

24 August 2007

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

Re:

Inquiry into Commonwealth Electoral Amendment
(Democratic Plebiscites) Bill 2007

Dear Sir/Madam

I wish to make a submission to your Inquiry regarding the amendments to be made to the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918.

As citizens of Australia apparently have only "implied" rights where freedom of speech is concerned, it is highly necessary for these implied rights to be as protected as possible. As we have recently seen in Queensland, these rights may be trampled on or completely expunged at the stroke of a pen or at the whim of an enthusiastic lawmaker.

To deny a community as a whole, or its members as individuals, the right to call a plebiscite to make clear their acceptance of a measure is completely unconscionable. For any elected authority to be able to make decisions, it must be primarily guided by the will of those it represents. Should the electors be deprived of the ability to express their opinion the whole matter becomes a travesty. When the indignity is compounded by threats of fines and dissolution of the elected authority, the time has come for action against misused powers. It is not sufficient for an elected authority to claim to have a mandate on one hundred percent of its decisions, merely because it was once elected. We are all aware of the changing circumstances, which place a completely different complexion on issues during a government's term of office, be it Local, State or Federal government and provision should be made for this.

What makes these amendments so important is that they will ensure, in the future, that Local Government, the level of government closest to the people, will never again have its right to consult its ratepayers

curtailed or be placed in the position of being bullied into submission. To most people, local government has a greater influence on their lives than any other tier of government. Whilst it lacks the seeming importance of its State and Federal counterparts, local government has more influence on people's lives than any other. Whether they have adequate car parking, facilities for the elderly or the very young, sporting facilities and even a decent footpath are just some of the most important factors in their lives and I would venture a guess that few would be worried if Foreign Affairs or even Defence absented themselves for a week or two, but they would be pressing panic buttons should the local refuse collector even be late emptying their bins!

All my life I have been proud of being an Australian. I have watched with pride those representing our country abroad, offering assistance and overseeing elections in other countries, ensuring those elections are fair, thereby allowing the people to have their say. To have recently had this right legislated out of my life – even fleetingly, has not been a comfortable position in which to have found myself.

Although this amendment may be a little late, it is, nevertheless, welcomed and I feel I must come down in support of it.

I thank you for your time and consideration and wish you well in your deliberations.

Fiona M Schaefer (Mrs)