



Speech by

Andrew Powell

MEMBER FOR GLASS HOUSE

Hansard Thursday, 4 June 2009

LOCAL GOVERNMENT BILL

Mr POWELL (Glass House—LNP) (5.23 pm): There is no denying that the tapestry of local government that was in Queensland has been torn apart and restitched like a patchwork quilt as a result of, as the explanatory notes describe, the 'most extensive reform process in more than a century'. My seat of Glass House previously would have interacted with councillors and staff from the Caboolture Shire Council, the Caloundra City Council and the Maroochy Shire Council. Now I work with representatives from the Moreton Bay Regional Council and the Sunshine Coast Regional Council—the nation's third and fourth largest local government authorities by population, combined serving some 700,000 Queenslanders.

There is no denying that this restitching has proceeded with minimal pain in some situations. But in others the process has, and continues to be, a traumatic and frustrating endeavour. The process has not come without a cost. It has not come without a financial cost. Rather than deliver the cost savings and financial sustainability that the reformers intended, it has been a protracted and expensive activity, with financial repercussions continuing to stymie the daily operations of some of the new councils.

The costs of amalgamation continue to place a burden on some councils as they consider this coming year's budget and the out years. But it has also had a cost on local government employees. Whilst there was an undertaking to ensure no job losses, as the processes of melding councils continues some individuals are being negatively impacted by what I can only term selective application of the Workforce Transition Code of Practice—the guidelines by which councils must adhere when transitioning staff to new local government arrangements.

I will not go into the details today, but as a number of ministers in this chamber will confirm, I have recently sought advice on behalf of one such employee. Suffice to say, the reform—the amalgamations—has come at a considerable cost to many Queenslanders, including personal distress and disruption. So there is no denying that this reform also requires a new and modern act that allows mayors, councillors and council staff to deliver efficient, accountable and effective governance and service delivery.

Chapter 2, part 1, proposed section 9 of the bill outlines the powers of local governments generally. Exercising this power requires progressively more and more responsibility and deliberation. I have the considerable pleasure of working alongside Councillor Adrian Raedel, the division 12 councillor for the Moreton Bay Regional Council. Councillor Raedel and I share the common territory encompassed by Bellmere, Mount Mee, Elimbah, Wamuran, Woodford and Bellthorpe. As Councillor Raedel will attest, to achieve good rule and local government it increasingly requires in his division a strong grounding in both primary production and the needs of an expanding urban footprint—the planning and infrastructure required to provide a quality of life to his and my constituents. It also requires finding the balance between the two. I look forward to working alongside Councillor Raedel in finding and delivering that balance.

Chapter 4 part 1 of the bill outlines the rates and charges a local government can impose. As a ratepayer in the Sunshine Coast Regional Council I applaud their decision to include a public transport levy—a levy designed to enhance and expand upon existing public transport on the coast.

I particularly applaud the work my local councillor, Councillor Jenny McKay, does each and every day to improve access to public transport for the hinterland communities of Maleny, Montville, Palmwoods and Eudlo. So I share her concern that this government will use the council's forward-thinking levy as yet another excuse to cost shift the financing of fundamental community services. Like Councillor McKay, her fellow councillors and the member for Nicklin, I do hope rumours that the successful Hinterland Connect trial linking Maleny to Nambour will not be funded in future years are just that—rumours—especially the rumours that suggest this is on the basis that the council could use its own levy to take over the operational costs.

Chapter 3, part 3, division 1 of the bill outlines local government's role in delivering road infrastructure. On that note, I would like to acknowledge Councillor Anna Grosskreutz for her and her council's assistance during the recent road closure on Peachester Road. During that incident I was able to witness firsthand their commitment to delivering safe and accessible local roads for the community of Peachester. I know Councillor Anna works equally hard for her constituents in Beerburum, Glasshouse Mountains and Beerwah, and throughout her division. I look forward to continuing our partnership, in conjunction with the Department of Main Roads, to deliver safe roads for our communities.

Like others on this side of the House, I have concerns about clause 155 of the bill. That states that 'a person cannot be a councillor while the person is a government member'. Specifically, a person automatically stops being a councillor when that person becomes a candidate for election as a member of the Legislative Assembly. As previously mentioned, it is staggering that in this day and age we continue to place these restrictions on councillors.

As a public servant, working for the Bligh government and preselected as an LNP candidate, I was still able to hold my position. Yes, there was an expectation that I excuse myself from anything of a sensitive nature, which I happily did. And, yes, when the election was called I took leave. Listening to colleagues on both sides of the House, it is apparent that I am not the only former public servant who continued to hold a position while contesting an election.

Why can similar restrictions not be placed on councillors—that is, that they take leave from their position whilst campaigning? Surely this is a less discriminatory practice than what is being proposed. Surely this is a more cost-efficient practice for the constituents of that local government authority who will face a by-election regardless of whether the councillor is successful in their state campaign.

I think members will agree that former local councillors make significant and meaningful contributions to the business of this House. There are quite a few who have served this House with the dedication, passion and commitment that we all aspire to. Interestingly, the vast majority of those members sit on this side of the House. The cynic in me might question therefore the intent of this clause.

Fortunately for these members and the people of Queensland, these individuals were in a position that allowed them to step away from their role of councillor. Many who would like that opportunity are unable to because of financial and family commitments. We all know the challenges of campaigning are many. Why add yet another hurdle? I therefore add my support to the amendments circulated that change the point from which a councillor must resign to when they become a member of parliament.

Finally, I would also add my voice to those who are calling for a change in the conflict of interest provisions. Local government authorities have been through a lot. I know they await this legislation. I know many of their concerns have been addressed. In conclusion, I ask that the government consider these final two amendments as part of passing this legislation.