

# Trevor Forbes



## SUBMISSION RE LOCAL GOVERNMENT REVIEW

Reference is made to the review of Local Government in New South Wales with a panel appointed by the State Government. Having been involved in similar matters in Victoria and knowing the disaster it has become, I write as a rate payer of both Balranald and Conargo Shires.

It is significant that the Victorian experience has produced no savings, greater costs and lesser service in rural areas. One of the greatest disadvantages has been the loss of local control with residents who enjoyed close contact with their local councils being virtually disenfranchised as they feel removed from the essence of the word "local" in local government. It is also significant that the councils in N.S.W. are so much larger in area than councils in Victoria. Other factors such as population density etc., also always come into the equation, further comment will be made on this later.

The loss of employment in country towns which are already struggling is also significant. Whilst administrative staff increase greatly in number where restructuring has occurred, this is usually concentrated on where the head office is, outdoor staff were severely impacted with a great rush towards contracting, which has proved detrimental to many towns, as there are very limited options for employment.

There is always a push by State Governments to deal with Local Government, in Victoria, the number of Members in the State Parliament is the same now as it was thirty years ago. In addition, there is an Upper House, a further duplication, no attempt ever made to reduce this either. Imagine if a Local Council met as a Council, then had all decisions reviewed by another Council. This is how State Government works, yet it considers Local Government needs to be reformed, but never do it in your own back yard.

I will comment briefly on a few individual matters in respect of Balranald and Conargo.

### Balranald

This Shire serves a large area, I am still surprised at the distance from the Shire headquarters to its northern boundary and it seems the serviced area would significantly increase if there was to be any changes. This would lead to more costly services, contracting does not provide much in the way of economy given the distance involved.

The Shire services two towns, as well as a large rural area. In order to try to operate in the most economical way, this Shire has undertaken various reviews, the Council has actively sought to improve its services in an economical manner. It is acknowledged that the rural areas in all parts of Australia are declining in number, this makes it more important than ever that the Shire remains based in the main town of Balranald.

The Shire is a very important employer in Balranald, with professional and other staff all providing an important fabric to the life of the town and community. The loss of staff in various small towns in Victoria has devastated many towns, as these people are never replaced in an attempt to achieve efficiencies and economies. Local people want local control and if they are prepared to meet the cost of maintaining this, then that should be their choice. Local Government needs to be small, sensitive and efficient, large Local Government units do not achieve this and in the final analysis, people are removed from a close involvement.

It is acknowledged that the loss of employment opportunities in the timber industry due to the closure of forests etc., have had an impact on the town and Shire. However, there is every indication that with the large sand mining operations proposed, this will give the town a huge boost in employment and general economic activity. During the past few years, the town has already greatly benefited from a lot of the preliminary work needed in order for all the necessary approvals etc. to be obtained and it is evident that this activity will continue during this year, even if on a reduced scale. All this work is necessary before it may proceed as the deposits are reputed to be the largest in the world as well as being of the highest quality. Both the Shire and company have engaged on a co-operative basis for many years and this will continue in order for a beneficial outcome to be achieved for all parties.

I am not sure if the State Government has a mandate to restructure Local Government in rural areas. The members representing rural areas have an obligation to act on behalf of the wishes and interests of their communities, that requires them to defend local communities against all threats, including the State Government but history shows most Local Members are unwilling to do this as party matters seem to rate above local matters.

### **Conargo**

Some adjustments took place some years ago in relation to the rural areas surrounding Deniliquin, these matters will not be repeated here but it is evident that Conargo Shire meets the wishes of its residents who may not be large in number but the Shire still serves a large and very important rural area.

It should be incumbent on the review board to point out where the Shire has failed to meet its responsibilities and obligations to its people. The Shire is in a very sound financial position, there is clearly a very close connect between its citizens and representatives. No doubt this is seen by many as an obstacle to good government when in fact the opposite is the case.

It should be clearly demonstrated where any advantages are obtained compared to the present arrangement. Deniliquin Council is a significant Local Government area with a strong service centre for the town and surrounding areas, Councillors representing the urban area can concentrate on doing so, whereas Conargo Councillors representing the rural areas may do the same, with the opportunity to co-operate where the need arises, without restructuring being imposed. I know from experience that the one vote, one value argument would apply, this means the town area would far out weight the rural area thus resulting in a loss of local control for Conargo Shire residents as they presently know it.

## General

Dealings with both Councils have convinced me that the smaller the unit, the better the dealings. There is the opportunity to deal with whoever is associated with a particular matter, this personal contact is of the utmost importance. People who live in the area, and are familiar with local matters, have a far better understanding in dealing with any issues which arise.


In summary, the will of the people should prevail, that is, if they are given the opportunity. If the State Government is of the view that it should impose its ideas, put it to the vote and test it. At the same time, point out the efforts being made by the State Government to reform itself with the lessening of elected member numbers, both in respect of the Lower House and the abolition of the Upper House.

It may give cause for thought that the great reforms of the Victorian Government of the 1990's contributed to the Government being removed in 1999, the people rejected the changes made and the election result was just as surprising as the recent Queensland election. Even in the interest of self preservation of the State Government, this lesson should be noted.

A one off payment may be of some assistance in the immediate future and it is acknowledged that this is some incentive in the short term. It is also acknowledged that some people may be bought off by this incentive, short term gain for long term pain would be the outcome, and again, people should have the right to choose.

I wonder what the view of State Government would be if the Federal Government decided to restructure State Government, whilst this may overlook certain constitutional and legal matters, the question is still raised. We all know there would be great outrage at the dictatorial attitude of the higher level of Government imposing its will on the lower level of Government.

All State Governments have a history of wanting to interfere and change Local Government as they are then seen to be great reformers and doing something even if the outcomes are a disaster. It is not too late to recognise the benefits of smaller (so called) Local Government. If a Council and its people wish to restructure, whatever that may be, then they should have the right to do so. If this does not occur, then the current arrangements continue to apply and that is the choice made.



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