



Speech by

Ted Malone

MEMBER FOR MIRANI

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr MALONE (Mirani—NPA) (8.15 pm): It is with pleasure that I rise to speak on the Local Government and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. Although I say that it is a pleasure to rise, I must also say that the issue that has been put on the table today has created some hassles for members on this side of the House as it represents the absolute gutting of local governments throughout Queensland. This comes after the promises that were made, as detailed by the shadow minister, to lead local governments through the Size, Shape and Sustainability process. Approximately 18 months or two years ago, I addressed a conference at which I suggested that after the election the state government would be looking at some amalgamations and forced amalgamations. I was probably doing that tongue in cheek but, unfortunately, it has turned out to be the case.

The minister and the Premier have said that the effort that has gone into the Size, Shape and Sustainability process will be preserved in the ongoing role of the commissioners, and I can understand that that can happen. However, I have to say that local governments have put a lot of emotional and physical effort into working together to determine common boundaries and to change boundaries. As we heard from the minister today, while some may not have been doing that to the very best of their ability, I believe that a whole range of local governments throughout Queensland were doing a damn good job because they knew that, at the end of the day, if they did not then this government would move in and do something pretty drastic.

I was a spectator of the amalgamation of the Pioneer shire and the Mackay City Council during the last attempt at reform. Even though the mayor of Mackay has indicated that that amalgamation has been a success, I can tell the House that the people who live in the old Pioneer shire certainly disagree with her. The Pioneer shire had substantial assets that were taken over by the Mackay City Council. The old Pioneer shire mostly comprised rural land owned by farmers who made up small communities. Those communities now have only one or two representatives on the Mackay City Council. The services that are supplied to the old Pioneer shire are pretty meagre. I have talked to the people who live in that area and I can assure the minister and others that they no longer receive the same level of services that they received under the old Pioneer Shire Council. The situation is possibly getting worse simply because the enlarged Mackay City Council is struggling to deal with the boom times that the city is experiencing. One would have to imagine that, under a review of the strategy we are currently looking at, the Mackay City Council area would possibly be enlarged by including perhaps one or two other shires. The council would represent that region with some difficulty.

My electorate covers six shires throughout that region between Rockhampton and Mackay covering Sarina, Broadsound, Nebo, Mirani, part of Livingstone and part of Mackay. The demographics of those local communities are unique, as the member for Gregory has indicated. They are different. They have different needs. Let us look at the differences between Nebo shire and Sarina shire. Nebo is struggling with a coal boom in its area. It has around about 3,000 permanent residents and about 6,000 itinerant people. In some way the community has to cater for that number of people. The community is getting very little support to upgrade its sewerage plant. It is only getting a 40 per cent subsidy whereas under normal circumstances it should have got an 80 per cent subsidy. The shire is trying to build facilities to enable that

enlarged population to have recreation time in the shire. It is getting very little support for that. When this is looked at across all of Queensland, the imposts that have been put on local governments over many years by, more particularly, the state government but possibly by the federal government are quite extensive.

In my own shadow portfolio of emergency services, particularly in disaster management and SES et cetera, the costs that have been transferred on to local governments are quite severe. The councils have to maintain an SES group and run the disaster management program, which they get very little support from the state government for. On top of that, the councils run vegetation management programs such as weed and pest control, and quite a lot of other programs are run by the local government that are not really properly picked up in costs by any other level of government. The councils do not get compensated at all in terms of running those protocols.

I wonder, if those councils were expanded, how it would ever look after the expanded area. The best part about the smaller shires in my electorate is the fact that someone can ring somebody up and they know exactly what they are talking about, where they come from, what their problem is and they can almost tell them what their problem is before they can enunciate it.

If we are going to judge the councils or local governments in terms of dollars and cents, I think we have just completely lost the plot. The reality is that there is more to local government than making a profit. The reality is that being in a local government is about service. It is about looking after the people in that region. Quite frankly, all of my shires develop their area for the benefit of their local community.

Take Sarina Shire Council, for instance. Our businesspeople said that people drove through Sarina; they did not actually ever stop. The council got off its backside and got some money to do a pilot plant, and set up a small sugar mill and a distillery. My wife works as a volunteer there. This plant is now distilling alcohol and selling mango schnapps and butterscotch schnapps, and hopefully in the future it will sell different types of alcohol. Hopefully it will also showcase the sugar industry so they can take people through the plant, showing people the equipment and the history of the sugar industry in the Sarina region. I would go so far as to say that, if it were not for the Sarina Shire Council doing that, that facility would not be there. If we had a council that was remote from that region that would not happen either.

I have another instance that probably happens throughout Queensland as well, except for in the major metropolitan areas. I was involved in helping setting up an ag unit at Sarina High School, which is a state government program. There was a minimal amount of money for that. The council came in and did most of the plumbing and a fair bit of the earthworks. No money changed hands, yet at the end of the day that will not ever show up on the profit and loss table of the council.

When people really look at what local government does, we can never put it down on a profit and loss sheet nor should we ever try to do so. If people are going to start judging whether or not the local governments are profitable or sustainable, people really want to look at what they actually do in the communities. In my region, Broadsound shire has a coastal based component and an inland based component. If someone was to take away, say, the coastal component and split that up between, say, Sarina and Livingstone, there are going to be small communities on the Bruce Highway that are basically 150 kilometres away from anywhere. It is going to be very difficult for people in those communities to get any sort of representation or services under those conditions. If the commission is not going to look at how those smaller communities are serviced, it is just wasting its time.

Most of the shires in my electorate are dealing with boom times. The shires are having some difficulty getting affordable community housing. It is costing the shires a lot of money to do that. Very little money flows in from the state government except for special programs. The shires do a lot off their own bat. At the end of the day, unless those sorts of things are taken into consideration, I really wonder where we are going. Small, effective local governments—and I use the word 'effective' advisedly because there are different ways of judging that—are a far better way to deliver services into our regional communities than one larger local government that is remote and not dealing on a daily basis with the people in that area.

I reflect on the way in which it is proposed to look after the Torres Strait island communities in terms of the regional council, with one member who sits on that council coming from each of the islands. I thought that we had left the one regional council model quite a number of years ago. Members representing the islands travelled to that regional council. I thought we went away from that because that was not effective. I am wondering if we are going back to the past. Perhaps the minister could enlighten me on that as we move forward in this legislation.

Mr Fraser: It is not in this bill. None of that is in this bill. That will come at a later time.

Mr MALONE: Okay.

Mr Fraser: Torres Strait is not in this bill. There will be a separate act.

Mr MALONE: Okay. Moving on, the things that councils do in our coastal communities that probably never get on to a profit and loss sheet are issues such as maintaining boat ramps and maintaining the

roads to the boat ramps. They are usually half funded by Transport. Quite often extra work goes into maintaining those boat ramps that are never covered by Transport. For instance, in a lot of the creeks and rivers on the central Queensland coast, and probably other places, the boat ramps do not wash clean. They have mud on them from time to time that has to be cleared off. If a council has to hire a truck to come 100 kilometres to wash those ramps it is quite expensive. When there is a council truck that might be working on a road close by, the operators of the truck can wash the mud off. The cost is minimal. These are the sorts of things that really have to be considered. I am concerned that we are going to see some of the councils in my electorate being amalgamated. The ratepayers, even though they may pay a few dollars less in rates, will actually have very little or no services that they are currently used to.

We have had the issue of the Environmental Protection Agency imposing very strict terms on the way in which councils handle rubbish. I can assure members that that has been a huge impost on councils. Throughout my area, the council put in place temporary transfer stations and now it is actually closing them down because under the regulations they are not acceptable et cetera. We now have people who live 50, 80 or 100 kilometres away from a regional dump who have nowhere to put their bigger articles or even just their white goods—their refrigerators et cetera—which under normal circumstances they would just take to the local transfer station. That can no longer happen. Even mowing contractors cannot dump their clippings. They have to cart them to a regional recycle station which, as I said, could be 100 kilometres away.

Instead of actually enhancing services, we are restricting services. Councils are endeavouring to supply a service to their community but their costs are going through the roof. At the end of the day, as I said, most of those costs are being imposed by the state government. There is hypocrisy in this whole deal because the state government is comparing local governments in terms of profit and loss and the ability to be sustainable, and then we look at a situation where the state government has all this money flowing in with the GST, stamp duty and a growth tax which it can utilise very effectively.

I have to say that my own electorate probably reflects 90 per cent of the electorates and local governments throughout north Queensland. In terms of disaster management, for instance, we saw the councils take the lead role after Cyclone Larry in looking after their communities and making sure that the building programs were brought into place, the rubbish was cleaned up et cetera. If we amalgamate shires and reduce the number of councillors, for instance—and that cannot be done unless the number of employees is reduced as well—I wonder whether we will be able to handle a major disaster in Queensland. I am really concerned about this legislation. As the shadow minister has said, there is no way we can support it.