

LOCAL GOVERNMENT PLEBISCITES INQUIRY

To: fpa.sen@aph.gov.au

I am writing to make a submission to Senate Finance and Public Administration Standing Committee inquiry into the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Democratic Plebiscites) Bill 2007.

I have read the Second Reading speech by Mr. Nairn.

I believe that this is a most unwise and unsafe Bill, which should be returned to the government for further consideration.

Single issue laws are almost always problematical, in the short or longer term.

The Bill itself is deceptive. It purports to allow the Australian Electoral Commission to undertake any plebiscite on the amalgamation of any local government body in any part of Australia. In reality, most parts of Australia have amalgamated their local government boundaries long since, without the benefit of plebiscite. Quite clearly, as Mr Nairn's speech indicates, the Bill is directed at Queensland, and the minority of local government areas that oppose amalgamation.

The Bill also introduces the concept of "Democratic Plebiscites", without being required to consider why and how these are a useful additional part of the Australian democratic process.

Plebiscites are of necessity non-compulsory and non-binding. It seems unlikely that, with the complexity of issues surrounding amalgamations, plebiscites give people an improved opportunity to express their opinions. The surveys conducted by the Queensland Government and the Queensland Local Government Association use multiple questions to probe the complexities, but in both cases the results are extremely ambiguous.

And if plebiscites are appropriate and desirable, why are they limited to local government issues, and specifically to amalgamations? The Queensland Local Government Reform Commission Report dealt with matters other than boundaries, and the current review of the Queensland Local Government Act raises hundreds of other issues. What is the rationale for them not being subject to plebiscite?

There is an implication in Mr. Nairn's speech that plebiscites are necessary because there has not been an adequate opportunity for Queenslanders to participate in the process or to

express opinions. In reality, it has been the most public political issue in Queensland in a generation. The Queensland Government made available a very balanced discussion paper in April; there was plenty of opportunity for public submissions and many thousands were received; discussions by people in newspaper and webs sites through letters and blogs has been voluminous; and public demonstrations have been huge. Certainly, not everyone agrees with all of the answers, just as I disagree with many decisions made on my behalf by local, state and federal governments, but that is what life and politics is all about.

At issue is not the Australian Electoral Commission's impeccable fitness or ability to carry out the plebiscites, but the nature of the plebiscites themselves.

Mr Nairn's speech expressly says that the Bill is not intended to be an avenue for citizen initiated referenda, but it seems to me to be a dangerous step in this direction.

I urge that the Bill be returned to the Government for further consideration.

John McKinlay
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