

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT BILL
(Serial 107)**

Continued from 18 September 2019.

Mr McCARTHY (Local Government, Housing and Community Development): Mr Deputy Speaker, I move that the bill be now read a second time.

Mr HIGGINS (Opposition Leader): Mr Deputy Speaker, this legislation has been a long time coming. It is a much-needed update and has been mooted for a long while. I acknowledge the hard-working departmental officers who worked tirelessly to develop a substantial piece of legislation which aims to modernise the legislative base of local government.

This legislation is not bad or wrong, but it does not exactly inspire me or kick any major goals in modernisation, besides the language. I do not think it was meant to achieve much more than that. In fact, when I was chatting with various stakeholders at the annual conference of the Local Government Association recently, the overwhelming comment I heard was, 'It is totally underwhelming'.

Many still question elements such as the role of the Remuneration Tribunal in recommending allowance levels. Syd Stirling did a presentation at a LGANT meeting, but it turns out no one told him exactly how it would work under the new act. Syd did a sterling job in trying to explain the role of the Remuneration Tribunal.

I do not think it is fair to be totally critical of the legislation. It may be underwhelming, but I can see that a lot of effort has been put in. Local government is a legitimate third arm of government in Australia. It is much maligned and often wears the brunt of much criticism, but it is not an easy gig. I am sure the Member for Nelson will agree with that.

Local government deserves our respect. It is arguably the strongest form of grassroots representation with much pressure to deliver. It has moved on from the days of simply rates, rubbish and roads and there are enormous expectations for local councils to be involved in economic development, crime control and any number of other socioeconomic issues. Therefore, it is important the legislation, which sets up and supports this key government arm, is up to date and reflective of the increasing demands facing modern local government.

It is also important the legislative reform is flexible to cater for the ever-changing landscape of local government in the Northern Territory and individual councils. As pointed out by the department, this legislation seeks to provide sufficient flexibility for councils to determine reasonable and appropriate expenses based on their particular circumstances.

The example in the scrutiny committee report is a recent motion before the City of Darwin which was voted down. It was for a report to be prepared:

... outlining options to provide occasional childcare for both elected members and staff during council meetings and workshops.

But other councils may feel differently about that matter. The legislation allows councils to determine what is reasonable and appropriate for themselves. That is highly appropriate. What is interesting is the government's determination to enshrine its local decision-making policy into local government legislation. I have said in the past that I always thought local and community government was the essence of local decision-making; however, to quote the department's evidence to the committee, the legislation requires:

... regional councils to seek advice from local authorities regarding local government services and activities in the local authorities' areas.

More than that, the legislation also:

... requires councils to share information about regional council planning and activities with local communities with their local authorities and to respond to local authority's advice about community aspirations.

The department further advised that local authorities will be asked to advise their council regarding the council's budget, expenditure priorities, service deliveries, regional plans, strategic directions, cemeteries and the funding of projects.