



Speech by

Shane Knuth

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AMENDMENT REGULATION (NO. 1): DISALLOWANCE

Mr KNUTH (Charters Towers—NPA) (8.47 pm): It gives me great pleasure to rise to speak in support of this disallowance motion, which was moved by the shadow minister for local government. The Local Government Amendment Regulation (No. 1) 2008 was tabled in this House because the state government, in its wisdom, without any recognition of the circumstances, revoked a resolution of the Aramac Shire Council for its workers to receive an eight per cent increase in their normal pay rates. The Aramac Shire Council employees are paid basic award rates. The surrounding councils that were amalgamated with the Aramac council of Barcaldine and Jericho pay their employees through an EBA at rates respectively eight per cent and 15 per cent higher than Aramac employees.

The bulk of the Aramac council payroll expenditure is on construction and maintenance of roads within this area. The main construction effort is that which is currently being undertaken on the Torrens Creek Road. It causes the Aramac Shire Council employees considerable inconvenience and family disruption because those employees are required to camp at the job site, which is 100 kilometres from their homes. The completion of this road will open up inland Queensland. It will create an inland highway from Townsville to Melbourne and on to Adelaide. When fully sealed, the inland highway will alleviate pressure from the Bruce Highway and give tourist and transport operators alike an alternative, less dangerous route on which to travel. It will also breathe life into inland Queensland.

Aramac Shire Council submits that the cost of the pay increase will not result in funding problems for the incoming Barcaldine Regional Council. The Aramac shire is injecting \$7 million to \$8 million in cash reserves to the Barcaldine Regional Council plus off-program road construction grants and subsidies and MDRA works valued at about \$14 million.

Since the forced council amalgamations, communities such as Barcaldine, Jericho and Aramac have received the biggest kick in the guts. These local councils have been the engine driving these communities, providing infrastructure, jobs and administration. Local decisions are made through grassroots knowledge. The decision to amalgamate successful councils was one of the greatest attacks ever on a democratic tier of government, on rural communities and on the workforce in Queensland. To add further misery, this government has given Aramac Shire Council workers another kick in the guts by denying the local workforce a chance of pay rates equivalent to those of the workers in the surrounding shires. Jericho Shire Council, in an attempt to counteract employee defection to the mines, gave a wage increase to its employees to try to keep them in the community. I know of the circumstances that surround the poaching of local council workers such as plant operators, administration staff and diesel fitters to the mines. I commend this council and other councils for acknowledging this problem and tackling it to keep their communities alive by increasing the pay rates of the poorest of the poor.

These are the poorest of the poor. These are the lowest paid workers in Queensland. As an example, Xstrata in the township of Tieri was looking for diesel fitters. It could not get enough so it recruited from the United Kingdom and offered substantial pay increases and further incentives that were too good

to refuse. Aramac Shire Council's biggest crime in the state government's eyes was to give the lowest paid workers an increase so it could retain its staff and protect its community with its greatest asset, which is its people. The council is the greatest employer. Now it has been punished for being proactive in endeavouring to retain its staff by offering a pay increase equivalent to its counterparts in both Jericho and Barcaldine shires, but the state government has revoked this. Why is it a crime to give workers in the Aramac council a pay increase of eight per cent? It has been revoked by the state government. How can those opposite support this decision?

Local councils are right at the heart of local communities. Their importance to the retention of community spirit and identity cannot be denied. They support Aramac and Muttaborra race meetings and they support local festivals and events such as the Harry Redford Cattle Drive, which is renowned for its unique and traditional experience of life in the outback. I left school in 1981 at the age of 15 during a time when the majority of school leavers left at that age. There were many opportunities for school leavers to get work at this time, such as in the meatworks, the railways and local councils. Unless a school leaver decided to take up an apprenticeship, the local council employees were paid the lowest wage available for labouring jobs.

A rate rise of a measly eight per cent is very important for these employees. If members go to these employees' compounds in Aramac they might see a brand-new car. But if there is a brand-new car I can guarantee that the person who owns it is about to retire from the workforce. He may just pay off his home. That is the life of the average working person, especially the council worker. I ask members to take into consideration that these people do not have millions of dollars. These people are lucky to earn \$500 to \$600 a week. These are the poorest of the poor. These are poor labourers who are out there amongst the flies, the crows, the heat and the dust. They contribute to the community. They are the backbone of those communities. And this government will not give them a lousy eight per cent pay rise.

Those opposite can point the finger at us, at John Howard or at WorkChoices, but this is their opportunity to vote for the poorest labourers and give them a lousy eight per cent. I do not know how members opposite cannot support this. It is easy and simple. It is an eight per cent pay rise to the poorest of the poor. These people are the true, down-to-earth Aussie battlers who believe passionately in upholding the Australian way of life. They believe in the Aussie spirit of a fair go for all and an honest day's pay for an honest day's work. It is a disgrace that we are debating this motion in this House today. I support this disallowance motion.