



Speech by
Curtis Pitt

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

Hansard Thursday, 4 June 2009

LOCAL GOVERNMENT BILL

Mr PITT (Mulgrave—ALP) (3.31 pm): I would like to put on the record my support for the Local Government Bill. The bill is another example of the Bligh government's commitment to reforming local government in this state to give councils the tools to carry out their role as the important third sphere of government in Australia. Last year, 154 councils were reduced to 116 with the creation of 32 newly merged councils. During the election the LNP, to curry favour with disaffected groups, offered to turn back the clock. This would have been a huge waste of public funds as the majority of newly elected councils were not interested in de-amalgamation. Even some of the staunchest critics of the process were in agreement that this would have been a futile exercise.

In my electorate of Mulgrave, I am fortunate that I am able to work with Cairns Regional Council Mayor Val Schier and Bill Shannon, Mayor of the Cassowary Coast Regional Council. Both are committed local leaders, both with visions for their respective areas. Last week I hosted a breakfast where the Mayor of Ipswich, Paul Pisasale, was the guest speaker. His positive approach and leadership has single-handedly turned that city around. When speaking about council amalgamations, Mayor Pisasale recalled the 1970s movie *The Gumball Rally*, when Raul Julia's character tells his co-driver about the first rule of driving Italian style. He rips off his rear-view mirror and throws it out of the car and says, 'What's behind me is not important.'

The same notion can be applied to local government in Queensland at this time. Now is the right time for local governments to look to the future and grab the opportunities ahead with both hands. Paul Pisasale gets it. Val Schier gets it. Bill Shannon gets it. Why? Because they are the heads of progressive councils.

Mayor Shannon in particular is dealing with a very difficult situation. The Cassowary Coast Regional Council inherited financial stress from the former Johnstone Shire Council. Mayor Shannon and his team are doing a terrific job in proactively working with the state government towards a solution to the numerous infrastructure projects that must be funded. I will continue to do my utmost to support these efforts.

As I said earlier, the Local Government Bill 2009 provides a modern governance framework for local governments in Queensland. It takes into account the environment that councils now operate under as a result of the government's structural reform program. Rather than being prescriptive, it seeks to allow the many and diverse local governments across the state to strive for enhanced operational standards and greater openness appropriate to their individual circumstances.

It has been a government priority in the post-Fitzgerald era to ensure transparent and effective decision making in the public interest and ethical standards of the highest order. This bill delivers that. Greater transparency and accountability of local government to the community is a key feature of this bill. It provides a pragmatic set of standards for public officials such as transparent decision making, inclusive community consultation, accountability for decisions and integrity of behaviour.

The principles enshrined in this legislation help to ensure local governments are open and honest with their communities. Ratepayers across the state have asked for this during the consultation period, particularly in relation to material personal interest and conflicts of interest in decision making by

councillors. The bill mandates that councillors report conflicts of interest, misconduct or material personal interest. By making it compulsory to disclose illegal or unethical behaviour, honest councillors doing the right thing are afforded some protection from persecution and pressure by other councillors doing the wrong thing by using their position on council for self-interest.

This government is justifiably proud of the breadth of consultation undertaken in the development of this bill. In early 2007, options for improvement to the current legislation were discussed with local governments at 16 workshops and meetings across the state. Meetings were held with statutory agencies and peak bodies which play an important role of overseeing the operations of local governments, including the relevant unions representing employees in the sector. A Local Government Act Review Reference Group was established with membership from a wide range of stakeholders. Quarterly ministerial round table discussions were held with peak bodies and unions. The new legislation was a standing agenda item for such meetings.

An exhaustive consultation program was then undertaken during the development of the bill which included an invitation for public submissions, four rounds of council visits, and comment was sought on eight publicly released issues papers. In response to the issues papers released between July and October 2007, positive contributions were made by those with comprehensive knowledge and experience of local government—councils and their professional associations. Consultation on the papers was extended to 30 June 2008 to allow new councils elected on 15 March 2008 to make submissions.

Following introduction of the Local Government Bill 2008 into the parliament on 28 October 2008, 42 information sessions were conducted by the then Department of Local Government, Sport and Recreation around the state. These sessions aimed to inform local governments and other stakeholders about key features of the bill in order to allow them to make informed submissions on its contents. Over 700 local government stakeholders responded through these information sessions and written submissions after the introduction of the original 2008 bill.

On the whole, these bodies were satisfied with the degree of the changes. The majority of suggestions made by groups such as the LGAQ, the Queensland branch of the Local Government Managers Association and unions have been incorporated into the Local Government Bill 2009. The degree of consultation and engagement undertaken is extensive by anyone's measure. Put simply, this bill is a result of collaboration by government with all relevant stakeholders, including ratepayers.

For many years, the Queensland government has been working hard to bring Indigenous councils onto a level playing field with other local governments across the state. The Local Government Bill 2009 means that former community councils are covered entirely under Queensland local government legislation but takes into account those things that set them apart and make them unique: the rich cultural practices of Indigenous peoples living in Queensland—Aboriginal tradition and 'Ailan Kustom'.

Last week I attended the Ministerial Indigenous Roundtable held in Cairns and I would like to thank Minister Desley Boyle for the opportunity to participate in the process and also to support Mayor Percy Neal in his efforts on behalf of the Yarrabah community. At the round table, there was a real sense of momentum in terms of important issues such as Indigenous employment and resolving land tenure issues, both critical elements in improving economic participation. The provisions included in this bill for Indigenous councils to charge a levy on residents living on deed of grant in trust communities in lieu of rates is welcomed and will provide a degree of autonomy for these councils never before seen.

The Bligh government is looking to the future and working with councils to simplify their methods of operation and bring local government in Queensland into the 21st century. I look forward to working with councils in my electorate to meet our shared objectives. Those opposed to this bill need to look at the bigger picture and embrace the principles of greater accountability, governance and transparency that it will deliver.