

IPART Submission – Fit for the Future

I wish to make a submission in relation to the consideration IPART is giving in relation to the sustainability of Council's and what I understand is termed the "Fit for the Future" consideration that is being given to the question of how most appropriately Local Government may play a role in the future of this State, and considerations in relation to the key elements of what is referred to as strategic capacity.

Firstly, I wish to say that it is wrong to necessarily link the population density of a local Government Area or its geographical size to its sustainability. Sustainability will be dependent on the quality of the representation of the Local government Area and the participation of the constituency in that Area. It may well be that forcing larger Local Government Areas on the people residing in the area will force a disconnect between Council's and residents, thereby leading to reduced participation in local government matters, reduced access to services, a running down of services across the whole of what was a Local Government Area, and deteriorating quality of representation.

The most important consideration that should be applied in reviewing the roles of Local Council's must be their capacity to deliver services to their Local Government area and the capacity of the services that are being delivered. These are the traditional roles of Local council's and are their primary responsibilities. issues of development and overall state planning considerations are in many respects in conflict to these traditional roles of Council's and are more in the way of a secondary responsibility.

these are reasons why over 20 year ago the Local Government Area of Pittwater happily succeeded from Manly Warringah and why in the case of a number of amalgamations of Local Government areas in the state of Queensland, the move is back towards de-amalgamation, because there is an inherent conflict in larger Council's answering to more people across greater areas and in so doing having interests aligned more with what is said to be the greater interest, regardless of the interests and expectations of local people as to what will happen with their Local Area.

For these reasons and being understanding of this conflict between issues of regional development, funding of regional infrastructure and questions of population density where forced upon traditionally "under populated" areas, that what has become euphemistically known as issues of strategic capacity should not be influenced by pre conceived notions of scale and capacity. It is obviously an incorrect notion to determine that a Council in a wealthy population zone will by virtue of its population density be adversely economically effected, as opposed to a larger council traversing other local Government areas. Only considerations of universal planning could in such a case militate in favor of amalgamation and the benefits that may flow from it.

it is for these reasons that I wish to express my view that the manner in which Council's should be judged in terms of their Fit for the Future capacity is not by their projected geographical size or population density, but rather against a listing of

specified criteria including such factors as the quality of the representation, the number of services Council provides and the standards to which they are provided, the participation rate of local people in their local council, their degree of fiscal capacity and fiscal responsibility, the training and development programs in place at each council to ensure continuity of good management into the years ahead. These are the criteria that will determine the question as to whether or not a Local Council is fit for the Future.

If the question were one of size and area, then there could be no case put as to why a City the size of Detroit would have to be placed into voluntary bankruptcy. The fact is however that everyone is well aware that this occurred. Whilst this is drawing on a foreign comparison, the principal remains the same that if you run down the quality of your local services, if you do things to create a disconnect between the representatives and the people, if you take the attitude that everything can be resolved by reference to numbers of people and size of an area, you ignore the true purpose of Local Government.

It is for these reasons that in my view we are all doing a great and illogical disservice by any preponderance on size and population as critical factors in determining the future for Local Government. There are probably large Local Government Areas that are poorly managed and which have little local participation that would be afforded no injustice by the appointment of an administrator. There are other areas of much smaller size and scale that would be done a tremendous disservice were questions of amalgamation forced upon them by reference to their size or local population. These comments in many respects simply mirror what anybody could see as common sense. In many respects, size does not matter.

Trevor Hall

