



Speech by

**Rosa Lee Long**

**MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS**

Hansard Wednesday, 18 April 2007

---

## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

**Ms LEE LONG** (Tablelands—ONP) (8.33 pm): I rise to contribute to this debate on the Local Government and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. There is no doubt that the Size, Shape and Sustainability issues are the central issues in this bill. That is because our local council—our grassroots level of government—is both the closest to the people and the one the people are most familiar with. It is something that, if it is to be changed, should be changed slowly, with care and great deliberation and in full consultation with the people themselves. This was recognised with the five-year time frames and referendums both being referred to in the explanatory notes. However, in light of the announcements of yesterday morning by the Premier and the local government minister, I believe the Size, Shape and Sustainability objectives now need even closer attention.

This bill brings local councils and councillors more in line with state government election requirements by amending the Local Government Act 1993, the City of Brisbane Act 1924, the Electoral Act 1992 and the Local Government (Community Government Areas) Act 2004. I find it hypocritical that this government, which has made a fine art of gilding the lily, is now bringing in legislation calling for more transparency and honesty in local government. The reckless speed with which the Beattie government is bringing in these changes is breathtaking. It is simply short-circuiting procedures that affect an entire tier of government, which is to be forced into massive changes on an almost willy-nilly basis. This is arrogance in the extreme.

Our next round of local government elections may be more transparent, but this government's dictatorial approach remains as murky as ever. It would have been far more credible if it had provided real leadership by being more honest and accountable itself, but instead it has made a polished art of cabinet confidentiality, secrecy and spin-doctoring, and there is little or no evidence of widespread problems with the running of the majority of local governments in this state.

There were matters relating to a specific council on the Gold Coast and a specific election. Yes, they highlighted some potential issues, but let us remember that the people of Queensland in general have no real problem with their government at a local level. But they certainly do have problems with the government being delivered to them from Canberra and they certainly do have problems with the standard of government being delivered by 'Team Beattie'. But it is not those levels of government that are the subject of the bill before us tonight.

The explanatory notes for these amendments spell out a number of steps towards achieving the stated objectives of more transparency and accountability and of bringing local government elections more into line with state elections. These include greater standards of disclosure regarding financial matters, including third party expenditure returns, donor returns, loans, gifts and fundraising. There will be definitions of what constitutes a group of candidates and prohibitions on local government candidates from undertaking electoral activities together unless they are part of a registered group. Penalties will be introduced for electoral offences consistent with those applying in state elections, and independent and group candidates will have to have specific accounts for election purposes.

Councillors will face a formalised process dealing with what constitutes a conflict of interest. They will be required to identify any conflicts and declare them prior to taking part in decision making. Any councillor conflicts of interest must be minuted by the council. However, most local governments are already operating on this basis, so this will be more of a formality than anything else.

There are other provisions, including provisions for the appointment of a financial controller to a local government in certain circumstances. Councils will also be required to provide a formal statement of reason for deciding not to accept officers' or consultants' recommendations for significant decisions. Another provision makes it an offence for a councillor to direct council officers and there will be a penalty of 85 penalty units if this provision is breached.

Electors should have the final say on the size, shape and boundaries of their council, but this government is determined to deny them their voice even on such an important issue. As I have said, the boundary changes and amalgamation issues relating to the Size, Shape and Sustainability review processes are my main area of concern.

I know that the four tablelands shires in my electorate do not want to amalgamate. Some are happy to share some services, but amalgamation has not been on their radar. All these shires have been represented well and do not feel the need to amalgamate at all. The councillors, the CEOs, the administration and their workforces have all served their communities well. They have not asked for this, they do not want it, and it should not be forced on them.

The matters as originally presented in this bill have been overridden by the announcements of yesterday morning. Originally, councillors were to have five more years to consider their needs through Size, Shape and Sustainability processes. The original explanatory notes stated that the results of this exercise would underpin reforms to the Queensland local government system. There is even an indication that this process, taken in detail over a number of years, would lead to 'some potential structural/boundary changes'—in plain English, this means amalgamations and shifting boundaries.

This is nothing less than an attack on the three-tiered Westminster system of government that underpins our tolerant and democratic society. Following the recent announcements by the Premier which gazump his own legislation, it is an attack he is determined to make. And it is an attack which appears to be underway, despite clear evidence that amalgamations in particular are now clearly identified in academic work as not—I repeat, not—being a good answer to supposed sustainability issues for local governments.

A February 2007 working paper by the Centre for Local Government in the School of Economics at the University of New England spells it out. The abstract at the beginning of the paper says—

Local government has always been the favoured policy instrument for Australian state and territory governments intent on improving the operational efficiency of local councils. This policy consensus has flown against mounting evidence from Australia and abroad that council consolidation is not only largely ineffectual in reducing costs, but also generates significant unintended negative consequences. Despite the recent wave of compulsory amalgamations in New South Wales, there are at last significant signs that the erstwhile consensus on the desirability of local council amalgamation appears to have evaporated. This paper considers the deliberations of various recent reports into Australian local government on structural reform and demonstrates that a sea change in opinion on amalgamation has indeed occurred.

I will not quote the paper in full but I do refer members to it. It is significant that amalgamations are now clearly identified as not only not good but in fact bad. We do not need to see our local governments lumbered with amalgamations which are now well understood to be pointless.

There are references in the bill before us tonight to allow changes to boundaries to be voluntary. But this too has been gazumped. I believe it is vital that any decision on such vital matters as amalgamations and boundary changes be left with the affected communities. Local councils are the true grassroots government. I firmly believe that the people should have every chance to speak out on issues like this.

We have all heard over and over again the Premier complaining about how Canberra is stripping away state rights and how a new federalism is needed to ensure that states continue to have a voice. Yet, at the same time, he and his government have set about gutting local government and destroying an entire tier of our Westminster system of government.

It is gobsmacking to hear the Premier and the minister argue that councils need to amalgamate to cope with the increasing burdens they face when it is the state government that is imposing those very burdens in areas ranging from waste disposal to weed control and a host of other matters well beyond the traditional roads, rates and rubbish responsibilities. It is underhanded to screw councils into the ground with these extra cost burdens and then insist that they have to amalgamate to overcome them. I do not support the bill.