

Submission to the
Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee

inquiring into

**The Commonwealth Electoral Amendment
(Democratic Plebiscites) Bill 2007**

Addressed to

Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee
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Submission made by

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Summary

In addressing this inquiry into the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Democratic Plebiscites) Bill 2007 we believe that the process of Council Amalgamation undertaken by the Queensland Government clearly demonstrates the necessity for this Bill.

The Council Amalgamation process in Queensland has been dictatorial and undemocratic. It has denied citizens their rights to:

- representation of their interests by their elected Councillors and Mayor
- freedom of expression
- participation in the conduct of public affairs

The rights of citizens are protected only if all levels of Government honour those rights by legislation and by action.

The Queensland State Government has clearly not done so. The only recourse of the people, apart from civil disobedience, is that the Federal Government enacts legislation that will enable democratic process: in this case, legislation that enables Local Government Councils to hold plebiscites to determine and publicise the views of their citizens.

We commend

- the proposed legislation
- any other reform that will enshrine the rights of citizens to participate in public affairs at that level most accessible to them: Local Government

Supporting Information

The experiences of Taroom Shire Council, and the Taroom community, highlight the undemocratic Council Amalgamation process undertaken by the Queensland Government.

Our understanding of the Local Government Reform process in Queensland is that under the Size, Shape and Sustainability program, initiated in 2005, Queensland Councils were exploring a number of models for more efficient operation:

These models can be summarised as:-

- **Resource sharing through service agreements**, where Councils as a group agree to allocate functions between themselves with an individual Council undertaking a function on behalf of the group.
- **Resource sharing through joint enterprise**, where Councils form a joint business unit to achieve economies of scale across a functional area of core business.
- **Merger/amalgamation**, where Councils join together voluntarily;
- **Significant Boundary Change** which may also include joint arrangements.

Extract from *Size, Shape and Sustainability of Queensland Local Gov't Discussion Paper. Local Government Association of Queensland, March 2005, p .5*

In the case of Taroom Shire the opportunities consequently identified, and pursued with surrounding Councils, were primarily related to resource sharing. Significant efficiencies were being achieved and further opportunities actively sought between Taroom Shire and other Councils.

Amalgamation was seen by Taroom Shire Council as an undesirable outcome for the Shire community. Recent public meetings confirm this.

In April 2007, despite the planning and changes already taken by Local Government Councils and their staff, the Queensland Government arbitrarily decided to abandon the Size, Shape and Sustainability program. The Local Government Reform Commission was formed on the 1st May 2007 and in July 2007 published its recommendations. There was little time for Councils to prepare submissions, little public awareness of the Commission, and to the best of our knowledge, there were no public hearings.

The size of the document so speedily published can only lead us to assume that the process was underway well before Councils were advised of it. Premier Peter Beattie and Minister for Local Government, Andrew Fraser, had no intention of allowing the people to have much influence on the outcome.

In response to community outrage, some Councils decided to hold plebiscites. Law was passed, by the Queensland Parliament on 10 August 2007, that would prevent councillors having any involvement with plebiscites to determine the wishes of the people.

Mr Fraser, Queensland Minister for Local Government, stated on 9th August 2007 "councils also had the opportunity to hold referendums during the Size, Shape and Sustainability program."

Our understanding is those Councils that were planning to amalgamate would have held referendums but the process was pre-empted by Mr Beattie and Mr Fraser.

The recommendations of the Local Government Reform Commission reduce Queensland Councils from 156 to 72 and will have huge impacts. In the case of Taroom Shire the recommendation is even more devastating than amalgamation:

it involves splitting Taroom Shire, along a line that has no rationale, and amalgamating each division with Councils north and south.

Premier Beattie's decision that Councils could not hold plebiscites flies in the face of the requirement of Councils, as expressed in the "*Size, Shape and Sustainability of Queensland Local Gov't Discussion Paper*". *Local Government Association of Queensland, March 2005, p.6.*

However, if an amalgamation or boundary change is proposed, under current legislation this needs the Minister for Local Government to refer the request to the Electoral Commissioner as a reviewable matter. An amalgamation also requires a public referendum with majority support in each Council area regardless of whether each council has determined this as the best option to address issues.

Taroom Shire

Matters that Councils should have considered during the Size Shape and Sustainability program

Under the Local Government Regulation 1994, there are a number of prescribed issues which must be considered in relation to any reviewable local government matter. These issues are relevant to the sustainability of the current size, shape and structure of local government arrangements.

The prescribed issues include **resource base sufficiency, planning and community of interest** although the Regulation also requires consideration of **joint arrangements**. These prescribed issues indicate that sustainability must consider not only financial issues but must also include community and growth management matters.

Extract from *Size, Shape and Sustainability of Queensland Local Gov't Discussion Paper. Local Government Association of Queensland, March 2005, p .5*

Community of interest

Taroom Shire is largely rural with two towns, Taroom and Wandoan servicing a cohesive community. The strong community, and exceptionally high level of volunteerism, provide a standard of living well beyond that which simple financial assessment might indicate.

Both towns are well serviced with sporting fields, showgrounds, swimming pools and entertainment centre or town hall. They share hospital, doctor, aerodrome, Landcare and many sporting and service organisations.

Geography and boundaries

The Shire is physically separated from adjoining areas by natural boundaries and encompasses within it the water shed of the Dawson River. The entire Shire is included in the Federal electorate of Flynn.

The Shire's northern boundary delineates the extent of the Cattle Tick Free area and the Parthenium Free area. Both are examples of the cohesive effort within this Shire to address pest management, and other issues.

Finances

Taroom Shire has no debt and \$7.4 million in reserves. We are told by residents of adjoining Shires that Taroom Shire rates are lower per \$ value than in adjoining shires. The Council has strong financial management.

On a per capita basis, the equity of the residents of Taroom Shire is the highest of all the councils in the Local Government Review Commission's proposals for amalgamation. The equity per head of population exceeds \$50,000. This would reduce, after splitting and amalgamation, by approx \$36 000 for Division 1 residents and \$34,000 for Division 2 residents. (see Annexure A).

Are Taroom Shire ratepayers expected to fund the poor financial management of the Shires with which they are to be amalgamated?

Taroom Shire – The Future

Major Projects:

Within the Shire there are a number of major resource projects underway or about to start, and new infrastructure proposed. These include:

- Santos Gas Project
- Xstrata Coal Project
- Surat Basin Rail line
- Anglo Coal / Mitsui joint venture
- Wandoan Project (identified as a project of State Significance)

Tourism

Increasing numbers of tourists visit the area attracted to the rural landscapes and the wealth of National Parks.

Population

Significant population growth is expected across the Shire making retainment of the shire as a whole even more viable than it is now.

The strength of the financial management of the shire, the community of interests shared and the prospects for the future all confirm that Taroom Shire is viable into the future.

**Taroom Shire should not be forced to amalgamate with other Councils
Taroom Shire should not be forcibly torn apart by an undemocratic process**

Sincerely

Signed: Walter Bruce Wearing Ratepayer, Taroom Shire

Signed: Josephine Mary Wearing Ratepayer, Taroom Shire

Extracted from the Recommendations of the Local Government Reform Commission
 Comparison of new and previous Local Governments
 prepared by C Boyce.

	Banana	Taroom Div 1	Combined				
Population	14,426	1,347	15,773				
Total Community Equity \$M	177	70	247				
Equity \$ per Head of Population	12,270	51,967	15,660				
Equity Change \$ per Head of Poj	3,390	(36,308)					
Revenue \$M	28	5	33				
Revenue \$ per Hd	1,941	3,712	2,092				
Change in Rev / Hd	7.8%	-43.6%					
	Dalby	Chinchilla	Wambo	Tara	Murilla	Taroom Div 2	Combined
Population	10,500	6,224	5,385	3,974	2,735	1,200	30,018
Total Community Equity \$M	120	107	125	88	56	63	559
Equity \$ per Head of Population	11,429	17,192	23,213	22,144	20,475	52,500	18,622
Equity Change \$ per Head of Poj	7,194	1,431	(4,590)	(3,522)	(1,853)	(33,878)	
Revenue \$M	13.6	19.0	16.7	12.0	8.7	4.0	74.0
Revenue \$ per Hd	1,295	3,053	3,101	3,020	3,181	3,333	2,465
Change in Rev / Hd	90%	-19%	-21%	-18%	-23%	-26%	