

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

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**Bill introduced, and read a first time and ordered to be printed on motion by the Hon. Robert Brown.****Second Reading****The Hon. ROBERT BROWN** [11.13 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

The Shooters Party is pleased to introduce the Port Macquarie-Hastings Council Election Bill 2008. The object of the 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 council 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.

As members would be well aware, pursuant to a proclamation dated 26 February 2008, and published in the *Government Gazette* No. 25 of 27 February 2008, Mr Richard Persson was appointed as administrator for the local government area of Port Macquarie-Hastings. The administrator's term of office commenced on 26 February 2008 and will cease on the date of the declaration of Port Macquarie-Hastings Council's fresh election to be held in conjunction with the ordinary council elections on the second Saturday in September 2012. Under the bill, and despite the proclamation dated 26 February 2008, the administrator will cease to hold office immediately before the first meeting of Port Macquarie-Hastings Council held after the next fresh council election—that is, 13 September 2008—unless the administrator ceases to hold office under the Local Government Act 1993 before that time.

Port Macquarie-Hastings Council was dismissed primarily because of cost overruns on a major cultural centre being built in the area, commonly known as the Glasshouse project, and also because of argument about the location of the project. There have been no allegations of corruption or impropriety. I repeat: There have been no allegations of corruption or impropriety. The Glasshouse project comprises a performing arts theatre, a regional gallery, meeting rooms and a cafe, and is located on a Port Macquarie central business district site. The inquiry into the council found:

there is broad general support for the development of a facility for the performing and visual arts in the Port Macquarie-Hastings area subject to it being cost effective

The dismissal of Port Macquarie-Hastings Council is in no way similar to, nor should it be compared to, the dismissal of other councils in New South Wales. I repeat: No graft or corruption is alleged with regard to Port Macquarie-Hastings Council. The fact is that the Glasshouse project opponents who managed to have the council dismissed apparently wanted the facility built somewhere else in the council area. There was no dispute about the fact that the facility was needed by the community; it was simply a major disagreement about where it should go, and the end cost.

Governments are elected to govern and make decisions, be they right or wrong. People will judge governments at the ballot box. In the same way, councils are elected to make decisions, and that is what Port Macquarie-Hastings Council did with regard to the Glasshouse project. Surely, if the people of the Port Macquarie-Hastings local government area think their elected representatives went down the wrong path with the Glasshouse project, they should have a right to make that judgement in September 2008.

The New South Wales Department of Local Government report on the section 430 investigation into Port Macquarie-Hastings Council points out that the cost of the centre rose from \$7 million in 1997 to about \$37 million in 2006. What the report does not point out, however, is how different the project in 2006 was from the original 1997 concept. Community consultation on the centre appears to have been one of the issues focused upon by the centre's opponents and by the inquiry. Community consultation, by its very nature, is a very difficult beast. One can perhaps sympathise with the former mayor, Mr Rob Drew, who conceded in the case of the Glasshouse project that the council "could have done it better".

Port Macquarie-Hastings Council has been financially very successful—a fact that was established in evidence at the inquiry into the Glasshouse project, which showed that the council has a debt ratio of between 6 and 7 per

cent, one of the lowest in the State. To put this into perspective, Coffs Harbour, which is a similar-size regional centre, has a debt ratio of about 22 per cent. Port Macquarie-Hastings Council also was progressive in its developments. For instance, the council had the foresight to build a dam, which has drought-proofed the shire for 10 years, and undertook major upgrades to the airport. The New South Wales Government could perhaps take a leaf out of the council's book with regard to that dam.

Many councils of similar size would never have contemplated constructing a \$28 million arterial road on their own. In fact, the vast majority of similar-size councils simply are not in a position financially to undertake the major infrastructure program that Port Macquarie-Hastings Council has embarked upon. The council built a major recycling plant, and a world-noted garbage recycling facility, which is coping well with the second-highest growth rate in the State. The council had also won numerous awards and accolades for its work. In conclusion—and not much more needs to be said about this—if the majority of voters in the Port Macquarie-Hastings Council area do not want the Glasshouse project, or disagree with its location or cost, I am sure they will welcome the opportunity to have their say at the ballot box on 13 September 2008. I commend the bill to the House.