



Speech by

Stirling Hinchliffe

MEMBER FOR STAFFORD

Hansard Wednesday, 18 April 2007

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr HINCHLIFFE (Stafford—ALP) (5.06 pm): I rise in support of the Local Government and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. I suspect that many members speaking on this bill may focus on the minister's amendments which seek to establish a Local Government Reform Commission; that is what the opposition spokesperson did. While I will speak briefly in support of this decisive and long-overdue action, I will concentrate my remarks on an issue which was raised by the minister when he introduced the bill. I will focus on the importance of transparency and democracy in local government.

But, first, let there be no mistake about my position on the historic establishment of a Local Government Reform Commission. Efficient and effective delivery of local government services is vitally important to the economy of Queensland and the lifestyle of Queenslanders, and serious reform is long, long overdue. Reforming Labor governments in the 1920s began outstanding measures of local government reform. The City of Brisbane Act 1924 remains a beacon of far-sighted, city-wide government throughout Australia. I challenge members to reflect upon the way our capital might have developed in the intervening 83 years if the creation of greater Brisbane had not occurred.

In my own area, before being subsumed into greater Brisbane, the Kedron shire was largely a rural area and was politically dominated by a long-time shire chairman, Joe Gibson, who also happened to own the Stafford tannery. This was the largest local employer but also the largest local polluter. I would contend that Brisbane is a much better place because of the amalgamation that happened in 1925. Unfortunately, that was where the genuine reform of local government stopped. In 1927 a royal commission proposal to significantly reduce the number of local authorities from 152 to 86 came to nothing. When the Moore government was elected in 1929, it dropped those reforms—shelved them—along with a series of other social and political reforms. It is time for a return to this unfinished business.

Despite this neglect of systemic reform, Queensland has a proud tradition of local government—a tradition where, in comparison to other states, it has been very rare for a state government to intervene in locally elected administrations. Some recent examples which have come to the attention of this House and have given rise to the body of this amendment bill prove that rule. That is why systemic reform to ensure the ongoing viability of local government services is important. Services, including the proverbial rates, roads and rubbish, and the vitally important planning and development approval processes are important to the economy and the delivery of affordable housing.

So I reiterate my support for the proposed Local Government Reform Commission process. However, I note the provisions of this amendment bill address a broader range of matters for local government reform. Further, I note that the minister has flagged a review of the Local Government Act. It is in this context that I raise the need for democratic reform of the electoral systems used in Queensland's local authorities. This further reform is logical, needed and also overdue.

Most of the larger urban local authorities in Queensland are elected using single member divisions or wards in ballots using optional preferential voting. But they are a minority. Only 14 local government associations use this system. Therefore, the vast majority of local government associations are undivided councils and multimember divisions. Where they exist, first-past-the-post voting is applied across-the-

board, including for mayoral elections. These undivided local government areas, especially for the urban councils—for example, Bundaberg, Redcliffe and Toowoomba—are patently undemocratic.

By way of example, let us consider Redcliffe city. Despite being a geographically small community it has been strongly suggested over time that not all areas of Redcliffe are evenly or equally represented in council decision making. As a consequence, some people have suggested that basic service delivery is poor in parts of the city while other areas enjoy premium facilities. This problem is exacerbated by the inherently unfair and undemocratic first-past-the-post multimember electoral system.

This system massively favours incumbents who have the council resources and publicity machines working to ensure their name is well known. Moreover, the multimember first-past-the-post system is poorly understood by electors. Indeed, the version of this system in operation in Queensland simply deceives electors by appearing to be a preferential system. The requirement for voters to mark candidates with the numbers one to seven, in the instance of Redcliffe city, implies that they are expressing preferences. The fact that one has exactly the same value as seven is not understood by electors. It is not sensible or, frankly, even honest.

Single member divisions dictate a clearer line of responsibility to electors than multimember divisions. A truly local councillor is identified with their division and can have a personal, individual relationship with electors. While the proposed Local Government Reform Commission may consider this issue in the context of its review it may, in the end, be impractical to have single member divisions throughout Queensland. Therefore, I would suggest a threshold of density could be established in legislation to ensure that single member divisions are in place where appropriate, especially for urban councils.

Equally, wherever multimember elections are held proportional representation should be used. Proportional representation translates the wishes of electors, who like all 21st century Australians are accustomed to preferential voting systems, more accurately. Alternatively, perhaps the legislation should be reviewed and the use of proportional representation should be considered across-the-board. Let us make sure that we give our communities the best, most responsive representation, not councils elected by warped, undemocratic electoral systems. I therefore ask the minister to consider these important democratic issues throughout the upcoming reform process and during the wider review of the act. I commend the amendment bill to the House.