

Speaker; Mr Mark McGowan; Mr Colin Barnett; Deputy Speaker; Mr Bill Johnston; Mr David Templeman; Mr Tony Simpson; Mrs Glenys Godfrey; Mr Shane Love; Mrs Michelle Roberts

LOCAL GOVERNMENT — AMALGAMATIONS

Matter of Public Interest

THE SPEAKER (Mr M.W. Sutherland) informed the Assembly that he was in receipt within the prescribed time of a letter from the Leader of the Opposition seeking to debate a matter of public interest.

[In compliance with standing orders, at least five members rose in their places.]

MR M. McGOWAN (Rockingham — Leader of the Opposition) [4.32 pm]: I move —

That this house calls on the Barnett government to guarantee there will be no forced council amalgamations in the metropolitan area or regional WA.

This is an opportunity for all members of this house to put on record where they stand on a pressing issue in Western Australia today. This issue will be at the forefront of public attention tomorrow when the government releases its new boundary maps for local governments in metropolitan Perth. Today, prior to that release, members of the house can say whether they support forced amalgamations of councils or whether they oppose them. It is very simple. If local communities are forced to amalgamate without the opportunity for the referendum procedures under the law, it is a forced amalgamation. If local communities are legislated to create a larger local authority, it is a forced amalgamation. It is quite clear and simple. This is an opportunity for members to express their views on metropolitan Perth or regional WA. The government was elected on a platform. Indeed, while I am on the subject, the Whitlam government was elected on a platform and it set about implementing it. This government was elected on a platform and set about unravelling and unrolling the platform upon which it was elected. One of the promises the government made in the lead-up to the election was from the member for Darling Range, the Minister for Local Government. On 21 February 2013 he made a clear statement that I quote to the house —

I recently made some remarks at a local forum that the Liberal Party supported forced council amalgamations. The Liberal Party does not support forced amalgamations, I got it wrong, it was my mistake. I apologise for the confusion this has created.

That was the Minister for Local Government two weeks before the state election when he said there would be no forced council amalgamations. The Premier in his *Residents' Newsletter* of the summer of 2013 wrote about local government amalgamations in his own electorate. I will quote to the house what he claimed in his own newsletter to his own constituents. He wrote —

... claims that the State Government will use its powers to force such an amalgamation are simply not true.

If the government does not allow referendum procedures or if it legislates, it will be breaking these two solemn commitments it made to the people of Western Australia, and indeed, the Premier's own statement that he made two weeks from the election. He was asked whether the government would force amalgamations and not allow referendums and he ruled it out absolutely. Since then, in the last 18 months, we have had turmoil, uncertainty, chaos and dysfunction in local government as the government has rolled around with all sorts of ideas and plans because it was not clear about its intentions before the state election. If the government had gone to the state election and said it would legislate for a certain number of councils, it would have a mandate, as Gough Whitlam said, but it did not. The government deliberately and directly misled the people of Western Australia. That is what this government did in the lead-up to the state election.

Some people would say—the Premier says it—that we should get rid of councils because there are too many. What difference would it make to go from around 140 councils to 125 councils? What difference would it make to go from 30 councils to 16 councils in the metropolitan area? Is it a revolutionary reform? I do not think so. However, it breaks a promise and it flies in the face of the evidence about forced amalgamations. I want to quote the foremost academic specialising in local government, Professor Brian Dollery from the University of New England—the bloke they always get on the radio and who has devoted his life to examining these issues. On this government's plan he said —

... any hope of economies of scale arising from the termination of 18 councils is largely illusory. Furthermore, only two of the ten main council functions hold any promise of pecuniary efficiencies derived from scale.

Then in an opinion piece he wrote —

Anyone who still believes that compulsory council consolidation will somehow lead to financial sustainability in local government, with more efficient councils, lower costs and substantial scale economies, has not bothered to acquaint themselves with the vast empirical literature on amalgamation.

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Brian Dollery is a professor of economics and director of the Centre for Local Government at the University of New England and the foremost expert always quoted in relation to these matters. University of Western Australia economists James Fogarty and Amin Mugeru have examined the issue and have stated —

... the evidence that is available does not generally support the view that amalgamations provide substantial cost savings.

The government cannot quote anyone who endorses what it is doing. It cannot point out a business case or cost savings or efficiencies. All it has and all it is acting on is prejudice based on the Premier's dislike of the fact that in his own turf he has six councils and they cause him some grief. He does not like them, so he is saying, "Oh, we're going to get rid of them all, now", which is his petulant way. He has never served in local government, has not seen what local governments do, does not understand the work involved and does not understand the fact that local communities sometimes like to have a say in the decisions that impact them. We have seen a ham-fisted attack on local councils across Western Australia. The opposition is saying to the house that local councils deserve the right to have a say, and that the people and the Parliament deserve a mandate and an election if the government is going to do these things, rather than a bare-faced denial in front of the cameras two weeks before a state election.

What else have we seen from the government on these issues? We have seen two things. Firstly, I will start with the regions. On a number of occasions the Premier has said that once the government has finished with the metropolitan area, it will do the same thing in the regions. On 10 September he came out with some interesting ideas about the area north of Kalgoorlie; indeed, Madam Deputy Speaker, you are mentioned in his comments from the *Hansard* of 10 September when he stated —

... I am not picking on my friend the member for Kalgoorlie, but look at the area to the north of Kalgoorlie. What is there? Menzies, Leonora and all those areas. Are they viable? No. Do they provide extensive services? No. They are totally dependent on the commonwealth and state governments. What would it mean, member for Kalgoorlie? Imagine if there was an outback council, heavily funded by the state government and heavily funded by the commonwealth government to create the outback shire of Western Australia—it would be fantastic!

It would be an area potentially the size of Queensland out there that the Premier said is not currently viable, but then he said it would have to be funded by the state and commonwealth governments. We have seen what the commonwealth government does. It just pulls money away, from remote Indigenous communities, no less. These are, frankly, the poorest people in the country, and they will lose support for their water and power because the so-called Indigenous Prime Minister, as he calls himself, and the commonwealth government have just ripped those services away from them. The Premier of this state is saying, "We're going to amalgamate your councils in the regions without an electoral mandate", and he somehow thinks that everything out there will be rosy because a few councils have been amalgamated. Well, I will give the Premier a tip: whether or not they are amalgamated, it is tough out there, and the areas are huge. People actually want a local say in their own affairs, and if the government creates councils the size of Victoria, New South Wales or Queensland, people will no longer have a local say in their affairs, they will not even be able to go to meetings and councillors will not even know each other because of the distances involved.

The second thing we have seen from this government concerns the metropolitan area and Friday's pronouncement from on high. We have gone through years of this Minister for Local Government, and perhaps the former one, saying that the government is going to examine the Local Government Advisory Board's recommendations and either accept or reject them. I have heard the minister say in this house, half a dozen times at least, "We're going to get them and we're going to accept or reject them." The original wording was "in total", then it went to individual recommendations that the government is going to accept or reject; and now the language has gone to, according to the Premier, looking at "specialised legislation" for the City of Perth.

Mr C.J. Barnett: I said that 18 months ago.

Mr M. McGOWAN: Oh, there you go. After the election, I am sure.

The Premier said that the government would look at specialised legislation for the City of Perth, and I have a quote of what he said about that on radio. He gets away with it because people generally do not understand the history involved. In an interview on 6PR on 17 October 2014, he said, in part —

These boundaries in Perth haven't changed in a hundred years, it reflects a different era, a bygone era..."

I have the City of Perth Restructuring Act 1993 here. Hon Paul Omodei was Minister for Local Government at that time and the Premier was then the Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party who put in place the existing

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boundaries of the City of Perth in 1993! He sat in the cabinet when those boundaries were created, yet on Friday he said that they have not changed for 100 years! He would say anything.

Mr C.J. Barnett: I don't lie.

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order, members! Do not be tempted, members!

Mr C.J. Barnett interjected.

Mr M. McGOWAN: I am sorry, Premier; what was that? Is the Premier going to be ungracious again, attacking people who have died today? Is he going to do that again?

Point of Order

Mr C.J. BARNETT: To accuse me of attacking someone who has died today I presume refers to former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. I ask that the Leader of the Opposition apologise and withdraw that.

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order, members! Silence, please, when I am standing! Member for Cannington.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Whether or not criticising a dead man is “attacking” them, there was no breach of standing orders by saying that. Unless this man, who did attack someone this morning, can point out a standing order that the Leader of the Opposition is in breach of, then there is no point of order and all he is doing is grandstanding, again.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order, members. There is no point of order. Leader of the Opposition, resume.

Debate Resumed

Mr M. McGOWAN: The Premier is having a bad day. We can see from that reaction that this is a bloke who cannot handle it.

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Albany, I call you to order.

Mr M. McGOWAN: We can see from his reaction that he is a bloke under pressure who cannot handle it and, frankly, his behaviour this morning was nothing short of disgraceful. Former Prime Ministers Howard and Fraser and Prime Minister Abbott were all gracious, but we had this bloke over here behaving in this manner, and that is unacceptable.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Leader of the Opposition, will you return to the motion.

Mr M. McGOWAN: I return to the point.

Mr J. Norberger: Point of order!

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: No, member for Joondalup. Leader of the Opposition, return to the motion, please.

Mr M. McGOWAN: I will close on this point: on Friday the Premier said that the government was going to legislate on the central business district of Perth. If that is the case, it will be another broken promise that makes up the broken promise mosaic of this government. We have the regions and we have the city, and it is incumbent upon members opposite today to vote on this motion in accordance with what they believe. If this motion gets up and the government still wants to go ahead with forced amalgamations, it will need to call a referendum, and it should not legislate, because this house has told it not to.

MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah) [4.47 pm]: It is time for the Barnett government and the Minister for Local Government to come clean. It is time for the Premier and the Barnett government to stop the deviousness, the doublespeak, the broken promises and the deceptive approach that they have followed in their proposed local government reforms for Perth and their clear intentions for regional Western Australia. It is time for them to come clean. The motion we have moved this afternoon simply states —

That this house calls on the Barnett government to guarantee that there will be no forced council amalgamations in the metropolitan area or regional WA.

In moving this motion, we are urging all members in this house to demonstrate their support for the need for a guarantee. Why is there a need for a guarantee? The reason is simple: the problem for the Premier and the Minister for Local Government is that this government has betrayed and lost the trust of the sector. Many in the sector are happy about and supportive of reform in the local government sector.

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What has happened in the last five or so years, as outlined in this proposal—the so-called reform proposal for local government in the metropolitan area—is that at every post, when the government looks like it will not get its way or there is public opposition, the government has changed the goalposts along the way. Before the 2013 state election, as the Leader of the Opposition very clearly highlighted, there was a commitment not to force amalgamations and then, immediately after the March 2013 election, the government set out to do just that—to forcibly amalgamate councils. The government did so without any justification or substantiation with regard to an economic or business case. The government did not then, and still has not now, articulated that to the communities in the metropolitan area. That was followed up with the Minister for Local Government putting in reform proposals to the Local Government Advisory Board that very clearly sought to circumvent the Dadour provisions by proposing boundary changes rather than amalgamations as per the act. In the words of the government’s own kind—its own side—and particularly by some members in the other place, the government led the people of many communities in the metropolitan area up the garden path. What comments were made in the other place? The comment, “To say that this process is not forced amalgamations is tripe”, was not made by a member of the opposition or from a disgruntled community member in Canning, Fremantle, Cockburn or Serpentine–Jarrahdale; it was made in the other place by a member of the government’s own side—a member of the Liberal Party. Members in the other place very clearly articulated the opposition that they have been getting from their communities about this. The government led people up the garden path. Other comments in the Legislative Council include, “They fibbed to us”, “It is not what we were promised”, and, “It is an act of trickery.” These are comments from the Liberal Party’s side, and that is why it is time for the government to come clean.

In August this year, the Minister for Local Government, in his presentation to the elected men and women from councils throughout Western Australia at the Western Australian Local Government Association annual general meeting, did not rule out proposed council amalgamations in regional areas. Did the minister unequivocally rule out regional amalgamations? No, he did not. He said, “Not at this stage.” We know that that is a very clear code for any community in regional Western Australia that it is the government’s plan that they will be next. The National Party, in its wisdom, has wised up to this. The National Party recognises that the Premier’s and Minister for Local Government’s words are indeed hollow; they cannot be trusted. That is why a couple of weeks ago in this place, during debate on a private member’s business motion, we saw a clear determination that the National Party members representing regional Western Australia did not support the amalgamation process. The same thing happened in the Legislative Council two weeks ago when the vote—because they knew it would be lost—was carried on the voices. It was the first time in a long time that the government lost a motion on the voices. But the Legislative Council did not divide, because government members knew that they would lose. This is the time for the government to bring to an end the chaotic, bungled handling of a process that has made many people in the community, particularly in the metropolitan area, absolutely angry. I want to mention a letter I received this afternoon from the City of South Perth Residents’ Association. The letter states —

... during this period that the State Government has farcically termed, “Local Government Reform”. Without any business case or meaningful financial assistance, the Barnett Government has embarked on a programme of forced amalgamations. This is being carried out under the guise of boundary changes: nothing more than legal trickery under the Local Government Act to avoid the “Dadour” Poll provision of the Act. Local Governments have had to present reasons to the Local Government Advisory Board why they should or shouldn’t accept the Minister’s preferred Model: ... This is scandalous and against all principles of the Westminster System. While the electorate has come to accept that, governments of all persuasions may at times step outside what may be called normal process, the action of the Barnett Government in these circumstances has gone beyond the acceptable limits of good governance.

The merits of Local Government amalgamation, in the context of Local Government Reform, have yet to be debated in the public domain. Reform in Local Government has been in fact lost in the current process, as the government has had a fixation on only one aspect. The residents of our district would like a less costly exercise with clearly defined outcomes than that presently chosen by the government.

They ask members in this place to respect the democratic process. The motion before us is very clear, and I ask all members in this place to read it. It calls upon this government to guarantee that there will be no forced council amalgamations in the metropolitan area or in regional Western Australian.

MR A.J. SIMPSON (Darling Range — Minister for Local Government) [4.56 pm]: I thank the Deputy Speaker for the opportunity to put on the record my views about metropolitan reform in Western Australia. I think we need to understand the history of why we are looking at reform in the metropolitan area today. This issue has been on the plate for a number of years. I will read some of the reports that have been done over the years. In 1953, a departmental report on metropolitan council boundaries recommended that the number of councils be reduced to 11 or 19. In 1968 the local government assessment committee recommended

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a statewide reduction from 144 to 89 councils. In 1972 the local government boundaries commission's recommendation was a reduction from 26 to 18 metropolitan councils. In 1974 a royal commission on metropolitan municipal boundaries recommended a reduction from 26 to 18. In 1996 there was a report by the statewide Structural Reform Advisory Committee and in 2006 the Local Government Advisory Board undertook a sustainability report. Again and again there are reports that have looked at how best we can make our local governments more sustainable and prepared for the future.

It is interesting that the government is making a decision on an issue that, quite clearly, has been documented for years. As a result of government indecisiveness, the local government sector has asked the government to make a decision. There is just one more sleep until we can announce the reform that will be done. There are a couple of points that we are trying to achieve. Obviously, the most important thing is to provide councils with the economies of scale to build their capacity to deliver services without losing the community of interest. I think we have come a long way. When I first took on this job, I had the opportunity to look at the Queensland, South Australian and Victorian models. As I stand here today, I am sure some other work has been done in Queensland. It is interesting that Queensland went too far and too big and it is now trying to redress how best to build the economies of scale without losing the community of interest, which is the most important thing. I talked in this house about the City of Stirling, which has over 200 000 residents and the lowest rates, the lowest rate increases and the capacity to deliver services to its ratepayers. In comparison, the smaller local governments had the highest rate increases this year and have the highest rates. Clearly, that identifies that building economies of scale —

Mr M. McGowan: You have not looked across the metro area, my friend.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: I can show the Leader of the Opposition a graph that clearly shows, from the smallest to the largest local governments, that the smallest local governments charge the highest rates and the largest local governments charge the lowest rates. We are trying to build the economies of scale to get what is called “equalisation” around the rates.

We talked about savings, which is important. Savings of between \$5 million and \$6 million a year could be found from the pay of chief executive officers, councillors, mayors and presidents. I do not know how anyone in this place can think that having 325 councillors in the metropolitan area is a good outcome for democracy. No way should the metropolitan area have 325 councillors—that is just incredible.

Primarily through the former Minister for Local Government John Castrilli, the member for Bunbury, we have brought in the integrated planning process. It has been very good for local governments to look at their assets and how they will replace them in the years to come. The integrated planning process looks at not only a council's bottom line, but also its assets and how it will replace them. That is important because councils tend to operate budget to budget and do not look at the forward estimates. The integrated planning process identifies those savings. The integrated planning process can be used by a bigger local government to deliver services.

It is important to realise that Western Australia will grow by half a million people in the next 10 years. In 2050, there will be 3.5 million people in WA, 75 per cent of whom will live in the metropolitan area. We need to take control and develop local governments for not only today, but also the future. Local government has to deliver housing, roads, transport, parks, social services and waste management. Waste management is a big issue in the wider community and one of the clear things identified in the Robson report is that we need a waste management framework.

As I have said many times, if someone drives along Stirling Highway from Perth to Fremantle, they will drive through seven local councils. If I ride my bike around the Swan and Canning Rivers, I will go through 17 local governments. I am sure the Minister for Environment is trying to do some work around the Swan and Canning Rivers, but to deal with 17 local governments would certainly take a long time. For a coastal protection plan from Wanneroo through to Rockingham, we would have to negotiate with 11 local governments. Quite clearly, we are trying to work on not only giving local governments the capacity to deliver their services, but also how we can best provide for future years.

The Robson report did a fair bit of work on identifying metropolitan growth for the next 50 years. It made recommendations to the government on how we can best move this forward. Keep in mind that while I have been minister, we have been through a 17-week public submission period. We have been to 50 meetings with local governments to come up with proposals for the Local Government Advisory Board. Members will see this tomorrow when the report is released; even though the board received 38 proposals and only 12 were from me as the minister representing the government, the proposals from others were pretty much in line with the government's proposals. It is interesting to see that process. Of the 12 state government proposals, only one of them was recommended yesterday. The rest of the proposals have come from the sector. The sector has got

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behind the process. Members are probably quick to forget this, but just prior to the election, a G20 that turned into a G19 looked at how best it could get the number of local governments to fewer than 20. A group worked on that.

To respond to the comments of the shadow Minister for Local Government, the sector is very keen. Everywhere I go, councils are asking me about how soon we will get this out. They want to get on with it. They have been working on their toolkits and local implementation committees and on this process to embrace bigger and more sustainable local governments so that we can get on with the process. The advisory board report I have is 750 pages of fantastic work. It goes through a lot of processes and a significant amount of work is on the table. It will be interesting to see that tomorrow. After one more sleep, we will release that to the wider community and the sector will get some certainty. The government is making decisions about this and trying to resolve this issue that has been on the table for a long time. We will be here to make a decision and to help and direct local government on how they will move forward. We are building the economies of scale and local government's capacity to deliver services. We are planning for future growth in the sector and making it more sustainable.

I have to restate that we have not in any way changed the Local Government Act. Since I became minister, we have not changed the legislation to make it easier to do this reform process. The Local Government Act was enacted in 1965 and has been through a number of reviews, such as in 1995. The act quite clearly provides for amalgamations and boundary adjustments and we are working through that process. We have not changed any part of the act to make it easier to do this reform process. As I said at the start of my speech, the sector is very much ready for this process. It has been involved in this from day one. It has been through it a number of times. When I started my speech today, I mentioned all those reports that have been done to get to where we are today. If any member wants a clear picture of why local government should be reformed, I refer them to the Systemic Sustainability Study. "In Your Hands: Shaping the future of Local Government in Western Australia: Final Report" quite clearly states the directives. It looked at local government's capacity to raise rates and gain grants and how local government can best go forward. The recommendations in that report are very, very succinct and the sector was very supportive of them.

The state government needs to make a decision. When we started this process when I became the minister, the Premier commented that we could walk away from this and do nothing, but the reality is that the sector needs change and it has to happen. The only states in Australia that have not gone through this process are New South Wales and Western Australia. New South Wales started off its reform process the other month and our reform process is underway. Tomorrow the report will be released. We will implement the reform over the next two years; it will be a good plan for local government to make sure that we can sustain it —

Mr M. McGowan: Next two years?

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: Yes. I will explain it more for the Leader of the Opposition. There is this thing called the Local Government Act. Under the act, each employee is guaranteed a job for two years from the date on which a new local government is formed. That is why the budget included allocations for loans and grants over three years; the reform process does not simply happen overnight. We have to work through the process. We have to go through the workforce and the asset management base. The reality is that it will take a couple of years to settle down. However, now the sector will have certainty and a decision will be made. It will know how the process will unfold and it will have clear objectives. We have all been part of this process. We can add our report to the list of the ones I just read out; over the past 50 years many reports have tried to identify the best model for local government reform.

Just to reiterate, the report will be out after one more sleep. I will be very happy at 12 o'clock tomorrow when we finally release the report to the wider community. The sector is ready for it and keen to get on with the job. I acknowledge the member for Bunbury for the work he did to get to this point. He did a fantastic job in trying to bring this all together. I will be very happy and excited by tomorrow morning. I will be up early, ready to go to work, because I am excited about announcing a new report and starting the next stage of the process to create sustainable local government.

MRS G.J. GODFREY (Belmont) [5.07 pm]: I rise to speak on this matter of public interest to do with local government reform. European settlement of Western Australia was in 1829 and the Belmont council was formed in 1899. Belmont's boundaries have remained in place over 100 years and the boundary between Belmont and Canning is on an old railway spur line. It is frustrating that there has not been an ongoing process at a regular point in time whereby local government boundaries have been able to be changed. There are many local governments out there; there are 138 with 30 in the metropolitan area. In the postwar period, relatively few local governments have been established. The Town of Kwinana was established in 1953 and I lived there for some time in Born Road in Wellard. I was employed by the City of Perth when the Town of Cambridge, Town of Shepperton and City of Vincent were formed and later when Joondalup was split from Wanneroo in 1998. Very few local governments have been formed.

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Kwinana has the highest social disadvantage on the scale, and Belmont is second. Therefore, Kwinana and Belmont have very similar demographics. As early as 1918, there were Public Works Department investigations into desirable amalgamation, the first of many state government initiatives that the minister has spoken about this afternoon. What has been done so far? We have had all these inquiries into the sustainability of local government. There have been 21 amalgamations in WA since 1949, but only three of these have been in the metropolitan area. These are North Fremantle, Midland and Guildford. Consequently, many historical local government boundaries remain, in the face of dramatic democratic, social and technological change and changes in the role of local government. Between 2004 and 2014, in my role as the Mayor of the City of Belmont and as an elected member of Parliament, I have been involved with the Western Australian Local Government Association. That group is made up of 12 elected representatives from the country and 12 from the metropolitan area. It produced the Systemic Sustainability Study that the minister has mentioned today. It was instigated by WALGA. It produced its final report, titled "In Your Hands: Shaping the future of Local Government in Western Australia". This report showed that 83 local governments were found to be financially unsustainable. The commentary even argued that local government is not viable without embedded subsidies or grants. I know, through discussion at WALGA, that country councils at that time were concerned that they could not get qualified staff, so they wanted a reduced level of qualification for staff in the country. This was not supported; it would have meant that health officers and building compliance officers would not have the same quality and qualifications as those in the metropolitan area, in which case two standards would be created.

The Leader of the Opposition has called this process turmoil, chaos and dysfunctional. It could also be called giving people a voice. Members are elected to local government, and I can only tell members of my experience with Belmont and Kalamunda, as well as South Perth and Victoria Park. When I was Mayor of Belmont, we were looking at amalgamation with South Perth and Victoria Park. We held meetings for 18 months, and it was decided that a better fit was Victoria Park and South Perth. Within the Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council, of which Belmont is one of six members, and which has been sharing waste facilities for 30 years, we talked to Kalamunda. I spoke to the previous president in Kalamunda, and I think everyone was of the same view. Firstly, they agreed that we needed reform but, secondly, their option was that they would rather stay the way they were. WALGA came up with its sustainability report, but local government, with the minister of the day, pointed out that there would be amalgamations and recommendations for reform. The member for Bunbury, as the then minister, came to Exmouth and spoke to Western Australia local government representatives. However, the strong view of both metropolitan and country local governments was that the government should not do anything and that the local governments should be allowed to do it themselves. Ten years down the track, nothing has been done. There has been no outcome on any boundary adjustments or amalgamations.

The Metropolitan Local Government Review Panel then produced the Robson report, because local governments were telling the state government to go away and come up with suggestions of how many local governments there should be. They wanted some guidance. They wanted numbers and they wanted sizes. That is what the Robson report did.

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

Mrs G.J. GODFREY: The Robson report is there for the member to read.

The Metropolitan Local Government Review Panel was appointed to examine the current and anticipated regional, social, environmental and economic issues affecting the growth of metropolitan Perth for the next 50 years, to make a place for our growing community. After undertaking the review, the panel's view was that metropolitan local governments faced major challenges in planning for an increasing and changing population. This includes changing the community's perception on housing size and density, fulfilling the demand for a diversity of housing of suitable size and location, planning for increased road use and planning for sustainable urban forms that retain amenity, liveability and affordability. The panel also saw local government's role in managing accelerated growth, and the weaknesses with the current local government arrangements, including a significant level of duplication and waste of resources.

I would like to talk about some of this waste of resources. The minister mentioned that seven councils are involved with Stirling Highway. People in my community want to know what the benefit to Belmont is, and people in Kalamunda want to know what the benefit for them is, and who will be paying for it. Belmont has 1 500 public housing units, and some suburbs are well above the average for the state. I know that some local governments in the western suburbs have town planning schemes that are over 20 years old. The Swan River involves 21 local governments. Some of these local governments are doing excellent work in water quality, hydrozoning ovals, law and order, and Neighbourhood Watch closed-circuit television. Waste management is another area that has different schemes, and it is a bit of a dog's breakfast.

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Just in closing, Victoria Park is in very strong communication with South Perth, but it held a public meeting a few weeks ago that voted 100 to one against doing anything. Where can we go, once we get to that point of view? I will close at that point.

MR R.S. LOVE (Moore) [5.16 pm]: I rise to speak on this matter of public interest which seeks to require the Barnett government to guarantee that there will be no forced council amalgamations in metropolitan or regional Western Australia. Local government is a great topical issue in Western Australia at the moment. Like the member for Belmont, who has just spoken, I have a history of involvement in local government and quite an understanding of the background issues in this debate. Like the member for Belmont, I was involved in local government when the Systemic Sustainability Study was released. Local government acknowledged the need to make changes. I do not decry that, and I agree with much of what the member for Belmont said about the need to increase capacity, reduce costs and improve service delivery from local governments. Each region of Western Australia is different from others, and each has different needs. I disagree with any notion that a forced process is the best way to serve the needs of those different regions. I do not think we should be going down the path of trying to force council amalgamations.

The National Party is deeply committed to the empowerment and support of local government. I remind the house that, as I have said before, the National Party has a number of objectives in its constitution, one of which is the devolution of power, wherever practicable, from the commonwealth to the state government, and from the state government to local governments. The National Party, at its very core, is deeply committed to meaningfully supporting and empowering local government. The issue of forced amalgamations has been considered by our party at its last two conventions. At the 2013 convention in York, the party decided that the Nationals WA would take a position of supporting voluntary local government reform, and reaffirmed its commitment to opposing compulsory amalgamations in regional Western Australia. That lies very much at the heart of this MPI today. The Nationals as a whole will not accept any measures that would amount to forced amalgamations of local governments. That would be contrary to the core values of our party.

As we have heard from other speakers today, no evidence has been presented that would convince me or the Parliamentary National Party of the need to force amalgamations of country local governments. As has been pointed out here today, that has been reaffirmed by the work of Professor Brian Dollery, who works at not only the University of New England, but also through the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government. It is also supported by another group of academics, who have not been able to find savings that will come about through forced amalgamations. We should not look at forced amalgamations as a panacea for the problems that local governments face. The correct question should be: how do we increase the ability of local governments to provide the services required by their communities at a reduced cost without losing the identity of those local governments, local areas and small council towns? The answer to that is in using other measures that do not threaten that local identity. That is why I introduced into this house a private member's bill to ensure that local governments could form regional subsidiaries as a measure and a rather important mechanism to maintain that local identity while also building a position of economic sustainability and increasing capacity by allowing local governments to pool their resources and to share and introduce new expertise into their areas.

The Parliamentary National Party certainly supports reform of local government—voluntary reform. We understand that sometimes that might require the support and actions of the state government, but never in a way that forces local government down a path it does not wish to take. At the moment, the Western Australian Local Government Association is examining the best ways forward for country local governments through its country reform policy forums. The National Party stands ready to assist and support local government when it comes to introducing measures that might be identified through those forums that would result in cost-effective solutions for local government to, again, maintain their local identity, and increase their capacity to serve. The National Party is utterly opposed to forced amalgamations of local governments in the regions. We have no intention of opposing the call for a guarantee that there will be no forced council amalgamations because of our absolute determination as a party to oppose any such measures.

MR C.J. BARNETT (Cottesloe — Premier) [5.21 pm]: As has been said in this debate, Western Australia has 138 local authorities in a structure that evolved in a different era and is no longer relevant to a modern Western Australia. In the metropolitan area, several councils administer fewer than five square kilometres—most of them in my electorate. In country Western Australia a significant number of councils have fewer than 500 people living in them, and at least one has fewer than 250 people. Most primary schools in metropolitan Perth and major regional centres are bigger than that. Throughout the country areas, a number of councils cannot even find people to sit on their council; they have long-term vacancies. People are not interested. In the metropolitan area—the Minister for Local Government provided examples today—the number of local authorities and conflicting local laws go on and on. I do not think the case needs to be made. Every report in the last 50 years,

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including ones from the local government sector, have basically said that the system is broken and a large number of councils are not viable or sustainable—if members want to use the modern word—into the future.

I will give members an example in my electorate of Cottesloe. The seat of Cottesloe has six local authorities located either fully or partially in the electorate, with 48 elected councillors. If members take the broader western suburbs—by that I mean Subiaco and Cambridge—there are 70 elected local authorities. More people have been elected to run the western suburbs than the number in the Legislative Assembly for Western Australia, and members opposite reckon the system is not broken! The public have made up their minds; they want it tidied up. They want sensible boundaries that will give them, as the member behind me interjected, value for money, cost savings, infrastructure that is used in an effective way, and the ability for their local authority to partner with state and federal government to undertake big quality projects for their communities, whether it be sporting, arts or whatever. That is what the public wants. If members opposite come in here and say that this is a good model, it is not! This reform will ensure that local government is not only viable but relevant for this century, and can do a far better service for its communities. The government is the friend of local government. I know that cheap politics is to get on side with a whole lot of councillors who just want to keep their job.

Mr M. McGowan interjected.

The SPEAKER: Leader of the Opposition!

Mr C.J. BARNETT: Members opposite might tell me which council is about to have a forced amalgamation—which one? Does the member want to name them?

Mr W.J. Johnston: Canning! Canning!

The SPEAKER: Thank you, member for Cannington. We have heard that now; you have named it. Carry on, Premier.

Mr C.J. BARNETT: Tomorrow, the minister and I will table the maps. We will show the structure of Perth as it will be. There may be amalgamations, boundary changes and votes; and there may be legislation, or some mix of all of that, but that will be the structure of metropolitan Perth laid out for everyone to see tomorrow. It may not all happen overnight, but it will happen. I note the point: the Liberal Party is the only party in this Parliament that has a policy on local government. It is the only party that is willing to stand up on an important issue for Western Australia. It is the only party with some vision for local government and that is willing to reform, starting with the metropolitan area. The opposition has completely failed to present any position at all. They side with the grumpy old men out there who want to keep their little jobs. They have no vision for metropolitan Perth—not at all. Tomorrow, when we give our plan for Perth, I look forward to the Labor Party showing their plan for Perth.

MR W.J. JOHNSTON (Cannington) [5.26 pm]: I want to start exactly where the Premier finished: he is the one with the policy. That is why he went to the last election and did not tell the truth. That is why the Premier went to the people and said that there would be no forced amalgamations. Today the Premier proudly stands and says that tomorrow there will be forced amalgamations. That is exactly what is happening here. The Premier says that 138 local governments are too many and that 120 is the right number. That is the big change! The Minister for Local Government says that he is making decisions. He says that, at the moment, on the coastal plain in the metropolitan area there are 11 councils and tomorrow there will be nine, and that is a massive change! What a massive change! I can advise the member for Belmont that I have read the sustainability report, which said that three councils in the metropolitan area are unsustainable—Canning is not one of them; Canning is sustainable.

Mr C.J. Barnett interjected.

The SPEAKER: Premier!

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Canning gets strong support from its local community because it is a low-cost council compared with other councils, with a \$600 minimum rate. Tomorrow residents in the City of Canning will see a \$200 instant rate rise when the Premier amalgamates Canning with the City of Gosnells. That is a one-third increase in the minimum rate instantly because of the Premier's decision. The City of Canning has been able to deliver services that the community wants at a lower cost than all the surrounding councils. It has nearly 100 000 residents. What is the Premier's plan? The Premier will take the waste transfer station off the City of Canning and the amalgamated cities of Gosnells and Canning will have no waste transfer station. That is the brilliant plan of the Premier. That is what the Premier is going to do. The residents of the City of Canning have had an uprising against the proposals of the Premier, and everybody knows it. No wonder Hon Simon O'Brien is so opposed to this plan of Colin Barnett, the Premier of Western Australia. Hon Simon O'Brien talks to his local residents, as do I. There is no way that this is a plan.

The government says it intends to abolish 80 unsustainable council that are all in non-metropolitan Western Australia, but it does not have the guts to name them. It does not have the guts to explain to the National Party

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that that is what it is saying, because the Premier keeps saying, “We’ve looked at the sustainability reports and 83 councils are not sustainable.” He says they will be abolished. Of those 83 councils, 80 are in country regions. That is the Premier’s real agenda. No wonder he did not want to table this report last week before the Vasse by-election; he wanted to hide it until after the Vasse by-election. One thing we know about the Premier is that he is so proud of his policies that he will not tell people about them before elections. He would not tell people about forced amalgamations before the election. In fact, he said the opposite. He complains that his electorate has too many local governments, so what was his policy at election time? He sucked up to the mayors and told them they were safe. That was his policy; that is what he did. Talk about guts; talk about bravery. He was so proud of his policy that he did not tell anyone about it until after they had voted. The same happened before the Vasse by-election. He was so proud of his policy that he waited for the by-election to finish before he admitted the truth. That is how brave this man is. That is the simple reason this guy is not to be trusted on these issues. He has no plan for reform of local government. All he will do is change boundaries. That is not genuine reform.

Mr C.J. Barnett interjected.

The SPEAKER: Premier!

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Genuine reform would be addressing the overlap between local and state government services, doing some deals and changing what happens to get rid of the overlap. We have heard not a single word after six and a half years in government. That man is not prepared to talk about any of those things. He is so proud of his policies that he does not tell people about them before an election. His only plan is about boundaries because some of his mates in a couple of councils need the money. That is what this is about.

Mr C.J. Barnett: What are you saying?

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: I am saying the Premier is changing boundaries to help councils where he has friends who are mayors. I give the City of Melville as an example.

Several members interjected.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Why else would he take part of the City of Canning and give it to the City of Melville? There is no logical reason for that other than he is happy with one council and unhappy with the other. Look at the way the Premier treated that great Australian Linton Reynolds. That was disgraceful behaviour of the Premier towards a great Australian—a man with a life history of service to be treated like that by that man opposite is a disgrace.

MR M. MCGOWAN (Rockingham — Leader of the Opposition) [5.31 pm] — in reply: The principle here is that local communities get to have a say and the government does not legislate without a mandate. If this motion is passed by the Parliament, that should be the principle from this point forward on this issue.

Mr C.J. Barnett: No.

Mr M. MCGOWAN: No, the Premier says.

Mr C.J. Barnett: That’s right; read your motion.

Mr M. MCGOWAN: That is right, the Premier says. That is the principle we are voting on here. If the government goes ahead with a plan that does not involve local say or legislation without mandate, it will be defying the will of this Parliament. I urge members opposite to consider that if this motion is successful, that is the point of view. If the Liberal Party decides not to vote on this issue, that means Parliament has decided on this issue and tomorrow that is what everyone should understand the position to be. The government has created turmoil across local government for the past five years—since 2009. Millions of dollars have been spent by the government and by councils on this process. It has been wasteful; it has defied an election result; it has been driven by a whim; and it will not create real efficiencies. If the government wants to create real efficiencies in local government, the key is the sharing of resources. Whether there are 30 or 16 councils in Perth, the key is the sharing of resources; it is not the removal of local say. The same goes for the regions. It is the sharing of resources between councils—the sensible use of technology. Whether the number of councillors is X or Y is not the point; it is the sharing of resources. If the government wants my vision, it is for democracy, for the sharing of resources and sensible laws in planning and building. That is my policy and has been our policy for many years. We are not the ones breaking our promise. This motion will be instructive to this government and it will be instructive to see what the government does tomorrow.

Question put and passed.

The SPEAKER: Orders of the day.

Mr C.J. Barnett interjected.

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Mr M. McGowan: No guts; no guts.

Mr C.J. Barnett interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members! That is finished now. Orders of the day, Leader of the House.

Ms R. Saffioti interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for West Swan!

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members! Orders of the day.

Mr C.J. Barnett interjected.

The SPEAKER: Premier, I call you to order for the first time.

Ms R. Saffioti interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for West Swan!

Mr D.A. Templeman interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Mandurah! If you want to be ejected, member for West Swan, keep shouting out. Member for Mandurah, I call you to order now for the first time. It is over. I call the Premier for the first time and the member for Mandurah for the first time. Orders of the day.

Mr P.B. Watson interjected.

The SPEAKER: Thank you, member for Albany. I call you to order for the second time.

Dr A.D. Buti interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Armadale, I call you to order for the third time.

Ms R. Saffioti interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for West Swan!

Point of Order

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: You called the Premier to order for the first time. I thought you had already called him to order today. Is it the second time or the first time?

The SPEAKER: I have got it for the first time. Maybe someone else called him, but not me.

Mr M. McGOWAN: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, surely there must be consistency between yourself, your Deputy and Acting Speakers as to who has been called to order before, or is it dependent on who is in the chair as to how many times we can be called to order?

The SPEAKER: We have a list, Leader of the Opposition. He has been called once. We have checked the list.