



Victorian Local Governance Association

Suite G06, 60 Leicester Street, Carlton VIC 3053
Phone (03) 9349 7999 • Fax (03) 9347 9933
Email vlga@vlga.org.au • Web www.vlga.org.au

15 February 2013

Submission Number: 220

Date Received: 15/02/2013

Ms Michelle Rowland MP
Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Local Government
Department of House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Via email: jsclg@aph.gov.au

Dear Ms Rowland,

The VLGA welcomes the opportunity to provide a written submission following the release of the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Local Government report. This submission follows our appearance before the Committee on Wednesday 16 January 2013.

The VLGA's mission is around strengthening local government and building its capacity. Constitutional recognition of local government will strengthen the sector by further legitimising local government's critical role in providing good governance and services to local communities. It will also ensure local government's future democratic basis and that any future reforms and cooperative arrangements will incorporate the essential democratic concept of communities being able to elect their own local governments.

The VLGA continues to support the financial recognition of local government. This is in accordance with the majority finding of the Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Local Government and recommendations one and two contained in the Preliminary report of the Joint Select Committee, including by amending section 96 of the Commonwealth Constitution.

We believe that constitutional recognition must guarantee the capacity of the Australian Government to fund local government directly.

As many others have observed, we believe there are several pre-conditions to ensuring a successful referendum.

Firstly, bi-partisan support is a crucial precondition for success. History suggests that referenda fail when a high degree of bi-partisan support is not achieved.

Secondly, the referendum would require significant support from governments at all levels. There would be few in the local government sector who do not support at least some form of constitutional recognition. While the Australian Government is supportive of the referendum, unfortunately several state governments are opposed and, at this point, it appears there is significant equivocation from the Federal Opposition.

Thirdly, voters need to be informed about the problem that recognising local government in the Commonwealth Constitution is seeking to address.

While some doubt remains that progress toward these preconditions has been sufficient to date, we believe progress may occur with a concerted effort to engage voters. The VLGA has been supportive of the efforts of Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) and their Victorian constituent, the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) in working with councils to raise awareness of the issue. However, we do not believe these efforts to date have had an impact on public understanding of the issue, certainly not great enough to ensure the success of the referendum.

The VLGA believes a large scale campaign communicating to the Australian public about financial recognition, about what it means for them as citizens, ratepayers, and service users is the crucial element to ensure the success of a referendum. Voters need to comprehend the importance of local government in order to maximise the chances of success of the proposed referendum. A national civics education campaign is crucial. The Australian Government should also work in partnership with local governments through the ALGA to assist a 'yes' campaign.

We believe local governments can then present this matter directly to their communities, to supplement ALGA leadership on this issue. Through a nationally coordinated process and with the support of the Australian Government, local governments will be enabled to facilitate a conversation about the importance of constitutional recognition.

The VLGA believes that a national campaign will significantly increase the likelihood of a referendum succeeding, whenever it is held. We therefore support recommendation four of the committee on preparatory activities. Timing will be the critical factor. In order to ensure a majority of voters understand constitutional recognition of local government by the time of the September 2013 election, the preparatory activities outlined in the Committee report must commence as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely

Maree McPherson
Chief Executive Officer