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Committee Secretary
Finance and Public Administration Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

**RE: Submission to Inquiry into the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment
(Democratic Plebiscites) Bill 2007**

This Bill enables local communities to have a vote on forced council amalgamations in Queensland and for that reason I support it. The Federal Labor Leader Kevin Rudd on the 17th of May 2007 outlined our opposition to forced council amalgamations and our belief that the community should first approve any changes through a plebiscite.

Local communities should have the ability to vote on these changes as they are far reaching and will change the nature of Local Government in Queensland for ever. These changes have also come as a major shock to many communities and a plebiscite will enable people to exercise their democratic right and voice their opinion.

The forced amalgamation of the Douglas Shire with Cairns City Council was a major surprise to me and most residents of our region. The Douglas Shire is unique, home to the World Heritage Daintree Rainforest the rural community of Mossman and one of the regions premier tourist destinations Port Douglas.

It has had significant governance problems within its elected council but the shire is in a strong financial position and continues to do businesses. This is demonstrated by the Douglas Shire winning the Planning Institute of Australia's (Queensland) planning award this year.

The shire effectively met the Terms of Reference for the Independent Reform Commission and many residents are angry about the decision to amalgamate their shire with Cairns.

Adding to this anger is the fact that local residents have not been allowed a say through a plebiscite. The State Government in fact originally passed legislation to sack councils who undertook plebiscites on amalgamations. I am pleased that the Queensland Government finally back down on this decision and the legislation has been changed.

The Queensland Government however, still plans to proceed with forced council amalgamations no matter the outcome of these plebiscites.

It is important therefore that Federal, State and Local Government work with communities to ensure that local values that people are fighting to protect are maintained.

We need to ensure that local communities maintain their capacity to develop local solutions that best meet their needs and aspirations. Localism needs to be maintained and placed at the centre of national policy. Decisions that affect local communities need to be made at the local level, not in capital cities.

The development of new technologies particularly in telecommunications and transport should enable this to occur through more decentralised service delivery and decision making.

Achieving this will require more clearly defining the roles of Local, State and Federal Government and ensuring that the different levels of government are properly resourced to deliver their particular services and responsibilities.

There has been a steady decline in Federal Support for Local Government – Financial Assistance Grants have fallen from 1% of total taxation revenue at the time Mr Howard took office to 0.76% in the last budget. Local government at the same time is being asked to do more.

Federal Labor is committed to working to reform Federal, State and Local government relations to ensure that every level of government is meeting the needs of local communities not competing with each other or blaming the other for failures in service delivery.

Constitutional recognition of local government needs to be an important part of this process. So that local government is not seen as the third tier of government but a partner in decision making and service delivery.

John Howard as then Opposition Leader campaigned against constitutional recognition of local government in 1988 and failed to support constitutional recognition when it was put to the Parliament by Labor last year.

So I support this Bill as it will enable local communities to exercise their democratic right and have a vote on forced council amalgamations. I'm also committed to work with local communities to ensure that their local values and services are maintained.

Jim Turnour
Federal Labor Candidate for Leichhardt