

## INQUIRY INTO LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NEW SOUTH WALES

**Organisation:** Braidwood Greens and Queanbeyan-Monaro Greens (two groups)

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## **Local Government in NSW (Inquiry)**

### **Submission from Braidwood and Queanbeyan Monaro Greens local groups**

Braidwood Greens (BGs) and Queanbeyan-Monaro Greens (QMGs) offer the following joint submission to this Local Government in NSW inquiry, and thank you for the opportunity to comment. Most of our local group members reside in the Queanbeyan City Council and Palerang Council LGAs, with some also living in the Cooma-Monaro and Eurobodalla Shires.

We have addressed a number of the terms of reference in our submission.

#### **Introduction**

Local government is a vital part of Australian democracy, and should be recognised in the Australian Constitution. There have been long-standing problems with some aspects of local government, but we believe these will not be solved by forcing councils to amalgamate.

The reaction of many councils across the state, especially but not exclusively rural councils, to the merger proposals put forward by the State Government demonstrates the unwillingness by councils and communities to go down this path, and we believe the State Government should listen.

If local government is to become truly fit for the future, we need to find ways to make existing councils more efficient and democratic while retaining the ability of people to have local representation. Creating mega councils (in some instances) and albeit smaller but at the same time merged regional councils will not facilitate local democracy and merely create state government-style microcosms, such as what happened in Victoria when the then Premier pushed through amalgamations, some of which were later reversed. De-amalgamations have also happened in Queensland and most recently, amalgamations have been abandoned in WA.

#### **Financial sustainability**

The BGs and QMGs believe that financial sustainability has become the issue that it is because of the inadequacy of state and federal funding to local government, often brought about as a result of cost-shifting. Successive state and federal governments have exacerbated the problem through ongoing erosion of funding while expecting councils to do more and more with less and less. When councils have been unable to fulfil these expectations, community members have understandably become increasingly frustrated with their councils.

It is in the interests of neither local democracy nor ecological sustainability to expect councils to derive ever more of their revenue base from increased rates and never-ending development. It should not be assumed that the best way for a council to become “fit for the future” is to increase development and therefore its rates base, yet this is what some councils are feeling is necessary if they want to avoid amalgamation. The current State Government has expressed a commitment to a Big NSW, but The Greens strongly believe that this is absolute folly if we are to have any regard for the capacity of this state and this country to continue to provide clean air, clean water and clean food. According to Haydn Washington (UNSW), speaking on ABC Radio National's Ockham's

Razor in April this year, “60 per cent of ecosystem services are degrading, ... the Earth’s ecological footprint is more than 1.5 Earths, ... extinction is at least 1,000-fold above the normal levels in the fossil record and (it is estimated) that without change by 2100, two-thirds of life may be extinct... due to our actions.’

Further, “since 1960, population has grown by a factor of 2.2 while consumption has gone up six-fold. ...If the entire world were to adopt American (or Australian) lifestyles, we would need at least four more planets to supply them.” And let us not forget that every person in Australia is generating just over 2kg of waste every day, much of which is currently going into council landfills.

These shocking statistics ought to be a clarion call to immediate action, yet governments, including the current NSW State Government, continue with business as usual and expect everyone to follow.

Recognition of local government in the Australian Constitution would go no small way to ensuring local government received a guaranteed, greater share of the federal budget, reducing the need for it to rely on rates increases and development to pay for the services and facilities that it has been asked by the state government to fund and provide.

While we recognise there is some overlap in legislated roles (General Manager, mayor, etc) by retaining the status quo, we believe that economies of scale can be achieved in other ways. We already have an effective model for resource-sharing with the Regional Organisations of Councils (ROCs) which could be built on further, and many councils have already taken the initiative and are selling their services to others. For example, Palerang has for many years tendered for and provided roadworks in adjoining LGAs and those further afield, and has shared planning services with other councils too. QCC has announced similar plans.

#### **The role of co-operative models for local government including the ‘Fit for the Futures’ own Joint Organisations, Strategic Alliances, Regional Organisations of Councils, and other shared service models, such as the Common Service Model**

We reiterate the benefits of some of these models as an alternative to full-scale amalgamation (please refer to comments above) and would add that councils have worked hard to pursue cost-saving measures such as purchase of bulk electricity. There is room for further creativity and innovation.

#### **The effects of forced amalgamation on the specific needs of regional and rural councils and communities, especially in terms of its impact on local economies**

In many smaller communities, local government is the largest employer, and this applies to the town of Braidwood and its surrounding villages, and to a lesser extent Bungendore (only because a larger proportion of Bungendore residents are employed in the Canberra public service). Aggregate redundancy costs would also be an issue in terms of the financial cost of amalgamation alone, leaving aside the huge social impact.

#### **Protecting and delivering democratic structures for local government that ensure it remains close to the people it serves**

We believe there is more opportunity under the status quo to ensure local government remains close to the community it serves. It is hard to see how an LGA covering such a large geographical area such as a merged QCC and Palerang Council would be could hope to properly represent its constituents, especially given the current legislated requirement for wards/ridings to contain roughly the same number of people. A merged QCC/Palerang Council would most likely leave Palerang ratepayers and residents, especially those in the more rural areas, without a voice. Furthermore, it does not take into account the substantial differences that exist between between city and rural/regional councils.

While a number of people have become disenchanted by their experiences with local government, we do not believe that amalgamations are the answer. Instead, we suggest that any government inquiry would be best to look at how to make local government as it currently stands stronger, more resilient and more democratic. If such an inquiry were to take place, there may be some LGAs which recognised that some boundary adjustments would be beneficial, but the almost arbitrary amalgamations being proposed by the State Government are at best only band-aid solutions, and do not look at the root cause of the problems that exist.

### **Conclusion**

The BGs and QMGs do not believe that what is currently being proposed by the State Government will benefit either of our two main local government areas, nor for that matter many of the other LGAs that are affected, and would urge the Government to consider other ways of achieving long-term financial sustainability while at the same time preserving the essence of local democracy.

Thankyou again for the opportunity to comment on this important issue.

Catherine Moore and Noela McDonald

on behalf of Braidwood Greens and Queanbeyan Monaro Greens local groups, July 3, 2015