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SPEECH BY THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER, MR L.H. BARNARD  
AT THE OPENING OF THE TASMANIAN DIVISION OF  
THE MUNICIPAL ASSOCIATION'S CONFERENCE IN  
LAUNCESTON - 5 NOVEMBER, 1973

Today I am talking to you about our new deal for Local Government in Australia.

We are not seeking changes for changes sake nor, as some would say, to centralise power in Canberra. What we are really doing is to give a new and realistic meaning to Federalism, real local participation in public affairs - and in effect, real decentralisation of Government.

The Australian Government is moving quickly to develop its policies for Local Government and the cities. Our commitment to Local Government is an important part of our overall commitment to urban and regional development.

I think most of you here today know about the three specific promises which the Labor Party made to Local Government while in Opposition.

Firstly, we promised direct Local Government representation at the 1973 Constitutional Convention. You will all be aware that on the Steering Committee of that Convention there was some division over this question.

We remained firm to our commitment and I am pleased that the outcome was successful and that Local Government was represented at the convention.

Secondly, we promised to change the Loan Council so that Local Government representatives from all States could have a voice and a vote on that Council.

On the 11th of last month the Prime Minister met the State Premiers to resolve this question. Unfortunately, some of the Premiers (not including Tasmania) would not accept our proposal. But we are not going to let the matter rest there.

We now propose to hold a referendum on the matter early next year.

Thirdly, we promised to amend the Grants Commission Act to authorise the Commission to enquire into and make recommendations on grants to regional groups of Local Government. In May, we changed the Grants Commission Act which will give some relief for Local Government areas. You will remember that Mr Whitlam has been speaking for years about the Grants Commission doing a similar exercise for regions in need within the States as it now does between the States. No one doubts the strength of Local Government's case for more financial assistance.

Under the new Grants Commission Act some relief is in sight for Local Government areas. Let me turn now to some aspects of the Grants Commission operation.

We should be quite clear that the responsible Minister under this legislation is the Special Minister of State, Senator Don Willesee.

I know that people in Local Government would like the grants from the Commission to flow through as quickly as possible. But we must all realise the difficulties. The Grants Commission now has to adapt to its new role, recruit extra staff and work out how it is going to deal with applications from Local Government.

When the Commission is ready to begin considering applications an announcement will be made.

On present indications this might not be before January next year. In the meantime a handbook is being prepared to assist regional organisations in drawing up their submissions.

Another colleague of mine, Mr Tom Uren, the Minister for Urban and Regional Development, has two important responsibilities in this area. Firstly, he is responsible for approving regional groupings of local councils through which submissions to the Grants Commission must be made.

Secondly, he can comment to the Commission on the submissions from regional groups. In this way, Mr Uren can inform the Commission on how the applications may be assessed in the light of the Australian Government's overall regional planning and development objectives.

What we are trying to do is to encourage councils to think big. Certainly far bigger than they have in the past. We hope that this new move of ours will provide an effective and useful fillip to bigger regional planning.

As you know, the Department of Urban and Regional Development has already made some tentative grouping of regions. We expect that Local Government will want to make some comments to the Department through the appropriate Minister in each State. The appropriate Minister in Tasmania is, of course, Mr Michael Barnard. I would like to emphasise that at this stage the suggested regions are tentative. This is because we can in time carry out longer investigations. Also we expect to gain a lot of experience in the first couple of years in the working of the Act.

In its investigations the Department has found that regions already adopted by the various State Governments for the rural sectors in each State will probably be suitable for purposes of the Grants Commission Act.

As a general rule the State's regions have been taken as the main basis for approved regional organisations in non-metropolitan areas.

I would like to stress again that the report being sent out to all Councils is designed to encourage comment through the appropriate State Minister on the suggested regions. We will also have the benefit of experience before we decide on the final regions after a couple of years.

These are still very early days in our new approach to urban and regional development generally and Local Government in particular.

We must make sure that we act quickly because the needs are both great and urgent. But, on the other hand, we must also make sure that we take notice of the views of Local Government representatives. All of us must try to make sure that we take notice of the views of the citizens we all represent.

I have already mentioned the role played by the Grants Commission and the requirements for regional groupings. But these are small elements of the Australian Government's plan for a new federalism.

The Department of Urban and Regional Development is charged with the responsibility for the development and implementation of national and regional development strategy.

It is also charged with the development and monitoring of an urban and regional budget programme to co-ordinate resources allocated for investment in urban and regional services by federal departments, state and local governing bodies.

The Department of Urban and Regional Development has a role in the administration in the Grants Commission Act. But it will be guided by a wider concern to promote effective regional development and to improve generally the resources of Local Government so that it can operate efficiently. Unfortunately we are being thwarted in our attempts to advance the role of Local Government by the attitudes of some State Premiers.

On this issue it is not the Federal Government which is adopting a centralist stance but some of the States. We want to give an effective say to local populations on local matters. We want to give local populations an effective say about the things that immediately concern them. We are not being allowed to and that is why we are being forced to go to a referendum so that Local Government has direct access to the Loan Council.

These are just a few thoughts on what we are doing in this important area. They have been Labor Party policy for some time. We are fulfilling the promises made many years ago. I think we are on the verge of an exciting new era for our third tier of Government in this country. Whatever way you may look at it, it is certainly the best deal that Local Government has ever had in our living memory.

Thank you for having me. It has been a pleasure to be here today to give you a progress account of what's happening in this field. By the time you meet again no doubt a lot of the administrative problems will have been sorted out but most importantly I hope that the Australian people will have decided to support your cause and give you direct access to the Loan Council and therefore the means to put into practice imaginative plans.