



Local Government Amendment (No Forced Amalgamations) Bill.

Second Reading

Mr ANDREW FRASER (Coffs Harbour) [10.31 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

This bill is identical to the bill I introduced on 4 September 2003. I draw the attention of honourable members to my speech in *Hansard* on 4 September 2003 at page 3175 and concluded on 18 September 2003 at page 3578. Since I made that speech, and since this legislation was passed by the upper House, a number of regional reviews have commenced in New South Wales, including the council areas surrounding the Australian Capital Territory and Peel Valley. This morning I am meeting with the Hon. David Simmons—he was the Minister for Local Government in the Keating Government—who will commence a regional review in the Clarence Valley in the next few days.

I appeal to the Government to put the review process on hold. At present the local council rolls must close 60 days before the election date and be advertised 40 days before the date. That means that the review process must be completed in five months, which is insufficient time. I suggest there will be substantial boundary alterations and amalgamations, especially around the Australian Capital Territory and in Peel Valley. I have spoken to most of the councils in that area, and I met with Murrurundi councillors earlier today. I point out that some councils in the Peel Valley area have put up their hands and said, "We would like to amalgamate." They will not be forced amalgamations. Let the local council elections take place in March as planned, and let us undertake the review process sensibly and with public participation over the next four years. That will ensure that people who are feeling disaffected by the process and the way it is being run will have an opportunity to contribute fully and in a meaningful way.

Earlier this week the honourable member for Burrinjuck raised a matter of privilege because she was not given the opportunity to speak at a public meeting in her electorate. Mr Speaker, you recognised that the honourable member's privilege in conducting her duties in this place was not necessarily impeded. However, a government official, enforcing what I suggest is an unpopular process in the Burrinjuck electorate, physically stopped the honourable member from speaking at that meeting. It is disgraceful when members of Parliament and elected council officials are not, through an edict from a government official, allowed to speak on an issue as important as this at a public meeting in their electorate. That clearly demonstrates that the process is not being run properly and is not welcomed by people in regional and rural New South Wales. As the honourable member for Burrinjuck said, it is neither fair nor democratic.

I appeal to the Government to defer the review process. We know full well that at least one-third, if not more, of the March 2004 council elections in New South Wales will have to be deferred. That will add huge expense and a huge amount of time to the election process. We are in a mess. The review process should be undertaken properly. As the process has already commenced, let the elections take place in March and give people an opportunity to participate in the process of structural reform. If the process results in some council amalgamations—some councils in the Peel Valley area have volunteered to amalgamate—let that happen. We must ensure that forced amalgamations do not take place.

Pristine Waters Council has made a submission to take over south Clarence, but other councils in the Clarence Valley do not want to amalgamate. However, the Government is looking at forming one council for the Clarence Valley. Where did that suggestion come from? It came not from the people but from the Minister. The people did not ask for that, yet the review process has commenced. That means that the elections for Maclean Shire Council and Pristine Waters Council, which were formed only recently, must be delayed. Previously in the House I have said that the review process is not democratic; it is autocratic.

I hope the Government will support this bill, as it was supported by the crossbenchers and the Coalition in the upper House. It will ensure that democracy in New South Wales is maintained, with a due process in which people can participate. Amalgamations must be undertaken under this legislation, rather than by stealth, which is the Government's intention. All this bill does is introduce a process by which people will have an opportunity to participate. I thank the Hon. Duncan Gay and the crossbenchers in another place for supporting the legislation. I look forward to this House supporting the bill and reintroducing democracy into New South Wales. I commend the bill to the House.

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