



Speech by

Lawrence Springborg

MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT BILL

Mr SPRINGBORG (Southern Downs—LNP) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (12.15 pm): This is a very important piece of legislation. It is basically a rewrite of the Local Government Act in Queensland, and it is a much more condensed piece of legislation than the previous one which was debated in this parliament. It had the gestation period of about six elephants. I think this one has only had two, so it has been done much more quickly than the previous one. One would hope that at least on the surface it is far more seamless and easier to understand for those who are in the business of local government, whether they be local government councillors, or local government council administrators, or those who are subject to dealing on a day-to-day basis with local government either through a development approval process or whatever the case may be.

I agree with the opening words in the introduction of the explanatory notes, where it says that contemporary local government legislation reflects what Queensland needs in this day and age. That is very true. I do believe, however, there are some aspects which are still imbued with Labor ideology which hold local government back in Queensland. A moment ago the shadow minister discussed some of those issues. The issue of decorporatisation was an unbelievable assault on what have been the sovereign rights of local government over a long period of time. We are still waiting for that to be reinstated. That was the first time that had happened anywhere in a Western democracy, where local government had been decorporatised. It was quite extraordinary.

Whilst local government performs a very important role and a growing role, particularly with the responsibilities which have been delegated to it by state government over a period of time, in many cases without the necessary and essential resources, one would think it should be put on a far greater and more sound footing than what it has been by the state Labor government in Queensland. Even the Commonwealth government sees the benefit in bypassing the state and going straight to local government in delivering services, resources and initiatives to their local community. I suppose you would say that is cutting out the middle man. It is a very important arm of government. It is one which I do not believe, from what I have heard in this place over a range of years by honourable members opposite, has been completely respected and completely understood.

If you go back to the debate we had in this place a couple of years ago with regard to the scandalous forced amalgamations and undemocratic approach toward the legitimate rights and aspirations of local government, I was standing in this place listening to honourable members opposite who one after another stood up in this place and attacked their local government personally and collectively, and it was quite extraordinary.

Mr Dickson: A few of them are gone.

Mr SPRINGBORG: A few of them are gone, as the honourable member for Buderim has said.

From my perspective, I have always had a close working relationship with the local government in my area. I do actually stand up for one of the aspirations enunciated in the explanatory notes to this legislation, that is, the need to partner and cooperate with local government. I have my job to do; they have their job to do. We should be cooperating for the benefit of our local community based on the shared

concerns and shared aspirations we have, understanding the cross-jurisdictional responsibilities we have in this place vis-a-vis local government.

Mr O'Brien: Is that still the policy—deamalgamate?

Mr SPRINGBORG: I have always said that local government boundaries should reflect the contemporary nature of communities based on community of interest. What a silly, silly comment from a member of parliament who almost lost his seat. He has taken a safe Labor seat and made it one of the most marginal seats in this parliament because he has refused to stand up for a certain section of his electorate—whether it be the voters of Port Douglas or members of his electorate in the Indigenous community who expressed real outrage at the undemocratic way this government ripped apart the fabric of their local communities.

Just as the government talks about having contemporary local government that reflects the aspirations of modern Queensland, I, too, have that view. But I believe in doing it in a democratic and proper way which reflects the true community of interest that exists within communities across Queensland. That is something this government did not do. It did not do it in a democratic way.

Local governments provide absolutely fundamental leadership in their communities. We have seen the consequences of local government forced amalgamations in recent times. I have seen it in my local area. Local leadership, which is fundamentally important, has been stripped away and watered down. We did have many people who were able to represent diverse communities. We now have very, very few. In some cases there may be one or two representing those communities. In my electorate there is one person performing the role of representing a community that a whole local government did in the past. That is extraordinarily concerning.

It is about local leadership. It is about community advocacy in so many ways. It is about community development. It is about service delivery. The great thing about local government is that, through local leadership, they are usually able to advocate for the service needs of that community. They fill a very important leadership role and advocate for economic development and service delivery. They go out and lobby the government and work with the other elected representatives in their area. That has been watered down and profoundly affected by the changes in the structure of local government in the last couple of years.

This comes back to a fundamental lack of understanding of and a lack of respect for local government by the Labor Party. Those opposite see local government as an impediment. They fundamentally see it as an annoyance. They believe that it should be disempowered. If it is disempowered it takes away the representation of local communities by these people.

That is what this is about. Local government has been a pain to the Labor Party in the past rather than it respecting their particular role. Local governments struggle and will continue to struggle with the passage of this legislation with the delegation of responsibilities that continue to be foisted on them without the necessary provision of resources to do the job.

Frankly, it is now leading to a situation where more and more people out there are questioning the role of the state house and its responsibility when so many things are being delegated to local government and so many things are being ceded to the Commonwealth government. What is the role of government at its three levels in our contemporary society? We have to be prepared to assume our responsibilities and do them properly and not necessarily just foist them onto local government because of some sort of cost-shifting arrangement due to inefficiency and mismanagement in the state government.

I continue to be concerned that there is no reversal of what is a profoundly undemocratic law that was passed through this parliament by the Labor Party a number of years ago—that is, the disqualification of local government councillors when they stand for election to the state house. That was a get-even; that was a fix from this government for candidates who it was actually concerned would be elected to this side of politics. When the government tried to make a similar change in respect of local government councillors standing for election to Commonwealth parliament, the High Court overturned it because it considered it to be unconstitutional.

If it was such an absolutely anachronistic provision then why has the Labor Party in New South Wales not disqualified local government councillors or mayors from standing for election to their state houses of parliament? As I understand it, Clover Moore, a very high-profile Independent member of the New South Wales lower house, is a mayor in Sydney.

Mr O'Brien: That's silly.

Mr SPRINGBORG: It makes no sense. It was a get-even. There is nothing more certain than that.

It is very important that we also understand the role of local government councillors. I speak to local government councillors all the time. There is a lot of concern about their responsibilities, their powers and

their ability to do their job given these changes. They actually believe that they are becoming little more than a token or rubber stamp to decisions which have made by the administrative arm of government. They talk about being like a board of directors or something like that.

I actually have a view on that. Elected members of parliament or elected councillors have a responsibility to ensure and to oversee, to a fair extent, the decisions which have been made through the democratic process. To do otherwise actually disempowers them in favour of the administrative deliverers of those particular decisions. It actually makes the whole process even more unaccountable. There needs to be a balance. I think the balance is going too far the other way.

If the government thinks this is such a good idea then it should do it for itself in terms of the decisions made in cabinet. It should remove its ability to have any sort of democratic oversight or any capacity to reflect the general view of the community. The government should do it for itself if it thinks it is such a good idea. Members of the government will not do that because they believe that they are elected, rightly or wrongly, to make certain decisions and bring about certain changes and that they should be overseen by the administrative arm of government. If they are not they will be more actively involved in making sure that the aspirations are followed through.

Councillors complain to me all the time about being stripped of their authority and not being able to properly do their job—that is, reflect community concerns and community aspirations. That is something we have to be very careful about because they have been elected. They have stood for election, they have been elected, they have been supported and they should be able to be accountable for the decisions they make and the resolutions they pass. They should also be able to make sure that those particular aspirations are properly followed through and they are not being disqualified and frozen out of the process to the extent that is being facilitated by this sort of legislation.

We will watch this with interest. There is no doubt that local government has undergone profound changes in recent times, most notably those brought about by the forced amalgamation process, which was undemocratic, which was conceived earlier and which was a fait accompli. There is no doubt about that. The SSS process was thrown out and the government's own mantra was imposed. The great irony is that this legislation facilitates formalised processes for cooperation across local government which, on the surface of it, make a lot of sense.

Prior to the government throwing out the SSS process when it forcibly and undemocratically amalgamated many councils, a lot of communities were actually moving towards shared resources. I point out the shire of Inglewood in my electorate. It was working on cooperative arrangements with the neighbouring shires including Warwick and Waggamba. The government came and said, 'That is not good enough. Forget about what we told you beforehand. We are going to do this.' We have to make sure that the aspirational rhetoric is properly carried through because there is a lot of rebuilding of relationships and trust and faith that needs to happen in local government communities across Queensland. It is now going to be up to the Labor Party to properly rebuild because it has done a lot in the last two or three years to tear it asunder.