

Local Government

AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN TERRITORIES & LOCAL GOVERNMENT LOCAL GOVERNMENT

As government at the state and federal level has become more centralised and bureaucratic it is imperative that there is real community representation at a local level. Local government is not just about the cliché of 'roads, rates and rubbish'. More than any of these, it is about representation and community.

The role of local government must be recognised and strengthened, and it should be an equal partner in decision making at both federal and state levels.

“Local Government will be crucial to dealing with some of the most pressing issues facing the nation like climate change and water but it is sadly rare for them to be invited to the decision-making table by other levels of government.”

Senator Lyn Allison
Leader and former councillor

Our Action Plan

- formally recognise local government in the Australian Constitution and set up a review of Federalism and the role of all three levels of government
- raise financial assistance grants to local government to real terms, per capita, pre-1996 and link to a fixed percentage of Federal Government receipts, so that local governments are able to forward plan and budget effectively
- remove restrictions on local government setting rates
- encourage Commonwealth/Local Government agreements for the delivery of appropriate national programs and services
- involve local government much more in decision-making on tax reform, planning, greenhouse abatement, health, early childhood, aged care, transport etc. and in determining how major national funding programs are delivered
- encourage a uniform policy for salaries and expenses for elected representatives with salary levels determined by an independent tribunal
- require real public consultation and a plebiscite to determine council mergers and boundary changes
- make voting in local government elections compulsory for all residents over 18 and discourage postal voting other than for absence or sickness, unless there is a clear case that to do so would increase the participation
- introduce multi-member electorates and proportional representation
- not use National Competition Policy to compel local government to tender out its services
- allow local government to determine if and where in their municipality gambling licenses will be granted

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The Issues

Local government provides Australians the best opportunity to be closely involved in decision-making, it is central in fostering a sense of community and it provides essential services such as libraries, home and community care, sporting facilities and child care centres. However, local government is often asked by other levels of government to do more and to provide more services and infrastructure without receiving the necessary funding to do so.

Local government has not been consulted on national programs and reform processes. Local government has no equivalent of the COAG or ministerial council processes adopted at state and federal level and it has little influence even in areas that affect its services. For example the lack of incentives to develop a market for recycled material has increased the cost of collection. No formal guidelines or role were given to local government in the allocation of money from the Natural Heritage Trust.

Local government and the constitution

The Australian Democrats support a constitutional convention to review federalism and the role of all three levels of government and which could also become an opportunity to support a referendum on the constitutional recognition of local government.

Dramatic weakening of the power of parliaments and unprecedented interference in state and local issues by the centralist government in Canberra show that it is time to examine what is the best option of government for Australia.

The role of local government and how it fits into the mix is very important as it has a far greater potential than state governments to represent local views and community needs.

Voting systems

Local government voting systems differ widely between and within states. In some states voting is compulsory and in others it is not. There is a mix of postal and in person voting. Some local governments have multi-member electorates and groups of councillors elected at large, but most use the single member, preferential system requiring 50% plus one of the vote.

The fairest, most representative method of election is multi-member electorates and proportional representation, with compulsory voting for all residents over the age of 18, giving local government elections the same status as other elections and is consistent with treating local government equally.



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