Speech by

Glen Elmes

MEMBER FOR NOOSA

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr ELMES (Noosa—Lib) (3.32 pm): I wish it was with some degree of pleasure that I was standing here today and speaking in the debate on the Local Government and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2006. Prior to Tuesday of this week I expected to be standing here today and, in the main at least, supporting the legislation before the House. There are some very good provisions in it. The announcement on Tuesday by the minister concerning the wholesale amalgamation of local authorities across Queensland makes it impossible for either me or the coalition to support the wholesale slaughter of one level of government in Queensland.

Local government delivers basic services. That is its role and its job and it has done it very well over many years. In more recent times this Labor government and Labor governments prior to this one have flick passed additional responsibilities onto councils. They are responsibilities that councils have picked up and run with and they have done exceptionally well.

I have listened to everybody who has spoken in this debate. Members have talked about their own councils, their own local authorities and their own experiences with those local authorities. It shows the diversity that exists across Queensland in all of the local authorities. They all operate differently. They all have their own identities. They all have their own set of problems. This government has turned around and is trying to put them all in one box. This is the Labor model. It all must look the same, it must feel the same, it must be the same and if they cannot do that then they destroy the whole thing and build it up again. This is the sort of thing we cannot have. This is the sort of thing that the members of the coalition will fight against.

Most of my Noosa electorate falls within the Noosa shire but part of it is in the Maroochy shire. Nothing more clearly demonstrates the difference between two local authorities than looking at the differences that have developed between these two local authorities. Over a number of years the Maroochy shire has become more development orientated. There are a lot more high-rise buildings. Development in the Maroochy shire has generally been a lot more intense than is the case in the Noosa shire.

In the case of Noosa, which is where I live, we made a decision many years ago—it has evolved over 25 years or more—to be more careful with our environment and we make sure that the industries that develop in their peculiar ways generate jobs in our community. We have looked at the population that we can sustain as a community. The Noosa shire introduced a population cap, which is now likely to disappear out the back door. We decided on the population cap based on things like the available land that we wanted developed and the amount of water that we had available to us to use in our community sustainability. That is what is now under threat in my part of the world.

The amalgamation rumours have been around for quite some time. When I came down for this sitting week I came armed with an adjournment speech that I wanted to make. I had a question on notice that I wanted to ask. It was all aimed at appealing to and pleading with the minister for local government not only on behalf of my community but also communities across Queensland to allow the residents and ratepayers of local authorities to have a say about this at the ballot box; to go through the Size, Shape and

Sustainability process and to decide what their future was going to be. If it came to amalgamation I wanted them to be given the opportunity by this government to exercise their right at the ballot box and decide what their future was going to be. This opportunity has been taken away this week. It has gone.

In three months time we will have a group of ex-politicians and public servants make their recommendations to this parliament. Because of numbers the Labor Party government will decide the outcome and the future for Queenslanders right across this state.

Mr Stevens: The commissars are coming.

Mr ELMES: Thank you very much: the commissars are coming. The problem that I really see in the almost 24 hours that this debate has been proceeding is that on the opposition side we are talking about our life experience and we are talking about the local authorities that we live in and are a part of but the contributions from members of the Labor government are neatly compartmentalised.

I doubt whether—with the exception of you, Mr Deputy Speaker Hoolihan, because you mentioned that you have travelled extensively in Queensland—anyone else on the Labor side has ventured west of the divide. If they had gone west of the divide they would understand the way these local communities operate and the degree of protection, in some cases, that they need to have. They should be shown by this minister and this government.

At the time of the last federal election the amalgamation debate was around and on polling day Noosa community groups manned every polling booth in the Noosa shire and in one day collected 18,600 signatories all demanding that Noosa shire not be amalgamated—18,600 signatories in one day. My community has spoken. I do not know about other members, but my community has spoken. It does not want a bar of amalgamation. It wants to find its own way, and it wants to be left to find its own way. We need to go back and support the Size, Shape and Sustainability system. We heard that $25 million had been set aside for that process and only $2 million of it had been spent. However, that $2 million does not cover the discussions that have been going on within the councils themselves. It does not take into account the discussions that have been going on not only between council staff in the same local authority but also between council staff in different local authorities. It has been a long process. It may have been going on for too long. That may very well be the case, but it is a process that should be allowed to be completed, because not completing the process and not involving the people will create the age-old problem of judging people from the top down rather than bringing people from the bottom up. We also need to ensure that the Size, Shape and Sustainability process is well advertised. We have to do more with that. I know that the information that has been gathered so far is going to be handed on to the commissioners so at least they get a bit of a jump-start when the time comes, and I hope they find that acceptable to them and take those facts on board.

One other issue that I want to mention with regard to the Noosa shire is the way our tourism industry has developed over the years. Something like $600 million a year is generated by tourism just from the Hastings Street precinct alone. Most of our jobs come from the Hastings Street precinct and many local small businesses rely on the business that that brings. It is another great example of how it has evolved differently to the Gold Coast and differently to our neighbours in Maroochy or Caloundra. It would be a very brave Premier indeed who starts to muck around with industries of that kind not only in Noosa but right across the state. Local authorities have reduced in New South Wales from 176 to 152 and in Victoria from 210 down to 79 between 1991 and 2007. That is a great reduction, but I am here to tell members that there are still local authorities in those two states that are stressed financially, and in recent times I have read about a great many of them in Victoria that do not like one little bit the amalgamation process that was forced on them by the Kennett government.

Mr Lawlor: So you'd do nothing, would you?

Mr ELMES: I take that interjection. As state parliamentarians we are about to go through a redistribution. Federal parliamentarians go through redistributions in this state pretty well every three years. It should be no different with local government. There should be tinkering at the edges. There should be boundary realignments. Those sorts of things need to happen. That is part of the process. What we are talking about is making local authorities viable and not taking away the community of interest. If we do, we will find ourselves in a situation where we are absolutely decimating a level of government. What will happen as part of this process—because it seems pretty well set on its way—for the Beattie Labor government is that by the time this mob of commissioners has made its findings the Premier and his ministers will have less troublesome mayors and less troublesome councillors around to give them some grief in the press. I can tell the House that there are going to be tens of thousands of Queenslanders who will remember what this Labor government has done to them and their communities and they will have their revenge at the ballot box at the next state election.