

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Debate resumed from 6 September, on motion by **Mr Lloyd**:

That the House:

- (1) recognises that local government is part of the governance of Australia, serving communities through locally elected councils;
- (2) values the rich diversity of councils around Australia, reflecting the varied communities they serve;
- (3) acknowledges the role of local government in governance, advocacy, the provision of infrastructure, service delivery, planning, community development and regulation;
- (4) acknowledges the importance of cooperating with and consulting with local government on the priorities of their local communities;
- (5) acknowledges the significant Australian Government funding that is provided to local government to spend on locally determined priorities, such as roads and other local government services; and
- (6) commends local government elected officials who give their time to serve their communities.

upon which **Mr Albanese** moved by way of amendment:

That paragraph (1) be omitted and the following paragraph substituted:

- (1) supports a referendum to extend constitutional recognition to local government in recognition of the essential role it plays in the governance of Australia.

Mr WINDSOR (New England) (5.05 pm)—It is with pleasure that I speak to this motion. I thank the Minister for Local Government, Territories and Roads, Mr Lloyd, for introducing it in the House because I think a number of points raised in the motion do need some elaboration and, in my view, raise some concerns and some positives in the area of local government generally. There are a number of problems that I am sure most of us see in local government from time to time, but I would like to spend a few minutes particularly on the subject of the impact that the Australian Local Government Association has or could have on policy that is emanating from the federal sphere.

As we all know, local government is in a sense a plaything of state governments, but the federal government does help in a number of ways through federal assistance grants and, more recently, through initiatives such as the Roads to Recovery program and a number of other programs. So the federal government does have a role. I have never been a councillor on a council. I have been in two tiers of government, but I have no desire to be in the third, even though I think the local level is probably the most important in a lot of ways to people on the ground, particularly country people, whose numbers are spread out and whose service requirements are significantly different in some ways to those of city people. However, the federal government does play a role in funding arrangements through the Commonwealth Grants Commission and other agencies.

It is a pity that the referendum that was carried out some years ago did not constitutionally recognise local government. I think it is a shame. Because of the way in which that referendum was conducted, most people really did not know what was being asked. I would encourage the Australian Local Government Association and other people in the political parties in this place to revisit that issue. Perhaps in the election after next or whenever possible that issue could be revisited, because there is absolutely no doubt that the cost pressures that local government are under are, in many cases, actually eroding the localism that local government was essentially put in place to deliver.

Localism is being eroded in the name of economic efficiency, cost shifting or economies of scale and under the guise of eradicating two or three general managers because you then only have to pay one general manager et cetera. We have seen all of it happening across Australia, and there are always very good reasons why it would be better to eradicate the localism from local government. However, I think the great strength of local government is that it does have the capacity to represent local people at a local level on local issues. Quite obviously, with technology et cetera now you could, theoretically at least, run the business of local government from the top of Ayers Rock. But that misses the point of some of the major things that local government provides—that is, a local voice for local people on local issues.

I am very much in support of local government being maintained and that we do not just look at this business of how you can most efficiently deliver the services to people at the cheapest possible cost. I have said in this place before that, in terms of that sort of economic rationalist thinking, the most efficient way to deliver the greatest number of services to the highest number of individuals at the lowest possible unit cost is to put those people in a feedlot, and that is exactly what we have done in terms of some of our major cities. I was absolutely disgusted in recent days to see the Prime Minister in this place scoring what I considered to be fairly cheap political points against the opposition. I do not think the opposition has been right in terms of its stance on this issue either, but

the Prime Minister has maintained a view that we should be opening up more and more land around our major cities and that, in some sort of convoluted fashion, that would cheapen the price of housing.

That is an indication of where the government is going in terms of policy, and it is a very strong indication to regional local government that the two major parties here, the Liberal Party and the Labor Party essentially stand for a centralisation of the population—the feedlot mentality, which is the issue that I was talking about a moment ago. The most efficient way to deliver the greatest number of services at the lowest possible unit cost to the greatest number of people is to put them in a feedlot. We can look at the geography of the Sydney basin, the pollution impacts of the Sydney basin and the health impacts of the Sydney basin in the future, yet the Prime Minister stands up in this parliament day after day and says that we should release more land in our major cities and that that in some way will have an impact on the cost of housing, in a nation the size of ours. The Prime Minister quoted the Deputy Leader of the Opposition today regarding some very similar statement that she had made. So the feedlot mentality is in fact the policy of both sides of this parliament, and the cheapest way of providing services to people is to put them into major cities and ignore the regional consequences.

On the other hand we have this debate about the need for greater infrastructure inland. The two issues tend to run at a tangent, in a sense, and somebody might be able to explain how you can run both those agendas when on the one hand you have the policy mix that is saying, 'Proceed to the nearest feedlot and, if possible, use gravity to some sort of physical advantage,' while on the other hand we have people saying that we need such things as inland rail networks and that we need to develop regional Australia.

Whenever regional Australia issues are mentioned—for instance, the development of the ethanol industry—we have this argument going back the other way: 'No, unless the market can dictate the terms, it is not possible—we can't foster the advent of new industries; we can't assist in any meaningful fashion to encourage the development of those industries.' But with respect to the building industry—and I am not opposed to this, but I think the House should be aware of it, and I have raised it a few times when the drought has been raised—if you look at drought assistance, about \$300 million over four years has actually been spent on business assistance to the farming community. Some would say, particularly those at a local government level, that that is not sufficient for the worst drought in 100 years. The Treasurer and others would suggest that you cannot prop up industry; that over time they have to learn to stand on their own two feet. But look at what has happened to the building industry over that period of time—or for one year longer than the worst drought we have ever had. The goods and services tax came out. The government recognised a political problem—and a real problem—in that the 10 per cent imposition of the goods and services tax would have an impact on the price of a house. The building industry cried foul and said that this would decimate this particular industry. They said, 'You can't do this to us. You have to help us through this particular period.'

The First Home Owners Scheme was born to assist our young people into housing. I am not suggesting that is a bad thing, but in a real sense it is a direct subsidy of the building and construction industry. I think at last count somewhere between \$5.6 billion and \$6 billion has been spent on that program, with the employment impacts that that obviously has for the industry. I am not arguing the rights or wrongs of that, but I do argue that the \$300 million spent on business assistance during the worst drought in living memory should not be viewed as a massive subsidy to a few peasant farmers when assistance of the order of \$6 billion is offered by the same government, in the main to the western areas of our major metropolitan areas where, coincidentally, most election results are determined. I will leave that issue at that point.

I have spoken about the constitutional issue of local government and the recognition of local government. The other point I would like to make is that, in my view, the Australian Local Government Association do very little to promote their cause in this place. I would suggest that, rather than come to this place with last year's 150 motions determined at their conference, they come to the government, the opposition and the crossbenches with one, two or three major issues that they see of importance. If those major issues happen to include the constitutional recognition of local government, they could actually drive that debate. I do not see that happening in here. Maybe they do not come and talk to me; they probably talk to some of the other members. But I do not see it and I do not read about it happening.

I have absolutely no doubt that local government has a problem with its income stream. That is mainly state induced; I am not blaming the federal government for all of this. If there is not enough income to deliver the services that local government is required to deliver and there is very little growth in federal assistance grants and other sources of revenue that local government is able to garner, the 450 local government bodies across the nation could weld together on two or three specific issues and demand what they want of the government and the opposition of the day, be it one per cent of income tax, so much of the goods and services tax or whatever else. It may well be a proportion of the fuel excise to reconstruct the country bridges on local roads across the nation or a variation of that theme. But I do not see the Australian Local Government Association setting the agenda in this

place. I see it more as receiving the agenda of the government of the day and almost saying ‘Thank you very much’ for any little bit extra that it gets.

To the credit of the federal and local governments, I have seen an initiative where, when they came together, they were able to set an agenda and have it delivered by government. That was the Roads to Recovery program—an excellent program. It actually cut the head off the state governments on the way through and delivered the funds to local government. They made the decision locally about how the money was going to be spent and the federal government was able to deliver. I think that funding comes to about 1c of the excise from each litre of fuel bought at the bowser. It has had a massive impact, but, if all the country bridges on local roads in Australia are in a dreadful state, perhaps it is time to look at a ‘bridges to recovery’ program that uses some of the fuel excise. I am against the concept of energy tax as it currently exists, but, if it is to remain, perhaps some of it should be targeted towards some of the infrastructure needs that people have.

I say this to the Australian Local Government Association. Don’t come in here with an agenda that is 150 motions long. Determine what is important. Get your people behind it. Determine what you agree on, not what you argue about. And set the agenda within this place. I am sure that in terms of those major issues, if you need an income stream, constitutional recognition or having bridges fixed, then, if you come as one and are prepared to get behind those issues and not go to water when the heat comes on, you will have enormous success in achieving a policy outcome not only at this level but, most importantly, at local community level.

DISTINGUISHED VISITORS

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. AM Somlyay)—Before calling the honourable member for Barker, I inform the Main Committee that we have present in the gallery the Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons, Sir Alan Haselhurst. On behalf of the Committee, I welcome Sir Alan.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Debate resumed.

Mr SECKER (Barker) (5.21 pm)—Mr Deputy Speaker, I join with you in welcoming the Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons. This morning I had the pleasure of spending about an hour with him, talking about different matters that we have a common interest in, including the way parliament is run and this Main Committee. It is a pleasure to have someone of his stature here watching us in this Main Committee.

I found it very interesting to listen to the member for New England when he referred to feedlots. I know there is a very interesting agricultural analogy with the centralising of our populations in cities around Australia. That has been going on from time immemorial: as long as this country has been a federation, the population has been going into the cities. I would agree with him in one area: I would not want to bring my children up in the city; I would rather bring them up in the country. I think we would all be better off socially if more people were brought up in rural areas—where there is more of the real world approach to life and a more honest approach to life.

Ms Hall interjecting—

Mr SECKER—I was actually referring to the member’s speech. I think I have a right to rebut or agree with the member’s speech. I thought it was an interesting—

Ms Hall interjecting—

Mr SECKER—Yes, I do think it is very much more in the real world in rural areas, because they deal with life, and often life and death matters, when it comes to—

Ms Hall—I have a question for the member.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. AM Somlyay)—Is the member for Barker prepared to accept a question?

Mr SECKER—No.

Mr Windsor—He is making a very important point.

Mr SECKER—I think it is too, but I think it was a little bit unfair to refer to the Prime Minister’s reference to interest rates and the availability of land, which is a local government matter and often a state government matter. He was not using that as a reason to centralise populations in Australia; it is more about the old supply and demand. There is demand for people to live in cities. If you do not supply enough for the demand—if you do not supply enough land—then that excess demand raises the price. I think that is very simple economics that the Prime Minister is referring to. I certainly do not think it was fair to verbal him and to suggest that we raise that as ‘feedlots’, in the terminology of the member for New England.

The member for New England also raised the GST issue. In 2000, local government lost a real opportunity to get a share of the GST income. We have seen the state governments go from this level and then go up quite a bit to

another level of income, which the local governments all around Australia have not benefited from. I have always been a believer because I think local government generally is a very efficient user of government moneys.

We have seen that local governments used every cent of the Roads to Recovery money that the member for New England also referred to. As a result of that, I think we have seen a great improvement in our roads. I was part of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Transport and Regional Services, which really came up with that idea. There was a real need for us to go directly to local government and increase the funding. The Australian Local Government Association chairman at the time showed us that we had a real problem with not only the upgrading of roads but also keeping up with the maintenance of roads under local government responsibility. The Roads to Recovery program has been a great program and we have increased it. I am not quite sure whether the member for New England was correct when he used the terminology of 1c excise. My quick calculation was that it was about 3c.

Mr Windsor interjecting—

Mr SECKER—My calculations say that definitely. The idea of constitutional recognition was interesting. I was in local government when that idea was put to a referendum. One of the arguments was that we could not, as a federal government, deal directly with local government because it was not recognised under the Constitution, although several of the local governments were recognised under state constitutions, which were in turn recognised by the Australian Constitution. The argument was that we could not deal directly with local governments. We have proved that wrong now.

Ms Hall—Did you vote against it?

Mr SECKER—I actually did vote against it because I did not see the need for it. I have always believed—and we showed this with Roads to Recovery—that we are able to deal directly with local governments. There was not a constitutional bar and in fact we did not need that.

Ms Hall—Mr Deputy Speaker, I have a question.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. AM Somlyay)—Does the member for Barker wish to accept a question?

Mr SECKER—I am not answering it. In actual fact we have proved that we did not need that constitutional recognition to deal directly with local government. We have proved with the Road to Recovery program that we do deal well with local government. Because we do not have that constitutional recognition, it does not mean that we cannot actually achieve a lot with local government. In fact, Regional Partnerships is a great example. I know that the Labor opposition opposed it and said it was a rort for rural areas. But it has actually been a great way of having partnerships between federal government, state governments, local governments and local community.

Mr Bowen interjecting—

Mr SECKER—In actual fact, I do not have a marginal seat, as Deputy Speaker Somlyay would know. I have received more Regional Partnerships funding in South Australia than any other area in South Australia. It is not for marginal seats. It is actually balanced all around Australia for rural areas. It came about as a result of a summit—I believe it was in 1999—at which the Deputy Prime Minister at the time brought together ideas on what local rural people wanted. That is the history. We have been able to achieve things with local government and state governments through programs such as Regional Partnerships.

Today I rose to speak on local government, which I have a reasonable knowledge of. In fact, I spent 11 years as a councillor in local government in South Australia. I was first elected at the age of 25. I think I was the second youngest councillor in South Australia at the time of my election. I am quite sure that local government is a place that quite a few members of this parliament have cut their teeth on and in which they have learned about representing their constituents, although the local government area is much smaller, with smaller constituencies.

I found it interesting that, when I was first elected, we did not receive any payment at all except for expenses for travelling. I think after a few years we received the princely sum of \$200 annually. When I retired—and I was deputy mayor of the Mount Barker council at the time; that is probably a good name for the council, given that I represent the federal seat of Barker—I received the princely sum of \$1,500 annually. I think I worked that out to be about 7c an hour for my labours.

We were not highly paid, but most people who go into local government do so to serve their community. Most of them do it to the best of their ability; it is a good training ground for politicians. To me, local government has always been that level of government that deals even more directly with its constituents because of the issues it deals with. It might be rubbish collection; it might be direct planning; it might be a whole lot of issues—food quality—that are more important on a day-to-day basis than the big picture issues we deal with.

I certainly have great pleasure in working with the local government areas in my constituency, the seat of Barker. In fact, I have 16 councils in my electorate and I have regular contact with them as well as with the local

government associations. I also try to get to the annual South Australian Local Government Association meeting in South Australia each year. Local governments do have a feel for the local issues, and that is another reason why they are a very important contact for any member of parliament. You can ring them up very quickly and they can say, 'This is what's happening with this issue; this is our feeling; we talk to a lot of people.' They are certainly a great resource for any politician if they wish to use them.

So it gives me great pleasure to speak on this resolution before us. As I have said a number of times, including in my maiden speech, I believe that where possible—and I echo the comments of the member for New England—local people should decide their own fates as best they can for their own areas. I am very much decentralist when it comes to government: if local areas can make decisions for themselves, that devolution of power back to local regimes works well for democracy. They play a very important part in democracy in this country. They provide us with the basic services that allow us to work and do business, to socialise with friends, to gain an education and to ensure that we have a clean and safe environment. The role and functions of a council, as set out in section 6 of the South Australian Local Government Act 1999, are:

- (a) to act as a representative, informed and responsible decision-maker in the interests of its community; ...
- (b) to provide and co-ordinate various public services and facilities and to develop its community and resources in a socially just and ecologically sustainable manner; ...
- (c) to encourage and develop initiatives within its community for improving the quality of life of the community; ...
- (d) to represent the interests of its community to the wider community; ...
- (e) to exercise, perform and discharge the powers, functions and duties of local government under this and other Acts ...

The range of regulatory services provided by all councils include land use planning, development, building control, fire prevention, dog and cat management and control, parking control and food and public health inspection. Further to these services, councils oversee local road construction and maintenance; footpath construction and maintenance; street lighting; waste management; recycling; stormwater and drainage; library and information services; maintenance of parks, ovals and sporting facilities; coastal care; home and community care services for elderly people and for those with a disability; tourism initiatives; and crime prevention programs. So there is a very wide, very direct relationship between local councils and the people they represent.

Coming back to the Roads to Recovery program, I recall that the Leader of the Opposition called the Roads to Recovery program a boondoggle. How out of touch is he with what local councils think about the Roads to Recovery program? I can assure you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that every local council area in my electorate, and I would suggest all around Australia, think the Roads to Recovery program is fantastic.

Councils contribute to many issues that are important to everyday living. Without these services being attended to, we would be in quite a state. Our local roads would be poor, footpaths would be dangerous, rubbish would be strewn in the streets, and other hazards and issues would be poorly managed.

Our government has increased the total amount allocated by way of financial assistance grants to local government for 2006-07 by \$67.4 million, so we do continue to increase funding in this area. But I come back to my earlier point: I firmly believe that a share of GST should be going to local government. I think that is an issue that they really need to put some work into, and I would support them wholeheartedly.

Mr BOWEN (Prospect) (5.36 pm)—I am pleased to make some brief comments on this motion moved by the Minister for Local Government, Territories and Roads. Of course, local government is very important to people's lives. Other honourable members have referred to this. Any honourable member who goes doorknocking, holds a mobile office or has any other form of community interaction would say that many of the issues that are raised with them are local government issues—less so than perhaps federal or state issues. Of course, local government affects people's lives very directly.

In my case, I served for nine years in local government, including as a mayor, and as the President of the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils, WESROC, in the fourth largest city in terms of population in New South Wales and the fifth largest city in Australia—Fairfield, which has 200,000 residents and a budget of \$100 million. I have seen first-hand over those nine years in local government the stretch on resources faced by a council that is trying to do good work, that is trying to improve its community, but that is dealing with constant cost shifting from both federal and state governments, which come in and perhaps start programs and then abolish them. At this stage the community has come to expect them and has a real need for them and it is then incumbent on local government to continue them from a very limited funding base. I think there is much more scope for local government to be much more effective across the country with more support from both federal and state governments.

It is hard to disagree with the sentiments expressed in the motion moved by the minister, but I would like to deal with some of the matters of substance. The first matter I would like to deal with is funding. In 1996, the fig-

ure for financial assistance grants to local government as a percentage of Commonwealth tax revenue was 0.97 per cent. In 2006-07, it has fallen to 0.77 per cent and by 2009-10 the figure is estimated to fall to 0.75 per cent. I think that is a retrograde step and I would support the calls from the Australian Local Government Association to restore financial assistance grants to one per cent of Commonwealth tax revenue.

In fairness, I do know that there are other forms of grants for local councils, including Roads to Recovery, but financial assistance grants are grants which the council is allowed to spend on their priorities as they see fit. They are a level of government that is very close to the people and they know what priorities are important in their own area. I think the financial assistance grants are underdone and I think it would be a good thing if they returned to one per cent of Commonwealth taxation revenue, as they were under the previous government.

Perhaps even more importantly, I think one of this government's most retrograde steps was the abolition of the Better Cities Program, the abolition of the Department of Housing and Urban Affairs and of the office of the Minister for Housing and Urban Affairs. Not only would I like to see the Better Cities Program reinstated; I would like to see it reinstated on an expanded scale. Local councils could do much for their local environment with more support from the federal government. I have seen local councils come up with great ideas and plans to improve their local environment, but they have very limited resources to do so.

The Better Cities Program would be one where federal and local councils could work together, with assistance from state governments, to improve local environments and to do some really good things. The honourable member for Shortland particularly would know the benefits of the Better Cities Program through the Honeysuckle Development, which I know is not in her electorate but is in the general region.

Ms Hall—And benefits everyone in the region.

Mr BOWEN—And benefits everyone in the region. It is now 10 years since the Better Cities Program was abolished and we have seen 10 years of lost opportunities when it comes to the sorts of programs that could have been funded under Better Cities.

I would also like to make mention of the issue of flood mitigation, which is a particularly important issue in my electorate. Under the previous government's Urban Flood Mitigation Program, funding was provided to local councils on a 2:2:1 basis—that is, two from the federal government, two from the state government and one for local councils. A lot of work was done under that program, particularly in Fairfield City. Many of us in Fairfield, including me, remember the impact of the 1988 floods, which left a damage bill in our city alone of \$15 million and at least 700 dwellings and more than 30 factories flooded above floor level. Emergency services rescued 550 people. I remember trying to get home in the 1988 flood. I had to jump fences and swim across my neighbour's backyard just to get home. It was a particularly devastating thing for Fairfield, and over the last 20 years Fairfield City Council has made a really strong effort to conduct flood mitigation works to reduce the impact of future floods. The 1988 flood was what we call a 'one-in-a-hundred-years flood', but it is likely to come again and Fairfield City Council has identified \$23 million worth of outstanding flood mitigation works. The Urban Flood Mitigation Program was effectively emasculated by the incoming Howard government in 1996 and there has been very little federal government support for flood mitigation since that time. I think Fairfield City Council has written to every successive minister for local government and to the Prime Minister, and the issue has been raised at local government conferences; yet we have seen no action and no progress.

I want to refer briefly to the matter of child care, which is of course an important matter in the community. I was concerned that the federal government recently changed the way in which the child care supplementary worker program was implemented. Fairfield City Council, amongst others, has for 20 years provided the supplementary worker program, which is a program whereby child-care centres are given support and assistance in dealing with children with special needs, who have a greater call on resources and have special educational needs in the early years of their life. That program was put out to tender and Fairfield City Council bid, with other south-western Sydney councils, to continue the work that they have done over the last 20 years. They lost that tender and the work has now gone to another organisation. I have nothing against that other organisation and, in principle, putting government services out to tender is nothing that I would object to, but where you have a council that has done good work—nobody has complained about the work; it has been done efficiently for 20 years—I really would question whether the move to put that work out to tender has been driven by a case-by-case analysis or by an ideological approach.

I do want to say something about local government itself. I think local government could do more to help itself. The honourable member for New England referred to this. I feel there is more scope for amalgamation in local government. I cannot claim to speak for other states. Sydney is the only city that I know well in terms of the local government boundaries. But I think that, for efficiencies, larger councils are better. I served for nine years on a council of 200,000 people, which makes it the fourth biggest city in New South Wales. I think that councils with

very much smaller populations than that could do well to examine the prospects of amalgamation. I do not refer particularly to rural areas, because they obviously have big areas to cover, but to metropolitan areas where you have very small councils. Fairfield City Council, I once said when I was mayor, mowed the same area that some of the smaller councils were in total. Fairfield City Council's parklands were equivalent in area to Hunters Hill Council, which is one of those councils that should be looking seriously at amalgamation to improve the services it has available to its residents. I think amalgamation should as a general rule be voluntary but that local government should be taking it very seriously.

The other initiative that I think councils should be embracing is the Independent Hearing and Assessment Panel, which again we introduced in Fairfield Council. We were, I think, the second council in Australia to introduce one after Liverpool. It is a process with a much less confrontational approach to development approvals—

Ms Hall—It operates like precinct committees.

Mr BOWEN—It is not really similar to a precinct committee. It is a process whereby, if somebody has a development application before the council, the council delegates the consideration of that to a panel that consists of a community planner, a lawyer, an architect and a community representative. They sit around the table and work out if there is a way that objections to a development can be overcome and then make a recommendation to the full council. We found in Fairfield Council that our legal bills in the Land and Environment Court fell very dramatically. People were much more satisfied. Not only were objectors much more satisfied that they had their case heard but also developers were much more satisfied, because they got a quicker result and they were able to overcome issues without taking it to the Land and Environment Court.

It has been some years since I put my mind to local government, having retired at the last election and not having to think or talk about local government since then, but I did want to take the opportunity to make this brief contribution. I think local government does deserve our support. I support constitutional recognition and a referendum to achieve as much, but I think that it is more important to give resources to local government and provide them with more funds to do the job they do best.

Mrs MOYLAN (Pearce) (5.46 pm)—I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak on this historic parliamentary motion on local government, which was introduced into the House of Representatives last week by the Minister for Local Government, Territories and Roads, the Hon. Jim Lloyd MP. I take this opportunity to congratulate Speaker Hawker, who at that time was the chair of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration, whose inquiry produced this report. I also congratulate the other members of that committee, because I understand it was a unanimous bipartisan report.

The objective of the motion before the House, which came out of the report, is to recognise the contribution that local government makes to democracy. Through this motion, the Australian government acknowledges the role and importance of local government and the role they play at the local community level. The Australian Local Government Association, represented by the president, Councillor Paul Bell, was instrumental in bringing this motion forward in consultation with Minister Lloyd, and I have written in support of it. I am pleased to place on the record my support for the 19 local government areas that are responsible for local communities spread over the 26,000-odd square kilometres of the Pearce electorate.

Both the electorate representatives and the full-time officers in local government deserve recognition for the tremendous work they do. Most local government elected representatives, at least in Western Australia, receive no remuneration for the work they do. It has become obvious to me over the years that more and more responsibilities are placed on local government councillors, and some of the issues are exceedingly difficult to manage. Issues in growing communities of town planning matters and approval of new developments are very difficult matters indeed and often cause great consternation in the community—and I notice that our councillors come in for a fair amount of criticism.

Personally, I find that staying in touch and consulting with local government on a range of issues in the Pearce electorate—issues that affect the communities for which we have a shared responsibility—is a very worthwhile activity and a great opportunity to find out about the aspirations of local communities. This regular contact with the 19 councillors and shires keeps me abreast of the local issues and matters of concern. Having had discussions with local government, I am then able to come back to this place and convey their concerns on various issues to relevant ministers, and on many occasions we have arranged meetings.

I note that the member for New England talked about greater interaction by local government with members and senators. On many occasions when there have been specific issues to be addressed, we have arranged for people to come over here and talk directly with the relevant minister. There have been many occasions when we have had great success. Probably two of the biggest issues for my electorate are the crossroads between the eastern seaboard and the road that takes all the traffic to the northern mining and pastoral areas. Those two roads have been

under greater and greater pressure from large trucks carrying double and treble loads, and the roads simply were not designed for that kind of traffic. So these have been two ongoing issues, both of which have been resolved substantially by local government representatives coming here to Canberra, all the way from Perth in Western Australia, and talking through those issues with our ministers.

In the case of Northam, I have had the greatest support and activity from both the council and the shire. There are two local government representatives there, and both the former and current incumbents have been tireless in meeting with ministers and putting their case. The result a few years ago was a \$55 million bypass road for the town of Northam, which had been something they had wanted for two or three decades.

In relation to the Great Northern Highway, nobody could have worked harder than the shire president, Jan Stagbouer, and both her previous chief executive officer and the current incumbent, to get money to fund improvements to the Great Northern Highway, which carries all of the traffic up to the northern pastoral and mining centres of Western Australia. With the boom in mining, this was very urgent roadwork. Once again, they have been tireless in coming to this place or, when our ministers have been visiting Western Australia, making sure that they were in touch, putting their case and very often having to straddle both federal and state governments to ensure that these works were put on the urgent list. I cannot speak highly enough of the work of local government in the Pearce electorate and about the way in which our local government representatives conduct themselves. In most cases, it has just been exemplary.

Many projects apart from roads have been undertaken in the electorate of Pearce. I cannot name all of them; they have just been too numerous. I think we all recognise the importance today of the need to reduce greenhouse gases and the need to conserve water. There have been some wonderful projects supported by local government and funded by the federal government in energy efficiency. The energy efficiency house at Northam won a number of awards and it is a great demonstration project about how the average citizen can actually save energy and conserve water. It was a fantastic project and it continues to be a very popular one. Community water grants have been available for several Pearce councils for important water conservation projects.

For those who do not know the electorate of Pearce, it is an electorate that grows a large quantity of grain and sheep, with both wool and meat being major exports. In addition, we have a lot of intensive agriculture, such as olive growing, the Swan Valley wineries and table grape production in the Swan Valley. In fact, it is the oldest wine-growing region in Western Australia. Many new industries have been set up. So water conservation has become a very significant issue in the electorate of Pearce.

I spoke after the 2004 election in a grievance debate about housing affordability, which I think is a very significant issue, particularly in trying to make sure that young couples can afford to get into new housing. As I said at that time, that could have been achieved by opening up more land. Certainly in Western Australia and in the Pearce electorate that is achievable, if only the state government would commit to spending some money on infrastructure.

The Chittering shire president, Jan Stagbouer, met with Malcolm Turnbull, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, on water, who then made representations to the Western Australian government to try and transport water 30 kilometres from Bullsbrook to Chittering. With that extended pipeline, there would be plenty of land available for development. They are trying to build an aged-care facility, but they are constantly stymied by a lack of water and a lack of commitment by the state government to fund the extension of the pipeline. As I said, it is only a matter of about 30 kilometres, so it is a great tragedy that these projects could be up and running very quickly if only we had that commitment by the state government to infrastructure.

The member for New England talked about bridges as well. The government did have a program. It was funded to improve and repair bridges that were in disrepair. I recently opened the Glebe bridge in York. This money came out of the original Roads to Recovery funding allocation. Another thing an electorate like Pearce needs to consider, because we have got a lot of national parks and large tracts of heavily wooded areas, is bushfire and natural disaster mitigation funding. Our electorate has been the beneficiary of the federal government's funding for natural disaster mitigation.

We have seen local government become more and more involved in providing social services including medical services, childcare facilities and support for people with a disability in their communities along with other programs. One of the programs very strongly supported and funded by the federal government has been the rural medical infrastructure fund. It has been well received by local governments in the electorate of Pearce.

I could go on. There are so many programs that the federal government has funded, but one of the most popular, and one that I have been asked continually to write to our ministers about and raise in the party room, is the Roads to Recovery program. It has been so successful that every year before the budget I get a flurry of activity from local government representatives asking me to make sure the government keeps funding this program. It has

been an enormous help. Again, representing an electorate with many rural towns and small rural communities, the road conditions are so important not only in fuel conservation in these days of high fuel costs but also to get people to medical treatment and to transport farm produce to the wharves and to the airports and by rail. This has been very welcome in the electorate of Pearce and we hope the federal government will continue to fund the Roads to Recovery program for some time to come. It has been an important catch-up program.

Sometimes we do not talk about the Green Corp project, but local government has been the beneficiary of both Green Corp money and Work for the Dole funding. This not only has helped young people to get a better understanding of the importance of conserving our natural environment but also has done very practical work to help communities in local government areas. Local governments have been very supportive of the federal government's Green Corp and Work for the Dole projects. Work for the Dole has offered employment opportunities to people in the community who might otherwise remain on the dole for a very long period of time. I welcome the interest that the shires have shown and the practical attempts they have made to take advantage of these two fantastic programs—Work for the Dole and Green Corp—and we see the benefit of those programs every day.

I want to finish by saying that I look forward personally to continuing to work closely with the 19 local government area representatives in the Pearce electorate. I hope to build on the productive working relationship I with them so that by working together we can endeavour to fulfil the aspirations of the people that we represent and continue to provide the infrastructure and the support services that are so important in an outer metropolitan, regional and rural seat such as Pearce. This motion has my complete support.

Main Committee adjourned at 6.00 pm