



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR GREGORY

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr JOHNSON (Gregory—NPA) (7.58 pm): The Local Government and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2006 is certainly that—another legislation amendment bill. The date 17 April 2007 is going to go down in Queensland's history as the day the Beattie Labor government made a change that I hope is going to be advantageous to local government and the future of local government. This morning I heard the minister say in this House that 16 March 2008 is going to be a better day for people in local government in Queensland, or something to that effect. I hope those words are not going to echo in the minister's ears for the rest of his life.

I know that it is the prerogative of government to make change but, if something is not broken, why fix it? I know that a lot of issues relating to local government probably need addressing. But, as previous speakers have said—and I have heard other opinion makers in the media over recent days stating precisely this—local governments are important.

Local government is the most important bastion of government that we have in this country. I think it emphasises what democracy and the democratic process in a state like Queensland is all about. It would be impossible to manage this state with a regionalised government. We need local government to assist the state and federal government to give true and proper representation to the multitudes of people who live right across this great state.

I heard the member for Callide, the Leader of the Opposition, refer to the 12 local authorities that he represents. I represent 11. Some of those shires are certainly very big shires. The Diamantina shire out in the far south-west corner is a shire of 88,000 square kilometres with a population of probably fewer than 300. Let us look at that shire on the basis of not how many people there are but the productivity factor.

Let us look at the productivity factor—the huge expanses of roads that have to be maintained, the huge numbers of tourists who come through on an annual basis, the fact that that shire has to spend over \$100,000 of its own money to uphold medical services in that remote corner of Queensland in Bedourie and Birdsville, the two centres in the shire. It is a very progressive shire, and I think the minister would agree that it is probably one of the most progressive remote shires in the state, if not in the country. It is a shire that has gone out of its way to be progressive, to be dynamic and to be understanding of the needs of its people. It is a shire that boasts an Indigenous and non-Indigenous population and it is a shire that I think is an illustration of all things good. That is applicable to all of those shires in western Queensland.

I would like to quote what Gary Peoples, the mayor of the Aramac shire, said this morning on ABC Radio. He spoke about the assets and the social impact that amalgamation is going to have on some of those people who live in those remote areas. I have always said that the important thing we should be doing in this state is looking at the United States model in relation to states like Nevada and Arizona, where they are mainly desert states. People live in those vast states in inland US. Inland Queensland is no exception.

We are interfaced with road and rail infrastructure. We have had a debate here tonight in relation to infrastructure issues confronting the south-east corner of Queensland. We talk about the population explosion due to the mass exodus of people from the southern states who are coming across our borders

to live in our great state of Queensland. There are probably between 50,000 and 70,000 a year, and many of them want to settle in the south-east corner. We talk about the impost of that on government, particularly when it comes to infrastructure. We talk about the roads, water, electricity, schools, hospitals—the whole bit.

I believe that what the government should be looking at is diversification and taking advantage of decentralisation. We should look at centres outside of the south-east corner—places like Dalby, Charleville, Roma, Emerald, Longreach, Blackall, Barcaldine, Biloela, Kingaroy, Charters Towers, Cloncurry, Mount Isa and the list goes on—where the social infrastructure is in place, where kids can get a grade 12 education, where they do have good hospitals, where they do have people out there having a big go. They interface with those smaller shires.

The Isisford shire, which is in my electorate and is only an hour and a half drive from Longreach—about 120 kilometres—spends somewhere in the vicinity of half a million dollars a year in Longreach on services that they need for their little community and the money that is expended in the local business houses. It has a flow-on effect to the regions. All these sorts of dollars are going to be lost with amalgamation. That is what I am saying here tonight.

In relation to the commission that the government has established to conduct an appraisal of the boundaries, I salute all of the people on that commission. They are all very responsible people. Some of them are ex-members of this parliament and all three of them have been very good members of this parliament. I believe that those three people will have a very good understanding of what the social needs are of the people in those regions.

I think the important function of this group is to look at legitimate outcomes. The member for Callide touched on some tonight. He talked about social planning, regional economics and sustainable communities. We also have to look at economies of scale. I mentioned the Diamantina shire earlier. That is applicable to all of those shires. Winton shire is no different; neither is Isisford, Aramac, Longreach, Barcaldine, Blackall, Tambo, Jericho, Murweh, Quilpie nor Barcoo. They are all shires where there are not a lot of people—they all have populations of fewer than 5,000, I admit that. But look at the productivity of those regions.

They have just gone through probably the worst drought in living history but, still, there has been some handy rain in that country. I know their productivity will come back again with the return to normal seasons. People will go back into those regions and work there. There is tourism there—people who visit the region fall in love with the region. A lot of people do not even know the region exists. I am talking about not only the central west and south-west but also over the range.

We have the Emerald shire, which is another very important part of my electorate—it is a major shire in my electorate—and the Bauhinia shire. Both of these shires are now interfacing with the magnificent coal industry, the farming industry, the horticultural industry and all of the other industries associated with the dam at Emerald. It is the productivity factor again—the dollars generated by those industries. We all know what the coal industry has done for Queensland and the growth in Emerald itself. We have seen that growth passed on to the Bauhinia shire, Springsure and Rolleston. It has a multiplying effect that is going right across the region.

I spoke on ABC Radio this morning about the factor of four. Those members who have done economics would understand the factor of four—it has a multiplying effect as it goes along. The coal industry is helping the rail industry and the rail industry is helping the port industry. It explodes as it goes along. I quoted the beef industry this morning. For every bullock that is produced in the south west and killed at Dinmore, three jobs are produced at Dinmore, or whatever abattoir it is, each day. It is the multiplying effect. It is the generation and the compounding factor that is enhancing people's quality of life, giving them employment and seeing the gross national product of this country grow. It is growing through the blood, sweat and tears of people who do it hard and who work long hours to generate that productivity.

I also want to touch on the social aspect of this. I say to the minister here tonight that if any of us are in this House and do not have a social conscience I believe we should not be in the place for a start. The most important thing we can do as members of parliament is to understand the needs of our people and look out for the people we represent. If they have a problem we have to be able to address that problem or find them help wherever their area of concern can be addressed.

If the amalgamation of these shires does become reality, and we see some of those smaller shires pushed into oblivion because they will cease to have a base of operation, we will see the asset base of many of those people who live in those towns decrease. I always like to quote Senator Barnaby Joyce. I do not always agree with everything Barnaby says, but at the end of the day he says a lot of good things that do deserve credit and deserve to be brought to the fore. None of us are perfect. The one thing Barnaby has said is that if you live in a place like Cunnamulla your house might be worth \$50,000 and if you live in St Lucia your house might be worth \$500,000 or \$600,000. At the end of the week in Cunnamulla you might bring home \$500 and at the end of the week in St Lucia you might bring home \$1,000. The value of your house in St Lucia is going up every week but the value of your house at Cunnamulla is not going up

every week. Your asset in Cunnamulla is not increasing because of the region—the low economic return on investment out there, the jobs and economies of scale. There is a whole heap of factors that impact on the economies of those communities.

It is important to remember that people live in the regions because they were born and bred there, and because they love the place. I am a classic example. I have lived all my life in the back country. I was born and bred there, and I love it to bits. I would not be standing here today, representing the people of that region, if I did not love it. I would probably be living somewhere else.

It would be a strange old world if we all wanted to live in the same place. In Queensland a lot of people choose to live in remote western and northern communities such as yours, Mr Deputy Speaker, or in coastal areas. Regardless of where in the state people live, they are important. It is absolutely paramount that we recognise that, regardless of where they live, people should be given the opportunity to form a formidable and integral part of their communities, and that they should be allowed to represent those communities if they so wish.

My electorate covers some 380,000 square kilometres of Queensland, although there are only a little over 20,000 people on the roll. However, let us look at the productivity of the region. We have a multibillion-dollar coal industry and multibillion-dollar beef, wool and grain industries. The horticultural industry has been destroyed by citrus canker, but it will come back again because the people of my electorate never give up. So members should consider exactly how much money my electorate generates. It is all about creating an environment where people want to be and it is about belonging. When talking about local government on that scale, the important thing to remember is that the people do want to belong.

Tonight I appeal to the minister and his government to show some compassion and understanding when the final analysis is done and the details emerge. I ask them to take into account the fact that a lot of people deserve to be heard. For many people, their own backyard is very important. They might not have a lot, so I believe that we have to do the best that we can to preserve what they do have. We have to show some understanding of those people, their lifestyles and the industries that they work in, whether or not they work with the local shires.

The local shires are very big employers, and the minister knows that as well as I do. He is an educated and intelligent man, and he does not need me to convince him of that. People who work in the shearing industry, the roo-shooting industry—although I suppose I should call it the macropod industry—who use a rifle to earn their living, the trucking industry and industries associated with the pastoral industry keep those towns operational and viable. The garage operators in the towns, the grocery stores and the tourist industry further complement communities in western Queensland.

It is important that we take into account the production in those regions and the contribution of those regions to the gross state product. I always use the old adage that the minority provides for the majority and by 'minority' I mean 20 per cent. Usually about 20 per cent of the population allows the other 80 per cent, that is, the people who live in the south-east corner and along the coastal strips, to enjoy a certain quality of life that is associated with the enjoyment of good agricultural products.

I enjoy living in Longreach, and I enjoyed living in Quilpie before that. Like many others, I chose to live in those towns. I hope that, when the commission brings down its findings in three months time, it will be understanding and compassionate and will be focused on a realistic outcome that will be advantageous to regions such as the one I live in.

The CMC has made 19 recommendations which the minister has addressed in this bill. It is worth touching on the issue of local governments being responsible for how local councils are managed and the role of councillors. Like members of parliament, councillors must declare any pecuniary interest, interest in businesses and so on. I compliment the government and the minister for that, because in this modern day and age government should be about transparency. It should be about honesty and decency, and making certain that the people whom we represent are not being hoodwinked or cheated by their local representatives. Today, local government is so important because it is at the front line of representation and interfacing with government. It is absolutely paramount that the best men and women represent our local communities.

In closing, I trust that the minister will be fair and reasonable in his analysis of the findings of the commission, and that we will not see too much bloodshed and hurt in relation to this matter. In real terms, we can achieve genuine outcomes through genuine and responsible negotiation. The people who work in local government are very honest, very open and very decent people. The minister would know that from his dealings with them. I trust that we can get an outcome that will not hurt too many people.