




Speech By
Hon. Stirling Hinchliffe

MEMBER FOR SANDGATE

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT (DISSOLUTION OF IPSWICH CITY COUNCIL) BILL

 **Hon. SJ HINCHLIFFE** (Sandgate—ALP) (Minister for Local Government, Minister for Racing and Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (5.24 pm), in reply: It is indeed heartening to see agreement around the action we are taking here today in this parliament, and I do thank all members for their contribution. I think that everyone in this House knows this is not an easy decision to take. I want to thank members for the way in which they have largely approached this matter, but I would like to address some of the matters that have come up during the second reading debate.

Disappointingly, the member for Warrego was more than a little inconsistent. The member for Warrego said that on one hand the government should have done this months ago, yet on the other hand she said that she had concerns about the lack of access to appeal mechanisms. The Ipswich City Council had access to appeal mechanisms when I issued each of the show cause notices. In May when I issued the first of two show cause notices I did take action at that time. I accessed my powers under the Local Government Act and, as we have heard, I sought to strengthen those powers in this place as well. It was the Ipswich City Council that appealed to the Supreme Court. In the next breath there was a suggestion that with this bill we are denying councils access to the Supreme Court. I say to those members opposite who hold that position that it seems we were too slow to act for some, but for others we were rushing in. Some said that we should have done this months ago, while others said that we should not be denying natural justice.

The other suggestion that many members made is that this has gone on for years. When the Newman government was on the government benches I did not see any evidence of great action: I did see evidence of cosying up to some people on the Ipswich City Council. It has taken a Labor government to take action in relation to this council, so if the Labor Party is running some sort of protection racket we are not very good at it. While it was easy for the council to create problems and try and disrupt normal processes under the Local Government Act, it is important in relation to the certainty—and I come back to the point that I have made again and again—that the people of Ipswich need and it required that we act. This action and this bill are the most important ways to achieve that, but it achieves more than merely avoiding great cost and uncertainty as a result of the ongoing levels of action that would have arisen around the continued processes under the Local Government Act.

Under the LGA we would not see an administrator in place for a nine-month period with the ability to dig deep and go further into the issues that members have raised around the chamber this afternoon, including the member for Bundamba's call for a deep forensic investigation to be carried out. That will be one of the capabilities of the administrator and those people who advise and support the administrator. It is very important that we see that provided for, and that would not necessarily have been available under the Local Government Act. This bill provides the opportunity to achieve that transparency.

There has been a question raised in relation to the costs of the Supreme Court action in this matter. Because I want to be fully transparent about this matter, I want to advise the House that the state's costs were in the order of \$57,700. During the debate today I have heard people remark about the cost to Ipswich City Council and the ratepayers of that city. They are much, much larger figures than the one I have just mentioned, but I know that the action this government and this parliament has taken today has saved taxpayers and ratepayers further costs which would have achieved nothing.

Before I sum up on some elements of the bill, I want to address the amendments proposed by the member for Warrego. In relation to the first amendment, which seeks to insert the word 'Labor' into the short title, the Leader of the House and I had a debate earlier about whether this was a juvenile amendment or a childish amendment. It was a close run thing. I will probably go with the English approach of the Leader of the House, as opposed to the French, and say that this is childish—absolutely childish. I think it is a shame that the member would waste the time of the parliament with such a childish amendment, which does not even bear any relationship to the truth.

Mrs D'Ath: It is actually not addressed in the explanatory notes.

Mr HINCHLIFFE: It is not addressed in the explanatory notes. You would not address it in the explanatory notes because it is embarrassing.

Mrs D'Ath: And they couldn't explain it.

Mr HINCHLIFFE: It would be inexplicable, because it does not represent in any way anything that would be acceptable and understandable as the truth.

We are talking here about 11 councillors who will be the subject of this matter, four of whom are members of the Australian Labor Party. There are others who have been National Party candidates. There are others who are closely aligned with the LNP. I think pointing the finger at a particular party in this situation is not taking the matter seriously and does not take into account the needs of the people of Ipswich. It is playing cheap, sad political games.

The second amendment goes to the potential for an advisory committee to be created. I want to address that in the context of a broader discussion around the administrator. The point has been made by some members that as part of this process I should be announcing who the administrator is going to be. There have been some criticisms of me at different times. One of the things that has been raised in this debate on a number of occasions relates to something I found deeply embarrassing, when I made a grave error in relation to a previous bill in this House and announced a matter before assent had been given. That was gravely embarrassing to me. As many people around this place know—some people criticise me for being more about process than politics—I am attuned to the process. As a consequence, I would never pre-empt the parliament. This is a position that does not exist until the parliament decides so. We have to deal with what is in front of us.

Upon passage of this bill I will be seeking assent to the bill, as I flagged in an adjunct debate earlier today, after which we will see the administrator appointed. I am hopeful, with the good grace of the Deputy Governor, that we will be in a position to announce the name of the interim administrator—and, indeed, the names of the interim management committee members—tomorrow. In relation to the membership of the interim management committee, I make a commitment that these names will be made public. I also make a commitment, as I have on previous occasions, that none of the appointees will be politicians, former politicians or people with a link to a political party. That is not what the people of Ipswich deserve. They deserve the independent, studious service of an administrator and advisers to that administrator in the form of an interim management committee.

The question raised by the second amendment foreshadowed by the member for Warrego is: will there be an interim advisory committee? The advice I can give to the House is that I would not be proposing an interim advisory committee at this point. Interim advisory committees, as set out under the LGA, are typically made up of local residents. I have deliberately made the decision to have outsiders appointed and no interim advisory committee at this stage. There needs to be a clear set of eyes. As we know from what has been raised in relation to matters and discussions that have occurred and debate in this House on this bill, this community has been affected by these issues for some time.

There are people, no matter what their role in the community, who are in some way connected to, potentially conflicted by and involved in the issues that need to be addressed. It is my view that in the first instance we not have an interim advisory committee, that we have clear sets of eyes in the form of the interim management committee with expert capability to address the fundamental issues that need to be addressed within the Ipswich City Council. However, I do give a guarantee to the House that, should there be in future the need to establish an interim advisory committee—if that comes to being a matter that is appropriate—as is provided for in the bill, I will ensure the names of the members of that committee are made public.

I reiterate that we have not taken this action lightly. This bill is gravely regretful. I would prefer that we were not in this situation—I believe that everyone in the House shares that view—but it is the right thing to do. It is the right way to deal with the extraordinary circumstances that are in front of us. I put that into context by quoting a statement made by the chair of the CCC, Alan MacSporran, at the public hearing at which he supported the dissolution of the Ipswich City Council. He said—

... there has been a collapse of public confidence in that council and those councillors. That is what is being addressed here. It is not about them individually being guilty of misconduct or otherwise. It is about systemic failures collectively of good governance, and a lack of transparency and accountability across-the-board. They stand or fall, as they must, under the Local Government Act and the Constitution of Queensland as the body, the entity, collectively responsible for the good governance of that community. There has been a failure of that.

I conclude where I began when I introduced the bill this morning, by saying that it is our duty under the Constitution of Queensland to provide for the good governance of this state. In particular, I think what we are doing with this action, with this bill, with this intervention, is providing for the good local governance of the City of Ipswich. I commend the bill to the House.