

SPEECH BY ENCHE ABDUL HAMID BIN HAJI JUMAT, MINISTER
FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT, LANDS AND HOUSING, ON THE
THE SELECT COMMITTEE REPORT ON THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT
BILL, AT THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY MEETING ON
WEDNESDAY, JULY 17, 1957

As Honourable Members will have observed, the Report from Select Committee is very voluminous. In acknowledgment of the importance of this Bill a great deal of time and effort has been given to it. Many meetings of the Select Committee were held, in the course of which written and oral representations from the City Council, the Singapore Rate Payers' Association, the Chambers of Commerce and others were considered and several hundred amendments were studied. A great number of amendments have been made to the Bill as a result of these representations. Conversely, Government found that it was not in agreement with a number of proposals put forward and was unable, therefore to vary the clauses in question.

Honourable Members will expect me to apprise them of the main amendments which have been made and also to refer to proposed amendments which Government was unable to accept. I hope you will bear with me as this will be a lengthy business.

In respect of the definition "City" in clause 3, also alterations to boundaries referred to in clauses 5 and 15, and the description of the City boundary in the First Schedule, objections opposed the exclusion of part of Katong from the City on the one hand, and the expansion of the western boundary on the other. Various arguments were applied. In the case of Katong:-

- (a) that the Merdeka Bridge and Nicoll Highway brought Katong closer to the City;
- (b) that residents in Katong now paid City rates and would lose the benefits of City services and such amenities;
- (c) that residents of Katong would be mulct by the District Council in favour of the less developed areas of the District;
- (d) that the present division of Katong into two parts - along a small canal - only achieved a splitting of an otherwise homogeneous community;
- (e) and other lesser arguments.

In the case of the western boundary, it was said:-

- (a) that a purely rural area was wrongly being brought into the City and that its interests were dissimilar from those of the City;
- (b) that there was danger of increased rating and so forth.

Government disagrees with these views. Government has taken into account much wider and more substantial considerations. The division of Singapore Island into City and District local authorities takes into account not only the desirability of having three (and later four) equally balanced Districts, but in doing so takes into account future proposals as envisaged in the Master Plan by which New Towns will be developed, one at Jurong, one at

Bukit Panjang and one at Serangoon, each with fairly evenly balanced populations. At Katong there is no proposal for a New Town. Instead, the urban population will form the centre of the new District. It is thought that Katong will develop sooner and reach full status before the other Districts, and thereby provide a model for them. As regards services, the suggestion that these would be less beneficial consequential on the change, is not accepted.

Also if Honourable Members will turn to the transitional provisions of clause 323 they will appreciate that these can be applied in the early stages of the changeover. Nor is it thought that residents of Katong will be mulct by their own District Council and on which they will presumably be properly represented. As regards community interest at Katong, it is agreed that the more densely populated urban population which will form the nucleus of the Katong District is homogeneous, but it is doubtful if the urban part has an over-riding community interest with the residential area of Katong which is to remain in the City. The boundary - the canal - is an old City Boundary, and may be regarded as an extension of the line of the Green Belt.

As regards the western boundary, again this is the line of the Green Belt beyond which City, urban and industrial development is restricted to stop indefinite sprawl. Again it forms part of an overall plan. These new areas are not strictly rural - they are not agricultural - they are in fact urban or suburban, and include industrial development along the West Coast Road, the large areas occupied by the Armed Forces and housing estates of Queenstown as well as further similar future developments. This area should not for example be compared with the rural areas of Ulu Pandan which lie outside the City boundary. Government considers that these wider and planned measures considerably outweigh questions of rates and fears about services.

Concerning the constitution of the City and District Councils in clauses 6 and 16, representations were made to increase the number of Councillors from 32 to 48 in the case of the City, and from 12 to 18 in the Districts, and that there should be Aldermen appointed to the City Council. Government was not able to accept these proposals as it was not convinced that these increases were either desirable or necessary. It considers that a great improvement on the "City and Island Council", as envisaged in the Rendall Constitution with only 32 members, has been made since there will now be a total of 68 elected Councillors, plus 3 Chairmen and 9 nominated Councillors plus a fourth Council later on. With the adoption of these further proposals there would be the danger of over-representation, since it should be borne in mind that the people of Singapore are also to be represented under the new constitution by 51 Assemblymen.

In a small Island there is bound to be an overlap of interests between local government and State business and there is therefore a real danger of creating a multiplicity of authorities and of over-organisation, particularly as the electoral boundaries for local government and the Assembly in the City may be coterminous. It was also represented that increases would enable the City Council to conduct its business more expeditiously and efficiently by enabling it to appoint larger Standing Committees and to delegate authority to them. Government is not aware of inefficiency in the present City Council on account of inadequate numbers and in any case the numbers are to be increased from 27 to 32.

It would perhaps be of assistance if the City Council made use of the provisions of the new clause 47 (old 49) which gives powers to delegate authority to a Committee and also to delegate authority

to its employees. As the new Councillors become more experienced they may wish to consider these provisions since it appears from what the Honourable Member for Tanglin had to say on this subject - I refer to paragraph 183 of the minutes of evidence - that about 80% of the decisions in the City Council require confirmation by the full Council, and that authority is not delegated.

Concerning Aldermen, Government takes the view that this system, under which the persons nominated probably share the political views of the party which nominates them, is less attractive than an all elected representation.

With regard to the qualifications of candidates for election in clause 21, I said at the 2nd reading of the Bill that Government intended to follow the policy which is laid down in the White Paper to the effect that in the City Council the ability to speak "Mandarin or Malay or Tamil or English" would be the qualification required, whereas in the Districts the ability to speak "any Chinese dialect or Malay or Tamil or English" would be the qualification required. Government has not agreed that in the City area "any Chinese dialect" should take the place of Mandarin.

In this, Government is following the Legislative Assembly language qualification, taking the view that in an urbanised and sophisticated local government area such as the City, beset as it is with modern and technical problems, an unlimited range of dialects could seriously impede business. In the District, however, where the tempo of business will be much slower in comparison, and where insistence in Mandarin would seriously hamper adequate representation, this was considered to outweigh expediency.

Members will have noticed, with regard to^a paragraph (d) that the restriction on candidates in Districts having to stand for the division in which they reside has been removed. Under the amendment, a candidate can stand for any division within the local authority in which he resides. Government did not agree to a proposal to debar a candidate from standing for election on account of blindness.

Government was in agreement with the Honourable Member for Tanglin concerning the original clauses 31 and 35, both of which have been taken out of the Bill.

It was considered that clause 31, which gave provision to the local authority to grant gratuities in special cases, was open to abuse.

Concerning clause 35, by implication it would appear that employees of the local authority can run businesses in addition to their employment with the local authority. This clause was thought to be most undesirable and accordingly has been taken out of the bill.

On the question of rates, Government was not able to agree with the proposed amendment to subclause (3) of clause 108 by the Honourable Member for Tanglin by which the thirty per centum ceiling for rates in the City should also be applied to Districts. Government took the view that the original wording, slightly modified, would be more appropriate, and that in so far as Districts were concerned, the rates shall not exceed fifteen per centum without the sanction of the Minister in writing.

Government held the view that clause 109 was necessary and should be retained in order to meet the need for differential rating in the new areas affected by the changes to boundaries. By amend-

amendments to paragraph (a) and (b), the provisions of this clause will not only apply to the new areas but also to any part thereof. In other words, in the case of Katong District for example, it need not follow that the whole new area which is transferred to the District will be required to continue to pay City rates - a part thereof could pay less, depending on the services provided and other such factors. Government did not agree that clause 109(b) could be dispensed with as was suggested simply because of the amendment to clause 108(3). Clause 109 specifically concerns the changeover. The proviso to clause 108(3) has general effect and is not concerned with those areas specifically covered under clause 109(b).

With regard to provisions relating to the building of streets, an important amendment has been made to subclause (15) of clause 142 the effect of which is that unless the local authority does not approve plans within two months of their receipt or resubmission, they shall be deemed to be approved. This amendment meets criticisms of delays and should ensure that business is done more expeditiously.

A similar amendment has been made in respect of the approval of plans for buildings in clause 169, by which a time limit of two months is imposed under subclause (18). The reasons are the same - to expedite business.

Clause 170 is completely new. It supplements the powers already given under subclauses (11) and (13) of clause 169 and also clause 172 and is designed expressly to enable the local authorities to take action through the Courts to bring about the speedy demolition or removal of unauthorised buildings which are in the process of being built. The procedure is speedier since it does not have to await a conviction as in the case of clauses 169 and 172. Such measures are deemed necessary to enable the local authority to put a stop to the unauthorised buildings which are springing up everywhere regardless of planning or building approval.

Clause 188 is also new. It makes much fuller provisions than the clause which was disagreed, for taking immediate action, subject to the Courts direction, to prohibit persons remaining in ruinous or dangerous buildings. In extreme cases the building may be demolished.

In respect to clause 202, representations both for and against the City Council having the power to sell various kinds of electrical, gas and water apparatus and appliances were considered. On balance Government decided in favour of the City Council having the power to sell. This is not the first step in Nationalisation, as has been suggested. The real reasons are not at all sinister. In so far as electricity is concerned, the object is to reduce the cost of electricity to the consumer by increasing consumption - especially in the non peak periods in the day time and late at night. When prices are artificially high, the public is not inclined to buy. When equipment is sold by the City Council at reasonable prices, more such equipment is bought and more electricity is consumed. The object is to offer the consumer reasonable terms for consumer appliances and good service.

The City Council's object is not to trade in non-consumer appliances such as electric bulbs and electrical wiring. As a matter of interest it may soon cease to sell electrical cookers and fans because, so far as these are concerned, the trade prices are reasonable. It may also be of interest that the British Electricity Authority in the United Kingdom, which is a public body, has the power not only to sell consumer appliances but also to manufacture them. It is also believed that in the Federation the Central

Electricity Board have the power to sell.

As regards gas appliances on the other hand, it appears that the City Council is the sole trader and it is therefore in the public interest that the City Council should continue to hire its equipment and also, as it does in some cases, to sell such equipment.

The Honourable Member for Tanglin sought to add a number of new clauses with which Government was not in agreement. I propose to refer briefly to these because they appear to indicate a misunderstanding of Government's intention, although I had thought that the White Paper on the Local Government Report, read in conjunction with the Report itself, clearly sets out the position.

The first new clause sought to give the District Councils powers to appoint a Secretary, Treasurer, Health Officer, Assessor, Engineer, Architect and other such appointments.

The second new clause is similar to the first in that it provided for the Chairmen of District Councils to submit to their Councils each year a list of posts which are necessary.

The third new clause provided for the District Council Fund and properties vested in it to come under the direction and control of the District. Also that all payments to and out of the Fund should be made by the Treasurer (appointed under the first new clause).

Government does not disagree with the principles envisaged in these proposed amendments and, in fact, endorses them since it is intended that District Councils should be independent as soon as possible. At the second reading of the Bill I drew attention to the Explanatory Note which reads:- "Provision is also made for District Councils to be run, during an interim period after their constitution on lines similar to those of the Rural Board, particularly with regard to finances, staffing, vesting of properties, acquisition and disposal of land and other unmovable property. When these Councils have been set on their feet and have become financially viable, amending legislation will be introduced to enable them to function independently like the City Council."

Honourable Members will appreciate that it is not possible to create independent and 100% self-sufficient District Councils overnight. Membership of local authority is a job to be learned. The weight of responsibility we are proposing to place upon these Councils is, as the McNeice Report points out, very considerable, and experience in the management of weighty affairs is not immediately evident in these areas. It is for such reasons, as well as financial considerations, that a measure of guidance of these Councils in their early years is necessary for a strictly limited period.

Nevertheless it is agreed that District Councils should be as independent as practicable of control by Government. The Committee on Local Government sought for a system of financial assistance by Government which would preserve local authorities independence, and it was thought that a system of equalisation grants would offer the best solution. This matter is also referred to in paragraph 6 of the White Paper.

All these matters concerning the duties and responsibility of District Councils, the feasibility of a system of equalisation grants, staffing, and all such considerations regarding the machinery to establish District Councils are being studied by a Working Party, the establishment of which was referred to at paragraphs 210 and 211

of the McNeice Report.

In due course amending legislation on the lines envisaged by the Honourable Member for Tanglin will be introduced, but Government's view is that at present it is premature to do so.

Two minor amendments have been made to the description of District boundaries at the Second Schedule which have also been illustrated on the maps A and B attached to the Report.

The first minor amendment at Plan was simply to draw the boundary to bring the Royal Malayan Navy together with the Naval Base, rather than to have them artificially separated.

The second amendment, at Plan B, was to include Nee Soon Village in the Serangoon District Council instead of in the Bukit Panjang District. Nee Soon is comparatively remote from Bukit Panjang Village, and the lives of the residents of Nee Soon are more closely linked with those of the residents living along Sembawang Road and Thomson Road.

As regards the whole of these boundaries described in the First and Second Schedules, it has been represented that they should be subjected to the procedure laid down at Clauses 5 and 15. Government's view is that this procedure should be applied to all subsequent amendments, but in so far as these major changes are concerned, forming as they do part of a new Bill, that the proper place for consideration of them and debate upon them is in the Assembly alongside all the other proposals of the Bill. The Report of the Committee on Local Government, showing in "map-form" the first boundary proposals has been available since early 1956. The White Paper, Cmd. 30 of 1956, with firm boundary proposals was published together with a map a few months later, and the same boundaries have been described in the Bill. The proposed boundaries have, therefore, been given a thorough airing and it is not agreed that any further airing under clauses 5 and 15 is necessary.

As I said earlier, many hundreds of amendments to this Bill have been considered and made. Many of them are minor improvements and corrections. Others take into account the representations which have been made. I have already mentioned the more important representations and amendments. The final results are of course incorporated in the Bill attached to the Report. These are a few more amendments which I shall move shortly. Members will have observed from the notice of amendments, that all these additional amendments which I propose to move are minor ones and that those which are to be made to the more controversial clauses 21 and 108 are of little importance and have little or no bearing on the main issues.

Sir, Honourable Members of the Assembly are conscious of the importance of this Bill, particularly its special provisions for the establishment of several more democratic institutions in Singapore Island. The early enactment of the Bill is chiefly dictated by the urgent and widespread desire to hold elections to the local government Councils as soon as possible and, more particularly, to hold City Council Election in December. Nevertheless Members of the Assembly may well feel that a little more time should be given to consideration of the Bill. For this reason, therefore, I shall shortly propose that 'Committee Stage' should be deferred until Thursday, 25th July, for which purpose a special meeting of the Assembly will be proposed.

Sir, I think that is all I have to say for the present.

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