

LOCAL GOVERNMENT — CITY OF MELVILLE AND CITY OF COCKBURN

Statement

HON SIMON O'BRIEN (South Metropolitan) [6.26 pm]: I regret to have to inform the house that we have some trouble brewing in the south metropolitan area in the field of local government. Local government in this state is created under our constitutional arrangements, which prescribe that there shall be a system of local government in Western Australia. That is easier said than done. I think we have all seen many occasions of outstanding service provided in our shires, cities and towns; we have also seen unfortunate circumstances arise from time to time, so this house needs, before it rises, to be acquainted with a couple of matters that at the moment are concerning me greatly.

I again asked a question yesterday of the Minister for Local Government about when an inquiry into the City of Melville is going to be concluded. According to the response I received, they do not have the report; no, it has not been finished; no, he has not got it; and they do not know when they are going to finish it. I am very concerned about how long this matter is taking. I do not know whether it is because there are precious few people in the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries available to do this work, or whether others are running around putting out other bushfires. But it is very, very damaging to the morale of a council when this sort of question mark is hanging over its head. It is bad not only for elected members, but also, more specifically, for staff and the whole corporate entity and how it goes about its business when there is this sort of uncertainty pervading everything they do. I know it is affecting people this way. Why? It is because they tell me so. I sat down with a person I have known for very many years who has been a member of that council for 30 years. People beg him to run again because he is a safe pair of hands. He is non-partisan and all the rest of it. I appreciate his advice, and he confirmed what I know from a number of other people about the City of Melville—that this uncertainty is having a crippling effect. So I appeal, through the house to the Minister for Local Government, to please get on with allowing the City of Melville to get on. I do not believe the trumped-up charges that led to this inquiry have much validity, but we will see. It is important that the minister, please, gets on with it so that everyone can get on with it, whatever the future may hold.

However, it gets worse. As I speak right now, a special meeting of the City of Cockburn is in progress. I discovered a while ago that this meeting was about to take place. I inquired of several people discreetly about the business of that meeting. I understood that the business of the meeting was to consider a motion of no-confidence in the Deputy Mayor of Cockburn, Lee-Anne Smith. I discreetly sought some more information. Some people were able to give me a bit of information; others very primly just referred me to the agenda that appears on the council's website, because they are scared to say boo. I think a lot of people in local government across the state are scared to say boo or give any advice about the matters that are now being played out in public as I speak.

I became aware this afternoon that there is a disturbance in the force. Although I am old-fashioned enough to rely on traditional media sources, a lot has been going around, and has been for some time, on Facebook and other online sources —

Hon Stephen Dawson interjected.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I am trying to get into the twenty-first century, minister.

Hon Stephen Dawson: Do you read that stuff?

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I do.

Hon Darren West: Do you read *The West Australian*?

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Absolutely.

This is a serious matter, and it concerns me. I did say by way, again, of discreet response to a few people who hold various positions at the City of Cockburn that I wish them all the best in working their way through what is bound to be an unpleasant and difficult situation, without knowing what is behind it. As I said, in the brief communication I had with the Mayor of the City of Cockburn, who again was discreet in not telling me anything, I said these matters never end well, and my prediction is that this matter will not end well.

I have viewed the business of the meeting. It is, first, to consider a motion of no-confidence in the Deputy Mayor, Lee-Anne Smith. I have no brief for Lee-Anne Smith. It is the case for every elected member of any council in my region that if they want my assistance or support at any time to do their job, they have got it. They all know that, because I have given it to them in writing. I have undertaken to provide that to every one of them, whether I know them or not.

The second business of the meeting is to go further and consider the suspension of the deputy mayor from representing council on specified standing committees, reference groups and internal organisations. I do not know what this deputy mayor is meant to have done. However, as I said earlier to Mayor Logan Howlett, these things

do not end well. I do not know what sort of acrimony has given rise to this or what sorts of allegations will come forward.

The third business of the meeting is to consider the removal from the deputy mayor of the deputy mayoral allowance, to be reviewed following a six-month period. If a council is of a mind to remove someone as their delegate to some other forum, it can do that, and it can do what this council is proposing. If a council member is asked to be the council's delegate on a forum such as the Western Australian Local Government Association, an allowance, honorarium or other form of payment might be attached to that. Therefore, by definition, if that delegate was removed from that position, they obviously would not be paid for doing that. However, it seems to me that if a council proposes to remove a deputy mayoral allowance from a person, it is taking it upon itself to get that person by voting to see whether it has the numbers to impose that arbitrary financial penalty, for whatever reason. We do not know what the reasons are.

This is all public. It is very unfortunate that it has come to this. As I have said, the ripples in the community around this issue cause me great disquiet. I hope I and other members in this place are called to help the council work through this difficult exercise. I might on a subsequent occasion have further to report to the house. There is something about this matter that does not add up. As I have said, I have no particular relationship with the current deputy mayor. I do not know who is who in the zoo on this matter. However, members need to be aware of it. It is causing me disquiet, and it is something to which we will have to pay attention in due course.