

# Building a Cohesive Nation of Cohesive Communities - Shed A Tier Congress, Canberra, ACT

Anthony David

August 8, 2011

Civil society, by definition, is the foundation of civilisation. Where there is a strong cooperation between people who know and understand each other, there is a greater willingness to support or resist changes that confront their community in a unified manner. A community that is directed from without runs the risk of alienation, breeding feelings of frustration, feelings of being patronised and even feelings of resentment.

The role of Local Government needs to be elevated to one where people from all parts of Australian communities can participate in and direct according to their democratic will.

In this year of Federation, it would be a wasted opportunity to ignore the real issues of Constitutional reform. One important issue is to establish Local Government as a recognised entity, passing more responsibility and accountability for services to Local Government and thus into the hands of the community that directly benefits from them.

I initially got involved in the Abolish the States Collective because of a letter of mine that was published in "The Australian" some time ago.

It said:-

"While we are at reforming the Constitution, let's abolish the State governments and develop strong local communities with more responsibility given to local government."

At the time I wrote it I had no idea that others had similar views, I truly thought I had struck a novel idea.

I believed that the States were an impediment to the functioning of our nation and that communities can provide much better solutions to problems

confronting them. I was responding to an instance in the news where a State Government was acting in its own interest to the detriment of the community and the area of responsibility could be better controlled by one Federal body.

This conclusion was reached while contemplating the benefits of living as a citizen in the Australian Capital Territory. It is ironic that the region that most Australians associate with Government is also one of the least-governed peoples in Australia. We have the benefit of a Local Council with added responsibilities such as Health, Education and Justice. One factor to consider when extrapolating the ACT experience with other regions is that the population is predominantly urban with a good infrastructure to work within.

I cannot say with certainty how the ACT experience can be translated to a rural region. What I can say is that from my observations is that the current State Government structure does not support rural regional areas. Even the binding "cement" of states, their sporting teams, really represent the capital cities and not the entire state.

An illustration can be made using the sport of Rugby Union. The New South Wales team, the Warratahs, may have a smattering of players from the country (for example, Scott Staniforth - West Wyalong), but all of them play in the Sydney competition. The case of Steve Merrick who loved his town of Singleton and thus forfeited a chance of playing for the Warratahs and Australia is an instructive example. If a team was truly representative of a state, a player from Junee would have an equal right to a New South Wales jersey as a player from Paramatta would.

State Governments cover a wide range of regional areas. Some regions such as the nexus of South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales, are unnecessarily divided by artificial boundaries, leading to an inefficient allocation of resources and administration. State Governments receive Federal funding based on many factors. One of the factors is regional considerations that require specific allocations of funds. Once a State Government receives such funds, the temptation often becomes greater to spend that allocation according to the State Government's own priorities which may not always match with the priorities of the grant allocation.

State Governments sometimes take sides where there is a conflict between communities. A recent case in point was the Queensland Government siding with the Cairns professional fishing community against the wishes of the Murray Island Community in the Torres Strait. I feel the State Government's immediate response should have been to offer mediation instead of openly supporting one side of the argument. The Federal Government is the correct level of authority to provide direction and mediation in this case.

I would like to briefly mention a particular case for local autonomy. The Torres Strait Islanders have been working to develop a form of autonomy that

fits the cultural and economic needs of the indigenous population without disenfranchising the groups of more recent arrivals such as Japanese, Papua New Guineans and Pacific Islanders. The needs of mainland Torres Strait Islanders also need to be addressed by the final outcome of this process. Clearly a State/Territory-like government is going to be unwieldy for a population of about 8000 people. A workable Local Government unshackled from State Government influence with direct access to the Federal Government seems a better model to work towards.

In conclusion, the way forward in developing and strengthening community cohesiveness requires a workable model that can be applied to regions as diverse as the Australian Capital Territory and the Torres Strait Islands. I call for a Constitutional Convention that should be held every three years in order for our nation to seriously debate the form that Local Government should take in order to meet the needs of these diverse Australian communities.

References:

“House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Affairs - Reference: Greater Autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders Wednesday 28th May, 1997 Committee recommendations”

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/atsia/tsi.pdf>

“Government Response to Committee Recommendations”

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/atsia/GovResp.pdf>