

Local Government Amendment (Amalgamation Referendums) Bill 2017

Second Reading

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK (12:45): I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

It gives me great pleasure to introduce the Local Government Amendment (Amalgamation Referendums) Bill 2017. The object of the bill is to amend the Local Government Act 1993 to provide that:

(a) 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

(b) certain proposed amalgamations of local government areas are not to proceed unless approval to the amalgamation has been given by the electors of each of the areas concerned at a referendum.

The bill, if passed, will ensure that the council amalgamation issue that plagued the Government will be dealt with once and for all. More importantly, the bill will also ensure that local residents will finally 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, and the Animal Justice Party on any particular issue. However, quite often we are in lock step with the Christian Democratic Party, and on this issue I note that they have campaigned longer than we have and as strongly as we have. 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 because 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 an important and 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 recommendation of the Government to amalgamate a lot of 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 and yet they were still being forced to amalgamate. Residents in regional New South Wales rely on their council for rubbish collection, child care, maintenance of sporting fields, water and sewerage services, and many other services. I have no doubt that forced council amalgamations will negatively impact on the provision of those services and residents know and 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 as a direct result of the election of Phillip Donato in Orange, but what about the other communities across New South Wales, not just the ones where The Nationals know they are losing support?

It is simply not good enough to have an accidental and politicised solution for some, and then tell the rest, "Too bad, already done." That is exactly what has happened and is happening in New South Wales.

The bill was not difficult to draft, and I thank parliamentary counsel for their work. It is a simple bill and very easy to grasp. We live in a democracy, and it is incomprehensible that this Government could so easily, with the stroke of a pen, take those democratic rights away from the people—and then we have the nerve to talk about autocratic leaders in other countries. The bill does two things. Firstly, it provides for a plebiscite to be undertaken regarding the council amalgamations that occurred in 2016, in a form that shows the votes cast by the electors of each former area within the amalgamated area. Secondly, the bill requires a referendum take place before certain proposed council amalgamations can take place.

In fact, this bill allows the Government and the Minister a lot of latitude in respect of councils that were forcibly amalgamated 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, and perhaps in the other place, give this bill due consideration and find the courage to support it. We on this side of the House are extending a hand of fellowship on this issue. 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 the bill to the House.