




Speech by

Hon. Cameron Dick

MEMBER FOR GREENSLOPES

Hansard Thursday, 25 August 2011

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTORAL BILL

 **Hon. CR DICK** (Greenslopes—ALP) (Minister for Education and Industrial Relations) (12.44 pm): I am pleased to make a short contribution to this important reform bill that is currently before the parliament. I want to confine my comments to those parts of the bill that relate to the reform of the conduct of elections in local government in Queensland and also to those parts of the bill that will strengthen transparency in local government elections and reinforce the need for transparency in relation to the conduct of councillors and mayors in Queensland.

I am a strong supporter of the proposal that the Electoral Commission of Queensland be responsible for the conduct of elections at a local government level. At the outset, I make a declaration that my brother is a councillor on the Brisbane City Council. Regrettably, a number of members in this House who have formerly served on councils, particularly those members of the LNP, have failed to make any declaration at all about their previous history, including their history leading up to election to this House. I think that is a regrettable thing, particularly when the LNP continues to persist with this policy position, now endorsed and championed by Campbell Newman, that councillors should be able to run for state parliament whilst serving as councillors in Queensland. That was a very significant reform implemented by Labor governments.

I have a strong view about public service. When you go to the people and you ask for their trust, you should rely and respond and recognise that trust that is vested in you. It is not good enough to take the trust of the people, as the LNP would suggest, as a councillor and then say, 'I'm going to breach that trust. I'm going to break that trust now. You have put your trust in me to represent me in local government. But that is not good enough for me now. I am now seeking higher office. I am seeking higher honours and I will now use my position as a councillor to campaign for state parliament.' It is a very regrettable thing that the LNP persists with that policy.

Of course, the reintroduction of that policy by the LNP has been foreshadowed through an amendment that the shadow minister seeks to move through this parliament to permit councillors to run for state office. That is now endorsed by Campbell Newman. Campbell Newman is the leader of the opposition, although not in this House. For the first time in 151 years of responsible government in Queensland we have a political party in this House that is led by someone who is external to the parliament, that is led by someone who is not responsible to the parliament, that is led by someone who is not accountable to the parliament, that is led by someone who is not subject to the same scrutiny as are members of the parliament, particularly the scrutiny through the declaration of interests in the members' interest register. It is a shameful and supine lack of demonstrated leadership by those members opposite. The 32 of them could not find a leader to lead themselves in this place and they had to contract out that leadership to Campbell Newman, who is not subject to the same scrutiny.

Frankly, there has not been as much public debate about this issue as there should be. There has not been as much public debate about contracting out the leader of a political organisation in a democratically elected parliament to someone who is external to that parliament. I want to put on record that I think it is a very destructive and corrosive thing to have happened in Queensland. It does not

represent the traditions of parliamentary democracy that all of us in this place presumably—certainly those members of the Labor Party in this place—uphold. Even in 1974 when we were at our lowest ebb, we found a leader to lead us from within the parliament. I think it says much about the LNP—a party that often holds itself up as the protector of conservative values, as the protector of tradition, as the protector of establishment values—that it has trashed one of the most significant establishment principles in the democratic system, the most significant principle that oppositions should be led by someone who is drawn from and is accountable to the parliament.

So they persist. Now Campbell Newman—someone who is external to the parliament—has endorsed and led this policy position that councillors should be able to run for public office. He would have done that in a shadow cabinet meeting. The amendment foreshadowed by the member for Gympie and the shadow spokesman for local government affairs would have had that policy position endorsed by the shadow cabinet, led by Campbell Newman.

What a disgraceful piece of conduct by him that he should, when he is running for public office, bring back into Queensland the opportunity for councillors to run. By necessary implication, that is precisely the position he would have taken if he had been the Lord Mayor of Brisbane. He would have used the trappings of office. He would have used the substantial resources available to the mayor, including significant communication resources through a very large number of media advisors—I am advised up to five—and through resources available to one of the most significantly funded elected public offices in the nation. He would have used that to campaign for state parliament. He persists in driving this policy principle through the parliament. I think that says volumes about him as a leader and volumes about what he would see councillors doing in Queensland.

We need that clear separation. People need to make a choice. Local government is not a part-time position in Queensland anymore. It is a position in service of the community. It is a representative position that is sometimes closest to the community. So the bonds of trust between a councillor and the constituents they represent in their council area should be very strong and should not be broken by ambition for higher office as we have seen demonstrated by someone like Campbell Newman. I strongly endorse that position.

I strongly endorse the role the Electoral Commission of Queensland will play. As an independent body it will bring greater transparency to the way local government elections are conducted in Queensland. That is a good thing for local government. It is a good thing for democracy in Queensland. No-one can challenge the independent umpire, in a sense—that state body that is responsible for conducting elections. It should be beyond reproach. It should be beyond being impeached. I think that it is something that is worthy of support. Will there be an additional cost? If there is, that is the cost of democracy. It is a cost that is balanced by the openness and the transparency that will come through that system.

I would also like to place on record my grave concerns at comments made in the House yesterday by the shadow spokesperson for justice matters and the member for Kawana. There was some exchange in the House yesterday about the conduct of the member for Hervey Bay when he was mayor in relation to a financial transaction involving him. That was well litigated yesterday. Frankly, what the shadow spokesperson for justice affairs, the member for Kawana, said was that he regarded that as a private affair. He said it was a private matter that the member for Hervey Bay was involved in when he was a duly elected mayor. It is of grave concern that someone who would be providing advice to the cabinet, someone who would be the first law officer of Queensland, would suggest that a financial transaction involving an elected representative at the local government level, an elected councillor, involving the council upon which he sat, was a private matter.

The member for Kawana is developing a reputation for coming in here and making allegations about a whole range of individuals who serve in this place. This is a gentleman who is long on rhetoric but short on facts, long on allegations but short on the substance to support them. To think that someone who seeks to hold high office, ultimately as the Attorney-General of Queensland, would defend that sort of transaction as a 'private matter' should be of grave concern to all Queenslanders. I want to put on record my very grave concerns that he should seek to defend transactions by councillors involving the very council that they are involved in as a private matter. They are public affairs that should be subject to full scrutiny and accountability. Just as members of this House have to put any financial transactions on the register, so too should councillors be subject to the same level of high public scrutiny. Similarly, ministers of state in Queensland are under the very high standards set by this Premier and previous premiers and have to divest themselves of shareholdings of any public or private company. That is the standard we set. We are required to divest ourselves of those shareholdings when we become a minister. Why? Because it avoids not only any actual conflict; it avoids any perception of conflict of interest. To think that the member for Kawana could have come in here yesterday and defended a councillor, who of course subsequently ran for public office, involved in a financial transaction with his own council, as being a private matter is of very grave concern.

Mr Swarten: Sends a shiver up the spine.

Mr DICK: I take the interjection from the member for Rockhampton. It does send a shiver up the spine. It sends a shiver up the spine in relation to that honourable gentleman if he was to become the first law officer of Queensland advising the cabinet of Queensland on legal affairs. Pride, as they say, cometh before a fall. I will let the gentleman's conduct otherwise speak for itself, but we will keep an eye on what the member for Kawana says. As I said earlier, he is someone who likes to make allegations about others very freely and very liberally but very rarely comes up to proof or standard.

Vesting the responsibility in the Electoral Commission of Queensland will, of course, create an independent central oversight body for the conduct of all elections at a local government level in Queensland. That is a very important thing. It follows on from reforms we have driven through local government to deliver a better service to Queensland and to deliver better local government. I commend the Deputy Premier, Attorney-General and Minister for Local Government for this significant reform bill and I commend it to the House.