

**PORT MACQUARIE-HASTINGS COUNCIL ELECTION BILL 2008**

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**Bill received from the Legislative Council and introduced.****Agreement in Principle****Mr CHRIS HARTCHER** (Terrigal) [10.02 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now agreed to in principle.

The New South Wales Liberal-Nationals Coalition supports the Port Macquarie-Hastings Council Election Bill introduced in the Legislative Council by the Hon. Robert Brown. Pursuant to a proclamation dated 26 February 2008, an administrator was appointed for the local government area of Port Macquarie-Hastings. The administrator's term of office commenced from that day and will cease on the date of the declaration of the Port Macquarie-Hastings Council's election, to be held in conjunction with the ordinary council elections on the second Saturday in September 2012. The object of this bill is to ensure that a fresh council election is held for the local government area of Port Macquarie-Hastings in conjunction with the next ordinary election of councillors in accordance with section 287 (1) of the Local Government Act 1993. Under that section the next ordinary election of councillors is to be held on the second Saturday in September 2008, that is 13 September 2008.

Under the provisions of the bill the administrator will cease to hold office immediately before the first meeting of the Port Macquarie-Hastings Council held after fresh council elections, unless the administrator ceases to hold office under the Local Government Act 1993 before that time. This bill is simple and its object is simple: it will ensure that local government elections are held in Port Macquarie-Hastings this year on 13 September 2008 rather than on the second Saturday in September 2012, as set out in the proclamation made by the Minister for Local Government that resulted in the removal of the council from office and the appointment of an administrator, Mr Dick Persson, to act in its stead. The bill has been debated in the Legislative Council and I will not go over all those issues. By clear majority the Legislative Council determined that it was appropriate that local government elections be held in the Port Macquarie-Hastings Council area this year rather than in 2012 and that determination is now before this House for its approval.

The Port Macquarie-Hastings local government area has been well represented by its council over a period of time. The issue that led to the council's removal from office related to overexpenditure on a cultural centre called the Glasshouse. There was no allegation that the council or council officers had engaged in corruption or any mischievous conduct. The only issue was the blow-out in expenditure for the cultural centre. For this Government, of all governments, to take action against another layer of government because of cost blow-outs is the height of hypocrisy. We have witnessed the costs for the desalination plant at Kurnell go from \$1.3 billion to \$1.6 billion to \$1.9 billion and they are still rising, yet there is no suggestion that the Premier, who was the instigator of the desalination plant, or the Minister for Water will be removed from office.

We have seen the costs of the Chatswood to Epping railway blow-out by more than \$1.5 billion, yet there is no suggestion that the Minister for Transport or the Premier will be removed from office. We have had the massive cost overruns at Bathurst and Orange hospitals, but there is no suggestion that the Minister for Health will be removed from office. Yet, not only was this council removed from office and an administrator, Mr Dick Persson—presently the administrator of Warringah Council—appointed to act in the council's stead, but also the people of the Port Macquarie-Hastings area are to be denied a voice in local government for 4½ years. Port Macquarie-Hastings Council is distinct from other councils that have had action taken against them by the Minister for Local Government because in those cases there have been quite serious allegations of corruption and that corruption has caused systemic mismanagement that must be corrected throughout the council structure, both so far as councillors and council staff are concerned.

Of course, Wollongong City Council is the one that the whole community is familiar with, where a Labor-dominated council was rorted, and rorted systematically from the top to the bottom, by corrupt Labor Party councillors, corrupt Labor Party aides and corrupt Labor Party apparatchiks. There is no suggestion that this happened at Port Macquarie-Hastings Council, because it does not have Labor Party councillors. If a council does not have Labor Party representation, it is 90 per cent sure of being corruption free. Just as Liverpool council was dismissed and just as Wollongong council was dismissed, it is appropriate that an administrator be appointed and that there be a total renewal, a total revamping, of local government in those areas to eliminate the pernicious influence of Labor Party secret deals and Labor Party-endorsed corruption.

**Ms Virginia Judge:** Point of order: Standing Order 76 provides that the member speaking shall be relevant to the subject matter of the debate. I ask the member for Terrigal to remain within the ambit of the bill.

**The DEPUTY-SPEAKER:** Order! The member for Terrigal will confine his remarks to the leave of the bill.

**Mr CHRIS HARTCHER:** He is. He is talking about councils, elections and corruption in councils and why councils are dismissed. It just so happens that Labor Party councils are often dismissed for corruption. If the member for Strathfield is sensitive about the issue she can respond to my comments. The Australian Labor Party has a record of local government corruption and mismanagement unparalleled in the history of this State. This is not a debate about the entire Labor Party because the entire Labor Party stands indicted and its members know that the sword of Damocles hangs over their heads. Which one of them does not now have an inquiry into his or her activities? Will members who are not under investigation please raise their hands? The member for Wollongong raises her hand!

The people of Port Macquarie are entitled to pass judgement on their councillors. They are entitled to decide whether their councillors have acted wrongly and should be held to account through the ordinary process of local government elections, due to be held on 13 September 2008. If councillors at Port Macquarie have acted wrongly, the people of Port Macquarie will hold them to account. If the people of Port Macquarie feel that they should be reprimanded, they can impose that reprimand. The Minister has adduced no reason why the people of Port Macquarie should be denied local government representation until 2012. The concept of democracy flows through at every level of governance in this country—it applies in local government as much as it applies in State Government.

If the State Government is found to be corrupt and guilty of mismanagement, then the people of New South Wales are the appropriate vehicle to remove the Government from office, not some higher authority. Even though the Australian Labor Party screamed about the action taken by Sir John Kerr in 1975, an election was called within one month so that the people could pass judgement on the Government. There are no allegations of corruption against Port Macquarie council, merely a single allegation of mismanagement of a cultural centre's costing; yet for 4½ years the people of the Port Macquarie area will not have the right to pass judgement on their councillors or be represented by their elected representatives. The New South Wales Coalition stands by the people of Port Macquarie. We believe they are entitled to democracy and, accordingly, I commend the bill to the House.