



Speech by

Shane Knuth

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IMPLEMENTATION BILL

Mr KNUTH (Charters Towers—NPA) (4.26 pm): A great deal of my time is spent travelling throughout the electorate of Charters Towers and talking to the people who gave me the great honour of representing them in this House. In the past few months there has been only one issue of discussion—forced council amalgamations. People are disgusted and sick in the guts that a government could act in such a cold-hearted, dictatorial way.

The role of councils is varied and differs from shire to shire. No longer is the responsibility of councils solely roads, water, buildings, garbage and rates. They now have to be proactive to ensure the future of their communities. In some shires councils provide housing to attract nurses and doctors. In some shires councils invest heavily in local banks to ensure that the banks remain in the town. In some shires the councils act as funeral directors, offering sympathy, compassion and practical and financial support to families. Councils invest in businesses to safeguard the services offered, they provide activities for youth and children, and they support the aged and the frail. They look outside the square to develop local solutions to local problems. They contribute to the social, cultural and sporting lives of each and every citizen within the shire boundaries. These are just some of the many contributions to the fabric of smaller communities.

Amalgamations directly affect the livability of these communities. Mayors and councillors are democratically elected to the positions they hold. The government would be wise to remember that on Tuesday in this House the member for Keppel stated that since the reform provisions were first proposed the Livingstone shire had spent ratepayers' funds with 'gay abandon' at the whim of the mayor. It seems extraordinary that this government has the nerve to criticise the spending of any other level of government when over the years it has spent lavishly on sports stadiums, footbridges and multimillion-dollar parklands and is putting millions of dollars into promoting what a good job the Beattie government is supposedly doing.

This government is yet to explain to the people of the bush why their hospitals are understaffed, underresourced and downsized and why our Ambulance Service is in turmoil. Local councils have been the engine driving Queensland communities, providing infrastructure, jobs and administration. Local decisions are made through local grassroots knowledge. In many towns councils are by far the largest employer and the forced merging of local councils will rip the heart and the guts out of these communities.

While the Beattie government has failed to deliver basic services resulting in the health, energy and water crises, it is unbelievable that it has the gall to force amalgamation of councils that have the proven ability to capably deliver both efficiently and financially. There is no need to pursue the path of forced amalgamation. The state government is trying to create a distraction from its own incompetence. The state government should be working to fix the catastrophes that it has created in this state such as the energy crisis, the water crisis and the health crisis. These should be the government's priorities instead of putting its grubby hands on local government responsibilities which have increased dramatically as local councils endeavour to make up the shortfall—a direct result of the state government's incompetence.

This government knows very little about community spirit and pride. Through this whole sordid tale the lies told by this government have tried to discredit a perfectly capable and democratically elected tier of government. The Premier claimed that 43 per cent of Queensland councils are unsustainable. This has been distorted as it is only 13 per cent and half of these councils are large councils. There are more important issues out there than forcing councils to amalgamate, such as the energy crisis and the health crisis.

Six of our hospitals have recently closed down maternity services. This government is supposed to provide these services. How about giving our communities—places like Richmond, Charters Towers, Hughenden, Alpha, Clermont and Moranbah—a maternity service? Wouldn't it be much better to provide those communities with a maternity service than force those councils to amalgamate? When we want to get power put on, we have to pay for the high-voltage network because of the Beattie government's failure to invest in the infrastructure in that network. These are more important issues. The government has closed down our railway stations, it has closed down our courthouses, it has closed down our maternity services and now it wants to force our councils to amalgamate. This is one of the lowest acts in Queensland and the greatest attack to a democratic tier of government, to local communities, workers and families ever in Queensland history.

The six shires in my electorate—Aramac, Jericho, Belyando, Charters Towers, Dalrymple and Peak Downs—have been gutted by this government. It is with great passion that I vehemently oppose this legislation.