



Jason O'Brien

MEMBER FOR COOK

Hansard Thursday, 9 August 2007

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IMPLEMENTATION BILL

Mr O'BRIEN (Cook—ALP) (3.33 pm): I rise to support the Local Government Reform Implementation Bill 2007. When this bill is passed later today 84 councils will be subject to amalgamation in Queensland with 23, over a quarter of them, in my electorate. I said it in Port Douglas on Sunday and I say it again today: I want more. With two houses in the Commonwealth parliament, two in all state parliaments except this one and a system of local government, this has to be one of the most overgoverned countries in the Western world. While some people may argue that it also means we have stronger democracy as a result, I question whether having more politicians and more bureaucracy necessarily results in better democracies. What results is inertia, duplicity, buck passing and the most irritating political games imaginable. I am sick of it.

We are all Australians and we should be Australians first and foremost. Our federated system of government remains the last bastion of macro-economic reform. We need clearer lines of responsibility, less bureaucracy, more streamlined processes and, most of all, less politics and more action. Put simply, this House should be silent. Just like the one down the hall. It is a museum—a testimony to the way we did things in colonial times before we had things like aeroplanes, telephones and other modern equipment. So are the current local government boundaries.

I hope this bill is a stepping stone for greater reform, much greater reform. This bill will make strong regional councils which will have real capacity to deal with state and federal governments not just in terms of lobbying but, more importantly, in terms of partnering with them, matching their resources and working together on areas of shared interest. In the long run, I hope they take over many of our responsibilities which can be better delivered at the regional and local level. That is what really needs to be done in this country, and anyone who has anything to do with the mechanics of government knows it.

The problem, however, is that we cannot even get simple change or, even in the case of having an Australian as our head of state, symbolic change. What we get is vested interests trying to protect their patch without any regard for the bigger picture. The bigger picture in Queensland is that we are being swamped with growth—economic growth and population growth. Smaller councils do not have the capacity to deal with that growth. They cannot attract the planners they require and they get bullied by developers and their lawyers, who sometimes have more money than the council itself, into approving things they wanted to consider more fully.

I turn to some of the specific matters related to the changes in my electorate. The first thing I want to do is bust the myth that those opposite are trying to perpetuate that every amalgamated council is against the change. In the northern peninsula area on the very tip of Cape York Peninsula there are five councils. Four of those councils have grabbed the bull by the horns and decided their future lies together. Those councils are Injinoo, Umagico, New Mapoon and Bamaga. Only Seisia has been forced to the table and I think we will be able to allay their concerns. I will talk about their concerns in a moment.

First I want to say to the four councils, councillors and CEOs who have agreed to this amalgamation, thank you. When others have panicked they have been brave. When others have found fault they have found the challenge and risen to it. When others have predicted the worst they have planned for the future of their communities. I say to those mayors and CEOs—Tex Nona and Bill Dalton in Injinoo, George Mara and Noel Balasingham in Umagico, Jesse Sagaukaz and Dalasa Yorkston in Bamaga and Colin and Merv Bond in New Mapoon—well done. The minister should strike a gold medal as big as a frying pan and issue it to them and their councillors. They are real leaders.

Seisia's concerns surround the ongoing ownership of strong, profitable enterprises they have established over many years. Many of the other 15 Torres shire councils share this concern and, to be fair and honest, so do the four councils on the NPA who have been amalgamated. These are legitimate issues but should not be the deal breaker. There are ways and means of sorting these matters out both within this legislation and the Torres Strait (Community Services) Act. I am confident we will find a way forward to the satisfaction of local communities with regard to these matters.

Some Torres Strait community leaders such as Torres Strait Regional Authority chairperson, Toshie Kris, and Island Coordinating Council chair, Margaret Mau, have expressed concern about the changes. The problem the government has is that many of the island councils have poor financial management records. In fact, according to the latest Auditor-General's report only four councils have received fully satisfactory results in the last round of opinions. They are Warraber, St Pauls, Poruma and Iama.

Clearly these councils should hold their heads up high. Regrettably, they must suffer the same consequences as those councils that continually fail to account properly for their use of public funds. At the end of the day, this point seems to have been lost on the opposition spokesperson for local government. The finances of many of these councils need cleaning up. What he has in effect argued is that the government should keep sending taxpayers' money to organisations whether they spend it assisting their communities with service delivery or whether they give it to themselves in loans that never get paid back. I do not care if these people are my constituents or not; that is simply unacceptable, and how the opposition can say we should carry on regardless is unfathomable and demonstrates how unfit it is to occupy the treasury benches.

The argument has been put that the decisions we are making today will kill off island culture, and I want to totally repudiate that assertion. Island culture has existed long before community councils or, for that matter, parliaments. In fact, if there is anything that is killing off Ailan Kastom it is those councillors who lend public money to themselves while people scream out for better services and infrastructure. There has been a movement supporting greater autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders over their own affairs that has existed since colonisation. I support this move. Let us have no misunderstanding though: there can be no autonomy without accountability. There will be accountability under the changes before the House today.

Today the Queensland Labor government puts the Torres Strait on a pathway to autonomy that will continue to build momentum. I have said this before and I say it again: I want to see more amalgamations. I want to see the future Torres Strait Island Regional Council that will be established here today amalgamated with the Torres Shire Council and eventually take over the responsibilities of the Torres Strait Regional Authority. I want to see the Torres Strait have one peak body, one line of accountability, one strong united voice. Then the region will have the institution and capacity to seek the autonomy its people so desperately desire and deserve.

Before I came into this House over three years ago I spent a four-year term on the Cairns City Council. In my seven years of public life nothing has been more difficult than fronting the rally at Port Douglas on Sunday protesting the amalgamation of the Douglas shire with Cairns City Council. In my heart of hearts, I wish things had not panned out this way. Notwithstanding this, the council has been the master of its own destiny. It has more resources and opportunities than most shires in this state and certainly all other shires in my electorate. I truly believe that could it have governed itself in a way that the government and, more importantly, the community expect it would have survived. At no stage in the last three years has there been any concerted effort to work together in the common interests of the community.

Nevertheless, there are communities of interest between Cairns and Port Douglas that the reform commission and the government have deemed to be significant enough to warrant amalgamation. Most

importantly, the council areas have the same two large industries underpinning the regional economy—tourism and sugar production. The reality is that there is conflict between these two industries. The burgeoning tourism industry requires more accommodation to meet demand and affordable housing for its workforce. This puts pressure on the sugarcane industry that is fighting to keep the smallest mill in Queensland working. I do not know the answer to that quandary. I do believe that the answers are not confined to the current boundaries of the Douglas shire.

The government is acting to protect the concerns of people in the shire. Divisions will be introduced to ensure that people get a local voice. Iconic places legislation will be introduced to protect the components of the planning scheme which add to the unique lifestyle enjoyed in the area. This will protect the Daintree lowland rainforest and keep the high-rises off Four Mile Beach and other parts of the planning scheme the community deems important. The communities of Mossman, Port Douglas and other small towns will not disappear; they will continue to grow, continue to prosper and the strong spirit so evident at the rally on Sunday will not die. Instead, it will be supported by a larger budget with better corporate governance and capacity. I also want to quickly comment on the reform commission's recommendation that the government seek to normalise the town of Weipa. This will require the government to negotiate with Rio Tinto to make the transition. I hope these negotiations begin soon and happen quickly so that Weipa can become the great Queensland town it is destined to be.

I have seen all of this before. When the old Cairns City Council was amalgamated with the Mulgrave Shire Council, many people predicted that the sky would fall and over 30,000 people signed a petition to try to stop it. Now, seven years later, you would not find a soul to say the amalgamation was a bad thing. I said a few weeks ago that I will not be governed by fear. If the price we have to pay for decent, modern local authorities in this state is my political hide, then so be it. If that is the price we have to pay to get better services of government in this country, then so be it. I will not sit here and count the days until my super rolls in. I will use my time here to support the changes that continue to plan for our growing state and the people who reside in it. I commend the bill to the House.

Jason O'Brien's Speech for Port Douglas Rally on
Sunday 5th August 2007

It is hard to be here today in front of so many people who have supported me and now are wondering how I can be part of a government that is making these changes.

Yet when State Parliament sits next week I will support reducing the number of councils in Queensland from 157 to 72, with 23 amalgamations in my electorate including this one.

I hope there are more.

I know this has raised a great deal of concern in the community, most of which is unfounded.

The government understands that people do not want this area to develop the same way as Cairns. They want the Daintree protected, which the Queensland Labor Party has done more to achieve than most even when the beloved council voted for increased urbanization north of the river, no high-rise on beaches, a sense of community and belonging and strong local representation.

It wasn't my preferred option but there are good reasons why the Council most people wanted sacked two months ago will now be amalgamated.

1. Economies of scale allow you to provide a wider range of services and infrastructure. This does affect staff as you recognize and change the skill mix in your local service providers. Better economies of scale means you

get access to better plant and equipment and more services, like library books, planners and community development officers. Some of the biggest supporters of amalgamation in Cairns have been the workers at the Gordonvale depot. Although initially nervous amalgamation has meant they have been better trained, better skilled and more employable.

2. You get a stake in Cairns. Your entire economy is predicated on the Cairns port. Every cent every person here today has in their pocket comes through the Cairns Port. It is the portal for all your goods and services and you need to ensure that it does not develop in such a way that it jeopardizes your interests.
3. It allows you to think out of the box to find solutions to the tourism, industries problems. One of those problems is affordable housing. It affects the ability of the industry to retain staff. Part of the solution to that lies in Cairns and improved state supported public transport. What I will try and do now that you are part of Cairns is get you into the Cairns public transport contract area.
4. The crux of the issue here is population growth. The growing tourism industry needs more workers and supplying land for them is going to undermine the sugar industry. We believe that a more regional approach to planning and providing infrastructure will be better able to deal with that complex problem. There may not be a solution to that conflict but if there is a way to diversify our reliance on one or two industries which hold up the economy many of the solutions will not be confined to the current local government boundaries.

5. I think this is a stepping stone to greater reform. I have some experience in all three levels of government and there is too much of it. States are an increasing irrelevance and a future federal government will have to reform the federation and regionalize the states. Larger regional governments should be represented through the Senate while the House of Representatives remains the people's house. Reform is hard but Australians must be brave if they are going to set up efficient and effective government systems to handle the challenges of internationalization in the 21st century.

6. Improved governance. I'll say no more about this. We all know the score. If people are going to throw eggs at me today there are six other men who should be up here copping a couple. Melinda Cox, you are not one of them you have kept your head on, worked hard and been reasonable. My apologies for things ending up this way for you. Julia Leu. Apologies for putting you and your staff through this period of uncertainty. Their jobs are guaranteed for three years but will undeniably be changed over time. Efficiencies will mean some people will not be required in the long term but experience tells us that what you will require are more people with skills in planning, building and maintaining civic infrastructure and community development

Mike you are not the sixth man so I'll leave it up to people to work out who that is. I apologise that your community must go through this period of fear and uncertainty but I am confident that changes will not effect people's day to say life in any significant way and the state will continue to protect the attractions and lifestyle of the growing number of people living in this area.

You will get a say on these reforms if in 2 years time all the doom and gloom people are predicting today comes true. You get your chance to give me the punt. What you will in fact end up with is little noticeable change and improved services.

I understand that the community is angry today but this community will not die. Your presence here today shows how strong this community is and only you will decide if it all disappears as a result of our attempts to create stronger councils.

There are plenty of people in Cairns who share your vision for environmentally friendly and community enhancing governments at all levels. Val Schier is one who is trying to get a team of like minded people around her. She came close last time and with your help she can provide the strong people focused council you want and deserve.

Thank you for your time today.