

Voices for Indi Inc.
6 Dundas Street
Wangaratta Vic 3677

14 September 2017

The Chairperson

Select Committee on Regional Development and Decentralization

On behalf of the members of Voices for Indi, please accept the attached submission to the Inquiry conducted by the Select Committee on Regional Development and Decentralization.

Voices for Indi is a community group, based in the Federal rural seat of Indi. Its mission is to revitalize and build 'democratic capital' in rural and regional Australia. It has developed simple and effective processes to enable people of any political affiliation to express their voice in the political process.

As the overwhelming proportion of rural people are not members of political parties, we believe that this inquiry must consider the most effective 'best practice' ways in which they can be best heard.

Our submission reflects the importance of democratic strategies to achieve this; it presents key issues and priorities which have been identified by the people of Indi; and it identifies the benefits and positive outcomes for rural people, and regional development, if they are supported to be engaged, informed and innovative.

Voices for Indi would welcome an opportunity to meet with the Inquiry committee during its regional visit to Indi. Best wishes to you and the committee in undertaking this Inquiry.

With regards,

Denis Ginnivan

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President, Voices for Indi

Submission to the Select Committee on Regional Development and Decentralisation September 2017 by Voices for Indi Inc.

Focus of this submission

In addressing the Committee Terms of Reference, this submission predominantly considers part 1.a., best practice approaches to regional development, in an Australian context, and addresses clauses i. to viii. It also emphasises the fundamental nexus between the attributes of an engaged, informed and innovative regional community and the ability to attract and retain private and public investment and population to drive regional growth (parts 1.b. and c.)

Background

Voices for Indi (V4I) is a community engagement process which is revitalising and building ‘democratic capital’ in regional Australia. V4I was set up to provide a simple and effective process by which all people across the Indi electorate, regardless of political affiliation, can have a voice – where their interests, concerns and ideas are heard and respected. The participatory process allows constructive input, focusing on ideas and policies, and strengthening representation. It enables people to articulate their shared vision for Indi, to learn and to connect with each other and importantly, build alliances for action.

This submission articulates the vision of the people of Indi and outlines the process and philosophy which fostered the vision. The impacts of this process have implications and lessons for sustainable regional development in Australia pertinent to the Inquiry. The Voices for Indi process brings together human, social and relational capital which when given voice in a regional context forms ‘democratic capital’, leverages other forms of capital, and becomes a stimulus for regional growth (Capello and Faggian 2005).

The Inquiry Issues Paper and the panel of experts clearly recognise that place-based, endogenous regional growth is built on the ‘assets, abilities and talents of the region and the people within it’ (Andrew Beer, August 2017 quoted p. 17). The essential elements that the people at the Indi Summit in 2015 have identified in their regional development vision are: confident and vibrant communities; quality access to essential community services; economic prosperity; and a sustainable environment (key themes, Indi Summit 2015). These elements are further elaborated below.

Key priorities for regional communities

Confident and vibrant communities

People in Indi value strong, connected communities that are forward thinking, sustainable and self-reliant. They welcome and accept difference and appreciate that their region offers an affordable quality of life.

They view arts, culture and heritage as important amenities to improve quality of life and attract and retain people to the region.

They seek to develop a ‘shared reliance’ within a community and foster social and business entrepreneurship, and share know-how and ideas that are working.

Some of the priority actions they see to build vibrant communities are to:

- foster strong and distinct local community identities which are place-based and community-led
- develop long term community-driven strategies in all local government areas in Indi
- conduct a feasibility study for the resettlement of refugees
- support community leadership development programs
- develop early intervention to reduce social and economic disadvantage.

Quality access to essential community services

People in Indi believe their future depends on foresight and the investments made now in education, health services, communications, infrastructure and transport connectivity.

They value high-speed, quality internet access to all homes, businesses and services, equal to the city and at the same cost. They believe fast, reliable access to communications and transport is a right, not a privilege.

Some of the priority actions they see to build quality access to essential community services are to:

- provide choices for young people to actively engage in training and education locally, as well as have support for studying away
- increase connections between Indi alumni and their communities - champions for education and the future of work in Indi, more young people coming back to Indi and staying connected
- develop partnerships to collectively bargain for better infrastructure – similar to successful processes used for mobile phone towers and black spot funding
- ensure that government and stakeholders understand what is ahead and what is on offer for the future – infrastructure must reflect future needs.

Economic prosperity

People in Indi have a vision for a thriving and dynamic economy which is adaptable, growing, and with a diverse economic base.

They see success as small business and agriculture being recognised, growing, supported and measured for its worth in regional employment. They believe that regional training strategies should be linked to regional employment opportunities and that strong networks and partnerships between community, government and business are fostered.

Some of the priority actions they see to build economic prosperity are to:

- commit all stakeholders to processes which engage with rural towns and communities
- have government agile enough to support but not necessarily lead rural economic initiatives
- be responsive and celebrate champions and successes in regional economies
- support and promote leading examples of social entrepreneurship models and strategies.

Sustainable environment

People in Indi love the beauty of their natural and built environment and the productive resources which it provides. They acknowledge their role in the management and protection of these assets for current and future prosperity.

Some of the priority actions they see to further build a sustainable environment are:

- community energy production at a local and regional scale
- balanced water resource use and policy informed by community perspectives
- better waste management and utilisation
- energy efficient housing and improved housing construction practices
- broader environmental awareness and the ability to share knowledge locally and more widely
- community approaches to climate change adaptation.

Giving people voice in the democratic process

Place-based regional development requires an understanding of regional assets, with the human capital embodied in the people being the preeminent asset. Voices for Indi provides opportunities for people from all walks of life, of all ages and in all geographical locations to have their voice heard, to share ideas and listen to each other respectfully regardless of political persuasion and to have input into the issues with a common concern for the future good of our communities and our country.

Recognising that the quality of rural life and the style of rural politics is about networks and relationships, Voices for Indi seeks to kick start new conversations and new connections based on openness and inclusion rather than conduct surveys or consultation forums.

To achieve this, V4I adapted the Victorian Women's Trust 'Kitchen Table Conversations' model designed for the Purple Sage Project across Victoria in the late 1990s (Victorian Women's Trust, 2000). The idea is simple and powerful, based on the belief that:

'Democracy is the conversation amongst equals to determine what constitutes good life and the good society' (Rutherford and Shah, 2006).

In early 2013, across the Indi electorate from Marysville to the Tallangatta valley, groups of people met for Kitchen Table Conversations (KTCs). There was a public invitation for everyone to participate.

Following a brief training session, the 'hosts' brought together small groups of up to nine others. These people might be friends, neighbours, family, workmates, or from community networks. They met around the kitchen table or their workplace or wherever was easiest for them.

The hosts facilitated a conversation for a couple of hours focused on three themes with questions provided to kick start the discussion.

Initially 55 conversations groups, involving some 450 people were held across 40 postcodes in Indi. The opportunity to come together was enthusiastically received and conversations were held at cafes, in staff rooms, in pubs, in farmhouse kitchens, by locals out camping and young 'Indi expats' in Melbourne.

The views of people who participated in these initial KTCs were faithfully recorded and collated in to a V4I Report which was launched to a 300-plus audience and formed a 'charter of the people' provided to all candidates in the 2013 federal election (Voice 4 Indi Report, 2013).

The Voice for Indi report created a powerful resonance and resolve across the communities in the electorate. The people wanted to be part of solving their problems. They wanted politicians to listen to them, to work with them and had a clear expectation that political representatives needed to be connected, to create and support good communication, show leadership and value community participation.

Since the election of Independent Member for Indi, Cathy McGowan in 2013, Voices for Indi has continued to build participatory democracy in Indi. Local country hall seminars attended by 250 people were hosted by Voices for Indi in 2014 to provide citizens an opportunity to discuss ethics in politics, to better understand the contemporary practice of politics in Australia and how citizens can influence the political process.

Today active participatory democracy in Indi means not only having a process for citizens to have their issues of concern be heard, but to be able to participate in developing vision and actions to create positive change. It has skilled up hundreds of people and uncovered local leaders who are continuing to take action in their own communities.

Citizens in Indi come together around specific common issues of concern such as renewable energy or mobile phone coverage to set their agendas for change and work across communities and government to achieve them.

In 2015 Voices for Indi assisted with the inaugural Indi Summit hosted by the Member for Indi. Fourteen pre-summit discussion papers were developed and submitted by groups of community members with specific interests and expertise. This formed the platform for over 200 people to gather for facilitated group conversation and generate solutions and actions they want to progress.

Social media platforms, V4I's website, Facebook and Twitter broadens the scope of the engagement and is vital to overcome the barriers of distance across the region and to connect with young people in their own space and ways of engaging in democracy and being politically active.

The 'Indi Way' – implications for rural Australia

The method of best practice of community engagement adopted and implemented by V4I has had a significant impact both on the regional community, and on the quality of the interface with the federal parliamentary representative. It is a distinctive and an effective way of 'doing politics'. It includes: a commitment to engaged and respectful consultation; an effective partnership between representative and community; engagement and empowering rural people and communities; providing a way in which rural communities can get involved; a commitment and expectation for rural parliamentarians to represent rural communities ahead of their respective parties.

The evidence for effectiveness of the approach is that active involvement in political democracy continues to build in Indi since 2013 – with continued participation in 'Kitchen Table Conversations'; high level of volunteer registrations in the 2013 and 2016 Cathy McGowan election campaigns; development of specific interest groups which are now making their own presentations to government; large community processes and events such as the Budget Impact Tour; Indi-Talks focusing on topics of contemporary political relevance; Indi-Shares providing training and resourcing to rural leadership programs and to those from other rural electorates seeking to learn about community representative politics; and the high level of enthusiastic participation in the Indi Summit, which identified issues of importance, and strategies for responding to them. There has been an estimated 4,500 people participating in this wide range of events.

Thus, the implications for community representative politics in rural Australia are profound (Hendriks 2017). It provides for a healthy engagement within regions and competitiveness between regions. People wanted a closer relationship with the federal representative, and the political process. It is common that safe-held rural seats are less likely to attract federal funding and attention, than marginal-held seats. Young people have been motivated and encouraged to participate in the political process. Rural Australia can benefit from this approach as the process is not about party politics, it is about rural Australia. The philosophy of the 'Indi Way' is captured by the phrase 'policy over personality, people over politics'.

There has been a high-level ‘ripple effect’ across regional Australia regarding the positive community engagement achieved in Indi. This has led to requests for guest speaker visits to other communities and the label, ‘the Indi Way’ is starting to have resonance. Regional people are keen to explore the best way to structure and present their political voice, and to leverage their democratic capital to drive regional development and ensure that ‘the benefits of economic growth and opportunity *are* being shared right across Australia.’

Conclusion and recommendations

In summary, the recommendations are:

- Connect with regional communities in an innovative, engaging way, to work with the existing energy and vision of the communities
- Ensure the voices of young people in regional communities are heard and responded to with commitment
- Adopt longer term strategic policy approaches for rural and regional communities using an evidence base informed by the communities themselves.

The Voices for Indi story and the ‘Indi Way’ demonstrates the values and strategies underpinning the participatory process, and outline its impacts and plans for the future. These examples of place-based regional development and capacity building should be incorporated into a set of cohesive regional policies that combine best practice, embrace community-led participatory processes and build on enablers and existing strengths within regional economies.

These policies need the commitment of all regional and rural parliamentary representatives and stakeholders to ensure bipartisan long- term planning and a framework for regional strategy and success. Within this framework, regional communities work constructively together on a shared strategic vision; parliamentarians engage constructively with the people and the vision, and with each other; and regions can build ‘vibrant, more cohesive and engaged regional communities’, through ‘a place-based approach that considers local circumstances, competitive advantages and involves collective governance.’

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