




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR GREGORY

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTORAL (IMPLEMENTING STAGE 2 OF BELCARRA) AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

ELECTORAL AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr MILLAR** (Gregory—LNP) (2.51 pm): In rising to make a contribution to this very important cognate debate I would like to recognise the importance of local government in Queensland and salute the great job that the local governments across the seat of Gregory are doing in what are very dire circumstances. At a time when we are facing our eighth failed wet season, at a time when it can no longer be denied that we are being devastated by a drought of historical proportions, Gregory's local governments have played a crucial, significant role in sustaining their local communities and their local economies. This highlights the fundamental role that local governments play in the proper administration of a state as geographically vast as Queensland. Therefore, it is vital that Queenslanders can have a high level of trust and confidence in their local governments.

It was offensive to many to see the trust eroded by the endemic corruption at the Ipswich City Council. It was also offensive, but not surprising, to see how Labor tried to silence their own members who tried to blow the whistle. It was also offensive to see a Labor cover-up continue for many years to protect members of the Labor Party and it was offensive that, when the smell could no longer be ignored, it took an incompetent government three goes to remove the Ipswich City Council. The associated prosecutions are still ongoing, so I will say no more on that account. However, I will say the final insult is to see Labor now attempting to use this sorry saga as a way to advance their own Labor Party interests over the interests of Queensland and good government in Queensland.

On what basis do I say this? In the form it went through the committee, more than half the clauses in this bill—some 58 per cent of the clauses of the Local Government Electoral (Implementing Stage 2 of Belcarra) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2019—do not relate to any findings of the Crime and Corruption Commission's Belcarra report on local government or on the Soorley report on the ECQ process in the 2016 local government elections. Take the proposed imposition of compulsory preferential voting. This is a change that is so fundamental it would have changed the nature of local government in Queensland entirely. Those with long memories will recall that out of the Fitzgerald inquiry came an independent and comprehensive review of electoral laws and processes. This was the EARC review and it is still unparalleled. That review found preferential voting to be complicated and flawed.

The shortcomings of compulsory preferential voting are only sharpened when they are applied to local government, but until yesterday the Palaszczuk government had shown every determination to foist it upon Queensland. Until yesterday they had said it was not about bringing political parties into local government elections. Until yesterday it was only about the Palaszczuk government protecting integrity. Suddenly yesterday our integrity was deemed safe and the compulsory preferential voting clause was gone—a backflip with a last-minute dismount. While we have to give thanks for that, let me spell that out clearly: no integrity report ever recommended compulsory preferential voting for local

government—not the Fitzgerald report, not the EARC report, not the CCC Belcarra report and not the Soorley review. At least this backflip will save ratepayers millions of dollars and will keep local government local.

The LNP knows that the job of local government is to stand up for their local communities. We know that that happens when state governments work with them. This means listening to their concerns and hopes for their local communities and working with them to put solutions in place—

Honourable members interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr McArdle): Member for Warrego and Minister, not across the chamber. Thank you very much.

Mr MILLAR:—in answer to those needs and support those hopes. When in government, the LNP respected local government as an equal partner in ensuring our regions flourished. We tried to reduce red-tape and give them the tools they needed.

Local mayors and councillors felt very tarnished and insulted by the ongoing saga at the Ipswich City Council. They are to be congratulated for the wholehearted efforts they have made—mayors, councillors and council staff—to introduce and work with stage 1 of the Belcarra reforms. The first stage saw the establishment of the Office of the Independent Assessor as a part of the councillor complaints system. The Office of the Independent Assessor has been welcomed by Queensland as providing a clear path for councillor complaints to be looked at independently. It is disappointing in the extreme that while Labor introduced the reforms they do not adequately resource the OIA. Now we find we could be going into the next local government election period with unprocessed complaints still hanging over some councillors and some individuals from the current term of government. This is simply unacceptable for them. Not only is it potentially unfair to individual councillors and mayors but it undermines the Office of the Independent Assessor itself. In fact, it means Queenslanders still cannot feel full trust in local government. Just as QCAT has publicly pleaded for adequate resources to ensure Queenslanders can trust in administrative justice, I plead with the Premier, the Treasurer and also the minister to urgently provide adequate resources to the OIA to ensure they can clear this complaint backlog.

I want to say a few words now in relation to conflicts of interest. I know this topic is front of mind for all Queenslanders at the moment. When we look at the conflict of interest for local government we need to consider the context of population size. The Queensland government should avoid imposing on all councils—and I have spoken to the minister about rural, remote and regional councils—the standards and rules which have been developed for populous councils like Brisbane or those in the south-east corner. If this sounds like special pleading it is, but there is a valid case here for remote councils. Take Diamantina shire. It covers 95,000 square kilometres—twice the size of Denmark—but its population is only 287 people. Note that is people. The number of ratepayers is even less. I think it is down to six or seven. A very small number of these ratepayers account for the majority of the shire's businesses and therefore the majority of the shire's rates.

We cannot bring in conflict of interest rules that would exclude everyone who wants to stand for council. The population is so small and the interconnections through family, business and shared interests are so dense that insensitive rules could well exclude everyone. There is an old joke in this part of the world of the Diamantina in outback Queensland that you should not offend anyone because they will always turn out to be related to you; no-one offends the storekeeper or the publican. I am proud that we have these far-flung communities, but when we legislate we must accommodate them or we will legislate them out of existence.

Lastly, I come to the changes to postal voting under the Electoral and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2019. Again, I fear the impact on my rural and remote constituents. Many people in Gregory are permanently registered as postal voters because of where they live. Because of the size of the shire districts, many councils find postal voting for council elections and by-elections the only sensible way to conduct a poll. At some point many constituents will find themselves away on polling day simply because our location means we all travel to get things done. We travel frequently and we travel far, so postal voting is a key right of Gregory constituents. Currently, an elector can request a postal vote as long as the ECQ receives the request no later than 7 pm on the Wednesday before polling day. The bill moves this deadline to no later than 12 days prior to the polling day. As polling day is usually a Saturday, in practical terms this means it must be received by 7 pm on the Monday two weeks prior.

These Labor amendments go beyond what was recommended by the Soorley report. It recommended moving the deadline to no later than 10 days. The justification for either change is a deterioration in the Australia Post service. The move is required to ensure that the postal ballot requests can realistically be delivered to voters prior to the polling day. This explanation does not quite cut it for

me. It can take three weeks for snail mail to deliver a letter from a Longreach office to my Emerald office, so I do not see how either change genuinely addresses anything. In a nutshell, you are solving a non-existent problem with a non-existent solution. I fear that it will deprive many rural and remote Queenslanders of their vote. I suspect that we may find ourselves back examining this issue in the not-too-distant future if only because it will cause problems in terms of compulsory voting obligations on every Queenslander.

Finally, local councils right across regional and rural Queensland do a fantastic job. I reiterate to the minister the difference between councils in far-flung areas like Diamantina, Barcoo, Paroo—in the member for Warrego's area—and Quilpie that do struggle in terms of some of these laws. We are finding it harder and harder to find people who want to stand for council. We have got to remember that in the smaller councils and the smaller communities there are going to be issues around conflict of interest that we need to address, but we also need to encourage more people to stand up for their communities and be involved in their local council. I plead with the minister. Our rural, remote and regional councils do a fantastic job. They need all the assistance they can to ensure that we continue to see them doing a great job.