

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AMENDMENT (AMALGAMATION REFERENDUMS) BILL 2017*Second Reading*

Mr PHILIP DONATO (Orange) (11:01): I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

I introduce the Local Government Amendment (Amalgamation Referendums) Bill 2017 in this place on behalf the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party. I acknowledge those in the gallery today who stridently advocated against forced council amalgamations—the passionate individuals who comprise Save Our Councils. I recognise many of you, too numerous to name, but I thank two notable individuals, Phil Jenkyn and Will Tuck, who tirelessly campaigned for democracy. If this bill is not passed today, then the upcoming Cootamundra by-election will be a referendum on the National Party's inability to stand up to the city Liberals on forced council amalgamations.

The object of the bill is to amend the Local Government Act 1993 to provide that plebiscites are to be conducted to ascertain whether the electors of the local government areas amalgamated during 2016 wish the amalgamations to be reversed, and certain proposed amalgamations of local government areas are not to proceed unless approval for the amalgamation has been given by the electors of each of the areas concerned at a referendum. The bill, if passed, will ensure that council amalgamations, which have plagued this Government, will be dealt with once and for all. More importantly, the bill also will ensure that local residents finally will have a say on their council's future.

It is not often that the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party has been in lock step with the Opposition, the Christian Democratic Party, The Greens, the Animal Justice Party, and Independents on any particular issue. Therefore, I feel that the bill is a culmination of that collegiate and resolute cooperation, and the consensus is clear: We stand shoulder to shoulder on this important issue. The Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party has opposed forced amalgamations for many reasons, not least of which is that the Government did not give local residents a vote on the issue. The bill will right the problematic wrong created by this Government.

In many cases, councils are the largest local employer in their communities, particularly in regional areas. They play a vital role in delivering a broad range of services and employment opportunities. Without those services, many rural communities would struggle to survive or to attract and retain their local populations. Local government represents grassroots democracy. It is the closest government entity to citizens and it is best positioned to react to their concerns. This bill will ensure that grassroots democracy is protected.

The bill will give every voter across New South Wales the chance to vote on any future amalgamation of their local council, or a vote on whether to remain merged or to de-merge, if amalgamation already has taken place. Across this State, residents in local government areas have been robbed of their right to vote and to decide on the future of their local council. This Government has ridden roughshod, bizarrely in the name of council amalgamation, over the very people who voted for them. We still have not seen the secret KPMG study that prepared cases for about 40 council mergers and alleged that it would save taxpayers \$2 billion—but that has not stopped the Government from waving it about to shield itself from the discontent across New South Wales.

The recommendation of the Government to amalgamate many regional councils contradicts the intentions of those councils in their submissions for the Fit for the Future test. In fact, many of those councils passed the test, yet they were still being forced to amalgamate. I note that in the past week the Berejiklian-Barilaro Government has been running scared at the threat of this bill being debated today. The Government appears to have backed away from court challenges to five city-based councils because, irrespective of the court's decision, this bill would have granted locals a vote on whether or not to amalgamate. The question I ask is: What about the councils that did not have

the resources to challenge the merger in the courts? What about the councils that already were merged?

The amalgamations of Orange, Cabonne and Blayney councils were at the forefront of the Orange by-election last year. People in what was once known as National Party heartland made their voices heard loud and clear, "We don't want our councils merged without a vote." On this matter, The Nationals members of Parliament have been doing what they always do best—blindly follow the city-based Liberal Party in its decisions, even if those decisions are the opposite to what their electorates want. The Nationals have been hiding behind the Liberal Party on forced council amalgamations, but today those members of Parliament will not be able to hide anymore. Every member of the Legislative Assembly who is here today will have a chance to vote on this bill—unless the Liberal-Nationals Coalition tries to stall debate or do whatever it can to prevent a vote from taking place today.

At its very heart, this bill allows the very people we serve a chance to decide on the future of their council. If the Government has nothing to hide and believes that local communities are happy with their forced mergers, then there is no reason why this bill should not pass. When we have a vote on this bill, there are some members of The Nationals whose vote I will note carefully. I will watch closely the member for Cootamundra, who, as we all know, is retiring from politics, but still remains a member of this House. In her electorate there was a forced merger to create the Cootamundra-Gundagai Regional Council and the Hilltops Council. Now, free from the shackles of toeing the party line, she is free to join us in supporting this bill. My upper House colleague Robert Brown attended protests in Gundagai about the forced merger. The white-hot anger in the community is palpable. Does the member for Cootamundra believe her local community deserves a vote?

I will watch closely the member for Dubbo because in his electorate there was a forced merger to create the Dubbo Regional Council. As a fellow former police officer, I have a lot of respect for the member for Dubbo and his resolve. I fear he may be bound to toe the party line on this bill, but the question is: Does the member for Dubbo believe his local community deserves a vote? I will watch closely the member for Murray because in his electorate there was a forced merger to create the Edward River Council and the Murray River Council. Does the member for Murray believe his local community deserves a vote? I will watch closely the member for Myall Lakes, the member for Port Macquarie, and the member for Upper Hunter because in their electorates there was a forced merger to create the MidCoast Council.

Do these Nationals members of Parliament believe their local communities deserve a vote?

I will watch closely the member for Northern Tablelands, because in his electorate there was a forced merger to create the Armidale Regional Council. Does the member for Northern Tablelands believe his local community deserves a vote? Finally, I will watch very closely the member for Monaro and The Nationals leader. In the media he has been a vocal opponent of forced council amalgamations, but in his own electorate there was a forced merger to create the Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council and the Snowy Monaro Regional Council. This bill will give the people who voted him into office a vote to remain merged or to de-merge these newly created councils. Does the member for Monaro believe his local community deserves a vote?

Residents in regional New South Wales rely on their council for rubbish collection, child care, maintenance of roads and sporting facilities, water and sewerage services, and many other essential services. I have no doubt that forced council amalgamations will impact negatively on the provision of those services, and residents know that. They understand this, which is why they must be afforded the opportunity to vote on their council's future. The present situation in which forced mergers were abandoned in some parts of regional New South Wales was no doubt a direct result of the electoral defeat of The Nationals in the Orange by-election last year. But what about other

communities across New South Wales, not just the ones where The Nationals know they are losing support?

I realise that time is short, and I request that all members in this place who wish to speak on the bill keep their contributions short. We need a vote on this bill today. This bill provides the Government and the Minister with a lot of latitude in respect of councils that were amalgamated forcibly in 2016. The onus would be on the Minister for Local Government to use his or her best endeavours to give effect to the vote, should a majority of the electors vote for the amalgamation to be reversed. I hope that Government members in this House give this bill due consideration and find the courage to support it. The Shooters, Fishers and Farmers, the Opposition, the Christian Democratic Party, The Greens, the Animal Justice Party and the other Independents—that is, every non-Government member in both Houses—are extending a hand of fellowship to the Government. We are offering a way out for the Government to right a wrong and have this issue laid to rest before the 2019 State election. I commend this bill to the house.