

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AMALGAMATION POLICY

Motion

MR P. PAPALIA (Warnbro) [6.12 pm]: I move —

That the house condemns the Premier and the Minister for Local Government for their confusing, destructive and non-consultative local government amalgamation policy.

This motion addresses the ever-changing story of the Minister for Local Government's amalgamation process. Whilst I am reluctant to cover old ground, I am dealing with shifting ground, so it is necessary that I go over it. The Premier has demonstrated that he has an incredible propensity to rewrite history, and that he is willing to do so. I intend to address that by looking at the ever-changing story —

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr V.A. Catania): Order, members! If members need to have a conversation, it is best that they go outside the chamber and have it.

Mr P. PAPALIA: I will look at the minister's ever-changing story or never-ending story—that is, his contribution to destabilising local governments at a time when they are confronted by unprecedented uncertainty and destabilisation resulting from the global economic crisis. The 11 000 employees and hundreds of elected officials in the sector are desperately seeking certainty, but the minister does not give it to them.

The minister has been out in the community working as my publicity agent and trying to build my profile in probably much the same way as “Terrance the Trailer” has been doing for some of the backbench members of the government. The minister has his staff beaver away at lifting my profile—I appreciate that, minister! I thank him for the effort! Nevertheless, I must correct some of the assertions that have been made.

At the outset, I reiterate—as I have done since the minister commenced this debate on 5 February with his unilateral announcement in Exmouth at the Western Australian Local Government Association meeting—that Labor is for reform of the local government sector, as am I. Labor supports reform of the local government sector, that is why when it was in government —

The ACTING SPEAKER: Members, there is far too much conversation inside the chamber. I again ask all those who are having conversations to please take them outside the chamber.

Mr P. PAPALIA: Labor was engaged in a consultative and cooperative process led by the Western Australian Local Government Association and backed by the full support and cooperation of the then minister of the day with an aim of achieving the outcome of sustainability in the local government sector. Our policy was to encourage, where appropriate, amalgamations to achieve sustainability. There are many other ways of achieving sustainability, and the sector was well engaged in the process of achieving sustainability of its own volition as part of that systemic sustainability process that the minister is very familiar with. As the minister is aware, it can be done by sharing resources —

Mr C.C. Porter: Like the Office of Shared Services?

Mr P. PAPALIA: I am talking about the local government sector, minister!

Last time we debated this subject in this place, the Leader of the National Party and I discussed the South East Avon Organisation of Councils, an agreed cooperative arrangement where the various councils come together—they retain their individual identity—to cooperate and work together on projects with a value of around the range of \$250 000 to \$450 000 that small councils are engaged in —

Mr B.J. Grylls: It is actually a bit bigger than that. They are looking at —

Mr P. PAPALIA: That is what Dominic Carbone was speaking to me about when I met him.

Mr B.J. Grylls: They want to amalgamate their work crews so that they can actually go for some of the bigger road contracts—the multimillion-dollar contracts that normally the BGCs and —

Mr P. PAPALIA: I was referring to what they are doing now. They have been cooperating and operating that range of contracts, and they are keen to cooperate in a larger fashion to achieve bigger projects. That would require action by the minister. It can be done right now. All they need is the assurance that their cooperative organisation at the SEAVROC level will not be required to replicate the same administrative processes that are required of the council so that there is not the burden of additional red tape and expense on their processes at the cooperative level in the regional council. That process is underway.

As members know, there are something like 32 regional agreements among the 139 councils around the state. They are all operating, to some extent or other, in a manner to achieve sustainability, to share resources and personnel, to avoid duplication and to maintain consistency of processes. The minister is aware that in the south

west, councils in areas such as Donnybrook-Balingup, Capel and Dardanup were working towards a shared information technology system. That was prior to the local government amalgamation process getting underway; it was part of the systemic sustainability process. These are the shared and duplicated processes referred to. As the minister is aware, the south west group of metropolitan councils are working towards and are well down the track of achieving electronic submission, compilation, distribution and receipt of rates notices. That was all underway well before the minister's statement on 5 February. The statement on 5 February was not required to elicit that sort of progress in the sector. The systemic sustainability progress had these initiatives, and dozens of others, well underway across the state at the time the minister made his statement. At the Western Australian Local Government Managers Association meeting that the minister and I attended on 17 September, I think I said—and the minister agreed—that that process was moving at a slow pace. Since this process of amalgamation has been underway, my argument has been that, yes, that process could have been faster, but I do not see the point of threatening to force amalgamations. The threat made on 5 February has had a negative impact. I know the minister and the Premier are unwilling to concede that, and the Premier is even unwilling to acknowledge that the minister made that statement, but he knows that it was said. It was reported by the 40 or so representatives of the Western Australian Local Government Association present on the day. Bill Mitchell issued a media release on the day. The Minister for Local Government said to journalists from *The West Australian*, *The Australian* and the government online news site that in the event that local governments chose not to amalgamate, he would force amalgamations. The consequence of that is exactly as was predicted by Bill Mitchell in his media release. Bill Mitchell's media release of 5 February 2009 states —

What this announcement has done is damage all work towards regional cooperation by Local Governments who will now be focused only on ensuring their own survival in an amalgamation process.

That has happened. Admittedly, some councils are keen on the idea of amalgamations. Not surprisingly, in many cases they happen to be larger councils that sit beside smaller councils. The problem is that when the minister made his announcement on 5 February, the only criterion he gave was an arbitrary figure of 2 000 people living within the realm of the council.

Mr G.M. Castrilli: What did I say?

Mr P. PAPALIA: The minister said in his speech that a number of councils in the state have fewer than 2 000 people living within the confines of their boundaries. I am not saying that that is what the minister said he was trying to achieve; I am saying that that was the only guidance councils received. I know that the minister has subsequently released guidelines. The guidelines call on councils to complete a sustainability checklist. The minister has almost reverted to the collaborative and cooperative process that was underway prior to 5 February, but he has not retracted that statement. He has left the threat out there hanging over councils. I am suggesting to the minister today that it is an unhelpful, uncooperative process to allow the threat to hang over councils that there will be forced amalgamations if they do not amalgamate. If they complete the minister's sustainability checklist and all the guidelines, and if they jump through all the hoops and confirm that they are sustainable, the minister will still force amalgamations for no other apparent reason than to achieve a smaller number of larger councils. A certain amount of evidence, particularly in South Australia, which has gone through this process, indicates that councils can be crushed together but that at the completion of that process there are still large, unsustainable councils. The number of councils in South Australia decreased to 68 from almost double that number, and 33 of the remaining 68 councils proved to be unsustainable. The problem is that this process is flawed. It is flawed because the minister has left the threat hanging over councils.

I gave the minister the opportunity yesterday to retract the threat and to confirm that he did not really mean it and that he will not go ahead with it. At the Liberal Party state conference, the Premier denied that the minister ever said it. The Premier is trying to rewrite history completely. The Premier thinks that if he holds his breath, closes his eyes, stamps his feet and says that something did not happen, everyone else will accept that it did not happen. That is not what is happening in the sector. The people who heard the minister say it and who read the reports of him saying it, and who have not subsequently heard him retract the threat, believe the threat is still there, despite what the Premier has said. The minister was further undermined when it was revealed after the Liberal Party state conference that the Premier had given undertakings to the Monaco of Western Australia, Peppermint Grove, that it will never have to engage in this process. The wealthy Liberal Party donors of Peppermint Grove will not have to engage in an amalgamation process, no matter what is said. The Premier has subsequently said that that was just his personal opinion. The problem with the Premier's personal opinions is that they tend to have a bit of influence on what goes on in the state. This gives an insight into the Premier's thinking and into the type of person he is. Even if it is only his personal opinion, he believes that it is okay for one tiny local government within his electorate to be excluded from a process that he is happy to impose on every other local government in the state. That is demonstrably unfair. Not only is it demonstrably unfair, but also it has been acknowledged as being so right around the state. We were at the University of Western Australia on Monday as

part of the shadow cabinet to meet people and conduct an outreach program. We spoke to the guild at the conclusion of our morning's activities and, surprisingly, the first question asked by these young people, who I doubt will be impacted on by the local government amalgamation process, was what was my view on Peppermint Grove being exempted from the process. I can understand where they were coming from. As young people, they are a little idealistic; they think that they are growing up in Australia, where people do not get to choose whether to participate in a process that is imposed on everybody else just because they are wealthy.

As I understand from some of our country members, there is significant unrest and concern in certain parts of the regions. The member for North West, who is Acting Speaker at the moment, has reported to me the significant turnout of people to his mobile office as a result of the minister's statements and the media reports about his and the Premier's behaviour subsequent to the minister's statement on 5 February. I am sure that he will speak to the motion later to give his personal account of the concerns of a large number of people. It is still an issue. It will not go away just because the minister has said that it did not happen or because he has refused to say the words "forced amalgamations". No matter how many times he says "voluntary amalgamations", it will not erase his actions on 5 February. The minister needs to retract his statement and say to the people who will be directly affected and who are spending tens of thousands of dollars and time and effort on proposals that the minister has demanded, "This process will proceed in a more cooperative and collaborative fashion and when you have completed the sustainability checklist and have determined that your council is sustainable, and you have confirmed, in accordance with the guidelines, that there are no benefits to be had for your ratepayers from amalgamation, that will be okay."

I concede that some actions will still need to be taken to achieve reform. I have suggested some actions and the minister has ridiculed some of those suggestions. I have suggested things that the minister could do right now. Because he has the benefit of a \$400 million country local government fund and a significant amount of money to entice activity, I have suggested that he could take up the recommendations of the 2006 report of the Public Accounts Committee's inquiry into local government accountability, chaired by the member for Mindarie. It was an excellent report. A key recommendation of that report was that the Auditor General be brought into play in the local government sector in a more significant manner, and that he be tasked with auditing and assessing sustainability efficiency and those sorts of practices, and benchmarking the results against all other local governments to a percentage of about 18 per cent, with the remainder to be outsourced to the industry. This will also allow transparency to be achieved whereby local governments across the state can be compared with each other to identify whether they are performing at best practice. That could be achieved without going through any of the process that we have engaged in to this point. The minister could encourage that activity just by funding the Auditor General to undertake that function and by outsourcing the remainder. The minister has the money to do that. Strangely enough, in a budget process in which all departments and organisations are searching for a three per cent efficiency dividend, the minister has the ability with his \$100 million to elicit in the next three months positive outcomes for the local government sector. That is one thing the minister could have done.

Mr G.M. Castrilli: Are you saying that I should use that as a carrot or a bribe?

Mr P. PAPALIA: No; I am saying that the minister could pay for the Auditor General to benchmark all local governments. That is one point.

I refer now to enticing activity. I ask the Minister for Local Government to tell me why it was a better outcome for him to threaten that he would force amalgamations if local governments did not come up with amalgamation proposals, rather than proffer some of the money that is being given to the 110 local governments in the regions. I commend royalties for regions. It is a great idea, but it should be done in an appropriately financially responsible manner. That is what I said in the debate on the Treasurer's Advance Authorisation Bill. The same thing is true in this instance, because the minister has responsibility for \$100 million. He could utilise that money as an incentive for amalgamation, if that is what he wants to achieve. I actually think that sustainability should be the outcome.

I question why the minister chose to turn the debate to amalgamations instead of sustainability. By doing what he did on 5 February, he abandoned the government's pre-election promise and all outcomes of the systemic sustainability study. Instead, he chose to turn the debate from sustainability to amalgamation. I wonder why he did that. I suspect the minister may have a lingering desire to achieve amalgamation of a greater Bunbury council. That may or may not be the case. It is interesting to note that the number of ratepayers in the councils around Bunbury far exceed 2 000. They are not captured by the number the minister referred to in his statement on 5 February.

After yesterday when the minister chose to put up the brick wall and refused to respond to the opportunity to retract his threat to enforce amalgamations, I came into this place today with the desire to give him another opportunity. He should not continue to parrot the old lines that this is a voluntary process. If it is a voluntary process, that is fine and the minister can retract his threat to enforce amalgamations. The minister could make a

one-line public statement to the effect that, "If councils follow the sustainability checklist and identify that they are sustainable and there are no benefits to be had from amalgamation then I, Minister John Castrilli, will not force them to amalgamate." If the minister says that, I am with him because he would have then reverted to a collaborative cooperative approach, which was the Liberal Party's pre-election policy and is still the Labor Party's policy.

Mr G.M. Castrilli: It still is.

Mr P. PAPALIA: The minister says that now. If that is the case, he should get up and say what I asked him to say. I am giving the minister another chance to have the opportunity to say, "I got it wrong. I should not have said what I did on 5 February. If you go through the sustainability checklist and you are sustainable and there would be no benefits to your council from amalgamation, then your council can stay as it is. You will still have to participate in reform within the local government sector, but I will not force you to amalgamate." If the minister says that, he would retract his statement and begin to undo the damage that he has done today.

MR T.G. STEPHENS (Pilbara) [6.33 pm]: What a fine speech to follow. The member for Warnbro has put to the house in an extraordinarily clear way a case against the Minister for Local Government. It is a humbling experience to come after such a fine presentation by the shadow Minister for Local Government. The Minister for Local Government must wake up every day and wonder why he has to have such a skilled and talented opponent. No doubt at times he would prefer to keep his head under the covers and not get up. He is up against a formidable shadow minister. The Minister for Local Government is his own worst enemy.

Several members interjected.

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: But not while the member for Warnbro is alive.

I reiterate to the Minister for Local Government that the process of reform in local government requires hard work and not glib lines. The hard work requires tackling the issues that stand in the way of the reform process. I ask the Minister for Local Government to tell the house what work he has done to sort out the formulas associated with the Western Australian Local Government Grants Commission that basically reward inefficiencies. Rather than talk about enforced amalgamations, he should tell the house about the quality hard work that he is doing. The Minister for Local Government should then ignore his arbitrary formulas about population numbers as though they will somehow or other determine what councils should appropriately be amalgamated with other councils. He should look to places like, for instance, the little township of Cue, which deserves the respect and support that local government delivers it, even though it does not have the vast numbers to justify the apparatus of local government. If it were stripped of that apparatus, enormous damage would be done.

Another reform process that could be supported is the collaboration and cooperation across the Murchison councils that should be rewarded by the formulas of the Local Government Grants Commission to support various structures within the communities. The township of Cue could survive as a vibrant part of the fabric of Western Australia rather than be destroyed through an amalgamation process that would injure it.

I note that the preservation clause seems to be in the government's policy for the Monaco of the western suburbs; that is, Peppermint Grove. I inform the good burghers of Peppermint Grove that an alternative formula could be put in place by a sensible Minister for Local Government. There is a good case for amalgamating Peppermint Grove with places like Halls Creek or Wiluna. They should be joining them together. Instead of Peppermint Grove having a valet rubbish service, such a service could be balanced out. The people throughout the Shires of Wiluna and Halls Creek would probably have a rubbish service. It would not necessarily be with gloves on, but at least there would be a service. Communities all over regional Western Australia would get some sort of fiscal equalisation if they amalgamated with Pilbara shires. If the minister brought in that proposal, I would seriously consider it. I might be able to persuade a few of my colleagues why we might be able to deliver a forced amalgamation to the people of Peppermint Grove rather than it retain the Monaco status it has under the preservation clause that has been delivered for them alone by the Premier of Western Australia.

The western suburbs beg for a structural reform process. However, this government botched it previously when it was in government. Under Minister for Local Government Paul Omodei it divided Perth councils into a multiplicity of councils. It then left behind assets that should not have been distributed in the way they were in places such as Ocean Gardens. The Labor government was left to sort out the mess that was caused by the then Liberal government in its tampering of local government boundaries for its political purposes. This minister should not get up to those tricks again. He should introduce a much more profound and respectful process to encourage local governments to cooperate.

The minister should not come up with unnecessarily restrictive formula. He should come to the table promoting a genuine partnership with local government. He should get rid of those words from the lexicon that see local government as though it were another tier of government. It is a sphere of government. Three spheres of

government operate around this country. Local government is a sphere that operates in a different space to the space in which this sphere of government operates. The local government sphere, the state government sphere and the federal government sphere should be respectful towards each other and should not be waging war on each other, which is what this Minister for Local Government did in his speech in Exmouth.

The opportunity is available to put incentives on the table for collaborative asset management opportunities and for local governments to pick up the term contracts for road maintenance if they collaborate in regions like the Pilbara and Kimberley. They must ensure that they have the opportunity to bolster recycling across a region. For example, the Pilbara has an enormous opportunity to respond to the challenges of environmental health by providing a response to recycling.

The council of the Town of Port Hedland has just commenced an enormously exciting process associated with paying a rebate for the return of bottles and cans. Overnight, the town has been transformed by that one process. Collaboration across the region could really bolster that. However, the local governments need on the table the carrots and the incentives to encourage them to make that happen. They need shared senior planning officers and building inspectors. They need help with the asset register management process. That does require encouragement. If this government could just manage to get some collaboration between the Liberal Party Minister for Local Government and the National Party Minister for Regional Development, it could deliver for local government funds that would secure greater reform in the local government area than has ever previously been on offer. The minister had a good opportunity. However, the minister has virtually blown it now. I repeat what the member for Warnbro—the esteemed shadow minister, whom I am fiercely proud of, and whom I am proud to stand behind and support —

Mr P. Abetz interjected.

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: I will happily take the halo from my head, if that is what the member is talking about, and put it onto the head of the member for Warnbro.

The member for Warnbro has given the Minister for Local Government a good opportunity. The minister should apologise to the state of Western Australia, apologise to local government and apologise to the house. The minister should just admit that he got it wrong. The minister should be a bit like velcro in his approach to his mistakes. He should not try to be like teflon and be smart and say that his mistakes do not belong to him. The minister should own his mistakes. He should wear his mistakes. He should shine the lantern on his mistakes and let people know that he knows what everyone else knows: he made a mistake; he got it wrong. If the minister does not do that, he will be feeding the fear in local government that he is committed to a forced amalgamation strategy. The minister appears to be playing out the fantasies that come from being “Lord of Bunbury”. He appears to be some sort of latter-day John Forrest from Bunbury way who is determined to roll out the sphere of local government from Bunbury and take over all the local government councils in his area.

I want to give my good colleague the member for North West the opportunity to say a few words, so I will conclude my remarks.

MR V.A. CATANIA (North West) [6.41 pm]: From the way the member for Pilbara has been talking about my electorate, I am worried that there may be some amalgamations down the track and that the member for Pilbara will be moving south a bit!

I support what the member for Warnbro and the member for Pilbara have said about forced amalgamations. Recently, I set up my mobile office, as the member for Warnbro has said, in Shark Bay. I was also present at the Shire of Shark Bay council meeting. Although that is an interesting council at the moment, I believe it is the Peppermint Grove of the north west.

Mr T.G. Stephens: All those Liberals who love one another!

Mr V.A. CATANIA: That is right! Shark Bay is a wonderful place. It is the jewel in the crown of my electorate. When I set up my mobile office in Shark Bay, I was inundated with constituents who wanted to see me. That was not only at the council meeting, which went for several hours in fact, but throughout the day. I ended up seeing 56 constituents. Shark Bay does not have as many people as Peppermint Grove, but, nonetheless, a very high number of people in the community came to see me because of their concern about forced amalgamations. The people of Shark Bay are concerned about the comments that were made by the Minister for Local Government in Exmouth on 5 February. They are even more concerned about the comments that were made by the Premier about how it is okay if his Liberal mates in Peppermint Grove do not want to go through the amalgamation process. I said to the people at the council of the Shire of Shark Bay exactly what the Premier has said to the people of Peppermint Grove. I said, “You are the Peppermint Grove of the north west, and you do not need to fill out this questionnaire. You do not need to justify your existence. You are a shire that should stand alone, because you are doing a good job.” They took my advice, and they are now going to have discussions with the other Gascoyne shire councils. The ratepayers who were present at that meeting had some concerns about the moneys they would have to expend on the amalgamation proposal, which were not in the budget that had been planned

for this year. They have estimated a cost for the three shires in the Gascoyne that are participating in this exercise. I say “exercise”, because I do not think anything will come out of it in those three shires. They are anticipating a huge cost, because all of the 139 councils in this state have been told to fill out this questionnaire and employ a consultant, when there may be only five local government consultants in Western Australia, so obviously the cost will go up. The Gascoyne shire councils are now looking at a cost of \$80 000 or \$90 000 to fill out this questionnaire, because of the fear that they will be forced to amalgamate. They want to make sure that they go through the hoops that the minister is making them go through so that they will keep their status in their community. The Gascoyne residents know the importance of having these shires from Exmouth down to Shark Bay. They do not want forced amalgamations.

I actually would like the minister and the Premier to keep on speaking and making these comments, because it is making it easier for me to be re-elected as the member for North West.

Several members interjected.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I am even safer! I am hoping I will be able to increase the Labor vote, as I did at the last election, even more because of what the minister and the Premier are now doing. They are ostracising even their own voters. The people in the Peppermint Grove of the north west will not vote for this government. They are very upset that this government wants to take away their identity. Therefore, I would like the minister and the Premier to keep making these comments, because it is making my job a lot easier, and it is making our job in opposition a lot easier. I think this will be a one-term government. That is what I think. The people in the community are also saying that.

Mr B.J. Grylls interjected.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Did someone hear a member of the National Party speak? Has any member of the National Party spoken on any subject so far—other than a couple of questions here and there? I have not heard any National Party member speak on this issue. I would welcome their contribution to this debate, so that they can say to their coalition colleagues that they do not want any forced amalgamations. I want them to say that in this place, because they owe it to people in the community. This is about jobs and security. This proposal for forced amalgamations is causing unnecessary unease for families who live in places like Cue, Mt Magnet, Meekatharra, Yalgoo and Murchison settlement. They are worried that these forced amalgamations will affect their livelihoods and their towns, because it is the Gascoyne shires that keep these towns going. Sure, these shires fall under the minister’s criterion of having fewer than 2 000 ratepayers. However, we need to bear in mind the distances between these towns. The member for Pilbara touched on Cue. Cue is one of the most fantastic places in this state. It is a very well run shire, and it is a very financial shire. This attack on Cue will have a dramatic effect not only on the livelihoods of the people in that town, but also on the fortunes of the minister and the Premier at election time.

MR C.J. BARNETT (Cottesloe — Premier) [6.49 pm]: Mr Deputy Speaker —

Mr T.G. Stephens: Are you a one-man show, Mr Premier?

Mr C.J. BARNETT: We are saving the Minister for Local Government. We are holding him back and feeding him red meat, and next week we will let him loose.

Mr M. McGowan: As soon as Parliament is over.

Mr C.J. BARNETT: No. It is the opposition’s call, of course, and I hope that it does bring it on next week because a number of members have a lot of experience in local government and would like to speak on this bill. I do not come from a local government background, but I do want to say a few words. Local governments precede state governments in a sense as sovereign government. Perth City Council was established in the 1830s or the 1840s, was it?

Mr M. McGowan: The member for Mount Lawley was only deputy mayor. How would he know?

Mr C.J. BARNETT: I am sure he will know by next week! The Minister for Local Government has placed on the table the issue of the number and structure of local government authorities in Western Australia. Why should he not? He is a new local government minister with a long and outstanding career in local government. He was probably the most popular mayor of Bunbury ever. Look at his share of the vote at the last election. On average on this side of the house we settled for a modest 4.3 per cent swing. In Bunbury we had a 12.63 per cent swing. What a ringing endorsement.

Mr A.J. Carpenter interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr V.A. Catania): Order, member for Willagee!

Mr C.J. BARNETT: I think the member for Willagee has been eating too much red meat!

Mr T.G. Stephens: Perth City Council was established in 1858. I have just googled it.

Mr C.J. BARNETT: I thank the member very much.

Mr P. Papalia: Will you take an interjection?

Mr C.J. BARNETT: No, I have not got to two minutes of my speech. The member for Willagee has interjected for one and a half minutes so far.

I start with this simple proposition: Western Australia has a little over two million people. The state has 139 local authorities. They grew out of the old roads boards. We all broadly know the history of local government. I have asked this question in forum after forum in recent weeks, including at the Western Australian Farmers Federation conference last week where many people were very passionate about their local authorities and their local towns, and good on them. The Minister for Agriculture and Food is not here now but was there then. I asked if anybody in that room could seriously suggest that in 2009 some 139 local authorities were the best structure for local government for the twenty-first century. Do members know the response I got? It was silence, because everyone knew that 139 local authorities in 2009 were not logical. After my brief address a number of local government councillors came up to me and thanked me for saying the obvious; that is, what everyone knows and needs to be said. We have here a Minister for Local Government who has said the obvious; something that everyone in this chamber knows and that everyone in Western Australia knows. He has had the courage to propose that we do something about it. What is wrong with that? What is wrong with some leadership from the great mayor of Bunbury?

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Order, member for Wambro!

Mr C.J. BARNETT: I have a plant in a pot in my front courtyard and I call it the Papalia plant because when I went out doorknocking in his electorate, where he had a good win in the election, I asked myself what I should say. I saw a very unusual plant. I do not think the people there were Liberal voters. I said that it was a very unusual plant. The man was very pleased to see me, asked me to hang on, whipped out the back, got his cutters and potted the plant for me. It is growing. I named it after the member. It is a very healthy plant, although it is a very ugly little plant.

Mr P. Papalia: Premier, I am hurt!

Mr C.J. BARNETT: I like the member! Western Australia has 139 local authorities. Queensland has twice the population and is relevant because, like Western Australia, it is a very large geographic area. Queensland has 73 local authorities compared with Western Australia's 139. Queensland has a population of four million people. South Australia has 68 local authorities for a population of 1.5 million people. Victoria has 78 local authorities for a population of five million people. New South Wales has 152 local authorities, which is more than Western Australia has, but it has 6.5 million people, over three times our state's population, and so it goes on. In the past 100 years the number of local government authorities across the country has reduced by 55 per cent. Reform has taken place around Australia except for here.

Let us have a little think, if we can. What is the role of local government? Why is this an issue? We could do as I have done and simply say that there are too many local authorities relative to the population, but it goes a bit beyond that, does it not? Western Australian Local Government Association members conducted their own investigation and produced a report. I think they took four years to do so. They came back with the alarming conclusion that a large number of local governments are not sustainable, which is the buzz word today. They ran campaigns during the last election telling people to support a candidate who supports sustainable local government. I can remember saying to my wife Lyn when the advertisement came on, "What the hell do you think that is about?" I did not understand what they were on about. One part of me was asking what they were doing spending ratepayers' money running expensive television campaigns during a state election to tell us to support a candidate who supports sustainable local government. I did not understand it. Maybe I am a bit thick but I did not know where they were coming from and I am still not sure what they were trying to get over. That suggests to me that they are a bit lost in the cyberspace of the twenty-first century. They do not quite know where they fit.

There maybe a school of thought that says that local authorities should go back to roads and rubbish. I do not think that anyone seriously believes that that should be the case. Equally, local authorities are branching into all sorts of areas. I am sure that many people in all of our electorates are saying that they do not really know that they want their rates spent on that or surveys in the suburbs or whatever else, because they do not see that as the local authorities' role. My view is that local government is there to manage the local community—the parks, roads, gardens, local services, community events—and its worth considering whether they should do more. For example, the state government owns hundreds of heritage properties. Why not think about vesting those

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Mr Paul Papalia; Acting Speaker; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Vincent Catania; Mr Colin Barnett

properties in local government, which can then run and manage them as local community facilities? Why should the state take the view that those are the state's and those are theirs? Why not regard it all as public ownership and look laterally in a twenty-first century sense about what is the role of local government? The minister has brought this issue on.

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

Mr C.J. BARNETT: I heard the member's speech. The minister wrote to all local government authorities in Western Australia. I want to draw the attention of the house to the date of the letter, which was 5 February and quite some time ago. It was not just when this issue appeared in the media. He wrote to the local government authorities.

Mr P. Papalia: What did he say?

Mr C.J. BARNETT: I will tell the member what he said. I want to read from the third paragraph of the letter.

Mr P. Papalia: That is not the issue.

Mr C.J. BARNETT: It is the issue right now. The member has made his speech and I have only 10 minutes left, and very little time tonight. The minister wrote to all 139 local authorities —

I formally invite each of the 139 councils within Western Australia to embrace this opportunity to voluntarily amalgamate and to voluntarily reduce the total number of elected members for each council.

That is pretty clear. He wrote to every council, including the Shire of Peppermint Grove, and Peppermint Grove will respond. For the first time in years we have got a local government minister who is actually willing to take on the issue that local government put into the arena. They said they were not sustainable and now we have got a minister saying that they are probably not. Having 139 local authorities does not work in the twenty-first century, so he has had the courage to put the issue out there in the public arena. What do we get from the opposition? Nothing.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.

House adjourned at 7.00 pm
