



Speech by

Peter Wellington

MEMBER FOR NICKLIN

Hansard Thursday, 19 April 2007

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr WELLINGTON (Nicklin—Ind) (7.30 pm): I rise to participate in the debate on the Local Government and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2006. As a former local government representative I have a pretty good idea how the local government system works. During my contribution to this debate I do not intend to express an opinion on the effectiveness of the local government in my electorate. Instead, I will try to restrict my comments to some of the amendments proposed in this bill.

First I take members to clause 51 of the bill, which inserts the new section 461A. In the minister's second reading speech he refers to how these amendments will improve the conduct of councillors and the councils. He actually refers to councillors being required to provide a statement of reasons for decisions taken when those councillors and the council makes a decision which is contrary to the advice of council officers in particularly significant matters. The minister refers to the fact that this will strengthen and increase the transparency of council decision-making processes. He goes on to say that the aim of this amendment is not to erode council's decision-making powers, but rather to ensure that councils identify the intended benefit to the community as a result of their decision.

In speaking to this very important amendment, which I support 120 per cent, I remind members of the recent controversial decision made by the Maroochy Shire Council which was known as the Links development proposal where, if I am correct in my recollection, the council voted against its own departmental staff's recommendation. At a later date it then passed a further motion directing the council staff to draft appropriate reasons to explain why it made a decision which was not consistent with its own departmental staff's recommendations.

This amendment that the minister has put forward is brilliant and it will certainly remove uncertainty about the reasons why some councils have chosen to vote in the past in a way which is clearly inconsistent with recommendations from its council officers. In saying that, it is not the case that councillors always have to support the recommendations of their council staff. But it does require that the elected councils have to clearly set out the reasons why they choose to ignore or go against the recommendations of the council officers.

The next amendment that I propose to take members to is clause 50, which deals with the caretaker period arrangements. In the minister's second reading speech he refers to how a caretaker period will apply to councils during the period from the close of nominations until the end of the election period, and that would be a maximum of 42 days. The minister states that during the caretaker period councils will be prohibited from publishing or distributing electoral material other than materials relating to the conduct of an election. Councils will also be prohibited from making major policy decisions during the caretaker period, including in relation to contracts of a financial value of \$150,000 or one per cent of rate revenue or the appointment, remuneration or dismissal of a chief executive officer. This proposed amendment is very important and I have no doubt that it will be well received by all councillors and Queenslanders.

The other amendments I wish to refer to are those which have the objective of reviewing local governance in Queensland. In the explanatory notes the minister sets out clearly that the objectives of the review are to establish local governments that facilitate optimum service delivery to Queensland

communities; effectively contribute and participate in Queensland's regional economies; better manage economic, environmental and social planning consistent with regional communities of interest; and effectively partner with other levels of government to ensure sustainable and viable communities. I note that many speakers have shared with the House their views on this proposed amendment.

I would now like to reflect on the people who will be on this panel. It will be a seven-member Queensland Local Government Reform Commission. It will be chaired by a former electoral commissioner, Bob Longland. It will be supported by six commissioners: Di McCauley, the former Queensland local government and planning minister between 1996 and 1998; Sir Leo Hielscher, the chair of the Queensland Treasury Corporation with more than 50 years of experience in government, banking and finance; Terry Mackenroth, a former Deputy Premier and Treasurer and a member of parliament from 1977 to 2005; and Bob Quinn, a former leader of the state Liberal Party. Mr Quinn was a member of parliament from 1989 to 2006. He was also a member of the parliamentary electoral boundaries review committee in 1992. Also on the commission is Tom Pyne, a former president of the state Local Government Association and former mayor of Cairns. Mr Pyne has served over 39 years in local government. The final member of the commission will be Mr Kevin Yearbury, a former electoral commissioner and director-general of the department of local government and planning who has more than 20 years experience in state and local government and will act as an administrative commissioner.

I do not believe that there can be any question about the integrity of these people appointed to this very important commission. I believe that the credibility and impartiality that they will bring to this commission will ensure that all perspectives will be able to be presented when there is an investigation into how we can ensure that the best possible local government services are delivered in Queensland.

A number of members have spoken about the views of their local councils. I table the view of the local council in my electorate. It was reported in the *Sunshine Coast Daily* published on Wednesday, 18 April as follows—

Maroochy mayor, Joe Natoli, said the shire would benefit from the opportunities that reform would provide and it was an exciting opportunity.

Tabled paper: Copy article from the *Sunshine Coast Daily*, dated 18 April 2007, titled 'It's time to get your act together: Beattie'.

For the record, that is the view of the Maroochy Shire Council, which by and large covers my electorate. The amendments set out very clearly an opportunity for public comment.

I refer members to the new proposed section 159T, which sets out a requirement for the commission to invite suggestions for structural reform on local government and to consider all properly made suggestions in making its recommendations. We have here an opportunity for people to make submissions to the commission. I would urge people to make those submissions. I put on the record that I have already received phone calls from some of my constituents who are very keen to make a submission. I have told them that the commission is not actually formed but I have assured them that if they want to write to me as their local member I will forward a copy of their submission to the minister and the commission. Some people on the Sunshine Coast are already preparing to put pen to paper to have an input. Queenslanders have an opportunity to have input into very important decisions that are about to be made about the type of local government representation in our state.

I would urge members when they leave the chamber tonight and before we return to this place to please encourage their respective constituents—whether they are from north Queensland, central Queensland, the Gold Coast, the Sunshine Coast or wherever—to take the time to make a submission. I realise the commission has not effectively been formed yet. Irrespective, I invite all constituents to write to their local member. I have no doubt that the minister and the commission will be very interested to receive submissions from Queenslanders.

The other issue I note is that the commission is required to consider how local governments can improve their financial sustainability. I believe that is very important and something that all Queenslanders are conscious of—how they can ensure that local governments are financially sustainable.

During the debate earlier, I heard one of my colleagues refer to the importance of Nambour on the Sunshine Coast. I believe Nambour is the geographical heart of the Sunshine Coast. It is the location of our current Maroochy Shire Council chambers. If it does come to pass that we have an amalgamation on the Sunshine Coast, what better location could there be for the site of the new chambers? If it is the case that there is an amalgamation of councils on the Sunshine Coast, I put it on the record—as I believe the member for Kawana did when he referred to the importance of Nambour and said that it was the geographical heart of the Sunshine Coast—that Nambour would be a wonderful site for the new council chambers. I put that on the record and hopefully the commission might listen to my submission as well.

Mr Hayward interjected.

Mr WELLINGTON: I am not taking your interjection.

Mr Hayward: The opposition said that Nambour would collapse if the council was amalgamated. It is ridiculous. It is a big town.

Mr WELLINGTON: I will take that interjection, because just a little while ago the Premier came into the chamber and made a ministerial statement announcing an investment of \$2.6 million to purchase additional land beside the existing Nambour Hospital to expand the car parking facilities. It is the first time in the history of the Sunshine Coast and the hospital in Nambour that we have had a government with the guts to stand up and purchase additional land to expand the car parking facilities. I am sorry for digressing, Madam Deputy Speaker. There certainly were rumours that the hospital would close. It certainly has not closed, and I am certain it will not close. Who knows? Nambour may be the heartland of a future supercouncil if the amalgamations come to pass.

I realise it is now 20 to eight and other speakers want to participate in this very important debate. Before I resume my seat, I just say that I will be supporting this bill. I repeat my invitation to all members of the House, irrespective of their political persuasions, to please when they leave here tonight or tomorrow—

Ms Jones: Come to Nambour.

Mr WELLINGTON: Yes, definitely come and visit me in Nambour. But, more importantly, I ask members to urge their constituents to write a letter to their local member, to the minister and to the commission. Hopefully, we will see great outcomes as a result of this investigation.