

## **SENATE COMMITTEE INQUIRY**

### **COMMONWEALTH ELECTORAL AMMENDMENT (DEMOCRATIC PLEBISCITES) BILL 2007**

#### **AGFORCE SUBMISSION**

##### Who we are:

AgForce is Queensland's peak rural lobby group representing more than 8000 primary producers and their families in the commodities of beef, sheep and wool and grains. AgForce is committed to ensuring the needs of the agricultural sector, the bush and related communities remain vibrant and prosperous for future generations.

##### Background:

Local Government is very important to our members. A great many of them live in regional and remote communities where their Shire Councils play an important role in community activities, employment and often are instrumental in providing "identity" for the community. Councils often provide manpower for community events, organise medical services and undertake a range of activities for their constituents above and beyond "normal" Shire activities.

##### The issue:

The recent Local Government amalgamations process has caused considerable concern amongst our membership. While many of the far western and northern shires were not amalgamated many others in our rural heartland were. These amalgamations have the capacity to impact greatly on rural and remote communities in terms of services, employment and community events and identities.

### Core concerns:

The issue has been one of the most divisive and vocal in terms of community reaction and media attention. Our members concerns can be broadly divided into the following three categories:

(a) The process undertaken by the Government in relation to this issue

The most contentious part of these changes has been the process undertaken by the Government to impose these changes. Members feel aggrieved that they have had little input into the entire process and the timeframes have been ludicrously short.

Whilst some Shires certainly would have voluntarily amalgamated it can be said that others may have required more time and influence to take this step. However the approach taken by the Government is seen by our membership as unnecessary and very heavy handed and unfair.

We surveyed our members on this issue and received 1400 responses in two days. Never before have we had such a response to an issue in a short time frame. Over 98% of members disagreed with FORCED amalgamations.

(b) The impact of amalgamations on communities

As mentioned Shire Councils have often taken roles in their communities above and beyond the normal functions of Councils in order to support their communities. Examples include providing manpower to assist at community events (eg campdrafts, shows), funding commercial activities in the absence of operators (eg undertakers, organising medical services) and doing whatever else is appropriate to ensure the sustainability of the culture and identities that the Shires have developed over 100 years.

Many members are extremely fearful that amalgamations will result in loss of services, loss of key community events and culturally a loss of area "identity". Members in many cases have expressed that they don't believe bigger Shires will necessarily look after the mixed requirements of the amalgamated shires. Competition for community events/provision of services is seen to be a large threat for many members.

(c) Representation:

Members have expressed extreme concern in relation to representation on amalgamated Shires and the distinct possibility of the larger regional areas having much better representation than smaller communities and towns. For example where eight shires have been amalgamated with the very large Toowoomba shire many outlying communities believe they will not be well represented by the totality of their elected representatives as their key interests will lie with the majority of the population (in Toowoomba).

The issue of divisions is fundamental to members as it does in many cases provide a much better chance of being well represented. The very tight time frame and arrangements for amalgamated Shires to agree on this issue (one week) did not allow for adequate thought/agreement and will result in a poor spread of representation. Many feel the smaller communities will always be disadvantaged no matter how the shire is divided and similarly many believe undivided voting will also result in poor representation ie either way smaller communities feel they will be disadvantaged.

Proposed changes to Federal Electoral Act:

Members have unanimously welcomed the proposed changes to this Act that will result in the ability to have their say via a plebiscite. Why this will not necessarily result in changes to the amalgamations it does provide at least an opportunity to get a clear picture and send a message to the State Government.

SUMMARY

Given the huge angst this issue has caused for our members AgForce therefore fully supports the proposed changes to the Act which will enable our members to have their say on this issue.

*Sue Dillon  
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August 24 2007*