



Speech by

Hon. Robert Swarten

MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON

Hansard Thursday, 9 August 2007

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IMPLEMENTATION BILL

Hon. RE SCHWARTEN (Rockhampton—ALP) (Minister for Public Works, Housing and Information and Communication Technology) (5.03 pm): This is a timely intervention in the debate, because I have in my hand 40 pages of amalgamations that have been done throughout the history of Queensland for which there has never been a referendum, there has never been consultation and there has never been any desire by the people who sat in this parliament from way back to the late 1890s to ever do what the previous speaker said. So when we say that this chamber is making decisions on the boundaries of Queensland, it is doing nothing different from what has been done by the other people who have sat in this chamber over the past 100 years. It would be remiss of us not to acknowledge that that is a fact. I challenge the member for Gladstone, or anybody else, to go through this document and show me one of these amalgamations that has been yielded by a referendum and where people have been consulted. It has never, ever happened. But, of course, there is one rule for Labor governments and there is one rule for tory governments.

Before the councils in Rockhampton were amalgamated—there used to be Rockhampton North and Rockhampton—back in 1923 and the councils in Brisbane were amalgamated at around the same time, again there was no consultation. I am glad that that occurred. Can members imagine Rockhampton today having two councils? My great-grandfather sat on the North Rockhampton-Burra council. So I have a very great attachment to the history of this issue. I will table the document so that people might better inform themselves before they make the outlandish and outrageous statements that have been made previously today.

Tabled paper: Document outlining the history of local government areas in Queensland.

The reality is that I am here today as the local member for the people of Rockhampton. For the people of Rockhampton, on a daily basis 8,000 people travel into their city. Thirty-five per cent of the people I represent are pensioners and 8,000 people come into Rockhampton every single day and use services paid for by the ratepayers in Rockhampton. Those people use those services and pay nothing towards them. If any member in this chamber can convince me that that is sustainable, I suggest that they go and see Stephen Robertson and get themselves booked into a health clinic.

The fact of the matter is that that is exactly the same as asking somebody who runs a service station to allow every 10th vehicle to fill up for nothing. I wonder how long that would last. Perhaps the way it would be done is that a few extra cents would be put on the petrol that the bloke in front puts in his tank to pay for it. That is what is happening at the moment. The facts are undeniable.

We talk about a democracy and a referendum, but why would the people of Livingstone vote to change that situation? Why would the people of Fitzroy vote to change when they are sponging off the people in Rockhampton? That is what it is. I have said it publicly heaps of times and not too many people have taken me on, I can tell you, because they know that it is true. I have seen people fill up their vehicles with great big plastic bottles of water out of fire facilities that are right opposite the Brunswick Hotel on a Friday afternoon to take home. Who do they think pays for that? People from Emu Park use the Rockhampton dump and do not pay a cracker for it. I stand up for those people who every single day push the button on the toilet, drive on the roads and use every other facility—the people who put me into this

parliament. Any person who stands up in this place and suggests that the people around Rockhampton ought to have a say so that they can continue to send my constituents broke—and the pensioners I represent get put out of their houses—does not know what they are talking about. So let us have no more of this pious nonsense that somehow the members on the other side can capture the business of representing the people they stand for.

I am opposed to John Howard's political referendum. I heard the member for Gladstone acknowledge that it is a political referendum. The member for Nanango said that it is okay for local councils to waste the money of the taxpayers. She said, 'It is government money. It comes from Canberra. It does not matter.' The reality is that the member for Nanango should listen to what the minister said—ratepayers are taxpayers.

If John Howard wants to start spending some money, I can think of 100 different places in my electorate where he can spend it. He can spend it on a new car park at the hospital for a start rather than asking the people of Rockhampton to go through a referendum that is not going to constitutionally yield one iota. I challenge any member in this room to tell me the constitutional basis upon which a referendum will change things. What will a referendum prove—

Mr Hobbs: It will show that the people don't want it.

Mr SCHWARTEN: No wonder the members over there are in so much trouble. Firstly, they have the manners of a razorback pig. Secondly, they have no unity whatsoever. The other point is that they hate the other members who sit with them. The members opposite think that this is smart politics. The people who back this in Rockhampton do not vote for me—the big end of town in Rocky, the people who are paying for the ads and who are pro amalgamation—and they do not vote Labor, but I can tell members that they will in future.

Mr Hobbs: We'll send this to Vince Lester. He'll beat you again.

Mr SCHWARTEN: That is all right. Vince Lester can run against me in Rockhampton. I received a higher vote at the last election than he ever got at Emu Park.

The fact of the matter is that the ignoramuses opposite show exactly why the National Party is in the dire straits that it is in. They are rude, ignorant and arrogant. They have nothing to be arrogant or proud about in backing this unwinnable horse. They are flogging a dead horse. The reality is that they would be better off going out and listening to the core businesspeople in Rockhampton who throw money to the National Party.

An opposition member interjected.

Mr SCHWARTEN: They will not be throwing any money the Nationals way again, I can tell them that.

Mr Seeney: What do you reckon Kirsten Livermore thinks about it?

Mr SCHWARTEN: Kirsten Livermore will be re-elected; do not worry about that.

Mr Seeney: You want to put a few bucks on the side?

Mr SCHWARTEN: Do you want to have a bet? I will bet you any money you like, because the people of central Queensland are much more concerned about their interest rates than they are about this, believe me. I know those wealthy people over there are not worried about it. They do not give a tinker's curse about it. Let me assure them that the people who will be going to the polling booths for Kirsten Livermore will be much more concerned about how much their mortgage is going to cost and how much their kids are going to go without—

Mr Seeney: What about the rates?

Mr SCHWARTEN: Interest rates; they are very much concerned about that, you are dead right.

Mr Seeney: No, those other rates.

Mr SCHWARTEN: Let me tell you, they are worried about the effect that this will have on their capacity to pay their rates. The young people in my electorate who have borrowed money got the biggest smack in the face they ever could have got yesterday. They are going to send a message back to Howard, and if they need to send it back via you they will. I would be very careful in wrapping my arms too tight around Howard. As the old saying goes, never warm your backside on a fire that is going out, and his fire is going out, I am telling you.

I need to make the point that when we look at the sustainability of the whole regional area of central Queensland there needs to be future planning. I have just come from a meeting with ZeroGen, and the member for Fitzroy had a similar meeting. There is a need to get industrial land and have proper planning there, but there is no incentive whatsoever under the current arrangements to do that. I remember when I was on the council in Rocky and we took over some of Livingstone's land. We had to pay them rates on it for many years afterwards. Have members ever heard anything as idiotic as that—one council paying

another council rates when they are right next door? But that is what we had to do. The Triple S project was going to fix that. Well last week they had a link-up between the four mayors of the councils and they could not even agree what the name was going to be. They could not agree whether they would have divisions or not, and here we are being conned into this view that the Triple S project was taking us somewhere.

I heard someone mention shared services. I have a bit of experience in shared services, because that is what our government does. With shared services they are all put together in the one place. That is what you do with shared services. You take the services out of Livingstone, out of Fitzroy and you plonk them in Rockhampton. That is how shared services work. If the member does not understand that—and I am not surprised that he does not have the intelligence or experience to understand that—I could draw it in cartoon form so he can understand it, but that is how shared services work. They do not work to push services out further; they bring them in. They aggregate them. That is what amalgamation is all about.

As for the mayors, we have heard about payback and all the rest of it. The fact is that the member for Gladstone is absolutely incorrect about this. There is no payback for those councils around Rockhampton at all. There has never been a time when they have identified with one another and had any form of unanimity. It never ever happened. So EARC had nothing to do with it. But if you speak individually to people who live in those areas they all say that they cannot understand why there are four administrations, four mayors and four CEOs in an area which you can safely drive around in less than half a day. No-one can understand why that is the case. The person in the street cannot understand it, but there has never been a mechanism to make it happen and there never was going to be. As the former mayor of Rockhampton, Jim McCrae, who now lives at Emu Park—not of my politics, I might add—said the other day, it was never going to go anywhere. There was never a mechanism to make it happen. Anybody with any common sense knows that.

We know that the mayor of Livingstone shire has been about self-interest the whole time. If you have a racehorse, call it 'self-interest'; you know it is always trying. He is always trying, and he is trying to feather his own nest in this. There is nothing about the people who are concerned. He does not believe in representative democracy. That is why my place at Kinka Beach does not have sewerage and does not have kerbing and channelling. That is why he gets on 4RO and makes it up as he goes along. He said that I paid 70 pounds for it when I bought it and why should I expect to get any services. I bought it in 1992. The decimal currency came in in 1966 but he does not seem to understand that.

The point is, why would he want to change? He told the Mayor of Rockhampton, Margaret Strelow, that if we were running an unsustainable business called the Pilbeam Theatre, of which I think 40 per cent of the usage comes out of Livingstone shire and those people pay nothing for it—

Mr Seeney: They pay to use it.

Mr SCHWARTEN: How embarrassing is this! I just want to get this on record. He said that the people of Livingstone pay to get into the Pilbeam Theatre. Anybody who knows anything about theatres that are council owned know that they are not full cost recovery. There is a pensioners discount. They get the same pensioners discount down there. It shows how little those opposite know about what they profess to talk about, because the audit sheets for Rockhampton show what a loss that runs at. Who picks that up? People like me who pay rates and pensioners like my parents who pay rates. What does he say? It is your fault if you run a business that is unsustainable. Of course he is going to say that. Why wouldn't he say that while his constituency sponges upon the people of Rockhampton? That is what they do. For the people who go there and pay nothing, there is no other word for it. They do not pay for the upkeep of such a marvellous building.

A woman from Glenlee wrote a letter to the editor just yesterday. She said, 'I can't wait for it to happen. There are no services out our way.' There is one park or something like that for 5,000 or 6,000 people. What do they do? They come into Rockhampton. Where do their kids play hockey, cricket and all the rest of it? In Rockhampton. Who pays for that? The Rockhampton ratepayer pays for that. As for John Hopkins at Fitzroy, he told me that he knocked on Don Close as the mayor on the basis that he needed the money. He said to me, 'Mum and I get a little car out of it. We get a car allowance, we got a bit more money to keep the pot boiling along, and we get a couple of trips here and there.' Talk about the motivation to be a mayor of a council, but that was it. That is the quality and calibre of people that we end up with. We put on the table that there must be divisions in central Queensland, because I have had experience in areas where there are no divisions. When Rockhampton City Council was undivided, I rang up a councillor—who happened to be a Labor bloke, I might add—and said that I was having trouble with the water pressure. He said, 'I'm not on the water committee.' So I rang somebody who was on the water committee.

Mr Hobbs interjected.

Mr SCHWARTEN: The next bloke was a tory.

Mr Seeney interjected.

Mr SCHWARTEN: I was just about to answer that. This was in 1980 and I am still waiting for him to come and have a look at my water pressure problem. That just demonstrates the commitment of tories in

local government. When I was an alderman in the Rockhampton City Council representing a division, I did what any good elected alderman did, and that is why I continued to increase my vote. That is how I got into here, because people could see that I represented and took up their cases, whether it be crows attacking their fowls, whether it be people ringing me up in the middle of the night because they had water under their house, or low-water pressure, or whatever the case may be. The nonsense that Bill Ludwig and others suggest that you cannot think strategically while you are thinking locally says a lot more about him than it says about us doing this. Obviously he is incapable of doing two things at once.

In terms of Mr Hopkins, he told me on a number of occasions that he told the minister and he has told the Premier on the quiet that he really supports amalgamation. He told me that himself but he thought the constituency were against it. How fair dinkum can you be when you have someone who opposes local representation, who thinks that you are going to have 67,000 people represented by 10 people with all care and no responsibility sitting at the boardroom table thinking strategically while the poor people at Mount Morgan are owed \$30,000 by the rotten federal government over Aboriginal housing for which they will not pay rates. That is what those people ought to be interested in. I support Gavin Finch, who told the mayor of Livingstone to pull his head in. He ought to pull his head in because he is wasting ratepayers' money. I am a ratepayer there. I have never been consulted about it. There is all this talk about referendums. Where was the consultation with me? There are people who were not on the role in Livingstone shire—about 30 per cent of them, I think, who live down there like me and who are not on the role. I am not advocating a dual voting system. I had no say about how my rates were spent in terms of taking on this issue. I had no say whatsoever. So do not come in here bleating your democratic nonsense to me.

The final point I want to make is that I have heard a lot said about the age of the minister for local government. That is all the opposition has been able to really attack him on, because he has articulated in a faultless way and he has been as sure-footed over this issue as anybody I have ever met.

Mr Hobbs: Ha, ha!

Mr SCHWARTEN: Don't you bleat!

Mr Hobbs: Everyone hates him!

Mr SCHWARTEN: Let me take the interjection from the failed minister who was sacked from the Borbidge government for incompetence and other things. The gentleman opposite was sacked by the Borbidge government for being an incompetent minister. He was in the most incompetent government in the history of Queensland and he was the most incompetent minister so he was sacked, yet he sits here criticising this minister. I say that history will record this very well. It takes absolute courage to do this.

Mr Hobbs: What about your mate Bob Ellis?

Mr SCHWARTEN: Just keep talking and reminding everybody how incompetent and rude you are. That is why members opposite will continue to sit where they are now. That is where you will continue to sit, forever and a day, while you still think backwards like you are doing now. You are unlike this confident, competent man who has taken the agenda on this further than any other member of this parliament ever since I have been here. I congratulate the minister for this.

Mr Hobbs: All local governments hate him.

Mr SCHWARTEN: I do not believe they do.

Mr Hobbs: Oh!

Mr SCHWARTEN: I can tell you that the Rockhampton City Council does not.

Mr Lucas: The Bundaberg council doesn't.

Mr SCHWARTEN: Yes, the Bundaberg council. The mayor of Cairns thinks he is a great bloke; it is the same in Townsville and the list goes on. Opposition members cannot tell the difference between voices and noise. They think that because people can shout the loudest they necessarily have the greatest voices. That is why opposition members are inept and out of touch. They are not out there talking to the ordinary people at the Rocky Swap like I was on the weekend, or at the Brunswick Hotel last Friday night or in the cabs on Saturday morning. Members opposite are not talking to the ordinary people that I am talking to, I can assure them of that. The people of Rockhampton and, as I said, the people who support the Liberal Party and the National Party have put their hands in their pockets to carry ads to support what this minister is doing.

An opposition member: Ha, ha!

Mr SCHWARTEN: It is true. Geoff Murphy is one of them and Grant Cassidy is another. There are plenty.

Mr Springborg interjected.

Mr SCHWARTEN: People who voted for you at the last election—and you did better than he did—will not be doing it again, I will give you the tip on that. They see this as driving the car by just looking in the

rear vision mirror. That is what the problem is with the opposition. This is a real litmus test for the opposition to try to scramble to get some relevance and get something.

Mr Springborg interjected.

Mr SWARTEN: You will have a stroke up there; I am worried about you. I am really worried about your blood pressure. The fact of the matter is that this minister is doing something that is absolutely crucial for the future of this state and history will record him well.