

Submission to Future of Local Government Review – Options paper [Stage2]

I am alarmed by this Liberal Government's latest attempts to wrest decision-making powers from local councils, and to force amalgamations.

Seeking public submissions is a laudable exercise, but when the Local Government Board hands down its final report *"it will be up to the Government to decide whether it agrees with all, some, or none of what the Board recommends"* [page 10]. Without accepting the report's recommendations in their entirety, this Government can apply a political filter and create a planning authority to suit its own agenda.

So the catchcry of *Let's All Shape the Future of Local Government* is a hollow call when the decisions will ultimately be made by the nine members of State Cabinet.

Skill shortages were identified as one reason for forced amalgamation. The Future of Local Government Review – Options paper [Stage 2] states *"86 per cent of the responding Tasmanian councils [are] experiencing a skill shortage"* [page 2].

Skills shortage is also an embarrassing reality in State Parliament, as evidenced by the need to increase the number of elected representatives from 25 to 35 – a 40% increase to cope with demand for services and the appointment of competent people to burgeoning ministries.

Our hospital system is at constant crisis point from poor administration and understaffing; there are not enough teachers and ancillary staff in our schools; the housing issue now sees the working poor living in tents due to inflated house prices and gouging by landlords; a mandated State of the Environment Report was not produced for 13 years; the Government is submissive in negotiations for an AFL team – and yet this State Liberal Party maintains that by establishing yet another centralised quango, it can provide better services and make better decisions than the current 29 councils and their staff.

This government cannot do anything as simple as meet the request of the Circular Head Council to reduce the speed limit on Woolnorth Road due to its inability to change the wording of a road safety act, or make a rational ministerial intervention. While 200 of these protected marsupials have been killed on a 25km stretch of road, the Government encourages the public and research institutes to spend millions funding the Devil Facial Tumour Disease program and assists in establishing insurance colonies of these iconic and endangered animals outside our State.

Page six of the report states: *"If this 'joining up' [of councils] is well planned and properly supported by the State Government, we think the sector can improve the overall quality and range of services it provides to all Tasmanians and better support a range of important social, economic, and environmental outcomes"*.

A critical look at the same promised support made prior to the implementing of the Tasmanian Planning Scheme and its Local Provision Schedule reviews will conclude that resources (both human and financial) did not materialise.

Submissions made to the Tasmanian Planning Commission's deliberations about amendments to the Central Highlands Council planning scheme (in which I participated) suggested the council consider such aspects as scenic amenity and skyline when assessing development applications – but the

\$50,000 needed to fund the council's investigations was not made available by the State. Therefore the TPC disregarded the concerns of local residents in favour of a "biscuit cutter" approach.

The enthusiasm of this Government to *"deconflict the role of councillors and planning authorities [and] refer complex planning development applications to independent assessment panels appointed by the Tasmanian Government and remove councillors' responsibility for determining development applications"* [page 26] is nothing more than a power-grab for the purposes of fulfilling an ideological agenda for rapacious development without any democratic input from affected communities.

Conflicts of interest occur regularly at the party political level, but these are concealed by weak political donation laws, and by the major parties' deliberate obstruction of any meaningful reform.

To suggest State parliamentarians are somehow unaffected by the persuasions of monied lobbyists or generous donors, and can therefore be trusted to select members of "independent" planning tribunals, is as fanciful as it is dangerous.

The FoLGR admits *"Tasmania's rental market is among the least affordable in the country, and a high proportion of Tasmanians experience housing stress. Tasmanians also have the lowest median weekly incomes in the nation. Growth in rents and property prices for regional areas is outstripping growth in cities, and income disparity is stark in regional Tasmania"*. [page 30]

State Government currently has levers it can pull (eg Airbnb reform) but although it has the capacity, it lacks the desire. The shortfall of affordable social housing is due to the demolition of the old Housing Commission, and the lack of interest in increasing or maintaining current stock. Local councils work in this sector because they have to. Ratepayers take the crises of homelessness and aged care to their councillors, and action is taken where possible. There is more empathy from local representatives than from bureaucrats.

"Housing challenges are another major concern in rural communities. Some councils would like to provide more housing and services, but consider it beyond their remit and financial means" [page 32].

Pointedly, this emphasises State and Commonwealth government failings, which are highlighted in individual terms at a local level. Strong social policy could remedy this within the jurisdiction of the current Minister for Construction and Housing.

Only 37 per cent of rural councils had compliant asset management plans, whereas 60 per cent of urban councils were compliant; • While there are examples of high-performing small councils, overall compliance with critical key building and health regulations is higher among larger councils; and • Larger urban councils are better able to plan for and manage roads and other council infrastructure than small rural councils. [page 32]

"Compliant asset management plans" suggests a lack of financial resources for rural councils. The State could easily provide assistance to have this rectified, and uniform systems and benchmarks applied across all LGAs.

If larger councils combine with smaller councils, it will not change the length of roads which need to be maintained. With more voices in a suburb than a country locality, there is a good chance that rural roads and infrastructure would slip down the priority list.

Any FoLGR writer citing TasWater as an example of State Government proficiency in compulsory amalgamation of councils' assets must have been incommunicado from 2008 to 2013, when its four corporate entities were forced into a merger.

Its activities since then have been muddied by controversy, ranging from reckless spending on consultants to a long list of Tasmanian towns which were without clean drinking water for years. While there was no doubt scope for improvement in water and sewage services, authoritarian acquisition by the State Government was not the answer.

The model of council amalgamations elsewhere has not been without its problems, as cited in the FoLGR. Apart from the paramount abuse of democracy, the process of transition is not spelled out anywhere in the document.

The only sensible strategy for executing amalgamations would seem to be sacking the elected representatives, then replacing them with administrators for the transition period. This process may take years – years without any local representation for ratepayers and where their needs are only viewed in dollar terms. Some councils may resist through legal action, thus adding enormous costs to the public purse through years of embroiled court cases.

Nowhere is the cost of amalgamation provided – although there must be representative examples throughout the country. Tens, if not hundreds, of millions of dollars would need to be spent. Where does this come from? Local ratepayers and/or State taxpayers? It has been shown in Queensland and NSW [with 84 and 24 attempted or aborted mergers respectively] that savings were overestimated and costs massively underestimated. Everything had to change, and every change incurred a cost.

Why not invest these huge sums to assistance to councils in introducing better management process and upskilling staff?

In the event that amalgamations (as evidenced on the Mainland), who pays for the next restructure, given bankruptcy would be the likely catalyst?

The implementation of Option 4.3 noted in the Appendix [*Establish 'virtual' regional teams of regulatory staff*] would be a prudent step in ensuring skilled service provision while maintaining regional independence and promoting employment and settlement in Tasmania's diverse regions.

However, Priority Reform Outcome 5 [*Regulatory frameworks, systems, and processes are streamlined, simplified, and standardised*] removes democratic processes to favour the developer. The same argument was used to implement the state-wide planning scheme. This should be enough. Tasmania is not and should not seek to be an homogenous landscape. Proponents need to factor in local sentiment. *Local political pressures*, denigrated in the review [Appendix page 23], are both desirable and necessary to maintain a sense of place and identity for residents.

The argument that scale equals efficiency is demonstrably false. But should our current Government be keen to lead the way, perhaps all 29 councils should be abolished, with State Government and its Public Service repurposed as The One Supreme Council of Tasmania.

Our state sovereignty would be ceded to Victoria, where voters from the electorate of Tasmania would be represented in an expanded Victorian Parliament.

The compelling case for amalgamation is apparently contained in this FoLGR.

Greg Pullen