

May 17, 2013

Facts not Fear, Please, In Referendum Debate – Opinion – The Australian

You would hope something as important as a referendum would bring on constructive debate. You'd also hope it would be a time for clarity, not fear-mongering. Sadly, we've seen little sense or clarity this week in the opinion pages of *The Australian*.

So, let's get the facts straight.

Recognising the financial relationship between the Commonwealth and Local Government sector simply recognises an existing reality. Drive around your suburb or town and there's almost certainly a town hall, a sports oval, a new wing to the local library, or a rejuvenated main street that was built with Commonwealth help.

It's hardly new. It's something that's been going on for a good four decades. Even the local road you're driving along was probably funded under the Roads to Recovery program which, in the last five years alone, has pumped some \$1.75 billion into local councils for road building and repairs.

When our Constitution was signed on 1 January 1901, Australia was a very different place. Keeping streets clear of garbage and the roads well-graded for horses and carriages was the prime job of a local council. They were little more than an administrative tool of State Governments to manage the most basic of services.

Skip forward 112 years, click onto your local council's web-site, and you'll see the enormous range of services they provide these days. There are childcare and employment services, aged-care hostels, disability programs, arts festivals and galleries, business incentive schemes, tourist centres... the list goes on and on.

Located smack bang in the middle of the communities they serve, no-one could argue that local councils are not best placed to provide those services. And it's hardly a surprise that many of those activities have been funded for many years at least in part by the Commonwealth.

So it is now time for our Constitution to recognise the modern reality of local government in the 21st century. When voters visit their polling booth this September, they will be invited to vote 'yes' to 17 additional words to our existing constitution.

Here they are in italics:

Financial assistance to States **and local government bodies**. During a period of ten years after the establishment of the Commonwealth and thereafter until the Parliament otherwise

provides, the Parliament may grant financial assistance to any State, ***or to any local government body formed by a law of a State.***

Whatever the conspiracy theorist might argue, this is not a Commonwealth attempt to take over the States. Under our Constitution, State Governments are and will stay responsible for local councils. The referendum is not seeking any change to this arrangement.

All it seeks to do is formally acknowledge the fact that some council services and activities from time to time receive Commonwealth help. It is a simple piece of national housekeeping that will enshrine the Australian people's right to benefit from the funding programs that help keep our towns and suburbs strong and connected.

This is particularly important for those who live in regional Australia. While I have many differences of opinion with Coalition Local Government spokesperson Barnaby Joyce, on this referendum issue we will unite to campaign for a "Yes" vote.

May 10, 2013

Let's embrace constitutional change – Opinion – Adelaide Advertiser

When South Australia's hard-working lifesavers put their hands up to ask for a new headquarters, they enlisted the backing of four coastal councils, the Cities of Marion, West Torrens, Holdfast Bay and Charles Sturt. Collectively, they turned to the Commonwealth which saw the merits of the case and funded a brand new centre at West Beach which will be helping save lives for decades to come. To the footy field and fans heading to the Glenelg Oval can now enjoy the spectacle of night football thanks to new lights. Again, these were funded under a partnership between the Commonwealth and the City of Holdfast Bay. Or there's the impressive new library, community centre, playgrounds and nature trails under construction at St Peters. It's a genuine investment for the future and has been possible because of a deal between the City of Norwood Payneham & St Peters and the Commonwealth.

Local and Commonwealth partnerships have been commonplace for at least 40 years. They help build community infrastructure and strengthen local economies. It would probably come as a surprise then to most Australians to discover that this financial relationship between the Commonwealth and local government is not actually acknowledged in our Constitution. That is because the Constitution was drafted more than a century ago when Australia was a very different place. In those days, we were a collection of separate colonies. People rarely travelled far from home, given that the horse and cart was the main form of transport. The tasks of those earliest councils were little more than maintaining local roads and collecting rubbish which they funded via property rates.

In 2013, councils are vastly different to those that existed at Federation. No-one thinks there's anything odd these days about them providing childcare, aged-care, employment and disability services, swimming pools, sporting fields and local roads. These days, some of this infrastructure development and service delivery is made possible by the Commonwealth partnering with local government.

This occurred in 2009 when the Commonwealth partnered with local government to deliver the Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program to keep jobs in local communities and build lasting infrastructure during the global financial crisis. Together, we funded more than 6,000 community projects such as roads, bridges, sporting centres and libraries. That's in addition to the \$1.75 billion we've put directly into council roads across the country over the past three years through the Roads to Recovery program.

It's important the Commonwealth is able to keep investing securely in communities and that's exactly what financial recognition of local government in the Constitution is all about. In 2011, an expert panel led by the Hon. James Spigelman AC QC concluded that financial recognition should be taken to a referendum. It urged the Commonwealth to work with the States to get their support. A Parliamentary Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Local Government was formed to consider the findings of

the expert panel. In its report tabled before the Federal Parliament in March, it agreed it was time to take the issue to a referendum. Uncertainty, it said, was affecting strategic planning and, as local councils are often the biggest single employer in both urban and regional areas, it was 'in the economic interest of these communities to have this issue resolved'.

We know that for a referendum to succeed it will require bipartisan support and broad consensus in the community. I have been encouraged with the response to consultations across the political spectrum up to this point. Such a change will merely confirm existing practice so that the Constitution reflects how our system of government works. It is a modest change but one that we should all embrace.

Ends...