible to go into those elections under the same system and risk the future collapse of many local governments. Once any proposed reforms have been considered by government, changes will come back to parliament for a vote on implementation in September.

Queensland and Queenslanders cannot afford that risk. Doing nothing here is not an option. That is why my government is stepping in and stepping up to the plate to provide leadership. This is not just an issue for Queensland; it is a national issue. Other states have undertaken reform over the last decade and each now enjoys a more streamlined system of local government. After reform occurs in Queensland we anticipate that we will have in place councils that are able to deliver better essential services with less bureaucracy and will be better placed to recruit the professionals they are now having difficulty locating.

Staff like town-planners are currently spread thin all over our local government network. Take, for example, the fact that only one local government in Queensland—only one—presently has in place a priority infrastructure plan despite this being a requirement since the Integrated Planning Act was introduced 10 years ago.

Mr Hobbs: What have you done on planning? Nothing!

Mr BEATTIE: Good heavens.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The Premier has the floor.

Mr BEATTIE: Take, for example, the fact that only one local government in Queensland presently has in place a priority infrastructure plan despite this being a requirement since the Integrated Planning Act was introduced 10 years ago.

Mr HOBBS: Mr Speaker, I rise to a point of order. I refer to the Local Government and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. Quite clearly it says—

(ii) avoid duplication of process where *Size, Shape and Sustainability* local government reviews meet current requirements.

The bill before the House is exactly what the Premier is talking about. It is quite clear. Local governments have for the last few months been going through this process. This bill enables local governments to do that. The Premier, in my humble opinion, is entirely out of order in this particular matter.

Procedure—Speaker's Ruling—Anticipation of Debate

Mr SPEAKER: I indicate to the member for Warrego that the bill is before the House. I have not studied all aspects of that bill but I take the undertaking of the Premier that it does not intercept with the bill in that particular way. I call the Premier. There is no point of order.

Mr BEATTIE: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As I said, take, for example, the fact that only one local government in Queensland presently has in place a priority infrastructure plan despite this being a requirement since the Integrated Planning Act was introduced 10 years ago. These are the types of situations we need to address in a growth state like Queensland.

The commission will look at all councils with the exception of Brisbane City Council, which operates under separate legislation. The commission will operate independently but with a clear charter to create regional suitability and sustainable councils. During the 1990s a program of reform of some local governments occurred, and the government does not expect to retreat from those reforms. We would expect that there will be, for example, a continuing Gold Coast City Council and a continuing Ipswich City Council with perhaps some adjustments at the edges of their boundaries. Mr Speaker, make no mistake that these will be significant reforms—reforms which will give Queenslanders more secure, efficient and financially viable councils and reform which is required sooner rather than later.

Queensland's population has tripled to four million in the last 50 years. Our population is changing and growing by approximately 1,500 people a week but our system of local government has not moved with the times. Of the existing 157 councils, 88 service populations of 5,000 people or fewer, and that is simply not sustainable. Queenslanders need—and ratepayers deserve—a more efficient approach. This reform process is about providing the leadership needed to tackle a major issue. We are the growth capital of Australia, and we need to ensure that we have a system of local government in place that can guide and manage that growth in a sustainable way for the future of this great state.