

**Submission
No 143**

**INQUIRY INTO LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NEW SOUTH
WALES**

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1. Public perception
 - a. There is a widely held public perception that the proposed amalgamation changes are a piteously driven response to the demands of the property industry to streamline the approvals process for development proposals.
 - b. The truncated consultation process, the “reverse onus” approach and failure to rule out forced amalgamations, and the ill-defined a priori criteria for the so-called ‘fit for purpose’ hurdle reinforce that perception.
 - c. Cynicism about and opposition to the proposed changes can be expected to continue until those issues are properly and satisfactorily addressed.
2. Good governance
 - a. Good governance at all levels of government requires transparency and accountability.
 - b. Councils as presently conceived are directed by part-time councillors who (unlike their state and federal counterparts) do not have personal staff to assist them inter alia to review reports and recommendations submitted to them for approval by council management.
 - c. Such a situation can still provide effective oversight and accountability provided that the quantity and complexity of reports etc to be reviewed remains at a manageable level.
 - d. However, it is unrealistic to expect that part-time councillors of councils of the size and ‘scale’ as is being proposed would be able to provide adequate time and resources to provide effective oversight for and accountability in respect of the quantity and complexity of such reports etc that would be generated by amalgamated councils of the size and ‘scale’ proposed.
 - e. Reports in the media of failures by councils to provide proper oversight and governance indicate that increasing the size and scale of councils does not improve such oversight and accountability.
 - f. In fact, the opposite – eg, the report in the media of 7 July 2015 that bigger councils in Sydney performed worst, according to the *Your Council* report for 2013-14.
3. Scale
 - a. It is ridiculous to postulate an arbitrary measure such as “scale” to which councils are expected to comply when that “scale is –
 - i. undefined
 - ii. arbitrary
 - iii. unsubstantiated
 - b.
4. “Local”
 - a. Local government is aptly named as it relates to government of local places.
 - b. ‘local’ means related to a particular place
 - c. ‘local’ is not the same as ‘regional’, which signifies a region of a number of local places
 - d.
5. Participatory democracy
 - a. A key benefit of ‘local government’ is the ability of local residents to have their voice heard when decisions which will affect them are being made by their local council.
 - b. This is a fundamental principle of democracy which can be realistically realised at the level of local government with smaller councils, in a way which is difficult if not unrealistic for most citizens in large councils or at the other two tiers of government.
 - c. While this may be seen as a nuisance and impediment to decision making, it is what distinguishes grass roots democracy from autocratic government by those who believe they know best and find the necessity to consult and negotiated irksome.
 - d. The proposed amalgamation proposals bring to mind the Thatcherist notion that there is no such thing as society, only an economy, and the misconceived notion of the Greiner government that it was “putting New South Wales first by managing better”, again giving primacy to the economic and financial over the rights of residents and citizens to be players in the messy game of government.
6. Terms of reference
 - a. The terms appear arbitrary, doctrinaire, ideological and unsupported by evidence.
 - b. As such they are defective and need to be rewritten.
 - c. I intend making a separate submission on this via the website questionnaire provided.
7. Financial justification
 - a. it would appear the proposed amalgamation changes are unsupported by evidence of financial benefit.
 - b. I understand there is well respected research which discredits the assumptions behind the proposals.
 - c. Fortuitously, the report in the media of 7 July 2015 that bigger councils in Sydney performed worst, according to the *Your Council* report for 2013-14, undercuts a key rationale for the proposals.
8. Conclusion

- a. The proposals should be taken off the agenda and reconsidered at a fundamental level