




Speech By  
**James Lister**

**MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS**

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**LOCAL GOVERNMENT (EMPOWERING COUNCILS) AND OTHER  
LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr LISTER** (Southern Downs—LNP) (6.05 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the Local Government (Empowering Councils) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. I do so both as chair of the Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee, which considered the bill, and as an MP who has been elected to serve the people of Southern Downs, which is a large country electorate that very much relies on the work of our local councils.

I am completely floored by the sanctimonious, censorious, carping contribution we just heard. The first thing that springs to mind is the pot is calling the kettle black. That side of the House has given us insights about this backbench all week—we have heard about some rebellion here—but we just passed the last bill with everybody onside. The Labor Party, with its iron grip, though, would seem unable to command a majority of all of its members. There we go.

I heard corruption being mentioned. There is talk about corruption and then there is action. The last speaker was the local government minister for 200 days during the Troy Thompson matter. Let's have a look at that.

**Ms BOYD:** Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to a point of order. Not only was I never the local government minister; I find the comments personally offensive and ask they be withdrawn.

**Mr LISTER:** I withdraw.

**Ms Boyd:** Get your facts straight.

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Ms Marr): Member for Pine Rivers!

**Mr LISTER:** Madam Deputy Speaker, I take personal offence at that interjection and ask that the member withdraw.

**Ms BOYD:** I withdraw.

**Mr LISTER:** My electorate of Southern Downs is covered by three local government authorities: the Southern Downs, Goondiwindi and Toowoomba regional councils. To us, they are not some distant administrative layer domiciled in Brisbane. They are the council grader fixing a road after a storm and the payer of the bounty when you have shot a wild dog on your property that would otherwise kill your lambs. The honourable primary industries minister and many others in this chamber know what I am talking about. It is the councillor who gets the call about a draft planning scheme complaint, the need to repair a flood damaged culvert or a neighbour who has just opened an unauthorised dog kennel next door.

In places like the Southern Downs, Goondiwindi and the Granite Belt, councils are very much part of the day-to-day life of the community. For that reason, legislation affecting local government needs to strike the right balance. We need proper integrity protections—of course we do. These must also ensure the framework within which councils operate is practical, workable and respectful of the fact that local councils are elected bodies.

Over time, however, the legislative framework governing local government in Queensland has become increasingly complex. There have been layers added that have made it harder for councils to simply get on with the job that they were elected to do. I would not be the only person in my electorate of Southern Downs who fervently holds the view that it was Labor's stewardship of local government over many years which has diminished the role of councillors and that it was done so with the deliberate aim of nobbling a councillor so they may not be in a position to challenge the way local government has been mishandled.

The local governments in my neck of the woods have not forgotten the forced amalgamations imposed upon them by the Labor Party. My communities have not forgotten this. Soft soap and weasel words in this chamber criticising this bill wash away very quickly when compared with the history.

This bill seeks to restore a measure of balance and common sense to that framework. One of the most significant elements of the bill relates to the appointment of council chief executive officers and other senior staff. Councils are responsible for running substantial organisations. Some of them employ hundreds of people and manage budgets worth hundreds of millions of dollars. It is appropriate, therefore, that elected councillors have a meaningful role in selecting senior staff who will lead the organisation.

The reforms in this bill restore the role of councillors in appointment panels. In my view that simply recognises the democratic mandate of the elected council. I found it fascinating that the Local Government Association and the Local Government Managers entertained concerns about sharing that power with elected councillors. I was very entertained by the contribution of one of the people who came before us—Rob Hayward, the CEO of the Maranoa Regional Council. I put it to him that surely the idea that these appointments occur in a vacuum now and that there is no political interference whatsoever—no influence whatsoever—is a fallacy. In the typical Western Queensland style—and I am sure the Minister for Local Government would agree with me that the further west you go the more straight talking people get—he readily agreed with me. He said, 'I have been in local government for a very long time and that is exactly what happens.' The point is that we need to have a framework which acknowledges the natural tendencies and indeed the political rights of those who are elected as councillors to have input into these appointments.

Another important element of this bill is the clarification of the leadership of the mayor. In Queensland's system of local government the mayor is elected directly by the community. That office carries with it an expectation of leadership. The bill clarifies that the mayor is the official spokesperson for the council and ordinarily presides over meetings of the council. These provisions are not revolutionary. In many ways they restore arrangements that most people would assume were already the case. Clarity in legislation matters. It ensures councils operate with a clear understanding of responsibilities and authority which ultimately helps them function more effectively. It was very revealing to hear from the Mayor of Ipswich City, Councillor Teresa Harding. She gave some very vivid testimony about the attempts to undermine her leadership of the council—most extraordinary things like trying to stop her from chairing meetings and stop her from being able to speak on behalf of the council. These are things which Queenslanders would see as unnatural, I think. This deals with that particular problem—a problem left to us by the Labor Party.

The bill also revisits the conflict-of-interest framework applying to councillors. Members of the House will recall that a number of changes were made to that framework some years ago. Those changes were ostensibly made with the intention of strengthening integrity, but the feedback from the sector has been that the rules became unnecessarily complex and, in some cases, confusing. I think this again is a vindication of my assumption that Labor was content to diminish the role of councillors—keep them tied up, keep them fighting with one another, keep them defending themselves.

This bill restores the earlier framework dealing with material personal interests and conflicts of interest. That framework is well understood and provides clear guidance to councillors about when they must declare an interest and step aside from a decision. Importantly, it also recognises the reality of life in country communities. It is not easy for everybody to distance themselves entirely from other interests, because in a small community councillors invariably are also the secretary of this, the chair of that and on the board of that because they are the sort of people who step up in leadership roles in their

communities. In smaller towns it is almost impossible for councillors not to have some connection—whether through community organisations, business relationships or family networks—with matters that come before the council. The legislation needs to recognise that reality while still protecting integrity of council in decision-making.

Another theme running through the bill is the reduction of unnecessary red tape. These are provisions removing duplicative reporting requirements, simplifying administrative processes and clarifying a number of technical matters that have caused confusion in the past. These may not be the headline-grabbing aspects of the bill but they are nevertheless very important. Anyone who has worked in or around local government will know that small administrative burdens can accumulate very quickly. They slow council's responsiveness to community demands and they take up staff time and resources that could be better spent delivering services to the community.

The bill also contains provisions dealing with matters such as councillor remuneration arrangements, leave of absence, vacancies and eligibility requirements. These are the sorts of issues that may not attract much public attention until something goes wrong. Having clear rules in legislation ensures consistency across the state and avoids unnecessary disputes about procedure.

The bill includes amendments relevant to Indigenous local governments, clarifying rating powers and establishing a framework that will allow those councils to implement a rating structure if they choose to do so. Financial sustainability is a challenge for many councils, particularly those in remote areas. These amendments provide greater flexibility for Indigenous councils to strengthen their financial base while respecting the unique circumstances in which they operate.

There are also some practical changes affecting Brisbane City Council, including acknowledging its budget adoption timetable to align more closely with other councils in Queensland. Again, this is a practical measure that promotes consistency and administrative efficiency.

When we talk about empowering councils what we are really talking about is trusting local democracy. The people of Queensland elect councillors and mayors to make decisions about their communities. They expect those representatives to be truthful, to exercise judgement, to listen to their concerns and to act in good faith to advance the interests of their communities. I believe that the best restraining force upon misbehaviour and deceit by councillors is the prospect of electoral defeat at the hands of an informed electorate. Our job as legislators is to provide the framework to support councils. This bill serves that end. I commend the bill to the House.

*(Time expired)*