Local Government

Everybody knows what the problems are:

1. There are too many councils in Tasmania. Perhaps twenty too many.

2. They have too many councillors …

3. … many of whom do not know why they are there, or how to do their job – which is **not** counting potholes, nor is it overriding qualified planning advice.

4. Many councillors have outlived their usefulness by a decade or more – there should be maximum periods of service; maybe twelve years? (state & federal too). But then, there's always the Legislative Council to retire to.

5. 'Voluntary amalgamations' are a joke; who's going to vote themselves out of office? Likewise, how many ratepayers don't want their local council?

6. 'Resource sharing' is just as bad. If there's only one set of resources, whether it's people or equipment, why do we need two or more organisations arguing about their allocation?

7. There are issues of funding and governance between all levels of government; how often do we see the federal government giving a grant to a council which does not know how to use it, even if they were expecting it. So a 'project' is started, with no ongoing funding. With luck, it may produce something useful before it winds up; as often as not, it becomes a future unfunded commitment for the council.

8. Last time a state government forced amalgamations (1993), it was voted out office. Maybe there was a connection, maybe not. But until a government displays enough guts and commitment to take serious and sensible action, the situation will not change.

There is about one council for each 17,000 Tasmanians – say roughly 1 councillor per 2,000 people (far fewer are ratepayers). There aren't that many qualified people in the state.

Popularly elected mayors? Try popularly election for Premier and see how the Gov't likes that one.

Oh, and I'd like a green waste bin, please.

Saul Eslake's article in Forty South Tasmania (11th Feb 2022) says many similar things more rationally.

David Fraser

TASMANIAN VOICES

The council debate

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Saul Eslake

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Not that long ago, Tasmania had 49 local councils. Areas such as Bothwell, Bruny Island, Green Ponds, Gormanston, Hamilton, Ross and Strahan had their own councils despite having fewer than 1,000 (and in some cases fewer than 500) residents. That number was reduced to 46 in 1986 with the merger of three councils on the West Coast, and then to 29 in 1993, following a wide-ranging review of the functioning of local government in Tasmania which also resulted in the creation of a new Local Government Act which gave councils much greater autonomy from the State Government in discharging their functions.

Despite those changes, Tasmania still has an above-average number of councils for our size and population. We have about 13 councils for every 100,000 households – the same as resource-rich Western Australia but more than in any other state, and more than double the national average of six councils for every 100,000 households. We have 4.2 councils for every 10,000 square kilometres of area, more than any other state, and six times the national average of 0.7 per 10,000 square kilometres.

All up, Tasmania has 256 elected council officials. That's just under five for every 10,000 people. Tasmanian local governments have about 4,100 people on their payroll, which is about 76 for every 10,000 people – a little more than the national average of 74, though less than Queensland or Western Australia where there are 83 and 84 council employees for every 10,000 people, respectively.

The University of New England's Professor Brian Dollery, whose work is often cited by opponents and critics of proposed local government amalgamations, concluded that the 1993 council amalgamations did achieve "greater efficiency through economies of scale" in a majority of cases, whilst also "maintaining some sense of community … in the new areas".

Tasmanian local governments do not appear to be significantly more or less efficient, on average, than their counterparts in other parts of Australia. They are more dependent on grants and subsidies from other levels of government than councils in other states, deriving 14 per cent of their total revenue from this source in 2019-20 compared with the average across all Australian councils of just under 10 per cent.

But their average spend per head of population is about 7.5 per cent below the average for all councils across Australia.

And although Tasmanian council rates are, on average, a little more than 5 per cent above the national average, that average is distorted by relatively low rates in New South Wales, where council rates are "capped"' by State Government legislation, and councils have to resort to other ways of raising revenue. Tasmanian council rates per head of population are lower than in every other state.

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Since the series of council amalgamations in 1993, there have from time to time been proposals for further rationalisation of the structure of local government in Tasmania. For example, the 1997 report by former Fraser Government Minister Peter Nixon, *Tasmania into the 21st Century*, recommended that the number of councils on the Tasmanian mainland be reduced to just eight. A review by the then Local Government Board in 1998 suggested that there be 11 councils in Tasmania.

A study undertaken in 2011 by Deloitte Access Economics for the Tasmanian Division of the Property Council of Tasmania estimated that a hypothetical amalgamation of the 12 councils in southern Tasmania into a single local government entity could produce "efficiency gains" of up to 35 per cent.

More recently, on a smaller scale, in 2018 the Local Government Board recommended a voluntary amalgamation of the Sorell and Tasman councils, noting that this would produce rate reductions averaging $920 per rateable property over 20 years, the capacity for "new and improved services", and "a greater strategic regional approach to planning and service delivery". The recommendation was unanimously approved by the Sorell Council, but narrowly rejected by the Tasman Council and then more comprehensively (by a majority of more than 2 to 1) by Tasman Council voters.

Late last year, the State Government commissioned a fresh Local Government Board review into "the future of local government in Tasmania" to make recommendations on "the future role, functions and design of local government and the structural, legislative and financial reforms required to meet this objective".

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Of course, local government reform should be about more than council amalgamations. In the Tasmanian context, it would seem particularly appropriate to reconsider the wisdom of the direct election of mayors – as opposed to the indirect election of the mayor from among those elected to the council – given the number of times the current system appears to produce dysfunctional outcomes.

But the question of whether the existing structure of local government is the right one for Tasmania today, and for the next (say) two or three decades, does need to be considered.

Councils typically like to portray themselves as the level of government that is "closest to the people", and given the services which councils typically provide, that sense of community identity is important to the effectiveness of local government.

I've long thought that a useful way of determining how people mean when they talk about their "community", in a geographic sense, is to ask how they would answer a mainlander who asks them "where do you live?" Most people who live in the urban areas of the cities of Hobart, Glenorchy, Clarence and Kingborough would say, in answer to that question, "Hobart". Likewise, most people who live in the urban areas of Launceston would say "Launceston" – even if they happened to live in Riverside or Prospect, which are actually in the municipalities of West Tamar and Meander Valley, respectively.

On the other hand, someone who lives in, say, Richmond, would almost certainly answer "Richmond", not "Clarence", if a mainlander asked, "where do you live?" Likewise, someone who lives in, say, Pipers' Brook, would almost certainly *not* reply, "Launceston", even though he or she does live within the boundaries of the City of Launceston. Someone who lives on Bruny Island would be most unlikely to say that they lived in "Kingborough".

Someone who lives anywhere between St Helens and Orford would probably answer "on the East Coast of Tasmania", while someone living in Queenstown, Strahan, Zeehan or even Waratah would likely say, "on the West Coast".

And residents of the Bass Strait Islands would, I'm sure, identify themselves as living on King or Flinders Island if asked.

I think that provides a good starting point for identifying the "communities of interest" that in turn provide the basis for drawing up local government boundaries. It would make sense, I think, to create a Greater Hobart Council out of the existing Cities of Hobart and Glenorchy, together with those parts of Kingborough whose residents think of themselves as living in the southern suburbs of Hobart; while the rest of Kingborough could be incorporated into the Huon Valley, with which it would seem to have a stronger community of interest.

I have an open mind as to whether a Greater Hobart Council should include the urban parts of Clarence: there is, perhaps, a more distinct sense of a separate identity about the Eastern shore. If that were to happen, then perhaps the rural parts of Clarence, such as Richmond, could be joined to Sorell (which should, in turn, be merged with Tasman). Likewise, it seems sensible to join the urban parts of Brighton to a Greater Hobart council, with the (small) remaining bits going to either Derwent Valley or Southern Midlands.

Similarly, the City of Launceston should include *all* of urban Launceston, including Riverside and Prospect, but it should shed the rural parts east of the Tamar River to a new Tamar Valley Council which would also include George Town and the non-urban parts of West Tamar, while the non-urban parts of Meander Valley could be merged with Kentish.

Outside of the major metropolitan areas, the case for amalgamations is in general less compelling, provided that the residents of those local government areas recognise that there may be an increasing cost associated with maintaining the existing structure in the face of a declining population.

But it would seem to make sense to consider merging the Central Highlands and Derwent Valley Councils; to create an "East Coast" Council by combining Break O'Day and Glamorgan-Spring Bay; perhaps to combine the Northern and Southern Midlands councils; and to return Waratah and surrounds to the West Coast while merging the rest of the current Waratah-Wynyard Council with Burnie.

Of course, none of this (or anything like it) should be done without wide-ranging and meaningful community consultation, whilst recognising that many (though not all) existing councillors will have a vested interest in seeking to preserve the status quo.

But, as with all of the other reform ideas which have been canvassed in this series of Tasmanian Voices articles, nothing will happen unless the state government is willing to expend some of the political capital it has accumulated during its period in office in pursuit of change.