



Speech by

Rosemary Menkens

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IMPLEMENTATION BILL

Mrs MENKENS (Burdekin—NPA) (12.03 am): The bill before the House this evening, the Local Government Reform Implementation Bill, has created more real anguish, anger and disruption amongst regional communities than any other single act Queenslanders have yet seen. It has been aptly called the amalgamation jackpot—jackboot.

Government members interjected.

Mrs MENKENS: Yes, a jackpot for you people. Today we see the implementation of the worst case of control, of centralism and devastation of democratic principles that I thought I would ever live to see.

Mr Johnson interjected.

Mrs MENKENS: That is right. Socialism is alive and well in Queensland. At the time of Federation, Australia was blessed with a very sensible and sound framework for a three-tier government—federal, state and local. This bill sees the socialist Labor government taking advantage of a power it believes itself to have—namely, power over the very existence of local government. In 1922 the socialists destroyed the upper house, or house of review, and today they are destroying the magnificent fabric of local governance.

Today we are watching the manipulation of local government in country Queensland in a way never imagined by our forefathers. This bill takes the word 'local' out of the term 'local government'. From now on it will become a quasi-government body and all councillors from today onwards will know in no uncertain terms that if they do not obey the state minister they will be under threat. We see the tactics this government uses to threaten, the tactics they use to control and the tactics they use to frighten their departmental public servants. These same tactics are now going to be used to control councillors and councils. A council is no longer going to be a servant of the people but a vassal of the state government.

We see in this legislation that the minister has the final say on the actions of the council before and after the changeover date. The minister has been given the power to be able to remove local transition committee members at any time. This bill also gives the interim chief officer the right to override the council CEO and can direct staff to do whatever that chief officer wants.

Councils will be in caretaker mode from the moment that this legislation is passed through to March, so they will be unable to make any major policy decisions. Councils cannot sack a CEO. They will not be able to employ a CEO. Councils will not be able to make decisions over \$150,000 or one per cent of their last annual report. These legislative decisions are being made by a Premier and a minister who are totally out of control. They are just like the bullyboys down the road. They think the people have picked on them because they are demonstrating and they are going out to get them. The people have had the temerity to express their disgust at this and the Premier cannot cop it.

Because the community has demonstrated their feelings, the minister and the Premier do not want this, and so the minister thinks he is going to make them pay. He is going to punish the regional people by inflicting all these totally unnecessary rules to perfectly law-abiding institutions. It is the most despicable behaviour. It is un-Australian, it is undemocratic and it is not worthy of any leader in this fine state. We are seeing a Premier and a minister who are totally out of control. In fact, I almost fear for them both because

the community's anger is very real and it is not going to abate. For the government to move in and suggest that the appointed interim CEO in these councils has far more local and operational knowledge than the very professional CEOs who are currently doing a perfectly satisfactory job is arrogance of the highest order.

What will come about as a result of this will probably be total bureaucratic bungling. No local government is going to be local anymore. The word 'local' is gone forever. I have been listening to some of the incredible statements being made by members on the other side while they espouse the benefits of this appalling legislation and I really cannot believe their hypocrisy. Those on the other side belong to a party that promotes the rights of individuals, yet here we see this government going to extraordinary lengths—and they really are extraordinary lengths—to ensure that regional Queensland people cannot voice their opinion. Tonight's debate is not about amalgamations. We are hearing lots about amalgamations. It is not about whether individual councils should amalgamate or not; it is about principles. The argument tonight is about principles. It is a free country where we have a democratic right to free speech and a democratic right to voice our opinions but, more importantly, a democratic right to vote on government decisions.

Tonight we are seeing that right being denied to the people of Queensland at a local level. The legislation here tonight is about the impact on communities; it is about the impact on families. It is a complete insult to Queensland people.

I used to teach leadership skills to vocational students in another life. We discussed the many kinds of leadership. We discussed and described styles of leadership. When we discussed leadership, we would discuss the autocratic leader, the democratic leader and the dictatorial leader. The perfect example of a dictatorial leader was one Adolf Hitler but, by golly, we have hatched another one here in Queensland. You have just about outdone Adolf Hitler now.

We have seen that there will be no appeal process. Even a prisoner on death row has the right of appeal, for heaven's sake. This is the most devious and underhanded legislation to hit this parliament. It is un-Australian. There have been no genuine facts used to come up with this legislation. The majority of these councils are not broke and they are certainly not on the point of extinction. We have heard lots of wormy words to cover the real story.

What is needed for this legislation is fairness and justice in an unfair and unjust bill. There are thousands of Queenslanders out there who have not been given an opportunity in any form to voice their opinions, their objections or otherwise to this situation. The heavy hand of control has taken over the councils' industrial relations as well. Councils will have little freedom to define their own industrial relations future. Basically, the councils' industrial relations will be controlled by the unions. Unelected union officials will have a disproportionate ability to affect the outcomes of any IR initiatives and will be able to lock the councils into outcomes. Through this arrangement, the government and unions will have a chance to bring all council employees in Queensland under their preferred IR model.

Councils of course will not be able to determine the rate of pay of councillors or whether they are full-time or part-time. This of course will come under the Remuneration Tribunal and the Remuneration Tribunal will have the final say on the pay of councillors. These types of decisions were always made at a local level. They were always influenced by the council's budget, and the decisions were made by the councillors themselves. They were always part of the local decision-making process. Again, this could have major economic ramifications. I thought this type of government control went out when the Iron Curtain came down.

Today's amendment that all councils will be sacked if the decision is made to hold a referendum is just an appalling indictment on this Beattie-led Labor government. It really is the most incredible piece of legislation. I am intrigued to know what on earth the minister is frightened of. This government is running scared and it is bringing in more and more bullyboy tactics every day. As the shadow minister for women, I must applaud the women of the bush.

Mr Johnson: Hear, hear!

Mrs MENKENS: Good on you, member for Gregory. We certainly do applaud the women from the bush. The bus load of women and children who travelled 28 hours to come into parliament last weekend to valiantly state their case and the concerns from their communities was a desperate gesture. Imagine the strength of their feelings and their desperation to take this kind of action. I dips me lid to them.

Families are the heart of all communities, and it is the women who are the backbone of every family. They are the nurturers, they are generally the accountant and they are the major force behind the family. It is the women who feel the pain and try to cushion the anxiety that is caused when the breadwinner's job and livelihood is threatened, and that is the tragic reality of this issue—it really is.

Right across regional Queensland, thousands of council staff and council workers are now very unsure about their jobs. More than that, right across Queensland there are small businesspeople whose businesses are reliant on the council presence in their town. Nobody has really taken into consideration these people and what impact it will have on them. There have been no economic impact studies done on these issues, there have been no social impact studies done, and there are so many towns that will soon

wilt and die as a result. We just have to look at the western line that goes through to Mount Isa. I remember when places like Maxwelton and Nelia were thriving communities.

Mr Johnson: Absolutely.

Mrs MENKENS: They were.

Mr Johnson: And Prairie.

Mrs MENKENS: Absolutely—all of those communities were thriving because they had railway workers living there. Then we had the centralisation of the railway and those towns died. I can actually tell a story of a young man who bought a house a few years ago in Hughenden for \$5,000. This is a true story. Give him his due, he thought it was a bit of a hoot because he got a \$2,000 refund from the federal government's first homebuyers grant, but it is not a joke. That is happening right across the western area.

This type of scenario will become an even bigger issue in so many more towns. Family homes will have no value and there will be no way these people will be able to afford a new home in a larger centre. Quite seriously, I really wonder if members opposite who live in their comfortable suburban homes—and good for you—who each year look at the value of their homes going up have ever really thought what it is like to live in these small communities where every year the values go down.

An opposition member interjected.

Mrs MENKENS: Absolutely. I do not know if members opposite can possibly comprehend what these people are going through. On a local issue, Bowen shire is part of my electorate and I feel for the people of Collinsville. I am aware of their concerns; I have spoken with a lot of people in Collinsville. They will be tacked on to Airlie Beach, which is a marvellous area but there is absolutely no community of interest. That is where the population is. Who will take much notice of Collinsville and Mount Coolon? For the people living way out at the other end of Mount Coolon, there is absolutely no community of interest. Poor old Collinsville. Every time there is a state or federal electoral redistribution, Collinsville gets tacked on to a different electorate. The people there have again been forgotten and they have been tagged on with Airlie Beach.

I was proud to stand up with the women of the west in the red bra campaign. Okay, I was suitably disciplined for this, but the red bra campaign is still alive and well across the state. As members have heard, the colour red was used to celebrate the bleeding of the bush, and certainly the use of bras highlighted the need for Queensland women right across the state to connect with each other and support and nurture Queensland communities. That is what they have been doing. As I said, that whole campaign is still alive and moving right across the western communities. Okay, it was perhaps a provocative campaign—it still is—but it was designed to highlight a very serious issue and bring understanding by raising the profile of women's stories and all those who are deeply affected.

I will quote from what the president of the Local Government Association of Queensland, Councillor Paul Bell, said today. He said—

Premier Peter Beattie's announcement that the government would legislate to dismiss without notice councils which chose to give their communities a say in the amalgamation debate was a sick, reprehensible action.

It is. I think he explains it extremely well. He then went on to say—

It's a dark day for democracy in this state and it is unprecedented in the history of this proud nation.

We are hearing sniggers and laughs from the other side, but this truly is unprecedented in the history of this nation.

Mr Seeney: It's all a joke to them.

Mrs MENKENS: It is seemingly a joke. I strongly oppose this bill. This truly is a sad day for Queensland.