



Speech by

Stuart Copeland

MEMBER FOR CUNNINGHAM

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr COPELAND (Cunningham—NPA) (5.15 pm): I have long been convinced that this is a debate that we were destined to have while this Labor government was in power. I have long been convinced that there has always been an aim by this Labor government to have forced amalgamations of local government. Regardless of what the former minister for local government constantly said, regardless of what this minister for local government has said with regard to the support of the Size, Shape and Sustainability process, I have always been convinced that the aim of this Labor government is to have forced amalgamations.

There is absolutely no doubt that the charade that has become the Size, Shape and Sustainability process was simply to deliver what this government wanted it to deliver. It was simply to deliver what this government wanted to put in place anyway under a different guise. The only reason we are having this debate now and not 12 or 18 months ago is that the government did not want to do this before the election. It did not want to go to the state election on a platform of forced amalgamations. It did not want to tell people what it knew it was going to do. I have no doubt that this government has always known that this is what it was going to do. It has just used its genuine goodwill with councils to put them through the heartache and the work involved in that process for absolutely nothing.

It is a shame that these amendments have been lumped in with this bill before the House that we should have been debating in detail here. As most members have commented, the amendments have been tabled in the House as a result of announcements by the Premier and the minister for local government on Tuesday. They have overshadowed the legislative changes that were included in the original bill. That is a shame because I think there are some worthwhile provisions in there, and it was a bill that the coalition would have supported. Like most of the other members, I am going to focus my comments on the changes that have been tabled in the amendments and the announcements that have been made by the Premier and the minister for local government regarding the forced amalgamations of councils.

I am very happy that I am following so closely after the member for Southern Downs. His contribution was a very worthy contribution. He has been through this process. He has seen this process occur. I share part of the area he was talking about that is now under the Warwick Shire Council. Notwithstanding the very good efforts of the councillors, the council staff and those people involved in the Warwick Shire Council, there is no doubt that there are parts of the Warwick city area that still feel left out, that still feel left behind, that still feel like they have been the losers out of that whole process, and that is after a decade or more since that amalgamation took place. That is what is going to happen in shires right across the state. There are going to be losers. This is not going to be an everyone-is-a-winner process like the government is trying to make it out to be. There are going to be communities and individuals who are going to be the losers in this process. Their communities will be worse off as a result of this amalgamation process.

From what we have heard from both the minister and the Premier, these are going to be major changes, major amalgamations—'profound change', I think, is how the Premier put it. It is not just going to be those communities of interest that can work together which will amalgamate and in some cases should

amalgamate. I have always been a supporter of change where it is necessary and where it will deliver a benefit, and I think there are areas where that can happen. There is no doubt, for example, that some of the doughnut shires, if not all of the doughnut shires and the cities that they surround, are very good cases in point. Changes can be made there. Likewise, there are boundary changes that should happen. The Jondaryan shire boundary, which also forms the boundary of my electorate, I think is a perfectly good case in point.

It is a case that I have spoken about with the mayors of the relevant shires in that area. They agree that that is an area that needs to be looked at. The Jondaryan shire boundary, which is a very, very old boundary—as they all are—cuts a number of communities in half. Because the electorate boundaries of Darling Downs and Cunningham follow that boundary, those communities are cut by the electorate boundaries as well. I think there is a very good argument for change in that area and so do the mayors. My electorate takes in no part of Jondaryan shire, but the mayors of Jondaryan, Cambooya, Pittsworth, Millmerran, Clifton and all of the areas within the Darling Downs Regional Organisation of Councils have been working through this Triple S process. They have been putting in hours and hours of hard work, council money and staff time to try to progress this issue, not just of potential amalgamations and potential boundary changes but also resource sharing. I think it was a very valuable process and I believe real gains could have been made out of it. The goodwill that those councils have shown in their dedication to progress the process is to be commended. Unfortunately this government does not support it. It has been completely thrown out. As I said earlier, I think it was always the intention that the government would come in over the top if the process was not delivering what it wanted.

We have seen time and time again that this government tries to set up a process that will deliver the outcome that it wants by an organisation or a process outside or at arms length from it so that it does not wear the odium of it. The Size, Shape and Sustainability process obviously was not delivering the outcome it wanted. There is no doubt about that. It was not going to deliver what the government wanted but it was going to deliver a lot of things to a lot of councils and retain the very best of what local government is.

Local government is called local government for a reason. It is all about local representation, local access and local delivery of service. The three-tiered system of government that we have in Australia by its very nature, from local representation to state representation to federal representation, means representatives get more remote from the people who elected them. That is a fact of life because of the way our system is set up. It has been a very good system. Each of those tiers has different roles and responsibilities. Each of them has a different nature. Each of them perform their responsibilities in different ways. The beauty of local government has been that it has delivered local representation at a very grassroots, personal level.

I have seen in my lifetime some of the very best examples of public service at a local government level. My father was elected to the local council of the Taroom shire very soon after I was born. For 26 years my entire life was related to him being on council and in the LGAQ at a regional and state level. To me, people like him who have dedicated their lives to public service at a local level are the very best examples of public servants. It is something that we can learn from. We should value it. We should be taking lessons from it and not deriding it as we have seen time and time again from members of this government.

During this debate, time and time again we have seen members of this government stand up and attack local governments in their area, attack individuals in local government in their area, attack the very notion of local government in some cases. There can be no starker contrast between how the coalition and the Labor Party treat local government than in the contributions to this debate. On this side of the House we value local government. We know what local government means to local communities. We know the value of what local governments are delivering and how they deliver it. It is at a very grassroots level. It is at a very personal level. Councillors should be known, and often are, by everyone in their shire. Councillors are phoned at five o'clock in the morning through to midnight in relation to various issues. That is access that many state members would not even know existed. In my view, that is the very best of what public service can offer.

Make no mistake that the very fundamentals of many of our communities will change. The very fabric of what our communities are will change with these massive changes in our local council areas. As I have said, that has been established already in what I have witnessed in what is now the Warwick City Council area and it will happen time and time again. Wherever we see a local government area that has a number of similar sized communities, or in some cases different sized communities, those communities that may not be the headquarters of the council, that may not have the main focus of the council, always feel as if they are missing out. I think it is very difficult, notwithstanding the very best intentions of councils and councillors, to make sure that those communities do not feel that they are missing out.

That will be exacerbated as the areas get bigger: the representation gets more remote, the service delivery gets more remote. Those people on the outskirts and in the smaller communities will be the ones who will miss out on that representation. That will be an absolute travesty. Bigger is not always better. There can be no argument about that. Councils have experienced this in other states. Much has been made of the fact that we are the last state to go through this reform process. The reform process has not

been overwhelmingly supported in other states where it has resulted in amalgamations. The evidence from both New South Wales and Victoria shows that the gains that were predicted have not been delivered. There are significant problems with the councils in those states. They cannot be held up as solving all of the problems that local governments face. There are problems that local governments face; there is no question about that. The simple move of making them bigger, forcing them into amalgamations, does not deliver that solution. It is not a silver bullet. It creates problems as well as solving them and I am not convinced it will solve many.

I have a lot of respect for the member for Aspley. I do not agree with some of the things that she says but I have a genuine respect for her commitment to her area. I quote from her contribution last night—

The Pine Rivers shire, which is where I live in my electorate, has 143,000 residents and is one of the major growth areas. The council is very hard working. We hear about people just living and breathing council matters, but hardly a single councillor in the Pine Rivers shire was challenged. People are disengaged from the council. They are disappointed and often feel that there is no way that people are listening to their views.

That is exactly right. If the member for Aspley, who is experienced in that area, says that a council of that size is having difficulty coping with some of the problems that it faces, that councillors are remote from the people who elected them, that people in that area feel that they do not have a voice, then surely that is an illustration that bigger is not always better. Surely that is an illustration that the more remote the representation gets at a council level, the more remote those people will feel at a constituent level. That will be the case right across Queensland. That will be the case wherever that representation becomes more remote from the people who elected those councillors. I do not think that that is a good thing. That will not be a good thing for our councils. I do not think it will deliver the benefits that this government says it will and I do not think it will do anything at all for the fabric of our communities and the fabric of the society of Queensland.

I think that it is a real mistake to go into forced amalgamations. I have never been against amalgamations where it is a voluntary process: where councils, communities and residents want that to happen. It will work where it happens with goodwill, where people are willing to go into this process and where people can see the outcome. Where it is forced on councils and communities—where in often cases there will not be communities of interest; I have no doubt about that—where there are different communities and councils, it will be an abject failure and we will see people disengage from the process. I think that that is an absolutely tragedy.

This is an incredibly important issue. We have seen time and time again government members bagging councils and councillors. It is a real shame that that happens because councils play their role, and state government plays its role. I have a number of councils in my area. I have the Cambooya, Clifton, Millmerran and Pittsworth shires, part of the Warwick shire and part of the Toowoomba City Council. Each of those are very different areas, but each of them have something that could have been gained out of the Triple S program.

In most cases, I would not know the political persuasion of the people who represent their areas on those councils—whether it is as a mayor or a councillor—and that is exactly how it should be, in my view, when it comes to councils. In my view, politics should not be involved at a local government level. In my view, the very best councillors are those who are truly community representatives. I will continue to work with all of the mayors and councillors in my area. I will continue to make sure they know that I value the role they play. I will continue to try to highlight the issues that I know they want me to. I see that the minister is trying to get me to wind up.

Mr Lucas: You are getting a bit repetitive. You made a good contribution and you are getting repetitive.

Mr COPELAND: Thank you for saying it is a good contribution, Minister. You have just encouraged me to continue. This is a very important issue, and one that I do not think should be rushed. I think that is one of the problems with this whole process we are going through within this three-month period—that it will be rushed.

The report that was tabled in the parliament on Tuesday by the Premier contains a lot of information about what will be achieved. I am not convinced we will be able to achieve it, but I will draw the attention of members to the information about community boards at 3.5.2. It says—

New local governments may establish one or more Community Boards to represent the communities within their local government areas. Local area representation is an essential element of any governance structure. 'Advisory boards' are commonly used by many private and public organisations to achieve this 'grass-roots' representation.

That is exactly right, and that is what councils are doing. That is what councils in my area are doing. Those councillors—who are not getting paid the huge sums of money that those in the Ipswich city area are, as the member for Bundamba outlined—are providing that grassroots representation now, and that is what we will lose. Some sorts of community boards will be set up to try to provide that representation that is currently being provided by the councils. That is such a waste in my view.

I originally got involved in politics in the National Party in the early nineties when the Goss government was wreaking havoc with the social fabric of Queensland. We saw local governments being forcefully amalgamated. We saw services being ripped out of regional communities right across Queensland. That was the motivation for me to get involved with the National Party in the early nineties, and I am very glad that I did. I find what this government is doing now to be unbelievable—it is riding completely roughshod over those local communities and councils in Queensland.

This will cause huge upheaval and huge disruption to our local communities, and I do not think we will get the benefits from it. I think the fabric of many of our communities will be destroyed, and this government simply does not see it. I think it is a tragedy and a mistake. I think we will have real problems from it.