




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR WARREGO

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT (DISSOLUTION OF IPSWICH CITY COUNCIL) BILL

 **Ms LEAHY** (Warrego—LNP) (11.46 am): I rise to contribute to the debate of the Local Government (Dissolution of Ipswich City Council) Bill 2018. Today is a sad day for local government in Queensland. However, when it comes before the opposition to comment on the identified and significant governance failures and cultural issues within the Ipswich City Council, it is clear that this case just does not pass the pub test. The LNP has judged this case and we have found it to be more than disappointing. We have not been sitting on our hands; we called for an administrator to be appointed some three months ago, when the second member of the Labor Party, who was also a Labor mayor, was charged.

What we have seen at Ipswich City Council are issues that should not have occurred within an environment where transparency, accountability and good governance are paramount. The way in which this Labor state government has handled this issue with Ipswich is unfortunately casting a shadow on the integrity of all hardworking councillors and councils across the state. This is a very disappointing circumstance. I applaud the work of local government representatives right across this state. We in the LNP opposition know how hard they all work every day for their communities. We thank them for their efforts. We also note that there are some 40,000 staff who work in the local government sector across Queensland. We also thank them for the work they do every day to make sure that essential services, like water and sewerage, continue to operate—and for the many other tasks and activities they are involved in.

We also know that from time to time things do go off the rails. To make sure that local governments' good work is not under a cloud, sometimes we have to lance the boil. In this case, the boil is very red—red just like the Labor Party activities that have perpetuated this problem.

Only 0.6 per cent of councillors are actually in trouble. That represents a very small number of councillors across Queensland. The rest of the 550-odd councillors and mayors are doing their job for Queensland communities. Unfortunately, Ipswich is a case on its own.

It was clear some months ago—and some will say years—that the long-term protection racket within the Labor Party was starting to unravel in Ipswich. There is an old saying that has been circulated in local government, and that saying is 'no tales past Gailes'. What this saying means for members of the House is that what happens on tour stays on tour. For years it has been a direct reference to the Labor Party activities and the behaviour at Ipswich—the disappointing behaviour at Ipswich. I have no doubt from reading the number of blacked out pages in the submissions to the parliamentary committee that there are probably still some attempts to run a protection racket and to keep those tales out past Gailes.

Members of this House should be reminded that parts of the Ipswich City Council are in the Premier's electorate of Inala. What did the Premier know about the corruption in the Labor Party from the people of her own electorate? We know that the member for Bundamba raised concerns. We know that the member for Bundamba raised concerns with the Premier. Why did it take this government so long to act? Why did it take this Premier so long to act and what did the two former ministers for local government know? What did the Deputy Premier know? What did the member for Ferny Grove know?

It should also be noted that in the past some of these Ipswich councillors have been travelling with the minister on conferences in the minister's former role as the planning minister. They stated this in their submissions to the committee. There are all sorts of allegations about who works for whom. There is a web of Labor Party connections and we know that there is an unhealthy culture of secrecy and deceit. This is a real cesspool of Labor Party activity unfortunately at its worst, and we should question further because this bill circumvents the Supreme Court action.

The public—the people of Ipswich—should have an ironclad guarantee from this government that this government is not running a protection racket for anyone in Peel Street, for any member of the Labor Party or for any members or any former members in this House. It would be remiss of the LNP opposition to not ask this question. The public expects us to be thorough and we request this guarantee from the government and from this minister that there is no protection racket for anyone in Peel Street, any member of the Labor Party or any members or former members of this House.

It would have been far better to deal with this Labor Party poor behaviour and deceit back in May rather than have the litany of stuff-ups that we have seen over the last three months from this government. Maybe a few reminders about what members opposite said back in May about the empowerment that was given to the local government minister through the public interest amendments might help those members reflect on the monumental stuff-up that this government has perpetuated and which has unfortunately placed a cloud over local government in Queensland. The member for Bulimba said—

The local government minister will be empowered to dismiss a council if he or she has a reasonable belief that it is in the public interest to do so. This will give the local government minister the ability to act immediately in the interests of the community.

That is what the member for Bulimba said back in May—'act immediately'. Here we are in August. That 'acting immediately' went really well, didn't it? The Premier said in relation to the public interest amendments—

The other amendments to be made relate to the ability of the minister to remove a council or councillor when it is in the public interest to do so.

I repeat: 'to remove a council or councillor when it is in the public interest'. Well, that was not good enough once the challenge was on in the Supreme Court and now we are here today in this parliament debating council-specific legislation. The member for Waterford said—

If the Minister for Local Government is of the view that local government principles are being breached or councillors or council are incapable of performing their duties, we will intervene in the public interest.

I think the important part there is 'we will intervene in the public interest'. We had legislation passed by this House back in May enabling the minister to intervene in that public interest and we have seen numerous reports and further reports from the CCC in relation to the situation at Ipswich. Here we are again with specific legislation to dissolve the Ipswich council. That intervention in the public interest worked really well, didn't it? This Labor government found its public interest amendments were not going to work as it had hoped, and that is why we are back here again doing Ipswich-specific legislation to dissolve the Ipswich City Council. What has happened is that there is a bad situation, and it has been made even worse for local governments in Queensland. The stuff-ups from this Labor government have contributed unfortunately for the last three months to that cloud which is now over all of those hardworking local government representatives in Queensland who do so much for our communities.

Let us go through what has happened with this Labor government. It has announced the suspension of four mayors and a councillor under new laws that were not actually in place at the time. It was this Labor government that issued two failed show-cause notices to Ipswich City Council, at the time costing the ratepayers and the taxpayers of Queensland and we still do not know what those full costs are. It was this Labor government which is now curtailing the Supreme Court to fix the mess that was meant to be fixed back in May with 40 pages of amendments. Those amendments did not follow due process and perhaps if they did we might have seen a better outcome. Those amendments did not go through the committee process. They were slapped on the table in the House.

I note that we have had a considerable change of tact this time. Because the parliament was not sitting, that is why there was a draft bill put forward to the committee so the committee could do a self-initiated inquiry. That is quite interesting. At least perhaps this government might have learnt something from the errors of its ways. It is this government that has brought this legislation into the parliament that breaches just about every fundamental legislative principle in the book. This legislation abrogates the rights and liberties of the individual. It breaches the principle of the presumption of innocence. It excludes judicial review and appeal contrary to fundamental legislative principles and the recommendations of the Fitzgerald inquiry. But wait, there's more. We have a minister here who is in charge of a racetrack and it cannot grow grass.

It is also important to note that, although there have been investigations by the CCC and a recent report from the CCC, it needs to be made very clear to this House what the CCC actually recommended. The CCC did not recommend this legislation. The decision to remove the council and the legal processes for this to occur are matters for the government, not the CCC, and the CCC on more than one occasion has made it very clear that it did not recommend this particular legislation.

I refer to the Johnstone shire. That is one of the most recent councils that has been dismissed in Queensland. There have been others and there have been others that have had an administrator—that is, the Burke shire and, some years ago, the Gold Coast—but Johnstone is probably one of the most recent in the last 10 years. The Johnstone shire had a fairer hearing from the most hated local government minister in Queensland in recent times—Andrew Fraser—during the Bligh government.

He is probably one of the most despised local government ministers because he presided over the forced council amalgamations. The Ipswich City Council has received a lesser hearing from the Palaszczuk Labor government than the Johnstone shire council received from Andrew Fraser. The Johnstone shire council had two investigations commissioned by the state government and the councillors were not dismissed until after the Supreme Court challenge had been heard and finalised.

That is a far cry from how this Palaszczuk Labor government has handled the Ipswich City Council issue and the circumvention of the Supreme Court process. Maybe the Labor government did not want the Supreme Court involved in any of its investigation or the disclosure of activities in its patch. Members of local government will draw their own conclusions about how the Ipswich City Council has been handled in comparison to how that detested minister in the Bligh government handled the Johnstone shire council issues.

I think the government should outline some of the projected costs so far in relation to the two failed show-cause notice processes and the taxpayer funds that have already been expended in the Supreme Court. I am advised that the ratepayers of Ipswich have already footed a bill of more than \$150,000 for the defence of Ipswich City Council. No doubt, that bill has increased. It is incumbent on the government to outline the cost estimates so far for the ratepayers and what will be the cost estimates to the taxpayers, because I am sure that defence in the Supreme Court does not come cheap.

The ratepayers of Ipswich should also be able to be given some indication by this House of the costs going forward in relation to the appointment of the administrator. Let us keep in mind that that administrator may not be one individual; it may be a corporation. At this stage, we still do not know who that administrator will be. We look forward to the announcement of the administrator. We hope that that person has absolutely no connections whatsoever with the Labor Party. This parliament is making a decision. The onus is on the government to tell the ratepayers what the government expects the costs will be to them. I hope that the minister will provide some of those estimates in his summing-up later.

I turn now to the recommendations of the Economics and Governance Committee. I would like to thank the committee for its self-initiated inquiry and for travelling to Ipswich to listen to the people of Ipswich. That gave those people the opportunity to at least have a hearing with the committee, because they are certainly not getting that opportunity in the Supreme Court. On this occasion, it is good to see that the government did not circumvent the committee process with this legislation, as it did with its 40 pages of amendments in relation to the public interest that we saw back in May.

The committee made three recommendations. Both recommendation 2 and recommendation 3 are sensible. I understand that the government will move some amendments to follow through with those committee recommendations. This is a very sad day for local government in Queensland. However, there is a need to deal with this situation. It would have been better if it had been dealt with by specific legislation back in May. However, this is the situation that we find ourselves in. We know that what is going on there at Ipswich—the 'no tales past Gaius'—just does not pass the pub test.