



Speech by

**Peter Lawlor**

**MEMBER FOR SOUTHPORT**

Hansard Thursday, 9 August 2007

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## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IMPLEMENTATION BILL**

**Mr LAWLOR** (Southport—ALP) (5.30 pm): I support the Local Government Reform Implementation Bill 2007. As members are aware, this bill results from recommendations made by the Local Government Reform Commission, which consisted of chair Bob Longland, Di McCauley, Bob Quinn, Terry Mackenroth, Sir Leo Hielscher, Tom Pyne and Kevin Yearbury—a very distinguished and experienced group whose credibility could not be questioned by any sane person.

Key changes will reduce existing councils from 156 to 72. Mayors and chairpersons will reduce by the same number and councillors will reduce from 1,094 to 454. These proposed changes have generated a great deal of hysteria fuelled by Liberal and National politicians in this House and also many soon-to-be-unemployed councillors, mayors and chairmen—also, I must admit, by many genuinely concerned residents. I have spoken to many of them both personally and by phone, and I do not doubt the sincerity of those residents. But I do question and object to the hypocrisy and political opportunism of the politicians right up to the Prime Minister. In this regard I cannot improve on the words of Sue Lappeman in the *Gold Coast Bulletin* yesterday—

Now is the time to be both alert and alarmed. There is nothing more frightening than a desperate, panicked, poll-crazed politician trying to find something, anything, that will help him hold on to power. Prime Minister Howard's latest outrageous attempt to claw back support by intervening in a state issue doesn't just smack of desperation—it reeks. His very generous promise to have the taxpayer-funded Australian Electoral Commission pay for council referendums, as well as being costly for ratepayers, is also dangerous.

She continues—

It is dangerous because it gives false hopes to councils that the results might overturn the reforms, which they won't.

How accurate and how sensible she is. It is now common knowledge that Mr Howard's last roll of the dice is to go out of his way to pick a fight with each state and territory government. We have the Murray River issue in Victoria; the Mersey Hospital intervention in Tasmania; he suddenly discovered that intervention is required to assist Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

**A government member** interjected.

**Mr LAWLOR:** I take that interjection. There is the timber mill in New South Wales. The offer to Queensland local authorities to have a referendum must be seen for what it is—a hypocritical prank from a desperate man—a tricky and dishonest old man, actually. The proposal is described in *Crikey* today as scrappy and ratty and that sums it up. The Prime Minister, by the way, opposed the 1988 federal referendum which sought to give constitutional recognition to local government. I would like to see what the Local Government Association of Queensland thinks of that and if it might ask the Prime Minister to please reconcile these positions. Maybe it can offer an explanation itself.

Howard has shown nothing but contempt for local government. I am reliably informed that he even had Brisbane Lord Mayor Campbell Newman, who is of the same political persuasion, removed from his table at a fundraiser at the Convention Centre because he was not interested in local government. Desperation has obviously raised his interest considerably.

A lot of the angst in relation to this bill emanates from the Sunshine Coast area, particularly the councils of Noosa, Maroochydore and Caloundra. Closer examination of the remuneration paid to mayors

and councillors is revealing. In Caloundra the mayor receives \$150,000 and each of the 10 councillors responsible for about 9,000 people each receives \$95,000 at least. In Maroochy the mayor receives \$112,000 plus a \$20,000 electorate allowance and each of the 12 councillors receives at least \$71,000 plus a \$12,000 electorate allowance. They are responsible for about 12,000 people each. The mayor in Noosa receives \$127,000, and nine councillors responsible for 5,500 people each receives at least \$70,000. Each representative, as I understand it, also gets a motor vehicle allowance, a phone and an office. What a rort. No wonder they are so upset.

We had the recent example of the member for Kawana's son winning a by-election for a division of Maroochy. They treat it as a family business apparently. Now we have a 19-year-old councillor on \$83,000 plus a car, a phone and an office. He received about 2,000 primary votes. I will move to the issue of conflict and competence a little later.

With all the noise generated from the opposition one would swear that these were the first amalgamations ever. The minister for housing gave an example of some 40-odd pages documenting amalgamations over the last century or so in Queensland. Brisbane was formed by an amalgamation in 1924—20 different shire council divisional boards and town councils were amalgamated. We now have one of the most successful local authorities in Australia. It was opposed, of course, by the Tories of the time.

The Gold Coast has undergone several amalgamations over the past 50 or 60 years. In 1948 the old Albert shire and South Coast Council were formed from the old Southport Town Council, Coolangatta Town Council, Burleigh Town Council and Nerang Town Council. In 1978 Logan City was cut off from the old Albert shire and in 1994 Albert shire and the Gold Coast city were amalgamated to form the present Gold Coast City Council. Other amalgamations have occurred in numerous locations: Mackay, Pioneer, Ipswich, Moreton and so on.

What is happening is not new and arguments such as 'We've been like this for 100 years,' are not logical arguments against change. Indeed, they may be strong arguments for change. We heard some other illogical arguments such as the one from the member for Darling Downs who got up in this place and said that because of amalgamations people who used to shop in Kingaroy are now going to have to shop in Toowoomba, for God's sake. What is going on here? I did not read that clause in the bill.

In other states of Australia this has happened time and time again. It happened in Victoria, which has been mentioned by several people, where Kennett overnight dismissed the councils and that was it. When Ray Groom was the Premier of Tasmania from 1992-96 they reduced the number of councils from 49 to 29. It has happened also in New South Wales and other states of Australia.

I spoke before of conflicts of interest. It is interesting to note that the member for Noosa, who was interjecting earlier—I do not think he said anything sensible.

**Mr Elmes:** It is your turn next. I will say something sensible, don't you worry about it.

**Mr LAWLOR:** I have been waiting for it for quite a while. I will hang around, don't worry. The member's wife works as a PA for a Maroochy councillor. As previously mentioned, the member for Kawana's son has gone into the family business as a councillor for the Maroochy shire—all fairly incestuous stuff, I suggest.

Many of the people I spoke to on the Sunshine Coast told me that they wanted to remain as they are because their council was so honest, efficient and consistent in its decision making. So I decided to do a bit of research. A name that constantly recurred was the name Steve Dickson, who was a councillor on the Maroochy shire. Members may have heard of him. He is now the member for Kawana in this chamber. Members would not have heard much from him, of course. He sits next to the member for Noosa.

**Mr Elmes:** A good mate.

**Mr LAWLOR:** I am sure he is a good mate. When he came in here the other day I thought he was an intruder and I called security. He was to be speaking on the bill but I understand he has the flu, although the way this debate is going he might have recovered and be able to tack himself on the end of the debate.

The research that I undertook was mainly in the *Sunshine Coast Daily*. I have a few cuttings here from the past few years and I will table them shortly. A reading of these cuttings, and the headlines in particular, would indicate that maybe all was not as perfect as was stated in paradise on the north coast.

Here is a cutting titled, 'Coast toxic lakes shock'. That is on the Sunshine Coast. Another says, 'Ratepayers face huge bill to clean up toxic lakes'. There are a couple more here, 'Council didn't bother to check' and 'Two more toxic sites revealed'. We have another one here, 'Council knew lakes were lethal to wildlife' and 'Officers forced out over lakes'. This is an example of Mr Dickson's ordinary memory. He was the chairman of the planning committee and all the planning officers were sacked apparently. This article states—

A week after the planning staff's disappearance, on July 8, 2002, the council held a special meeting in which approval was given for subdivision.

Divisional councillor Steve Dickson—who also served in council at the time of the decisions—yesterday denied knowledge of the reasons for the planning staff leaving council.

He also denied he was in council at the time of the decisions that allowed the development to proceed.

'I was in Lightning Ridge at the time and didn't hear anything about it until my return,' he said.

However, the Daily has received a copy of minutes of a meeting for determining the application for Chancellor Park West Master Plan dated July 2, 2002. Mr Dickson was one of nine councillors present at the meeting.

What a convenient memory he had. Another headline states, 'Health hazard in our backyard'—beautiful. I would love that! I would love to own a house there! Another states, 'How many dead ducks does it take for action?', 'Developer, council to meet on lakes fix'—lakes fix all right—'Residents hope Links isn't lost'. This is an interesting one and this is from the *Sunshine Coast Daily* of 8 May 2006, 'Developments in Maroochydoore stall'. This relates to lack of planning, which they reckon they do so well and something which the then Councillor Dickson refers to as 'densification'. I would have called it density. A particular developer complained about the lack of a master plan. He said that the master planning exercise should have started three years ago—and remember, this is something on which they are really strong on the Sunshine Coast! One of the arguments they put forward to justify not amalgamating the shires up there was that they are so efficient; they plan so well. The article states—

He also said the master planning exercise should have started three years ago, something Maroochy planning chair Steve Dickson agreed with.

He was pretty casual about it. The article states—

'Sure, it should have been in place years ago, but it wasn't,' he said.

'Now we've got to make sure we take the time to get it right' ...

Plenty of time apparently! In relation to the 'densification', one would think by the way they go on about it on the north coast that they are against any sort of 'Gold Coast style' development, as they often refer to it, but not Mr Dickson apparently. The article goes on—

Interestingly, while councillor Dickson said he personally was opposed to increasing the height limit on the Big Top site, he said he believed the building density on the Wises Farm site, approved by council back in 2004, was now too low.

'Things have changed, more people want to come here ... I don't think there's enough densification in the Chardan plans,' he said.

**A government member:** What was that word?

**Mr LAWLOR:** Densification. It is a new word. I have never heard of it, but you learn something new every day. Here is another article, 'How can rules work for some, not others?' That is not a bad headline. One of the real arguments that people tried to force upon me was consistency in the town plan. This article is about a hardware store that was given the green light by Steve Dickson. I will quote from the article. It says—

Maroochy Council has ignored the advice of its planning officers once again in approving a hardware store in a residential area of Sippy Downs.

The decision not only goes against planning officers' advice, it goes against council's own town plan.

Town planning chair Steve Dickson—who brought forward the motion to approve the development—said it was not often he went against the town plan.

'But if a town chair can't go against the town plan, then what is he there for,' he said.

In other words, you have a town plan but, if you do not want to follow it, do not worry about it. Do not go through the normal consultation processes, do not go out to the people, advertise and so on and change the town plan; just make a decision that is quite inconsistent with the town plan. That is his way of getting around the town plan.

This is the same person, of course, who refuses to rule out running for mayor of the amalgamated Sunshine Coast. I do not know what chance he has. I do not think you would follow him out of curiosity, to be honest. When asked on Sunshine Coast FM ABC if he would be running for mayor, he replied, 'I'll keep my options open.' On the evidence of these clippings, amalgamation will greatly benefit the Sunshine Coast as it will the other areas of Queensland. I support the legislation.

*Tabled paper:* Copies of various media articles regarding the Maroochydoore Shire Council.