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A Directly Elected Mayor for Geelong

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Mr MORRIS (Mornington) — It is a genuine pleasure to rise to effectively lead the debate for the government on the City of Greater Geelong Amendment Bill 2011. It was an election commitment made by the Liberal Party in the run-up to the 2006 election campaign and a commitment repeated by the coalition in the run-up to the 2010 election campaign to deliver a directly elected mayor for the City of Geelong, and I am delighted that we have the bill in the house and that that election commitment is on track to be well in place in time for the 2012 municipal elections.

The government also made a commitment to consult the Geelong community about the model that would be used to elect the mayor. We were not so confident as to say we knew exactly how it was going to be done. We were not going to simply impose the structure that is currently in place for the City of Melbourne.

The community of Geelong made it very clear to us that they wanted to have a directly elected mayor but there was not so much clarity about how that might be achieved, so we made a commitment to consult and to come up with a model that met the aspirations of the community. I believe that is what we have done in this case.

I have to say that in this instance the opposition is not a big wrap for the democratic process. Whenever this discussion has been had there has been every reason under the sun trotted out by opposition members for saying that people should not have a say in the direct election of their mayor, that they should not be able to go in and fill out a ballot paper and cast their vote directly for the person who is going to lead their city for the next four years.

However, that is what this bill is all about. We on this side of the house do not believe in guided democracy. We do not believe in developing structures that manipulate the process and manipulate the outcome. It is about putting people who have the confidence of the community in place, getting out of the way and allowing them to get on with the business of operating the municipality. That is what this bill is all about.

In terms of any future agenda, the commitment was clearly about the City of Greater Geelong and not a broader policy. I remind members on the other side of the chamber that this bill amends the City of Greater Geelong Act

1993. We are not amending the Local Government Act 1989. It is not about any of the municipalities of Ballarat, Bendigo, Shepparton or Casey. This bill is about the City of Greater Geelong — that is the whole subject of the bill. The City of Greater Geelong is a very large municipality. It does not have the largest population in the state, but it is well and truly up there.

Mr Wynne interjected.

Mr MORRIS — It has a big budget, as the member for Richmond suggests. It covers 1200 square kilometres and it has 220 000 people. You would have to say it is the principal provincial city of the state, and it is the most populous city outside the metropolitan area.

It is a city with a long and proud history. It was established as the town of Geelong by an act of the New South Wales Parliament prior to the separation of Victoria from New South Wales. Its most recent format was constituted under the City of Greater Geelong Act 1993, which brought together the cities of Geelong West and Newtown and the shires of Bellarine, Corio and Barwon South plus parts of Barrabool and Bannockburn as well. It is all pretty much ancient history now, but I think that amalgamation has worked well.

Currently there are 12 councillors. Under the Local Government Act the mayor of the City of Greater Geelong is now elected for a period of two years; the deputy mayor is not required to have nor recognised to have a formal role, but the council will elect a person to act as a deputy mayor.

I had the pleasure of fronting the consultation process undertaken by the government, which ran from March until May of this year.

The consultation process included the publication and release of a discussion paper in March, an invitation issued at that time for public submissions, a very good public meeting which was held in Geelong on 20 April, and listening posts at eight locations around Greater Geelong. They were well attended listening posts.

We also had an excellent experience with commuters at Geelong station at 6 o'clock in the morning. I must say we had a terrific response right around the city, particularly at the station, in terms of interest from the community, and there was a real desire to engage in the process and get the governance right. It was an excellent process.

There were 65 written submissions received. I also conducted meetings with a number of key stakeholders, including the Council of the City of Greater Geelong, the committee for Geelong, the Municipal Association of Victoria, the Victorian Local Governance Association and local government professionals. I must say all of those discussions were very worthwhile.

Sadly, there was one group who chose not to be involved, and that is the group of three members who are in this house this afternoon who represent lower house electorates in the city of Greater Geelong. They were all invited

to sit down for a chat and not necessarily put in a written submission and go through the slog, because clearly we on this side of the house understand that members have the opportunity to debate these matters in this house. I am not going to stand here and insult them by saying, 'You didn't put submissions in', but a genuine invitation was extended to them to have a chat and have an input into the formation of this process.

Unfortunately that opportunity was let slip not only by the lower house members in this place but by the upper house opposition members and federal members as well.

We know the view of at least one of those members — the member for Lara — who raised an adjournment matter when he was a member in the other place some years ago. He proposed the direct election of a mayor for the City of Greater Geelong. He was well ahead of his time in relation to that matter; unfortunately he was not able to convince his colleagues that that was an appropriate course to take, but I am pleased we are now doing that.

I have to say a couple of things that came out of that consultation process represented the overwhelming views of the community. Firstly, there was the desire to retain the current 12-ward structure — that was very clear. The government had an open mind regarding what the structure of the council might be. But again and again people put their position very effectively — they desired that 12 wards be retained.

The other matter is that while a directly elected mayor was strongly supported in the community, there was ambivalence in terms of whether a deputy should be directly elected as well. Once again the government had an open mind on this matter; we also had an open mind on whether an individual should be able to stand for both the position of a councillor and the mayor or deputy mayor if the deputy were to be elected.

Ultimately people did not mind one way or another. We felt for the sake of clarity that it would be best to be consistent with the model adopted by the City of Melbourne — that is, you put your hand up and you stand for one or the other but you cannot do both. That will do two things: it will assist the voters in not confusing the issue; it will also mean that once a mayor is elected, they are truly elected by the whole council and will not seem to be representing a ward that may have been the ward they stood for election in.

The structure that is proposed by the bill will be a useful first step in this process. The Victorian Electoral Commission will review the situation about halfway through the term and will look at bringing the structure more in line with the Local Government Act, but I think it is a worthwhile initiative. I commend the bill to the house.