



Speech by

Robert Messenger

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IMPLEMENTATION BILL

Mr MESSENGER (Burnett—NPA) (10.47 pm): The Premier in his speech earlier tonight says he wants communities with grunt. He has his wish. There are plenty of grunts in regional and rural Queensland tonight as the Premier's jackboot sinks into my community's stomach. This is a very dark and shameful day for democracy in Australia with the introduction of this Labor government bill which has been skilfully framed and named by the spin doctors as the Local Government Reform Implementation Bill 2007.

This is not reform. There is nothing to do with reform in this bill. This bill should be renamed the 'Local Government Extinction Bill', or the 'Local Government Termination Bill', or the 'Local Government Kill Bill'. This legislation is a declaration of war on the democratic freedoms of rural and regional Queenslanders.

The Premier also talked about the large number of local government bodies Queensland has when compared with other states. Let us look at the numbers in an honest way. I received this table from the local government authority. With 72 shires and councils reduced from 157, Queensland local government bodies have an average area in square kilometres of 24,320. That is the largest average area per local government body in any Australian state. The next largest average area in square kilometres is Western Australia, with 142 councils at 17,515 square kilometres, followed by New South Wales at 155 councils with 4,568 square kilometres, Victoria at 80 councils with 2,841 square kilometres, Tasmania at 29 councils with 2,379 square kilometres, South Australia at 74 councils with 2,102 square kilometres and the Northern Territory at 64 councils with 1,453 square kilometres.

These figures mean that on average each Queensland local government body has 38 per cent more area to cover than Western Australia and over 530 per cent more area than New South Wales—850 per cent more area than the Victorian local government body. This is proof positive of just how badly democracy in Queensland is being diluted. Legislation which will have a profound impact on the future of my communities is being forced through this place without proper scrutiny in an arrogant, dictatorial and punitive manner. This legislation is irrefutable proof that the leader of this state is a vindictive, egotistical, out-of-control despot.

With this legislation the Premier has insulted our families once again and has tried to snatch the heart from the Queensland local government. The Premier and his Labor Party colleagues, the Treasurer, the minister for local government and the rest of the government, have ensured that in every city and region in Queensland there will be substantial increases in rates because of the cost of Labor Party legislative thuggery, the loss of vital services, SES—

Mr SPEAKER: Order! Member for Burnett, as I have ruled from the chair, you should withdraw the word 'despot' and the word 'thuggery', and I would ask you to say 'I do'.

Mr MESSENGER: I withdraw. The loss of vital services, the SES, the volunteer bush fire brigades, road repairs and construction, libraries, local government, healthcare facilities and initiatives, loss of workers' jobs, loss of democracy and local representation. Communities, workers and ratepayers did not need to experience all this unnecessary heartache and pain in managing the changes in local government

boundaries. We all know that there had to be changes and helping local communities find ways of decreasing costs, increasing efficiencies and getting better value for money for their ratepayers' dollars.

We had a system of introducing change. In fact, this government introduced this system. It created this system of change. It was called the Triple S program, and we have heard about it from many members tonight—the Size, Shape and Sustainability program—and everyone was prepared to work with it. They did not like it but they were prepared to work with it. The Local Government Association signed up to it. It loved it. The mayors and councillors signed up to it; they loved it. The ratepayers were prepared to work with it. Why did all these people like this program? Because at the heart of the program was one of the most glorious of democratic tools—a referendum. It was a chance for the workers to be heard; a chance for the workers to have their say and express their wisdom. It was a chance for politicians to listen and to benefit from that local community wisdom.

Unfortunately, the Premier and his Labor Party do not like referendums; in fact, they hate them except when they are used as a useful political diversion—for example, 'Let's run a referendum on daylight saving.' This Labor Party fears a democratic referendum as much as a vampire fears sunlight. It has lost the ability to listen and did not like the process of change in Queensland local government under the Triple S program for a few selfish base political reasons. Firstly, the change was not fast enough for the Premier because the issue would still be alive at the next state government election. The issue would have been an electoral liability for Labor at the next state election. There was no need for this obscene haste in forced amalgamations. Boundary realignments, regional partnerships and shared services would have brought about greater efficiencies at a cheaper cost—cheaper in a monetary sense and cheaper in a social and an emotional sense.

Secondly, the process would still leave a significant number of local councillors in positions of community leadership who were capable of opposing, criticising and speaking out about the injustices forced on their communities by this Labor government. We only have to think of the reasons that we have to be on our toes. We have seen crisis after crisis. We have had child safety, health, electricity, water infrastructure and police crises. We need that local leadership to be able to speak out and alert us to those dangers.

Thirdly, because of the political ideology which drives the Labor government, it has an overall strategy that big is best, or the centralisation of power in the hands of a few. I have not only witnessed this policy in local government but also in other departments such as Education, where there is a policy to close small rural schools by manipulation of student numbers through the transport department; Health, where there is a policy to shut down small hospitals and the services that small hospitals provide; and we have heard examples of maternity ward closures.

I found a summation of the Premier's political philosophies. They are basically two—the centralisation of power in the hands of a few and the abhorrence of opposition and outspokenness. In a description of socialism by Brian Martin, who wrote the book *Uprooting War*, Mr Martin states—

The state bureaucracies are large, powerful and pervasive, and this is why this form of social organization is often called bureaucratic socialism.

Centralization of power in the early years of the Soviet Union also occurred as the Bolsheviks reconstructed the secret police and used it to help crush internal opposition groups.

The libertarian and democratic aspects of the revolution, such as the factory committees, were destroyed as political, economic and military power were concentrated at the apex of the state, especially in the communist party elites.

The principles that this sleazy Labor legislation is built on—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr English): Order! That language is unparliamentary. Please withdraw.

Mr MESSENGER: I withdraw, Mr Deputy Speaker. The principles that this Labor government is built on, the centralisation of power in the hands of a few and the abhorrence of opposition outspokenness, libertarianism, freedom of speech and democratic values are found in the worst excesses of socialism and fascism.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! 'Fascism' was ruled to be unparliamentary earlier in the day. Please withdraw.

Mr MESSENGER: I withdraw, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I am surprised that a word which describes the excesses of totalitarianism is banned from this chamber.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! That is a reflection on the chair. I have made my ruling and it is not the word; it is the way it is used. If you wish, I shall quite happily give you a lecture on it at some other point in time. I call the member for Burnett.

Mr MESSENGER: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The free world has fought, defeated and rejected on many occasions these perverted principles which I have outlined. The mums, dads, workers and battlers will not stand by and allow these perverted principles to take hold in Queensland. This bill marks the beginning of the end for this Labor regime. The Premier knows it. He will resign soon. The Treasurer, who is being groomed to take over, will be left holding this stinking, putrid mess.

The coalition has a solution. The conservative side of politics in this parliament has a solution to clean up this mess. Unlike Labor's socialist policies of centralisation, I am proud to be part of a coalition of conservatives who have a policy of decentralisation. As conservatives we value a re-empowerment of local communities and democratic freedoms. Local health and ambulance boards which have had the power to hire and fire all-powerful CEOs and also re-empower their communities is what we are all about.

The Queensland coalition will offer every local government a democratic choice. The Labor Party has arrogantly denied every community, every mum and dad, every worker and every ratepayer this democratic choice. If the communities so choose, when the National and Liberal parties are in government we will help them undo the damage that Labor has caused and de-amalgamate.

The people will have a number of opportunities to punish this Labor Party for its arrogant and dictatorial behaviour. The first will be at the next federal election. It is not '2007 is Kevin'; it is 'Rudd is a dud'. Kevin Rudd has made no effort whatsoever to intercede or influence Peter Beattie over this issue. Perhaps he does not have the influence, perhaps he does not have the political grunt. He had a chance to show leadership and help stop this Labor disaster, but instead he has been a willing participant in a sideshow, in a good cop, bad cop routine.

At the next state election, the people of Queensland will have an opportunity to punish this Labor government, this Labor regime. Bring on the next election. Peter Beattie has described the Prime Minister's guarantee of a referendum run by the Electoral Commission as political trickery. Since when is giving people a say in a vital and socially important matter 'political trickery'? It is absolutely ridiculous.

Under this Labor government regime, residents of Kolan, Burnett, Isis and Bundaberg local governments will be thrown together. I am not saying in this debate that all amalgamation is bad. No-one is. Some amalgamations would have been welcomed but we will never know whether the people of the day would have voted for them because this government, on page 45 in division 11, bans existing local governments from conducting a poll. The government is banning freedom of expression. It is absolutely outrageous. The government has already taken away my community's choice on such an important and fundamental issue.

Tonight, I had a chat with one of my hardworking councillors, the deputy mayor of the Isis shire, Tony Ricciardi. He told me that these vibrant local government members—the six councillors and one mayor—have worked their tails off serving the community of Isis and Childers and they have managed their ratepayers' money in a very responsible manner. With approximately 4,600 voters, they will be entitled to 0.8 of a representation on the Bundaberg supercouncil. The Isis council continually picked up the tab for state government services. If local government councils are going bankrupt as the state alleges and doing it tough financially, the only reason for that is that they keep on picking up the tab from the state government. The state government has walked away from its responsibilities.

This Isis council donated \$50,000 to the local state high school for a hot house so that its students could learn more about horticulture. It has once again made a significant investment in the state managed community sports hall attached to the public high school. It is managing state roads, funds to the SES and the volunteer Rural Fire Service. All these services are in doubt now.

I have received a number of letters from local constituents. Stephen W. Smith wrote to me and said—

These changes that you have forced upon us—

and he is referring of course to the Premier—

might be a good idea in your minds, but to carry out these changes in a dictatorial manner without asking the people of Queensland if they want to forgo their participation in the running of their local area, smacks of Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia and any other dictator run country.

In a democracy the people are the leaders and the elected representatives are their servants to carry out theirs, the public's wishes.

I have to ask what are the Labor governments ... real reasons for this move, to gradually take over a country—

and he used that word beginning with 'd' that I can't mention—'in a "d" way'—

is to slowly remove the peoples decision making powers and centralise all the decision making therefore allowing the country to be run by a dictator.

These moves are a step towards this objective and is undemocratic in its operation and way of being implemented. You all should be ashamed of yourselves and your resignation is demanded.

You've disenfranchised local government voter.

That was an excellent letter from Mr Smith. I received another letter from Vanessa Christi, who is the youth member of parliament for Bundaberg. She wrote—

Hi Rob

Just a quick note to say how opposed I am to the Local Government Reforms. I am glad that you are arguing against it in parliament. I see absolutely no point in the amalgamations.

Last week at the Bundy Youth Committee meeting we were shown a copy of the 'proposed' area of the new Bundaberg region. I was appalled. How on earth can people think that amalgamating Isis, Burnett, Kolan and Bundaberg will make the communities more stable, when the local council has been removed?!

In summary, on 27 July the Premier released the report of the Local Government Reform Commission. His announcement was heartbreaking and dictatorial because he failed to ask the people of Queensland through a referendum what they wanted and he has forced Labor's local government changes on the people of Queensland in an obscenely fast time frame. It is a report that was based on what Peter Beattie wanted, not what the people of Queensland wanted, and it has guaranteed that there will be less local representation, less democracy, fewer jobs and less service delivery in local government.

Some people may be happy with the latest boundaries, but many will not because there is no guarantee that these forced changes will make for stronger local government. Local government amalgamations and boundary re-alignments could have been brought about through decent, common-sense negotiations as part of the already existing state government's Size, Shape and Sustainability program.

The people of Queensland will have two opportunities to punish Peter Beattie and his party for their very arrogant and dictatorial actions. The first is at the next federal election. The people of Queensland should send a protest that 'Rudd's a dud'. The second opportunity is at the next state election, where a coalition government will give local government communities a say on amalgamation. If the community so chooses, we will de-amalgamate and fix Labor's mess.