



Speech by

Vaughan Johnson

MEMBER FOR GREGORY

Hansard Tuesday, 7 August 2007

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM

Mr JOHNSON (Gregory—NPA) (3.22 pm): It is with much pleasure that I rise to speak this afternoon in this matter of public interest debate on the issue of forced amalgamation of local authorities. I represent a huge tract of western Queensland and I was appalled to hear a product of western Queensland, the member for Keppel, make reference to bodies like the Remote Area Planning and Development Board and other local authorities in terms of the way in which they have expended ratepayers' money in the past. Nobody agrees more than I do that there has to be reforms in local government, but at the same time those reforms have to be done in a properly constituted way where the people involved are taken with them and not pushed to the side and treated with contempt as this government has done.

From day one this government deprived the people of Queensland the right to have their say by legislating to remove the referendum option out of the legislation—something that we would never, ever witness in another Western democracy. However, this has happened in this state. There was a woman marching in the crowd here last week rallying against forced amalgamations. Somebody said that this was about a dictatorship. It is a dictatorship when this happens. This lady said that she came to this country to get away from one of those regimes. She had come from Zimbabwe. Where had she moved to? Queensland, to cop a bit more of the same. I hope not.

Mr Hoolihan interjected.

Mr JOHNSON: Shame; exactly. The member for Keppel is laughing. I have respect for the member for Keppel. I know his background and where he comes from. I really believe that many people on the other side of the House do not concur with what this government is doing. I just wish that they had the intestinal fortitude to stand up and say, 'No, enough is enough!'

We have talked about the Remote Area Planning and Development Board. Over the time that that board has been constituted we have seen nothing but progress and development in western Queensland. We have seen that board interface with government, with ministers, with people outside businesses, the whole bit. It is nothing but a success story and one that is the envy of many other jurisdictions in this state. The real issue today relates to people's rights. Those women and other people who came down from western Queensland on buses overnight to stand in front of the Executive Building and march did not come down here for the ride. They came down here because they believe that they are being cheated and frauded by a government that took their rights away from them.

It is the smaller shires that are facing amalgamation while the bigger remote shires have been left as they are, and I applaud the commission for leaving those shires as they currently are. Some of those smaller shires that are not on the main track and now will not be stand-alone operatives have lost their rights. Their voice has gone. Many of these people are working-class families who live in a house that might only be worth \$40,000 or \$50,000. Now with a centralised council at Longreach, Barcaldine, Blackall, Roma, Charters Towers or wherever it may be, we have a situation where these people are genuinely concerned about their future. They are council workers. They are kangaroo shooters. They are shearers. They are pastoral workers. They are people who just reside in those towns and have done forever and a day and are a very integral part of those communities.

The flaw in this whole situation is that they have been robbed of an opportunity to be able to stand up and be counted for what they believe in. This morning I interjected on the Deputy Premier in relation to what her home is going to be worth after this debacle is all over, but she sidestepped the issue and went on to something else. For those people out there their homes and businesses will be worth not too much at all. I appeal to the minister, who is in the House, through the transition period and through the period of change as we progress after the 15 March elections in 2008 that if there are problems he shows some heart and some compassion to put it right. Today I heard that the federal government is putting money forward for a referendum to be held in relation to these local authorities, and I applaud that. That shows leadership from the federal government—something this government did not do. That is going to prove to the people of Queensland and this government why this should have been done in the first place!