

Submission to the Local Government Review Board

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Note. This submission has been written against the deadline. With more time it might be better presented and comprehensive.

Apologies

GENERAL

I have been (till the last election) a West Tamar Councilor for 26 years. In that time, I have applied myself to improvement of the West Tamar Council and the West Tamar region.

In that time, I have watched various attempts to 'improve' Local Government almost always initiated by State Government as is this current review.

My contacts with the Chairperson Hon Sue Smith are limited to one governance workshop, I think, for Mayors and Deputy Mayors, run by her about 8 years ago. What did I take away from that workshop? She said that the most important role for those in that position was to work with all the elected members together to develop an effective elected member culture.

As I look at the West Tamar council and local government in Tasmania, I believe that over at least the last 7 years, the state of Local Government has deteriorated significantly. This could be put down to my advancing age and being on council for too long! But I don't think so. The quality of the collective elected member culture in many of our Councils is pretty poor.

There is discussion of how hard the job of a councilor is, especially in the age of social media. However I would say it is much harder as a

result of the councilors being seen in local government as a problem for Mayors, General Managers and some in State Government.

Local government should see our Councilors as a talented resource, elected by the community whose involvement in the operations of council is welcomed and celebrated. There is not much of that in Tasmanian Local Government at present.

Local Government is about community, community development and community empowerment. Much of the discussion about local government in political circles and reflected in the media is 'deficit thinking'. I cannot remember recent serious discussion about even one high performing council, the characteristics of that council, and what can be learnt from that council.

This submission is my attempt to at least try to put a different view. I am sure that it will be seen as naïve and politically simplistic. But maybe it will be able to be said, 'At least somebody tried'.

Some relevant anecdotes.

When first elected (1996), I discovered that the State Government had just recently transferred responsibility for bridges to local government. As I started to get to grips with my role, I realized that, for the West Tamar, this amounted to approx. \$500,000 per year that was added to the capital works needs of the council. When I later questioned why we had not pushed back hard about this, I was told that councilors were under great pressure to accept this decision. There seemed to be more commitment to appeasing state government than to standing up for the residents.

When Competition Policy was brought in at a federal level, the states were rewarded financially for introducing reforms. The each state got financially rewarded based on the extent of the reform achieved in that state. Tasmania did a good job and was well rewarded. However most of the reform seemed to be done by local government. Needless to say, none of the financial reward went to local government.

When the Hawker review of cost shifting to local government from federal and especially state governments, it identified \$13.5bn of money cost shifted to local government in Australia. As the information above indicates, the Tasmanian State Government was active in this process.

The narrative about Tasmanian Local Government always implies it's need to be reformed to be efficient. Coming from the State Government and business it is pretty rich. "29 Councils is too many" is a slogan that has worked well politically but lacks rigor and substance.

Be careful what you wish for. If Tasmania had 4 councils, Two in the South, One in each of the North and the North West, who would the Tasmanian government have to blame!?

My conclusion is that State Governments cannot resist the urge to interfere in Local Government. They believe their interference will have a significant benefit to them and their supporters because they know what will work.

Unfortunately, the evidence is exactly the opposite. Their interference has not, anywhere in Australia, produced positive results.

What needs to happen?

Much of the first draft report was not dealing with the major issues.

Failure or poor performance can be put down to problems in three areas.

Governance; Leadership; Culture.

Governance.

Local government in Tasmania is not short of governance directives. They don't really deal with governance issues. Because they don't address the need to empower councilors. The briefing of councilors around Tasmania after the last elections heavily focused on telling councilors what rules they need to follow. Basically 'Do as the Mayor tells you, do as the General Manager tells you and never, never, never speak publicly'. Why do councils need lawyers to brief councilors at the start of their terms especially on "The Code of Conduct"?

Councilors are there to hold the General Manager accountable. To hold the Mayor accountable. If they can't do that then who does? All around Tasmania that problem is coming up and is not dealt with. Good governance requires that it be addressed.

Mayors and General Managers are often co dependent. When that works it can be OK but it is not good governance practice. When it doesn't work it leads to poor and expensive governance.

I know what precipitated the move to elected mayors. It was not a policy designed for broad improvement in governance. At the time I thought it might be a good move. I don't think so now.

When mayors were elected by councilors they were accountable to councilors who were accountable to the residents. If the mayor is doing a really good job election by councilors will not present a problem. Where the Mayor is not doing a good job, the knowledge that the collective of the councilors can remove them makes it much more likely that they will improve, become accountable or lose the role.

If councilors they have the capacity to elect or dismiss the mayor, the accountability process starts to work. Because it then makes accountability for General Managers real.

Leadership.

Some councils are places that welcome strong leadership. Leadership from councilors is valued and encouraged. In my view leadership is too often seen as the prerogative of the Mayor and General Manager so there is not a leadership culture developed throughout the council.

The current review does not engage, in my view, with the centrality of good, competent and effective leadership in producing a quality and effective council. A number of councils seem to be worried by strong leadership.

Local communities are looking for effective leadership and welcome it. Leadership that does not need command and control. Leadership that attracts respect in our communities.

The current picture of leadership across Tasmanian councils is very mixed. As with other areas we should make quality leadership across our councils a priority.

Culture.

The present state of council culture across Tasmania is in my view poor. The number of councils running culture reviews is significant. It is costing a great deal of money and costly inefficiencies. Do we know the extent of staff turnover and is it part of our reviews of council performance?

Summary

I don't believe many of these issues will be addressed by the sort of structural change being considered.

Yet for councils to be effective these issues need to be a priority.

Peter Kearney