

20 August 2010

Committee Secretary
Select Committee on the Reform of the Australian Federation
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

SUBMISSION—INQUIRY INTO THE REFORM OF THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION

Firstly, I'd like to thank the Senate of the Australian Parliament for an opportunity to make a submission on this inquiry.

However, it was only by chance that I became aware of this opportunity this week via an information bulletin of the *Western Australian Local Government Association* (WALGA) circulated within my workplace, the Shire of Carnarvon. Otherwise, I would have missed it.

I don't recall seeing notice of this in the local newspaper, the *Northern Guardian*, nor even in the *'West Australian'* newspaper.

I also noticed from the Senate's website that it was only on the 17 June 2010 that such an inquiry was moved by the Senate, leaving only a short time to make a submission.

Going by the title and purpose of the enquiry, and the particular matters referred to, one would have thought a much longer period of time would have been allowed to make submissions on what I believe is a very important issue. It begs the question as to whether the Senate is serious about such a matter. I guess only time will tell.

Nevertheless, I offer the following comments for consideration – which have been made in haste – based on my own thoughts and observations, and my experience in working both for and dealing with local governments for the past 30 years plus. I acknowledge, however, that I am not very familiar with the Australian Constitution nor fully aware of the machinations in respect to the particular matters the Select Committee is to inquire about.

My comments are as follows:

- *The Distribution of Constitutional Powers and Responsibilities between the Commonwealth and the States (including the Territories)*

I believe any examination of the distribution of constitutional powers and responsibilities between the Commonwealth and the States ought to be preceded by an examination and review of the roles and responsibilities of each, especially if these have not fundamentally changed or altered from the time of Federation.

With the effluxion of time, changes to the way public administration and business is conducted, shifting responsibilities etc, and the use of external powers by the Commonwealth on occasions to remove certain State responsibilities, I'm sure these roles and responsibilities have changed but without being constitutionally enshrined.

They have also possibly been blurred resulting in overlap and duplication of authority and services between the two levels of government.

➤ *Financial Relations between Federal, State and Local Governments*

In respect to financial relations between Federal, State and Local governments I believe the States and local governments, especially remote and regional local governments having small population and income (rates) bases, are too reliant on Federal funding for the provision of services and infrastructure, particularly where they are demanded to be delivered to the same standard and quality as delivered within the capital cities and larger metropolitan centres.

In my view, increased revenue-raising powers ought to be provided to State and local governments to enable them to be more fiscally independent (with the appropriate checks and balances in place). I'm not yet sure what these might be but I'm certain there have been plenty of ideas already proffered within this field that can be drawn upon for further consideration and debate.

➤ *Possible Constitutional Amendment, including the Recognition of Local Government*

In respect to possible constitutional amendments, one issue I do feel strongly about is that all revenues and moneys raised shall form one consolidated fund. The issue I have is the use of any taxation paid by me to indirectly fund activities and actions that are contrary or abhorrent to my religious beliefs and faith (I'm a Roman Catholic).

Whilst I understand that - from practical perspective - it may be a difficult exercise to appropriate moneys raised from income revenue into segregated funds for specific purposes (and thus acquiesce to people holding similar views as mine), I'm sure it can be done. I request it be a matter worthy of further investigation and consideration.

In respect to the possible constitutional recognition of local government I support this although I think local government's powers ought to be defined and limited. I also believe for all levels of government, candidates for constituent representation also ought to have undertaken and completed an accreditation course that explains the role, function and responsibility of an elected representative, expected standards of behaviour and conduct, ethics, a basic understanding of the machinery of the government they seek to be a part of, and a need to consider all matters before them in the interest of the constituency they serve - in my view, a lot of this is still lacking in local government.

➤ *Strategies for Strengthening Australia's Regions and the Delivery of Services through Regional Development Committees and Regional Grant Programs*

I think the solution to this is simple and straight-forward—just populate the regions with people!

As members of the Committee would know and appreciate, strength comes from numbers.

It is my view that funding for services, infrastructure, community well-being programs etc is *too* city-centric, principally because in Australia's capital cities is where the power, influence and wealth lies, and where the parliamentarians are more easily accessible.

I'm sure that facilitating population increases in Australia's regions (outside the capital cities) would reduce the imbalance and bias in respect to the level of funding of services, infrastructure, and community well-being programs etc currently provided in the regions.

This is why – at least in country and regional WA – the current State Government's *Royalty for Regions* program is so popular, and I would suggest, accepted. A program like this should perhaps be extended to all of Regional Australia—it would surely make the Federal parliament sit up and take notice if a Federal government were to enact this!

It is also my view, and as a practicing town planner, that Australia's capital cities are too large. Future growth and development ought to be more channelled to Australia's regional towns. The provision of a range of financial incentives encouraging people in the capital cities to move to a regional town would greatly assist.

Of course, there may debate about what would be an acceptable level of population that could be sustained in regional towns but perhaps we could take a leaf out of the 'Roman's book'—apparently, once a town reached 50,000 population, growth was curtailed by establishing a new town within the vicinity¹.

In respect to the delivery of services through a *Regional Development Committee* I'm perhaps ambivalent about this process. However, if such committees are to remain I would like membership of such committees to only comprise representatives elected from the local governments within the region, and State and Federal parliamentarians representing the region. Perhaps there could even be representatives from the region directly-elected by the region's constituents.

There should be no non-elected members of the committee. However, a technical advisory committee or group (drawing members from say the offices of all spheres of government, local chambers of commerce, and specialist consultants in say economic and community development) to serve and advise the *Regional Development Committee* ought to also be established. This committee would receive, assess, evaluate, critique and recommend on funding applications.

¹ David Macaulay (1974), *City—A Story of Roman Planning and Construction* (Houghton Mifflin Company Boston)

As I'm now running out of time to say more in this submission (and I would certainly welcome more time to expand upon this submission if this could be given) in order to make the submission deadline, I will close now.

In closing, I once again thank the Senate for this opportunity to make a submission on its inquiry and would be only too happy to expand and expound upon it if necessary or desired.

Sincerely,

Anthony (Tony) Dowling, BA and Grad Dipl (Urban and Regional Planning) MPIA CPP MTPC